

CHAZEN MUSEUM OF ART
University of Wisconsin–Madison
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Major Exhibition Celebrating African Water Spirits Coming to Chazen Museum of Art

Beautiful and seductive, protective yet dangerous, the African water deity Mami Wata (pidgin English for “Mother Water”) is often portrayed as a mermaid, a snake charmer, or a combination of both. She and related African spirits dwell in rivers, seas, and other bodies of water. *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* explores five hundred years of the visual culture and history of Mami Wata, honoring the essential, sacred nature of water. Organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and curated by UW–Madison professor Henry John Drewal, the exhibition brings together masks, altars, sculpture, paintings, and more from west and central Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States. It will be on view at the Chazen Museum of Art from October 18, 2008, through January 11, 2009. A special regatta on October 4, with sails painted by community artists, will announce the exhibition to come. Opening weekend festivities will include a costume reception and family day.

For centuries, traditional and now contemporary art has been created to celebrate Mami Wata. In the fifteenth century, mermaids appeared on European coins and ships that traveled to Africa, where they met images of hybrid aquatic creatures in ancient indigenous rock paintings and engravings, masks and sculptures. Water spirit traditions were carried across the Atlantic by enslaved Africans and were incorporated into the spiritual practices they encountered, including Vodou. Mermaids still hold prominence in African Diaspora art and culture. In Haiti, marine spirits like Lasirèn are often represented in sculpture, painting, and glittering sequined flags. Water spirits are also central to the festival of Yemanjá, the “Queen of the Sea,” along the northeast coast of Brazil.

The snake charmer entered Mami Wata visual culture after an 1887 German poster of a Samoan snake charmer reached West Africa, likely in the hands of African sailors or European merchants. By 1901 it had been interpreted as an African water spirit and carved into a headdress in Nigeria. In the first half of the twentieth century, traders from India brought prints of Hindu gods and goddesses to Africa, where they were adapted to represent a host of female and male water spirits known as *mami* and *papi watas*.

This exhibition will display the many faces of Mami Wata and other water spirits, from traditional African and African Atlantic masks and figures, to twentieth-century altars and ensembles, to paintings, sculptures, and installations by contemporary artists. It demonstrates the pervasiveness of the water deities, the centuries-long centrality of water and these spirits to the lives of people across many cultures, and the imagery's relevance and adaptability in an ever-changing world.

Curator Henry John Drewal is Evjue-Bascom Professor of Art History and Afro-American Studies at the UW–Madison and adjunct curator of African Art at the Chazen Museum of Art, UW–Madison. He has studied Mami Wata for more than thirty years.

Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas was organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and made possible by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, promoting excellence in the humanities.

Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas is a Bassett Performance Series Event. Other generous local support is provided by MG&E, Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin and the National Endowment for the Arts, Isthmus | TheDailyPage.com, Chazen Museum of Art Council, Madison Arts Commission, Anonymous Fund, Aquatic Sciences Center, Brittingham Fund, and Hilldale Fund.

Events

The Chazen is hosting several special events to celebrate the exhibition. In addition, an extensive program of artist talks, lectures, film, and music from October through December 2008 organized by, or in collaboration with, the Chazen will highlight the importance of water to cultures around the world and enrich the exhibition for visitors.

- **Saturday, October 4: Mami Wata Regatta**

3–5 p.m. Memorial Union Terrace

Set Sail with the Chazen! Set Sail with the Chazen! An afternoon of wind-powered water fun on Lake Mendota will feature sails painted by community artists and art organizations. Presented in conjunction with Hoofers Sailing Club, supported in part by MG&E. Rain date October 5.

Opening Weekend at the Chazen

- **Friday October 17: A Carnival of Water Creatures**

Mami Wata costume reception in Paige Court, 7–9 p.m. Admission: \$8 members, \$12 nonmembers, \$5 UW students with I.D.

