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## Northwestern Now

### Groundbreaking African art exhibit earns grant for Block Museum

NEH recognizes 2019 exhibition on global history of trans-Saharan trade

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Archaeological fragments of imported trade goods excavated from the ruins of Tadmekka, an early Islamic trading Center in northern Mali. (Photo courtesy of Sam Nixon.)

- \$60,000 awarded to research and plan 'Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time'
- Artworks and archaeological fragments highlight Africa's critical influence on global trade and culture
- Exhibition debuts at Block Museum from January through July 2019

EVANSTON - A major grant from the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) (NEH) has been awarded to the [Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art](#) at Northwestern University to fund research and development for a groundbreaking exhibit on the global history of trans-Saharan trade.

Scheduled to open in 2019, "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture and Trans-Saharan Exchange" challenges the widely held bias of a timeless Africa that is cut off from the dynamics of world history. This will be the first major exhibition to take stock of the material culture of early trans-Saharan trade and to offer strong evidence of the central but little-recognized role Africa played in medieval history.



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Kathleen Bickford Berzock  
Exhibit curator

Among the diverse materials featured in the exhibition will be sculptures and luxury objects in terracotta and ivory, gold and bronze metalwork and manuscripts from West Africa, North Africa, the Middle East and Europe. What unites these

materials is their connections to routes of exchange across the Sahara Desert during the medieval period (eighth through 16th centuries).

The \$60,000 Block award is part of \$79 million in NEH grants offered to 290 humanities projects and programs across the U.S. The Block Museum is one of only 15 national museums this grant cycle to receive support for exhibition planning. The NEH focuses its financial support on exhibitions that deepen public understanding of significant humanities ideas and topics.

“As a teaching and learning museum, the Block is dedicated to presenting exhibitions that invite the broad public to consider issues pertinent to contemporary humanities and inspire them to connect art with issues that matter today,” notes Lisa Corrin, the Block Museum’s Ellen Phillips Katz director. “We are grateful to the NEH for their support in advancing a body of scholarship that places Africa at the center of a global historical narrative and reintroduces American audiences to Africa’s vital presence in world history.”

“Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time” addresses the shared history of West Africa, the Middle East, North Africa and Europe during the critical epoch of the eighth through 16th centuries, when West African gold fueled a global economy and was the impetus for the movement of things, people and ideas across the Sahara Desert to Europe, the Middle East and beyond. Because of the scarcity of surviving intact works from before the 16th century, the early history and material culture of Africa have rarely been the focus of major exhibitions.

More than 100 assembled artworks and archeological fragments will help audiences discover the far-reaching impact of historic trans-Saharan exchange and the overlooked role of West Africa at the forefront of these developments. Using objects as points of entry and inquiry, “Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time” will interweave the art history, archaeology, history and comparative literature of trans-Saharan trade, situating it within a broad geographical and historical context.

The exhibition will be developed with guidance from a multidisciplinary and international advisory group and will be accompanied by a scholarly catalogue that shares emerging research and analysis. “Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time” will be presented by the Block Museum of Art in partnership with the [Yale University Art Gallery](#).

“Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time” has been a long-term project for Kathleen Bickford Berzock, who joined the Block Museum as associate director of curatorial affairs in 2014, after 18 years of guiding the development and display of the African art collection at the [Art Institute of Chicago](#). Berzock has presented internationally acclaimed exhibitions at the Art Institute, including the groundbreaking “Benin—Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria” (2008), which set the museum’s record for attendance of an African art exhibition. Berzock curated and authored the exhibition catalogue for “For Hearth and Altar: African Ceramics from the Keith Achepohl Collection,” a major contribution to the literature on this topic. Berzock and Christa Clarke are co-editors of the book “Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collection and Display.” It is the first book to consider the bigger story of how African art has been presented in American museum collections.

“Dr. Berzock’s work on this groundbreaking exhibition reflects Northwestern’s longstanding commitment to African studies and to the development of new ways of thinking about Africa in the world,” Corrin notes. “These include the [Program of African Studies](#), the [Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa](#), [Middle East and North African Studies](#) and the [Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies](#).”

Commenting on the impetus for the exhibition, Berzock states, “These ‘fragments in time’ offer irrefutable evidence of the key role Africa played in medieval history – a history that conventionally situates Europe at the center of the world – promoting a critical revision of our understanding of the past and the present.”

As a traveling exhibition, scholarly catalogue and series of public engagement programs, “Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time” will run January through July 2019 at the Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston.

## About National Endowment for the Humanities

In its 50th year, [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) (NEH) is an independent federal agency that funds humanities projects in fields such as art history, literature, philosophy and archeology. Funding supports museums, libraries, cultural institutions and local and state councils that create and sustain humanities programs in their communities.

“NEH grants help bring humanities experiences to Americans across the country,” NEH Chairman William D. Adams said. “Through films, original research and new intellectual insights, our grants strengthen the nation’s cultural fabric and identity.”

NEH awards grants three times a year to top-rated proposals, as examined by panels of independent reviewers. Other local NEH grant recipients include Newberry Library, Illinois Humanities Council, University of Chicago and Chicago Architecture Foundation. A list of all the award recipients can be viewed on the NEH [website](#).

Topics: [Arts](#), [Arts Circle](#), [Grants](#), [Visual Arts](#)