

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 19, 2008

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Erin Hogan
(312) 443-3664
ehogan@artic.edu

Chai Lee
(312) 443-3625
cle4@artic.edu

SIX HUNDRED YEARS OF NIGERIAN CULTURE AND TRADITION

SURVEYED IN EXCLUSIVE LANDMARK EXHIBITION AT THE ART INSTITUTE

Art Institute Sole North American Venue for
Benin—Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria

Major Exhibition On View July 10–September 21, 2008

“Passport to Africa” Series Further Explores and Celebrates
Historic and Contemporary African Expressions

Royal sculptures and regalia from the West African Kingdom of Benin are among the continent’s most historically important works of art. This summer, the Art Institute of Chicago will bring together more than 220 of these masterworks—from collections around the world—representing six centuries of Benin’s rich artistic heritage. *Benin—Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, on view **July 10 through September 21**, is the most comprehensive and illuminating exhibition ever mounted about this West African kingdom and its distinctive artistic expressions. Organized by the



Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna in cooperation with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria, the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, the Art Institute, and the musée du quai Branly in Paris, this major exhibition has been seen in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. It will conclude its tour in Chicago, with the Art Institute as its exclusive North American venue.

The Benin Kingdom came into existence in the 13th century and has no proper affiliation with the current Republic of Benin. This powerful, pre-colonial African state—located in present-day southwestern Nigeria—has been ruled by a dynasty of divine kings, called *obas*, for the past 700 years. Economic ties developed between the kingdom and Portugal as early as the 15th century, and fluid trade relations with Europe followed suit. The Kingdom's earliest exports were pepper, enslaved captives, and ivory. From these earliest times, artists in Benin also crafted curios, including magnificent ivory salt cellars, spoons, and horns, for sale to European sailors and merchants. The depth of their artistry, however, which found its greatest expression in court art, was never fully revealed to outsiders. After a period of internal conflict in the 17th century, the empire and its economy were reenergized in the 18th century by an increased demand from Europe for ivory. In the 19th century, following the British prohibition of the slave trade, palm oil and textiles were the main exports. In 1897, after major conflicts with British forces over the control of trade, the city of Benin was conquered by Admiral Sir Harry Rawson and his troops, and the *oba* was exiled. Following these devastating events, hundreds of brass and ivory sculptures, along with royal regalia and other palace furnishings, were shipped to London, where they aroused considerable attention from the European public. Objects were subsequently sold to many museums where they reside to this day.

The lavishly articulated royal arts of Benin on view at the Art Institute affirm the centrality of the *oba* and portray his divine nature. Objects in the exhibition recount the kingdom's significant historical events, activate the ruler's interactions with the supernatural, and honor his deified ancestors. Such practices continue to this day and forge a connection with the past that is vital to the present-day kingdom's viability. The wealth of iconographic detail in the art works conveys the sumptuousness of the royal court and its historical importance as a regional powerhouse in West Africa from the 16th through the 19th centuries.

Benin—Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria marks the first time that masterpieces from the Benin Kingdom—dispersed in European and American collections since the late-19th century—are brought together and interpreted in light of modern scholarship.

Many examples of these superb sculptures will be on display: finely cast brass figures, altar heads, wall plaques, and staffs of office; sculpted ivories; royal regalia and jewelry in brass, coral, and ivory; and other accoutrements of life at court across six centuries. This important exhibition interweaves these objects within multifaceted themes to reconstruct and interpret the kingdom's long, rich history. Planned with the most prominent scholars of Benin art, history, and culture, as well as the cooperation of reigning Oba Erediauwa and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, *Benin—Kings and Rituals* seeks to bring international attention and new perspectives to Benin art and history.

A 40-page catalogue, *Benin: Royal Arts of a West African Kingdom*, was produced especially for the Art Institute's presentation and highlights 22 of the exhibition's masterworks. An insightful essay by the museum's curator of African art, Kathleen Bickford Berzock, considers the meaning and use of these objects against the backdrop of the Benin Kingdom's long history. The catalogue will be available in mid-July 2008 in the Museum Shop and online at www.artinstituteshop.org.

"Passport to Africa" Series at the Art Institute

Benin—Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria marks the beginning of the Art Institute's summer program series, **"Passport to Africa"**—a prelude to the museum's **360°: Art Beyond Borders** season program—which features a variety of historic and contemporary expressions including art, music, theater, and movement from across sub-Saharan Africa. Some highlights during the museum's "Passport to Africa" celebration include the **Muntu Dance Theatre Chicago (July 19)**, **Yves François and Rocambu Jazz (August 2)**, the **Occidental Brothers Dance Band International (August 16)**, and the **Taylor/Morikeba Duo (September 13)**. The Art Institute has also partnered with the Old Town School of Folk Music to present a line-up of stellar world and folk musicians—such as the **Victor Pichardo Group**, **Lamajamal**, the **Teflons**, and the **Eric Noden Duo**—in McKinlock Court on Thursday and Friday evenings. Additional gallery talks in July and August will focus on African art in the museum's permanent collection.

For a complete list of “Passport to Africa” and *Benin—Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*-related events, log on to the Art Institute’s Web site: www.artic.edu.

Benin-Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria is an exhibition of the Museum für Völkerkunde Wien - Kunsthistorisches Museum, in cooperation with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, the Ethnologisches Museum -Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the Art Institute of Chicago and the musée du quai Branly, Paris.

Sara Lee Foundation is a Proud Corporate Sponsor.

Major funding is provided by the Perucca Family Foundation.

Additional support is made possible by the Ann and Robert H. Lurie Foundation.

IMAGE CREDIT:

Altar Group (Aseberia) with Oba Akenzua I and Attendants, 18th century. Nigeria, Benin Kingdom; Edo. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, III C 8164.

#

MUSEUM HOURS:

10:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday

10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m. Thursday

10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Saturday, Sunday

TARGET FREE EVENINGS THURSDAY AFTER 5:00 p.m.

SUMMER HOURS (from Memorial Day to Labor Day):

10:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

10:30 a.m.–9:00 p.m. Thursday, Friday

10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Saturday, Sunday

TARGET FREE SUMMER EVENINGS THURSDAY AND FRIDAY AFTER 5:00 p.m.

FREE FEBRUARY 1 TO 29

Closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year’s Day.

Please check www.artic.edu before your visit.

Admission: Adults, \$12.00; children 12 and over, students, and seniors, \$7.00; children under 12 free; members always free. Free Evenings are free to all, except for certain special exhibitions that may require full or extra admission fee. City of Chicago residents with Chicago Public Library cards can borrow a "Check Us Out" card from any library branch for free general admission to the nine members of Museums in the Park, including the Art Institute of Chicago. To reach the Art Institute on the World Wide Web, contact us at: www.artic.edu

The Art Institute of Chicago is a museum in Chicago’s Grant Park, located across from Millennium Park.