

## Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa [book review]

By: [Elizabeth Perrill](#)

Elizabeth Perrill, 2019, "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa," by Kathleen Bickford Berzock, ed. and curator, Book and Exhibition Reviews, *College Art Association (CAA) Reviews*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3202/caa.reviews.2019.117>

Made available courtesy of *caa.reviews*: <http://www.caareviews.org/>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

### Abstract:

The project of recentering histories is at the core of both the exhibition and catalog *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*. When art historians speak of recentering, the contemporary art world, biennials, and online media spring to mind quite readily, but shifting perceptions can seem Sisyphean in earlier time periods. Bringing the discursive practice of recentering to fruition in an exhibition of the medieval world requires extensive institutional collaboration and wherewithal. The labor required expands exponentially when one is dealing with an entire continent, namely Africa, that is still portrayed and positioned as peripheral. Well, there are now no more excuses for keeping Africa on the edges. Kathleen Bickford Berzock and her team, including partners from six nations, have brought together fragments of archaeological pasts, valued trade goods from trans-Saharan networks, sacred Islamic texts, and some of West Africa's most iconic sculptures. Thirty-two lenders contributed over 250 works to this exhibit and its accompanying catalog, and from this point forward, any new medieval or ancient African art history course has no excuse for ignoring, marginalizing, or diminishing the material and cultural sophistication of the trans-Saharan trade.

**Keywords:** book reviews | medieval art | Saharan Africa | exhibition catalog

### Article:

Kathleen Bickford Berzock, ed. *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*. Exh. cat. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 312 pp.; 192 color ills. Cloth \$65.00 (9780691182681)

Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, January 26–July 21, 2019; Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, September 21, 2019–February 23, 2020; Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, April 8–November 29, 2020

The project of recentering histories is at the core of both the exhibition and catalog *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*. When art historians speak of recentering, the contemporary art world, biennials, and online media spring to mind quite readily, but shifting perceptions can seem Sisyphean in earlier time periods. Bringing the discursive practice of recentering to fruition in an exhibition of the medieval world requires extensive institutional collaboration and wherewithal. The labor required expands exponentially when one is dealing with an entire continent, namely Africa, that is still portrayed and positioned as peripheral. Well, there are now no more excuses for keeping Africa on the edges. Kathleen Bickford Berzock and her team, including partners from six nations, have brought together fragments of archaeological pasts, valued trade goods from trans-Saharan networks, sacred Islamic texts, and some of West Africa's most iconic sculptures. Thirty-two lenders contributed over 250 works to this exhibit and its accompanying catalog, and from this point forward, any new medieval or ancient African art history course has no excuse for ignoring, marginalizing, or diminishing the material and cultural sophistication of the trans-Saharan trade.

Spatial choices made by Berzock and her team at Northwestern University's Block Museum reminded viewers of the African core of this exhibition and the continent's global reach, both philosophically and materially. Upon opening the doors to the exhibition entry space, a vast expanse of sand dunes greeted the visitor; a projected film of the desert terrain traversed by medieval traders crossing from the Sahel to the Mediterranean made it almost possible to hear the wind carving the sand. Archways between several of the rooms in the exhibition echoed regional architecture, and the deep indigo of the walls and the book's inner design work evoke both illuminated manuscripts and indigo textiles featured in the exhibition. To the right just past the main entrance, a map spanning from Arguin on the coast of what is today Mauritania to Ternate in contemporary Indonesia to Kyoto, Japan, encouraged viewers to shift from these evocative sands and focus on the vast scope of medieval trade routes. The image of Mansa Musa holding aloft a large nugget of gold from Abraham Cresques's *Atlas of Maritime Charts* (1375), a familiar image for most scholars of African or medieval history, also set the tone for tracing all paths back to Western Africa. Mansa Musa is referred to in the exhibition press release as the "wealthiest man in history," which is no hyperbole. A fourteenth-century king of the Malian empire, Musa made a pilgrimage to Mecca and distributed gold—carried by approximately one hundred beasts of burden—that temporarily altered the entire economy of the Mediterranean region. The iconic image of this foundational leader, featured in the exhibition's first room, is also the cover image of the catalog.

The scholarly exhibition catalog, a richly illustrated tome comprising nineteen essays, underscores the magnitude of Africa's influence on both the medieval world and the continued cultural expression in this region today. To discuss nearly twenty scholarly essays in a short review of this nature would be impossible, but needless to say the depth of research is astounding. The "Groundwork" section that opens the catalog highlights the often mediated nature of African historical writing from the medieval period, revealing the manner in which Arabic accounts informed European historical views on African kingdoms. This section then expands beyond these secondhand accounts with an essay on the material culture from the Mande and Akan kingdoms. The section concludes by highlighting current archaeological research and struggles against exploitative trade that continue to jeopardize the heritage of Mali,

Morocco, and Nigeria, as well as medieval sites throughout northern and western Africa. The “Sites,” “Matter in Motion,” and “Reverberations” sections of the catalog are equally rich and cover the general areas of archaeology, trade goods, and the influences of medieval trade on contemporary expression in the Mediterranean.

