

Highlights

Challenges of Presenting Fragments in a Digital Format

Close looking at archaeological fragments was integral to the experience of the exhibition, and we grappled with the implications of transferring images to a digital format. Questions of how their affective properties would change, the visual integrity of the objects, and the ability to place fragments and larger objects in conversation with one another were all factors to consider. Additionally, the digital presentation of small and often quite humble fragments may garner less attention when placed in comparison with more visually dynamic objects. One solution to this problem was to find ways to account for the loss of visual complexity by imagining more narrative connections in the text of the PWA.

Accessibility

The PWA format allows the exhibition to reach audiences beyond immediate constituencies of the three museums it travelled to, and to function as a teaching tool well-beyond the length of the exhibition. The partnering countries will also have access to the PWA in their official languages. Creating an app allowed for greater input from Generation Z undergraduate students, and the app is able to be accessed remotely and without consistent cell service.

Reimagining an Existing Exhibition in a Digital Format & Adaptability

Reimagining an existing exhibition in a digital format came with considerations about maintaining the integrity of the exhibition's narrative. We asked: how can the exhibition's thesis and the relationships between objects be communicated across a digital platform? Working with the exhibition's curator, Dr. Kathleen Bickford Berzock, ensured that the exhibition's thesis was successfully transferred to the app, while providing a slightly revised narrative structure that allowed for a less linear path. Forging connections between objects was at times difficult, as users of the PWA could only view one image at a time. However, the app allowed for greater connectivity between more objects, allowing us to draw out some relationships that were more difficult to identify in the physical exhibition.

Differences in Perspective

The *Caravans of Gold* undergraduate museum seminar was a collaboration between students with backgrounds ranging from STEM fields, to social sciences, to art history. These areas of study allowed for many avenues of thought to be expressed in the PWA, thereby creating space for perspectives other than only the art historical. Although the students worked alongside the curatorial team and well as interviewed archaeologists who conducted fieldwork at the sites detailed in the exhibition, there was still the limitation of only having the input of students at a private, North American institution, which did not incorporate local knowledge regarding the intended users of the app.



This QR code links to the Progressive Web App, which is still in the process of undergoing final edits

Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Making a Progressive Web App Exhibition

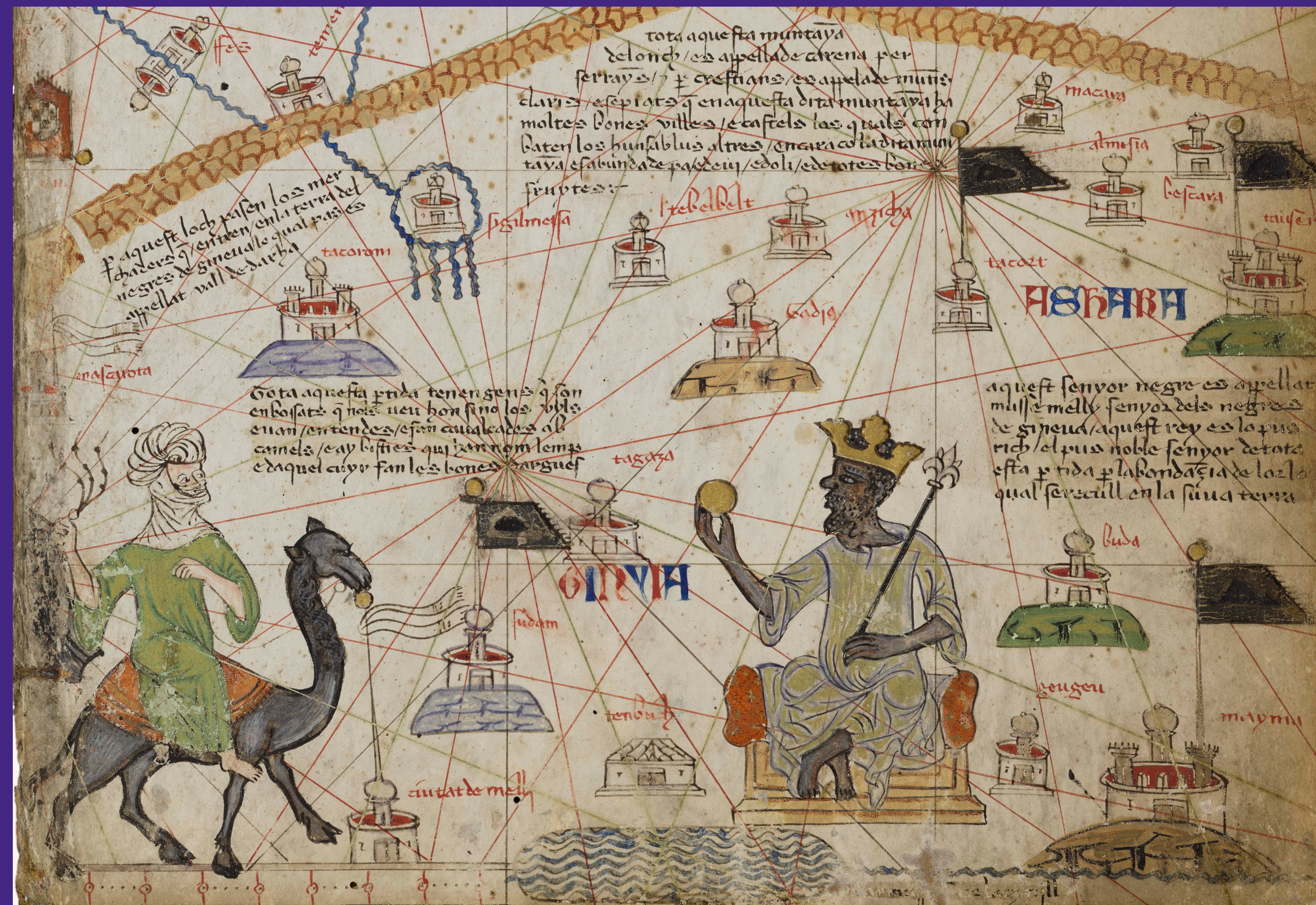
Emily Andrey, Meghan Considine, Brianna Heath, Nicholas Liou

