

## MEDIA RELEASE

# CONGO RIVER

arts of central africa | 10.12.2010 - 10.04.2011

*First major exhibition on African art in Southeast Asia and Singapore opens at the  
Asian Civilisations Museum*

**8 December 2010, SINGAPORE** – For the first time in Singapore, experience the visual power found in the art of the Congo at the Asian Civilisations Museum’s (ACM) latest exhibition. ***Congo River: Arts of Central Africa, on show from 10 December 2010 to 10 April 2011***, features over 100 sculptures, masks and other beautifully crafted objects that illustrate the artistic traditions of the Central African nations of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo and Gabon.

Jointly organised by the ACM and the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, this is the exhibition’s first international stop after its debut in Paris earlier this year. For the show in Singapore, the ACM has incorporated 27 additional objects drawn from the collections of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden and the Musée national Picasso in Paris. A selection of works by Pablo Picasso is presented in the exhibition to allow visitors to witness how African sculpture influenced the development of Picasso’s Modernist style.

“Singapore visitors have a unique opportunity to explore the cultures of the Congo River basin through strikingly beautiful objects,” said Dr Alan Chong, Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum. “The masks and sculptures displayed here may be unfamiliar, but they are made in striking forms and possess an immediate visual power. Moreover, the objects tell a rich story. Congo artists used the human figure in inventive ways to convey spiritual and social meanings, often through dance and ceremony.”

*Congo River: Arts of Central Africa* marks the first showcase of the Musée du quai Branly’s collections in Singapore – the result of a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2009 to intensify cultural cooperation and exchanges between France and Singapore. This collaboration with the MQB is especially significant as this is the first time a major exhibition on African art has been staged in Singapore as well as Southeast Asia.

## **Life force of Central Africa**

Central Africa is dominated by the Congo River which, together with its numerous tributaries, drains a vast area of diverse environments, ranging from rainforests to savannahs. For thousands of years, the Congo has also connected people and as the river has carried goods and trade, it also linked culture and art. The majority of the people living around the Congo River and the nearby Ogooué River speak the Bantu family of languages. They share many traditions and social institutions, and express their identities through sculptures and masks that are closely connected to ceremonies and rituals.

## **Exhibition storyline and highlights**

The exhibition examines the common artistic heritage of the Bantu-speaking peoples in three broad themes – heart-shaped face masks, ancestor veneration, and female representation. The final section explores the contribution of African sculpture to modern art, with selected works of Pablo Picasso on display to trace the inspiration he drew from African art.

## **Heart-shaped masks**

A distinctive feature common to several communities living along the Congo River is the presence of masks in the general shape of a heart, usually worn during rituals and performances. Masked dances served multiple roles besides entertainment – they reinforced teachings and unified the community, drove away spirits, cured sickness or acted as a tool of justice. One of the highlights in this section is a mask with encircling horns, representative of benign forest spirits known as *ekuk*. Such masks were used by the Kwele peoples of northern Gabon during village ceremonies to resolve problems.

## **Ancestor veneration**

Ancestor veneration is an important element of Central African culture. Various communities preserved the remains of prominent ancestors – chiefs, warriors, mothers and formidable women – which were then stored in bark boxes, woven baskets, or in the cavities of wooden figures. Ancestor figures were also carved by some communities to emphasise family continuity, community bonds, and the claims of chiefs to power. Of special note in this section is a Kota reliquary figure which would originally have been placed on top of a reliquary basket to guard the ancestral remains contained within. Kota reliquary figures from northeast Gabon were among the earliest African artefacts exhibited in France in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their radically stylised depictions of the human form had a tremendous influence on the development of Western art.

## **Female representation**

This section explores the eminent position of women in the savannah cultures of Central Africa through masks and statues which take on feminine representational forms. Women played important roles as rulers, royal spouses, priestesses, honoured mothers and powerful ancestors. Their high status is also reflected in the concept of matrilineal descent found throughout Central Africa. A white funerary figure of a kneeling mother with a child on her back is a highlight in this section. Such sculptures were often enshrined in memorial houses in cemeteries where they guard the dead and acted as a means for the living to contact ancestors and spirits of the otherworld.

## **Picasso and African art**

Pablo Picasso was known to have drawn inspiration from African art prior to his famed Cubism phase. Picasso began collecting African masks and sculptures in 1907 and this section displays four of his artworks that reflect strong influences from African sculpture, spanning the early years often referred to as his African period (1907 to 1909), right up to 1971, two years before his death.