The evening will feature John Hughes playing the kora, a traditional West African stringed instrument; Madison's Atimevu Drum and Dance Ensemble; Patricia Smith delivering a spoken-word performance; West African music and dance choreographed by Professor Chris Walker and performed by UW–Madison students. Plus African food from Buraka, and a cash bar. *Costumes of mermaids, sea creatures, snake charmers, gods, goddesses, saints, or other inspiring water creatures highly encouraged.*

Before the reception: 6 p.m. “*Mami Wata’s Big Splash!*” Lecture by exhibition curator Henry Drewal, professor of art history and Afro-American studies, UW–Madison. Room L140, free admission.

• **Saturday October 18: Celebrate Water Spirits!: A Family Day**

12–4 p.m. Free admission. Children under 12 should be accompanied by an adult.

An afternoon of art, performance, and activities for families, including: Madison’s Ballet Folklórico México; John Hughes on kora; Milwaukee’s Ton Ko-Thi Children’s Performing Ensemble of drum and dance; Art Shegonee, Native American traditional dancer/performer; Sonia Valle and Goongoo Peas with Caribbean music and stories; Madison’s Young People of Promise of Mt. Zion Baptist Church with a praise dance; paper mask-making workshop with artist Gerald Duane Coleman. Plus: guided exhibition tours, and a charming surprise guest from the Henry Vilas Zoo.

Sunday October 19

Exhibition Catalogue Signing. 2:15 p.m. In conjunction with the Wisconsin Book Festival, curator Henry Drewal will give a brief reading and sign exhibition catalogues.

Exhibition-related Programs at the Chazen

Docent-led drop-in tours

Tuesdays, 4:00 p.m., November 11–December 16. Meet in Paige Court.

Lectures on Water Spirits

• **Thursday October 23, 6 p.m., room L150**

“Arts for Water Spirits in Haitian Vodou” Lecture by Marilyn Houlberg, professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Galleries open until 6 p.m.

Houlberg shows arts for the major female Vodou divinities (Ezilis) and discusses the recent impact of Mami Wata’s snake charmer image on Vodou beliefs and practices.

• **Thursday October 30, 6 p.m., room L150**

“Mermaids and End-Time Jezebels: New Tales from Old Calabar” Lecture by Rosalind I. J. Hackett, Distinguished Professor in the Humanities (Professor of Religious Studies), University of Tennessee. Galleries open until 7 p.m.

Addressing perennial concerns about wealth and sexuality in the Calabar region, Rosalind Hackett explores how old stories of spirit-human relations find new life in modern-day Nigerian Pentecostal churches.

• **Tuesday November 25, 6 p.m., meet in Gallery VII**

“Undercurrents: Secrecy, Initiation, and other Sightings of Mami Wata below the Radar” Lecture by Amy L. Powell, UW–Madison PhD student in art history. Galleries open until 6 p.m.

Despite abundant devotional uses of Mami Wata’s image around the globe, important aspects of her worship remain concealed. Amy L. Powell discusses exhibition artworks such as devotional altarpieces and looks at them in context of private practices, public ceremonies, and museums.

• **Thursday December 4, 6 p.m., room L150**

“Osun and other Yoruba Water Divinities in the African Diaspora” Lecture by Bolaji Campbell, assistant professor, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, R.I. Galleries open until 6 p.m.

The Yoruba female goddess (orisa) inspires the imagination of artists, scholars, and philosophers. Campbell explores the multifaceted nature of these water divinities and the ways they shape new religious movements in the African diaspora.

Artists Talks

- **Thursday November 13, at 6 p.m., room L150**
“An/atom/y of a Story” Obiora Udechukwu, professor of art, St. Lawrence University, N.Y.
Udechukwu will discuss his own work; issues critical to the postcolonial artist; and the Nsukka group of artists, who reference Igbo uli body and wall painting. His aquatint Watermaid I is in this exhibition.
- **Thursday November 20, 6 p.m., room L150**
“Cool Women and Hot Combs” Sonya Clark, chair of Craft/Material Studies, School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University. Galleries open until 6 p.m.
Wealth. Beauty. Power: Mami Watas possess them all. Clark, whose Aqua Allure is in this exhibition, discusses her artwork’s relationship to African water deities and emblematic material culture objects such as combs and mirrors.

