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Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa

Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada

Jake Eisensmith

Exhibition Review

Exhibition Schedule: The Block Museum, Northwestern University, Chicago, IL, January 26–July 21, 2019; Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada, September 21, 2019–February 23, 2020; Smithsonian Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, TBD–TBD

About the Author

Jake Eisensmith is a PhD Candidate in the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh. His research examines trans-cultural interactions during the Renaissance in Southern Italy, with a particular focus on Italian response to Islamic cultures. His work is primarily concerned with spatio-temporal cultural networks, emphasizing artistic creation in relation to historic and contemporaneous cultures. Sites of particular interest include Venice and its colonies, Naples, Sicily, and Apulia, and their complex relationship with their own cultural pasts and the Ottoman Empire and North Africa.

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Museum exhibitions occupy a pivotal role in the expansion of geographies and cultures considered by art history within the medieval and Renaissance periods as they highlight previously understudied objects and networks.¹ The exhibition *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa* successfully contributes to this trend in the astounding breadth and quality of the objects chosen as well as in the research the exhibition has spawned in the form of the accompanying catalog. The show decenters the historic focus on European art in favor of the Sahara Desert. The exhibition highlights the cultural interactions that occur between cultures, by placing equal attention on the

sites of artistic creation and consumption.

The exhibition began at Northwestern University's Block Museum (Jan. 26–July 21, 2019), organized by a team headed by Kathleen Bickford Berzock, before travelling northeast to the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto (Sept. 21, 2019–Feb. 23, 2020) and the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in Washington, DC (TBA–Dec. 31, 2021). My encounter with the exhibition came during its run at the Aga Khan Museum, which utilized the new and open exhibition spaces of the second floor complemented by the permanent collection below.

Upon entry, the viewer encounters deep blue walls, explanatory wall text, a map of Northern Africa and Europe that details the various trade networks in question, and finally an expansive screen projecting an image of the Sahara Desert. Here, the text clearly delineates the goals of the exhibition: to focus on objects that move rather than solely on the sites in which they were either created or consumed, and the map certainly emphasizes this point. The map lacks any borders—historic or contemporary—instead offering an array of major trade hubs that functions as nodes within a webbed network of trade routes that span from Ife through Tunis and Venice to Lubeck in Northern Europe. All of this is to say the geography the exhibition takes on is expansive, and the objects they have pulled together are equally broad in the forms they take. This didactic introduction is supported by maps and works on paper, none more eye-catching than the facsimile of Abraham Cresques's *Atlas of Maritime Charts* (1375). The *Atlas* prominently portrays Mansa Musa of the Mali Empire in Eastern Africa (Mansa Musa's role has been highlighted in previous reviews—see *Smithsonian Magazine* and *Chicago Tribune*), stretches past the Red Sea, all the way to the Pacific Coast. The map is endlessly interesting and at times can overpower the smaller works on paper within this front section. It does, however, strongly convey just how large and interconnected the late medieval world was, subtly articulating that Europe is in no way central to the narrative that is about to unfold.

The viewer is then presented a path through the exhibition, with each section identified by different saturated wall colors and introductory wall text. The beginning sections are nonchronological and instead narrate the different artistic modes that relied upon natural resources and cultural influence from Saharan Africa. "Driving Desires" sets the historic stage, where highly profitable gold and salt were the primary commodities of the trans-Saharan trade routes that facilitated the cultural contact and diffusion at the heart of the exhibition. This section details in particular how gold was the substance of currency, as in the gold dinar on

¹ Exhibitions like *Bellini and the East* (2005), *Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice* (2015), both at the Stewart Gardner Museum, and more recently *Armenia!* (2018) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art have all brought scholarly attention to understudied cultural networks, artists, and geographies.

display, the *de facto* currency of the Mediterranean, as well as material for cultural products, varying from gold leaf in Italian panel painting to lettering in the sumptuous Blue Qur'an. In "Saharan Frontiers," the exhibition becomes a sea of large display cases housing shards of pottery, glass vials, ceramic bowls, terracotta figures, and fabrics. The variety of objects helps to articulate the diverse destinations of African trade routes, each with its own resources of interest (like ivory, textiles, and indigo) that became essential in their own cultural objects. "The Long Reach of the Sahara" contains some of the more astounding objects of the exhibition, including European ivories and Igbo sculptures, which effectively expand the artistic materials and styles presented and demonstrate just how many cultures and cultural products were dependent on—and in dialogue with—Saharan cultures. "Shifting Away from the Sahara" begins a chronological consideration, outlining what happened when trade in the Atlantic began to slow desert networks, highlighting how direct contact between sub-Saharan and European cultures as well as those previously separated by multiple trade routes, like Mamluk Egypt, affected local cultural production. The final section, "Saharan Echoes," emphasizes the afterlives of Saharan medieval objects and concerns by showcasing their effect on more recent objects.

