BMA Exhibition of Bark Cloth from Africa and Oceania Expand Considerations of Art and Art History

The Matter of Bark Cloth presents 19 works from museum’s renowned collection

Baltimore, MD (March 17, 2023)—From Africa to the Americas and Asia to Oceania, artists have worked with bark cloth for thousands of years. Despite its significance and prevalence across global cultures, the medium continues to be undervalued by Euro-American art museums and within art history more broadly. On May 7, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) presents The Matter of Bark Cloth, a focus exhibition of 19 artworks from the museum’s renowned African and Oceanic collections that captures the intricacies of the medium and challenges its underrepresentation in Western dialogues about the development and nature of art. The exhibition explores the materiality of bark cloth—which is at once a painted canvas, work on paper, and textile—as well as the diverse ways in which artists, artisans, and makers have embraced and utilized the medium in the 18th and 20th centuries. The Matter of Bark Cloth will be on view on the third floor of the Contemporary Wing from May 7 through October 1, 2023.

“The Matter of Bark Cloth offers an important avenue to engage and embrace global perspectives within our galleries and to highlight the limitations within our common understandings of art history. The exhibition features materially exquisite and intricate artworks that expand our notions of art and its relationships to culture and daily life,” said Asma Naeem, the BMA’s Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director. “I very much look forward to inviting our audiences to experience these magnificent objects and to bringing greater attention to the BMA’s significant holdings of Oceanic and African art.”

Bark cloth is stripped from the trunks of paper mulberry and ficus trees, softened by successive rounds of beating, soaking, and drying, then shaped and dyed. It is supple yet sturdy and can absorb pigments and paint for it to be used in an array of artistic projects. Bark cloth has been used as clothing, blankets, and room dividers, as well as for the structure of masks. It also serves purely decorative functions, hanging in homes and palaces to beautify them. Its use across time has made it an important material expression of cultural heritage, allowing people from a range of cultures to connect to their past.

The production of Oceanic bark cloth, oftentimes called tapa, began nearly 8,000 years ago and spread from southern China to southeast Asia, Indonesia, and the Philippines before moving into western Oceanic islands such as Papua New Guinea, and eventually east to Hawai’i and Rapa Nui (Easter Island). Bark cloth examples in
the exhibition from Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Fiji, American Samoa, and Hawai‘i demonstrate the range of artistic production across the various states, societies, and cultures.

Cloth made from the inner bark of trees was perhaps the earliest type of fabric worn across much of central and east-central Africa. Across this vast region, bark cloth is frequently associated with history and the past as it wraps around masks used to represent and bring forth ancestral deities and is worn by dancers who perform annual masquerades celebrating the origin stories of kingdoms. It also acts as a marker of national and ethnic identity. Many of the bark cloth works from Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda in the exhibition were made for sale, demonstrating the ongoing significance of the material and its role in linking past and present.

This exhibition is curated by Kevin Tervala, BMA Interim Chief Curator and Associate Curator of African and Oceanic Art.

Baltimore Museum of Art
Founded in 1914, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) inspires people of all ages and backgrounds through exhibitions, programs, and collections that tell an expansive story of art—challenging long-held narratives and embracing new voices. Our outstanding collection of more than 97,000 objects spans many eras and cultures and includes the world’s largest public holding of works by Henri Matisse; one of the nation’s finest collections of prints, drawings, and photographs; and a rapidly growing number of works by contemporary artists of diverse backgrounds. The museum is also distinguished by a neoclassical building designed by American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of modern and contemporary sculpture. The BMA is located three miles north of the Inner Harbor, adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University, and has a community branch at Lexington Market. General admission is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

Visitor Information
General admission to the BMA is free. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours on Thursdays until 9 p.m. The Sculpture Gardens are open Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to dusk. The museum and gardens are closed New Year’s Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit artbma.org.

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