MOVING THE MIDDLE

An ambitious exhibition asserts the importance of Africa in a medieval world that was more international and cosmopolitan than it often appears to be in popular histories.

by Josephine Livingstone

Seated figure, possibly Ife, Tada, Nigeria, late 13th–14th century, copper with traces of arsenic, lead, and tin, 21¼ inches tall. Nigerian National Commission for Museum and Monuments, Abuja.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa," at the Block Museum of Art, Evanston, Ill., through July 21. The show will later appear at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Sept. 21, 2019–Feb. 23, 2020, and the National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., Apr. 8–Nov. 29, 2020.

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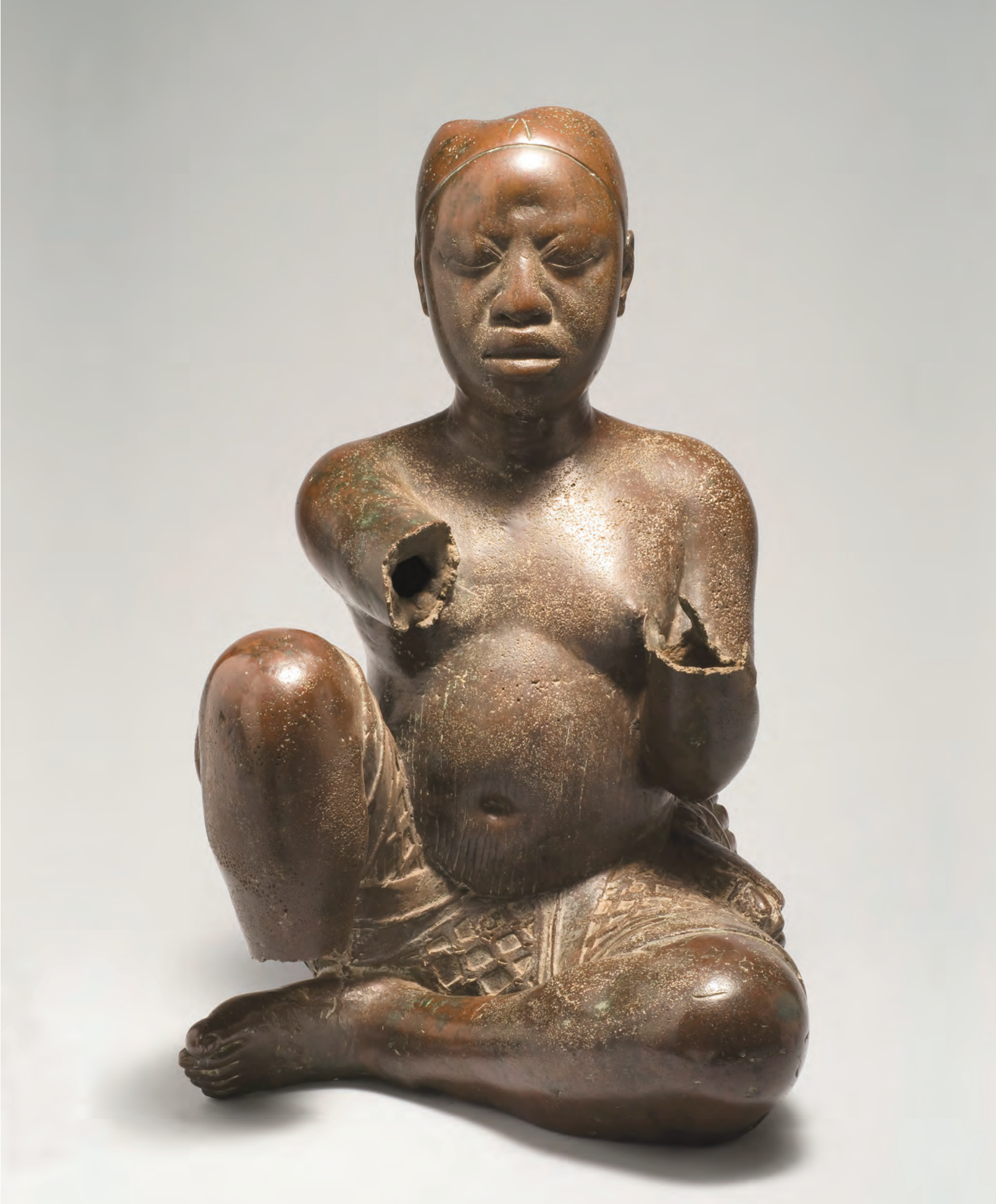
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY'S museum sits on the western edge of Lake Michigan, which was icebound when I visited in January. The campus gleamed with a mixture of frost, healthy funding, and Dirk Lohan's pale limestone architecture. If it weren't for the fact that Northwestern boasts America's oldest African studies program and a library containing the world's largest single Africana collection, the frozen fields of Evanston, Illinois, might seem like a peculiar place to find the first major American exhibition of medieval African art. "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa" is both a general and a highly specific survey, featuring more than 250 objects from West Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, dating from the eighth to sixteenth centuries. Most of the African artworks (and fragments of lost artworks) are on loan from institutions in Mali, Nigeria, or Morocco, which form a kind of triangle of focus for the exhibition. From there, the show's purview stretches outward to the Sahara and those who traveled it, for pilgrimage, trade, or cultural exchange—of gold, salt, ivory, textiles, texts, ideas.