Water Matters: A Lecture Series

Organized by the UW Aquatic Sciences Center and the Department of Art History to enhance public awareness and understanding of water resources in a changing climate. Free and open to the public. For more information call 608 262-0905 or visit www.aqua.wisc.edu.

- **Tuesday October 21, 6 p.m., room L150**
MadTown Singers, American Indian group
Keynote address: “The Sacredness of Water,” Patty Loew, associate professor of life sciences communication, UW–Madison
- **Tuesday October 28, 6 p.m., room L150**
“Conversations on Race, Privilege, and the Environmental Movement” Carolyn Finney, assistant professor of geography, University of California at Berkeley, and Kaylynn Sullivan TwoTrees, artist/activist
Galleries will remain open until 6 p.m.
- **Thursday November 6, 6 p.m., room L150**
“History of Wild Rice and its Restoration” Anthony Kern, associate professor of biology, Northland College
“The Past, Present and Future of Great Lakes Fisheries” Jim Kitchell, director of the UW–Madison Center for Limnology
- **Tuesday November 11, 6 p.m., room L150**
“Water and the Law: Two Wisconsin Ojibwe Cases” Larry Nesper, associate professor of anthropology and American Indian studies, UW–Madison
- **Tuesday November 18, 6 p.m., room L150**
“Wisconsin Groundwater Resources” Anders W. Andren, director of the UW–Madison Aquatic Sciences Center
“Global Warming and its Implications for Wisconsin/Great Lakes Waters” John J. Magnuson, director emeritus of the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies

Film at UW Cinematheque

Free admission. 4070 Vilas Hall, 821 University Avenue. Doors open at 7 p.m.

Titles subject to change. www.cinema.wisc.edu

- **Friday October 24, 7:30 p.m.**
Mammy Water (La Pêche et le culte de la mer), 1953, and the documentary *Le Niger*.
- **Saturday October 25, 7:30 p.m.**
Faro, la reine des eaux (Faro, Goddess of Water), 2007

Film at the Wisconsin Union

Free admission. (608) 262-1143 or union.wisc.edu/film

- **Saturday, November 8, 11:59 p.m. (Midnight Movies)**
Lady in the Water, 2006. Union South, Main Lounge
- **Monday, November 10, 7:30 p.m.**
Big Fish, 2003. Memorial Union, Play Circle
- **Thursday, November 20, 7:30 p.m.**
Incident at Loch Ness, 2004. Memorial Union, Play Circle

Jazz at the Chazen

Friday November 21, 7–9 p.m., room L150

The Onus Trio

Darryl Harper, Matthew Parrish, and Butch Reed offer a seventy-five-minute program on the theme of sacred water in African/African American musical traditions. The trio developed new improvisations and includes selections from their existing repertoire. Slide presentation of exhibition artworks during concert. Post-performance discussion with the artists.

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The Chazen Museum of Art is open Tuesdays–Fridays 9a.m.–5 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays 11 a.m.–5 p.m.; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located on the campus of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the north entrance (nearest to Library Mall). An elevator is down the corridor to the right. Parking is available at the City of Madison State Street Campus Ramp (entrances on Frances and Lake streets) and the University Square ramp (entrance on Lake Street). Metered parking is available in the UW Lot 46 lower level (entrances on Lake and Frances streets). Evening and weekend parking is also available in UW Lot 83 under Fluno Center (entrance on Frances Street) and in UW Lot 7 under Grainger Hall (entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson Street). The Chazen will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, (608) 263-4421 (voice). Information is also available by visiting our Web site at www.chazen.wisc.edu.