Northwestern

THE BLOCK
museum of art

Northwestern

Department of Art History



Atlas of Maritime Charts (The Catalan Atlas) [detail of Mansa Musa], Abraham Cresque (1325-1387), 1375, Mallorca. Parchment mounted on six wood panels, illuminated. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Detail of Afa Iddi making sabaani, Tamale, Ghana. Photograph by Cynthia Becker, 2017. Reproduced in exhibition catalog page 279.

MANSA MUSA CASE STUDY: GNAWA CYMBALS AND CATALAN ATLAS

In Morocco, the descendants of enslaved peoples from West Africa refer to themselves as Gnawa. Gnawa are known for musical performances incorporating instruments including iron cymbals (qraqeb). The repetitive sounds of these cymbals are said to mimic the sounds of chains used to shackle enslaved people. The exhibition makes reference to the many enslaved peoples from West Africa who accompanied Mansa Musa during his lavish pilgrimage to Mecca in the 14th century. While the Block Museum's installation included a pair of Gnawa cymbals in the exhibition's present-day coda, *Saharan Echoes*, the digital interface of the PWA allowed us to more seamlessly connect the qraqeb to objects evoking Mansa Musa's hajj.

Summary

In Spring 2019, thirteen undergraduates collaborated with curator Kathleen Bickford-Berzock to reshape the exhibition *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa* into a Progressive Web App. The exhibition originated at Northwestern University's Block Museum and highlights the material culture of medieval trans-Saharan trade through analytics of movement and migration. Although partner institutions in Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria lent objects to the exhibition, the exhibition will not travel to Africa. The app, appearing in Arabic, English, and French in early 2020, will share the exhibition's content with individuals in those nations and beyond.

During the process we grappled with pressing questions including: Will digital mediation diminish the affective properties of archaeological fragments and objects? Will user interfaces detract from meaningful comparisons? How might we use this tool to highlight obfuscated narratives, such as those of the many thousands of enslaved individuals who crossed the Sahara during the medieval period? What impact does our position as North American students have on our interpretation of African material culture for African audiences? How can we prioritize ethical strategies of presentation and interpretation?

The implications of undertaking a project of this scope are manifold. We highlight the strategies by which undergraduates found interpretative agency working with an exhibition that had already opened, emerging from a decade's worth of curatorial research. We detail the challenges that arose while reinterpreting the exhibition into the Progressive Web App's compressed form. Further, the project coincides with relevant debates around the collection and display of African art in Western museums.

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