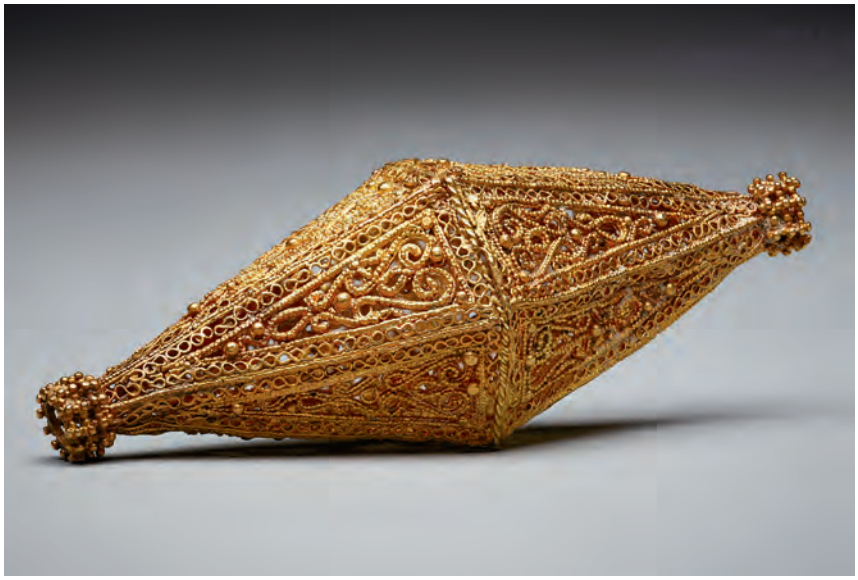
Spread across a handful of interconnected galleries are artifacts such as majestic bronze figures, astonishing terra-cotta sculptures, and vessels—both fragmented and whole—dug up from the ground. Together, the juxtaposed fragments and treasures bespeak a historical record—eroded by colonial looting and neglect—of goods, materials, and people moving across the medieval Sahara and into the wider world. Europe is represented here by artworks manufactured from African gold and ivory, but these are literally and figuratively at the exhibition's periphery. "Caravans of Gold" forces Europe into a marginal role. This show wants to be two things: a paradigm-shifting breakthrough in non-Eurocentric representations of global history, as well as a detailed, scholarly inquiry into one particular subject. That's a tricky two-hander to pull off. The curator is the Block's own Kathleen Bickford Berzock, a soft-spoken, rigorous expert in African art and co-editor of *Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display* (2010).

The Block is a big institution, but not the biggest. At a larger museum, "Caravans of Gold" might have succumbed to generalization. The middle ages are highly susceptible to inaccurate summary, and the word "medieval" invokes all sorts of old chestnuts: knights and round tables rather than ordinary human lives. Some viewers imagine the void that preceded capitalism, colonialism, and modernity. They see a lack of linear perspective and the infancy of our own visual culture. But the trans-Saharan focus of "Caravans of Gold" has helped it avoid the trap of that metanarrative, and the temptation to tack a parallel and equivalent story about medieval Africa onto medieval European history.

THE FIRST ROOM is full of gold. There's a vast array of currency here, from late antique and medieval Italy but also from Rabat in Morocco. The coins don't



As historical surprises go, Chinese pottery in medieval West Africa is very good indeed.



Biconical bead, Egypt or Syria, 10th–11th century, gold, with filigree, granulation, and "rope" wire, 2⅞ by 1 inches in diameter. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto.