Overall, the exhibition presents the material impetus for the trade networks and lays out why North Africa ought to be historically important even for scholars whose interests lay further afield: cultural products like gold-leaf paintings and ivory carvings could not exist without raw materials or influential cultural products supplied from Africa. The juxtaposition of *Seated Figure* (Ife) and *Madonna and Child* (France) perhaps best articulates this point in the section "Long Reach." *Seated Figure* at first attracts the visitor as a masterful bronze cast whose naturalism and intricate facture may draw comparison to traditionally lauded works by Donatello in Florence made a century later. The wall label instead helps reconceive the work's true importance beyond mimesis, as research on the work reveals the metal is not sourced locally but from France. *Seated Figure* is productively set against a contemporary French ivory sculpture of the Virgin and Child that proclaims the cultural entanglement of medieval Europe and Africa. By letting the objects take the lead and play against each other, the show tactfully demonstrates that any nuanced narrative of the Italian Renaissance or Ottoman miniatures must also account for the networks that supplied such artistic creation in the first place.

While the stunning objects take the fore, the average viewer struggles to identify the pertinent information that explains why this vial or that fabric was included in the exhibition. In many instances, without the aid of the exhibition catalog, the historic narratives and networks of objects are difficult to understand. In part, the wall labels are expected to fulfill this large task—provide tombstone information, illuminate the object to a general audience that may not be familiar with non-Western and medieval material culture, and only then divulge the particulars that made this specific object of interest within an exhibition dedicated to cross-cultural movements and aesthetics. Such a daunting task means that interested viewers frequently clumped around an expert or catalog owner passing through the exhibition hoping to overhear the information the wall label omitted. Some objects made use of the limited space by prompting more questions than answers, helping to articulate how much work and scholarship are yet to be done. Wall text for *The Asante Jug* (*Richard II Ewer*), a copper ewer created in fourteenth-century England with an English inscription and found in Asante possession during nineteenth-century British colonialism, notes that why and how the ewer went from medieval England into Africa is unknown but expresses the importance of Saharan trade routes as channels through which cultural goods and material resources flowed.

While understanding the range of objects and cultures this show endeavors to put in conversation, one major issue of entanglement that the exhibition does not address in a direct or satisfactory manner is slavery. While the wall text introducing "Saharan Frontiers" notes, "the imports of the desert such as male and female slaves," quoting the twelfth-century writer Mohammed ibn Abu Bakr al-Zuhri, the only noticeable discussion of the enslavement, sale, and forced movement of peoples comes in "Saharan Echoes." The wall label for the nineteenth-century Danish drawing of a guinbri informs the viewer that the term "Gnawa" originally

denoted descendants of enslaved people from Western Sudan who lived in Morocco, and today refers more widely to “black Moroccans.” Even the section “Shifting Away,” which emphasizes African European trade on the Atlantic Coast, focuses on the shift of objects to new hubs of trade and does little more than acknowledge that the slave trade would dominate in this area. One can understand why the curators wanted to focus on the benefits that contact between cultures conjured and downplay a fuller and more complicated assessment; indeed, such a narrative leads away from the objects at hand and prompts larger questions about human labor and social histories. And certainly, the objects are the strength of the exhibition; the curators have endeavored to afford equal attention to all objects (regardless of how visually enticing), attending equally to pristine gold dinars and a contemporaneous glass bottle, pulling together objects that do not prioritize the “fine arts.” This array in large part comes from the many non-Western institutions that the curators partnered with to bring stunning objects that scholars and publics who are familiar with Western collections would not come into contact with otherwise. Objects from museums and collections in Morocco, Mali, and Nigeria did much of the heavy lifting within the exhibition and will bring much-needed scholarship and visibility to these collections, listed in full in the catalog and corresponding website caravansofgold.org. And yet, the relative silence on issues of race, slavery, and institutional inequity must be points of conversation for future shows.

The exhibition climaxes in “Long Reach” and “Shifting Away” before taking a chronological jump in the final section, making “Saharan Echoes” feel disconnected from the rest of the exhibition. Here, the show risked entering into the problematic historic narratives that cast Africa as a timeless and unchanging location (something shared with the introductory screen of a static desertscape), which could be mitigated by wall text and labels, though once more such texts were already overburdened. Ultimately, the exhibition attempts to highlight how traditional forms are articulated in recent objects. But one wonders if it was the best ending given the strength of the previous sections, which were expansive in their objects and geographies and made clear that medieval Saharan Africa was a complex, nuanced, and thriving site of commerce and culture that was strongly interconnected with the cultures around it. This very point comes across strongly in the exhibition catalog, which deserves as much praise as the show for its interdisciplinary research and excellent illustrations, assuaging some of the logistical shortcomings of installing such a challenging enterprise. Overall, the diversity and multicultural connections presented in this show prove to be extremely relevant in a cultural moment in which we must continue to think critically about what voices are historically amplified or suppressed; confront institutions founded on White and European supremacy; and recommit ourselves, our discipline, and our institutions to a nuanced understanding of history that acknowledges its multivocal nature.



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