In the Block Museum exhibition, the striking entryway was followed by two far more subdued spaces that reflected the rigor of the full *Caravans of Gold* collaboration. One saw the hand of numismatic and manuscript scholars, archaeologists, and textile conservationists in the rows of coins, delicately cradled illuminated books, folio pages, fabric fragments, and cases of sherds, beads, and jewelry that filled the rooms. Extensive label copy that might be forbidden in many public institutions made ties to the *Caravans of Gold* publication and research scholarship clear. Smaller fragments were highlighted in these spaces and allowed to shine in a way that gave visitors a window into the meticulous cataloging that is part and parcel of medieval studies. Some of the way-finding cards were relatively daunting for the general visitor, as orientations of items in the cases sometimes did not match the layout of the cards, but overall the abundant layers of interpretive materials were helpful and would reward repeat engagement.

Transitioning into the exhibition’s central rooms, larger sculptural works from Gao, Natamatao, Igbo Ukwu, Tada, and France held court. While museumgoers may have readily recognized the calm and contained regard of a medieval European Virgin and Child carved in ivory, they may have been less familiar with the exquisite Tada copper alloy figure that sat with one hand on the ground and one raised. This figure, a masterwork featured in nearly every African art textbook, exudes a sense of repose and a regal gaze that make the viewer feel far less than courtly in their contemporary clothing. Once the visitor overcame their own sense of inadequacy among royalty, the subtle ways in which materials and ideas were exchanged across the Sahara became clear. The curatorial and design team’s nuanced archaeological recontextualization continued to assert itself in complementary cases positioned near these more physically intact “masterworks.” Of particular interest were comparisons between fragments and intact utilitarian luxury goods—for example, a small fragment of Chinese porcelain from the trading center of Tadmekka, Mali, next to a Qingbai bowl from twelfth-century China, and a patina-covered copper shield-fitting from the tenth–fourteenth century next to a twentieth-century Tuareg shield. Juxtapositions encouraged viewers to imagine the opulent surroundings of the medieval elite.

With an astute curatorial eye, *Caravans of Gold* guided the viewer to connect the dots between fragment and whole, and destroyed preconceptions about where the center lies, both physically and metaphorically. Notably, a jewel-box room positioned adjacent to the overall circular flow of the exhibition space contained a range of European carvings made of African ivory. The positioning of these European carvings in a side room made the flow of African raw materials toward other locations both physically palpable and metaphorically poignant. Iconic ninth- and tenth-century cast metalworks from Igbo Ukwu acted as a pivotal axis of the central exhibition space, and the European use of African ivory and the African use of European copper, as visible in the Virgin and Child and Tada figures, highlight the flows of physical materials and the power of royal kingdoms both north and south of the Sahara.

Just before the cyclical exhibition fed back into the initial entry room, visitors to the Block Museum installation had the luxury of perusing, side by side, fourteenth-century Asante ewers in

the style of English imports, a fourteenth-century Mamluk bowl, and a sixteenth- through eighteenth-century Asante *kuduo* bowl derived from the Mamluk form. The juxtaposition of forms allowed viewers to quickly realize that the Asante interpretations of imported wares were far from mimicry. The Asante kuduo both mirrored and distinctively transformed design elements of Mamluk metalwork. Visible mudfish, interlocking crocodiles, and “pseudo-script” offered viewers a moment to relish close looking. (The mudfish, a type of fish that can walk on land using its forefins, represents the ability to cross between this world and that of the divine, a power that only royalty would possess. The Asante metalsmiths carefully replaced Arabic script in the kuduo iconography with local power symbology of this type.) Having the opportunity to walk back and forth between the import-style ewers and bowls and the locally produced interpretations of these same forms was mesmerizing. The didactic wall panels nearby featured images of English ewers and Mamluk bowls maintained in Ghana as components of or as freestanding shrines. This imagery added yet another layer to the complex networks of iconography from across the Mediterranean and beyond that intersected in the Ashante/Akan region during the medieval period and continue to influence modern cultural expression.

While exiting the circular exhibition, visitors could encounter a second self-contained side room that connected the rich heritage of medieval trade to contemporary cultures of the Sahel and Saharan regions. It was striking to see that the exhibition’s conceptual thrust refused to allow viewers to interpret the medieval period as an isolated phenomenon of the past: a contemporary tent, clothing, saddles, and weaponry from Saharan regions reminded viewers that the period’s repercussions are alive and well in African culture and trade. The exhibition catalog maintains this vision, particularly as the final of the four book sections is dedicated to the modern reverberations of the medieval. The catalog, created in a wonderful format, will allow scholars of any time period or discipline to find course readings or keep up on new research.

Elizabeth Perrill

Associate Professor, Department of Art, University of North Carolina at Greensboro