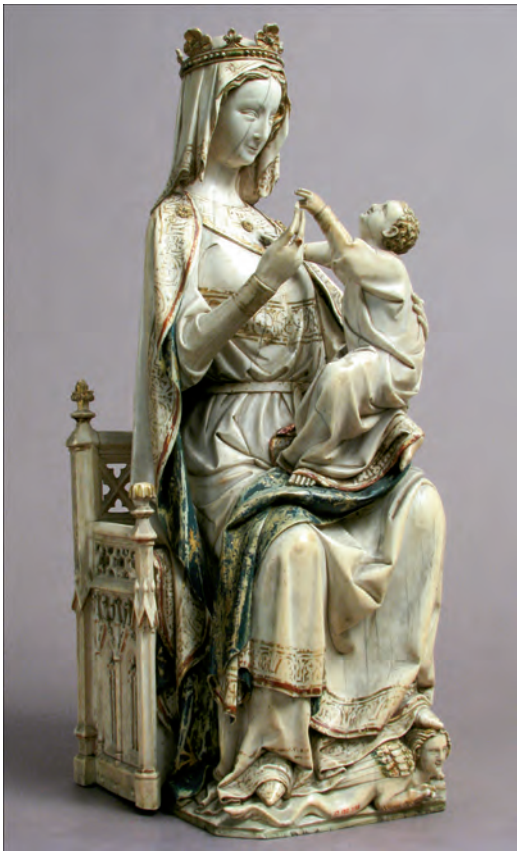
look all that different. The Sahara was the world's portal for accessing West African gold in the medieval period. Traders in the Sahara could swap salt, naturally abundant in the desert and crucial for human and animal life, for gold mined from the sub-Saharan region. This foundation led to a global economy motivated by foreign lust for gold. But that trade system didn't appear from nowhere, magicked into being by Western desire.

Gold is a visual medium, and its use in medieval Africa ranged from coinage to textiles to books. A folio from the famous Blue Qur'an, which was probably made in ninth- or tenth-century Tunisia, is shown alongside a fifteenth-century French Book of Hours, included as an example of the use of gold leaf in medieval European manuscripts, as well as other books and loose leaves from Muslim and Jewish traditions, such as a siddur prayer book from fifteenth-century Lisbon. The exhibited texts are written in entirely different scripts, for different audiences, but united by the materials they are made from, showing how the culture of the book spans diverse geographies, languages, religious practices. Gold was a sort of vector for that exchange. The trade in West African gold therefore is a history not only of commerce but of intellectual exchange throughout the medieval world.

