

The richest man ever was not named Gates or Bezos; he was king of Mali in the Middle Ages



Seated figure, probably life, found at Tada, Nigeria from the late 13th/14th century, with a baby elephant figure in the background at the Block Museum exhibit 'Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time.' (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)



By **Steve Johnson**
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This is what the king Mansa Musa brought with him on his trans-Saharan pilgrimage from Mali to Mecca: “8,000 courtiers, 12,000 slaves and 100 camels each carrying up to 300 pounds of pure gold,” according to the introduction to a superb new exhibition at Northwestern’s Block Museum of Art.

Musa gave away so much of the precious metal in the Muslim holy city that year, 1324, that gold lost value in the region, a scholar wrote. He is thought to be the richest person the world has known. Yet the name of the 14th-century ruler of the Empire of Mali, a place where gold was readily panned from rivers, is barely taught in standard African histories.



Supplying a fuller sense of the continent was a primary motivation for “Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time,” the seven-year vision of a dedicated curator and one of the most ambitious and, at more than \$1 million, costly exhibitions the Block has mounted.

It packs the museum’s 4,000 square feet with a spectacular array of ancient artifacts — and, as the title suggests, pieces of ancient artifacts — borrowed from African museums, the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution, among some two dozen lenders. After its stay in Evanston beginning Saturday, it will move on to two of those lending institutions, Toronto’s Aga Khan Museum and Washington’s Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

“Many of these objects have not been seen outside of Africa,” said Lisa Graziose Corrin, director of the Block.

Visitors to the museum will learn that Africa is about more than just standard narratives of colonialism and the slave trade and that medieval times were more than just European men in metal trying to knock each other off of horses. Subtitled “Art, Culture and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa,” the show details trade routes stretching across religions, to countries as far as China and England, and metal working techniques that were stunning on the levels of both craftsmanship and aesthetics.

Two demonstrations of the metal skill come in the eye-opening final gallery stocked with cast bronze figures from Nigeria: a knee-high baby elephant, from roughly the 14th century, and a nearby seated figure cast with copper likely from France, for which the Africans likely traded ivory, the material used in, for instance, the intricate French “Passion of Christ” carving on display, also from the 14th century.

“It’s the first exhibition to use material from the time to conjure the time — to imagine it, to make it visible,” said curator Kathleen Bickford Berzock, who has been developing the exhibition in earnest since 2012, when

she was curator of African art at the Art Institute. She is now associate director of curatorial affairs at the Block.

A challenge is that not many whole objects survive from that time, but “Caravans of Gold,” overcoming a federal government shutdown here and concerns about loaning out national treasures in African countries, has brought together some of the most important ones. Gold coins and rings are on display, but so are incredibly fragile textile pieces and excavated shards of pottery displayed alongside the types of bowls or jugs they once were.

“We’re doing this act of reclamation by taking the fragments and connecting them with real art objects and saying, “That was here,”” said Berzock.

The world was more entwined at that time than you might expect, she said, and she wanted to detail “Africa’s role as a kind of fulcrum in that interconnectedness. It’s because of the gold resources and the importance of gold in economies of that period of time. That is the impetus for this trade to really expand. But along with that comes a lot of other things: People move and ideas move and other types of materials move. And what the exhibition does is it traces all of those things, and you begin to see how these networks really extend across a very vast area.”

Berzock stresses the deep cooperation and enthusiasm she received from peers in Africa and elsewhere, some of whom will be in Evanston for an opening event this weekend. (After the exhibition ends in North America, more portable versions of it will be given to each of the principal partner countries of Mali, Morocco and Nigeria.)

“A colleague who’s closely involved in the project who is a Moroccan archaeologist called it ‘an homage to archaeology,”” she said. “And I debated whether or not I wanted to share that with the press because sometimes people think of archaeology as being very dry and very boring. But in fact there is a lot of poetry in archaeology, and we use this concept which is called ‘the archaeological imagination.’”

“Archeology is a work of imagination because, you know, you’re taking very small things that you find and you’re using that as a point of access to opening up a much bigger picture. We’re taking that methodology and we’re bringing it into the museum and trying to make it visible to people, but in a really beautiful way. And I think it’s awe inspiring to glimpse into the past in this way.”

The exhibition is a coup for the Block, a modestly-sized museum amid the university’s arts campus along Lake Michigan that has put on a spate of creative shows in recent years. It was funded principally by grants of over \$300,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Buffet Institute for Global Studies at Northwestern.

Corrin, who hired Berzock at the Block, credits her colleague’s vision in bringing “Caravans of Gold” to

completion.

“You can see here how the weight of a single intellect and a lifetime of relationships can make a remarkable thing happen even in a modestly scaled museum,” the museum director said. “Those partnerships are what make this exhibition a great exhibition, not just the objects we were able to get on loan, and Kathleen's responsible for those relationships.”

She's thrilled to be telling a new story, Corrin said. “Our schoolchildren, when they think about African art, it's masks and colonialism, and the narrative is told from the perspective of the colonizers,” she said. “It is urgent that the story be told from a different perspective. This is an opportunity to really redress the balance through culture. The presence of the objects themselves tells the story. There's the data. There's proof, you know, that there's another version of that history. You can talk about it over coffee, but there's nothing like seeing it through the objects.”

And in that context, the story of Mansa Musa — pictured only in an image made decades after his death, in an illustrated map reproduced on a gallery wall — may seem flashy, but it is also emblematic of the things we don't know.

“Why didn't we understand,” Corrin asked, “how important Africa was to that period where, you know, the greatest and purest gold reserves in the world sat in Mali and in the hands of the emperor of Mali?”

On a walkthrough Tuesday, as the finishing touches were being put on the exhibition, Berzock explained its progression, from a demonstration of the importance to trade of gold and, surprisingly, salt to displays of the range of objects those commodities were able to bring in.

One wall contains luxury items of the period of the kind that might have been part of Musa's journey. And one of the closing items is a ewer, a kind of giant pitcher, made in England in the 14th century and decorated with scenes from Richard II's reign. It was found in Ghana and taken back to the British Museum after the Brits conquered the Asante Kingdom in 1896.

She doesn't know exactly how the big bronzework made it from medieval England to western Africa, she said, but she does know what it shows: that before the 19th century conquest reshaped the story of Africa in Western teaching, there was a thriving, balanced intercontinental trade.

Standing by the introductory wall, where big-screen video of the Sahara sets the mood, Berzock said that at this moment in a seven-year project, “it's almost surreal to be at this point where we're ready, but I'm really so excited to have it come into the public eye. That's been the whole point of all this effort.”

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‘Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time’

When: Jan. 26-July 21

Where: Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle Dr., Evanston

Tickets: free; blockmuseum.northwestern.edu or 847-491-4000

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