## **Interactive Gallery Experiences for Everyone**

The exhibition at the ACM includes additional features specially designed to bring the Congo region to life. These include an interactive multimedia corner inviting visitors to take a journey through a vast savannah landscape, and stamping stations and activity booklets for children and families to get some hands-on fun. An interactive display offers visitors the chance to discover the similarities behind various masks from Asia and Central Africa.

“The art of the Congo region is visually interesting and the stories behind them engaging. We hope that visitors will not only gain an understanding of the diverse cultures presented but also seek inspiration from the beautifully sculpted artworks on display,” said Tan Huism, Deputy Director, Curatorial and Collections, Asian Civilisations Museum, and co-curator of the exhibition.

“Despite obvious geographical and language differences, Southeast Asia and Central Africa actually have many similarities in terms of traditions and belief systems. We want to encourage Singaporeans to take this rare opportunity to learn more about this region of Africa and see how we are alike in more ways than expected,” added Clement Onn, Curator, Asian Civilisations Museum, and co-curator of the exhibition.

## **Public programmes in conjunction with *Congo River: Arts of Central Africa***

Visitors can look forward to a variety of African-themed activities during the duration of the exhibition. Expect activities for both young and old, including specially organised talks, African storytelling sessions, energetic concerts and curator's tours. The highlight will be the *Congo River Weekend Festival* from 26 to 27 March 2011, which will offer plenty of activities for the family ranging from music and dance performances to craft activities.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the museum will also host a dialogue session with Father François Neyt, executive curator of the show at MQB, on 11 December 2010.

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### **About the exhibition**

#### **Congo River: Arts of Central Africa**

刚果河：中非艺术展

- Exhibition Dates : 10 December 2010 to 10 April 2011
- Venue : Special Exhibitions Gallery, Asian Civilisations Museum  
1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555
- Website : [www.acm.org.sg](http://www.acm.org.sg)
- Enquiries : 6332 7798 / [nhb\\_acm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_acm_vs@nhb.gov.sg)
- Admission charges : \$8 (adults) / \$4 (concession)  
Family package at \$20 for up to 5 pax  
Free admission for children aged 6 and below  
Free admission for students, teachers, full-time National Service men and senior citizens aged 60 and above (Singaporeans and PRs only)  
50% discount for students and senior citizens aged 60 and above (non-Singaporean/PR)  
50% discount every Friday, 7-9pm
- Opening hours : Monday: 1pm-7pm, Tuesday to Saturday: 9am – 7pm (to 9pm on Fri)
- How to get there : By MRT – Raffles Place, By Bus – 75, 100, 107, 130, 131, 167

### **For more media information, please contact**

#### **GolinHarris**

Poon Shumin / Ip Wai Yin

6551 5433 / 6551 5426

[SPoon@golinharris.com](mailto:SPoon@golinharris.com) / [WIp@golinharris.com](mailto:WIp@golinharris.com)

## **About the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM)**

The Asian Civilisations Museum's mission is to explore and present the cultures of Asia, in order to promote awareness and appreciation of the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans and their links to the world. The Asian Civilisations Museum first began its operations at Armenian Street in 1997 and re-opened in 2008 as the Peranakan Museum. The ACM's flagship at the historic Empress Place Building opened in 2003.

## Exhibition highlights

Image	Caption
	<p><b>Mask with encircling horns</b> <b>Kwele, Gabon</b> <b>Early 20<sup>th</sup> century</b></p> <p>Collection of musée du quai Branly Gift of Dr Pautchenko 71.1936.18.15 © musée du quai Branly, photo Sandrine Expilly</p>
	<p><b>Reliquary figure</b> <b>Kota, Gabon</b> <b>20<sup>th</sup> century</b></p> <p>Collection of musée du quai Branly Gift of Léon Guiral 71.1883.47.1 © musée du quai Branly, photo Thierry Ollivier, Michel Urtado</p>



**Funerary figure**  
**Kongo, Republic of Congo or**  
**Democratic Republic of Congo**  
**Late 19<sup>th</sup> century**

National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden  
480-23



***Dimanche (Sunday)***  
**Pablo Picasso**

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)  
© Succession Picasso – Gestion droits  
d'auteur  
Localisation: Paris, musée Picasso  
MP1990-47  
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