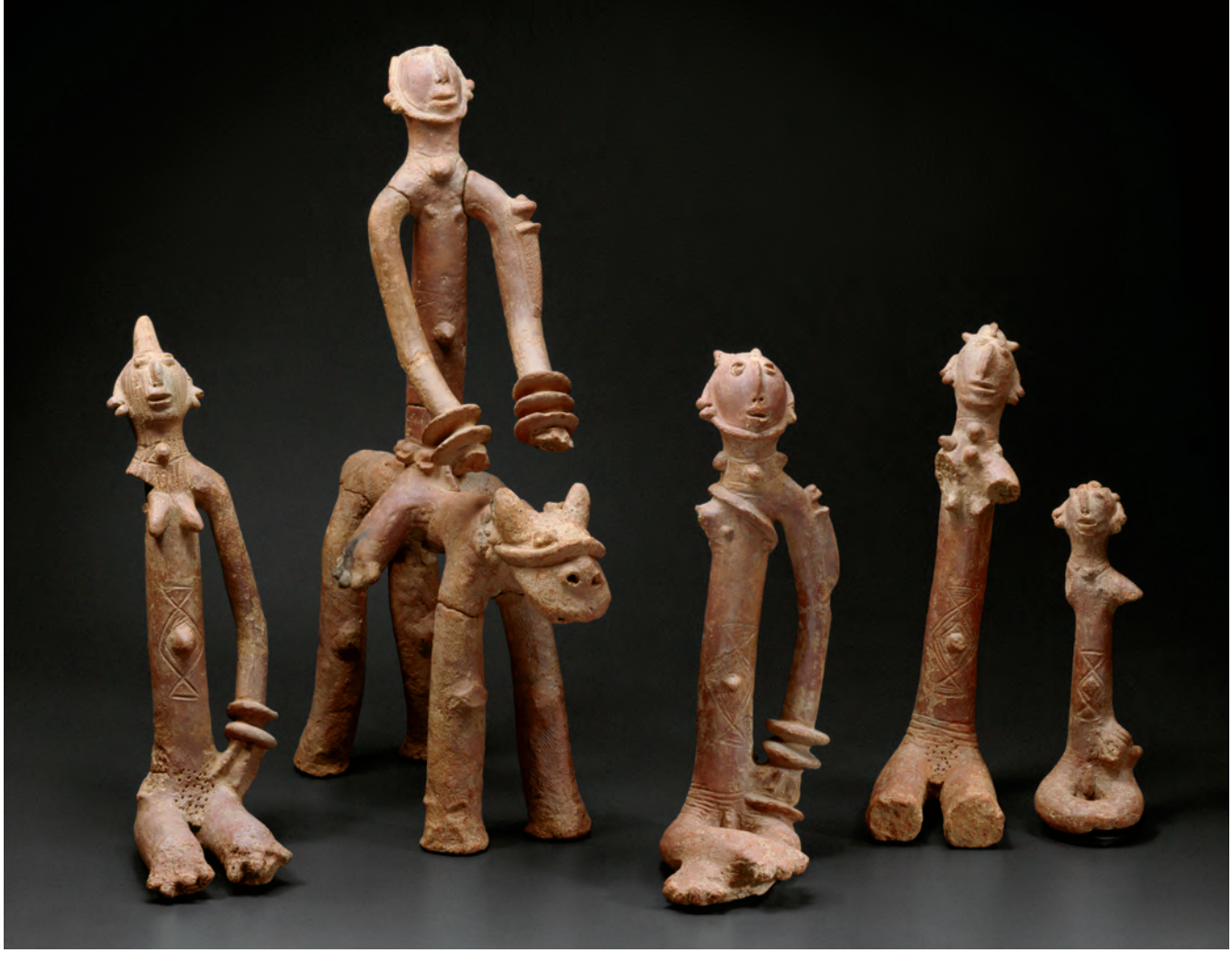
In the next room, a group of terra-cotta figures greets you: an indeterminate quadruped animal, a small mounted human figure, and a kneeling person. They're immensely charismatic sculptures, with pronounced ears and heavy, strong bases. The horse's body is stylized as a simple arc shape, with another arc for a head, and its rider is a simple vertical form. Some of the larger sculptures were excavated at a site called Natamatao in Mali, and they were part of a medieval tradition throughout the Niger River basin. The people represented in these sculptures controlled trade from their strongholds on the Niger River, a major thoroughfare that connected gold sources to the trans-Saharan trade routes. The people of Natamatao represented themselves as graceful and capable figures, fully in charge of their animals. Horses were key in controlling borders in this region in the medieval period, and Arabian horses were also brought across the Sahara as trade commodities.

After such whole and magnetic artworks, the section of the exhibition dedicated to the fragment, both as archaeological phenomenon (everything here was excavated in Sijilmasa, in Morocco, or Gao and Tadmekka in Mali) and as a metaphor for imagining history, is a little disappointing. It can't be helped that fragments look underwhelming in their vitrines, more like the remnants swept from the floor of a kiln than art.

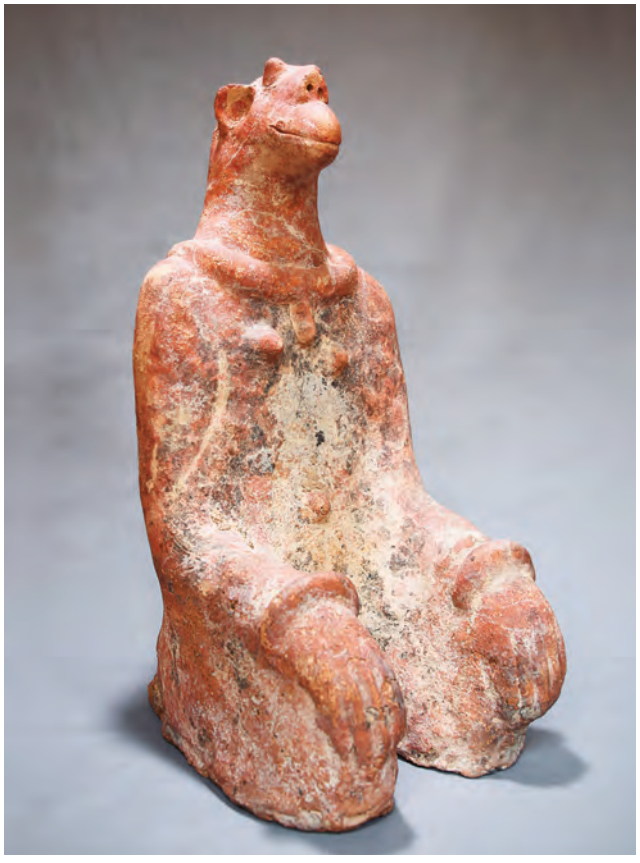
But the fragment has a special poetry for the archaeologist, whose work recovers objects that are simultaneously "*of* the past and *in* the present," to use a phrase



Virgin and Child, France, ca. 1275–1300, ivory with paint, 14½ by 6½ by 5 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



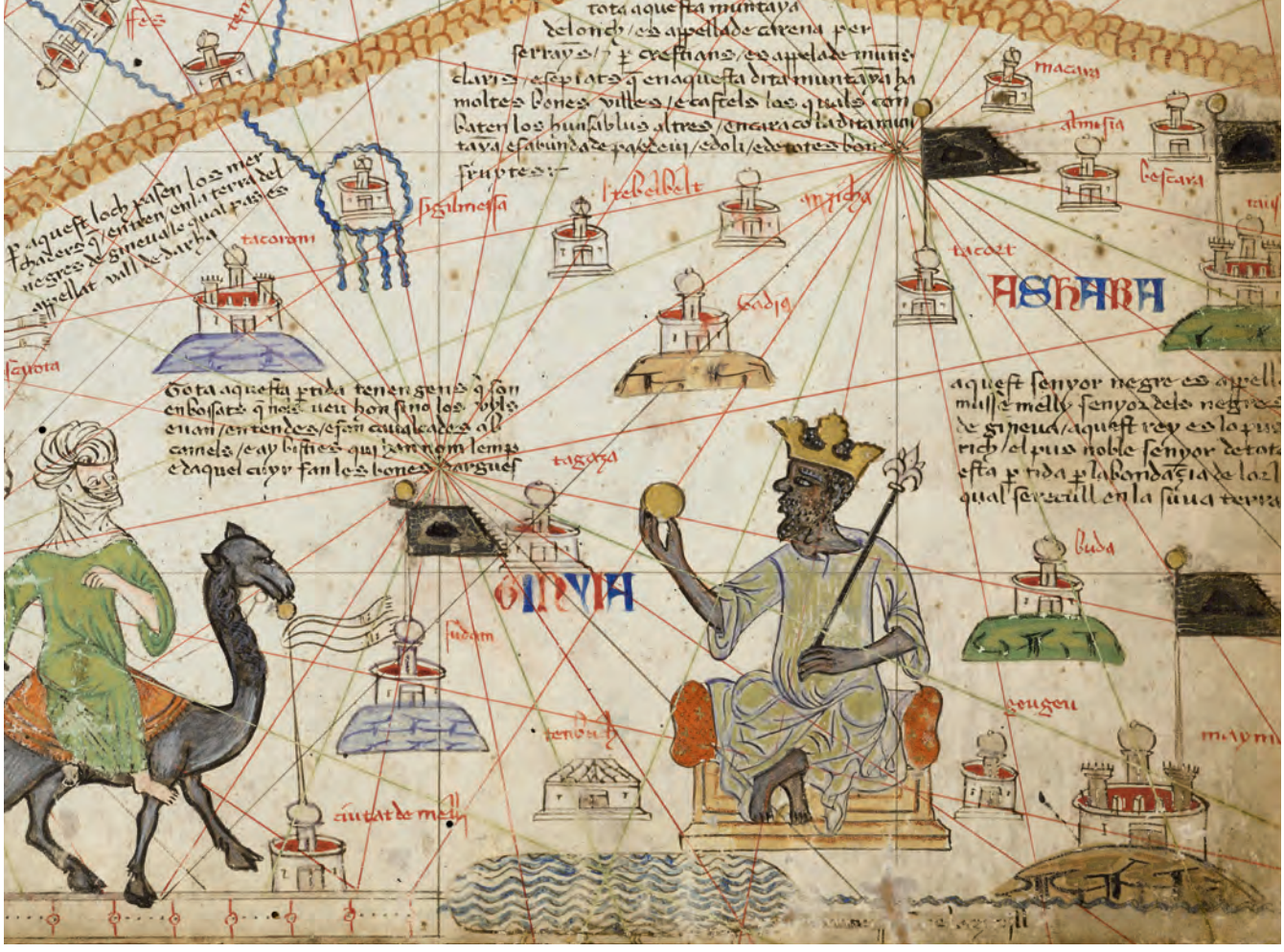
Horseman and four figures, Bankoni, Mali, ca. 13th–16th century, terra-cotta, ranging from approx. 17 to 27 inches tall. Art Institute of Chicago.



Kneeling figure, Natamatao, Mopti region, Mali, ca. 12th–14th century, terra-cotta, 18 by 8¾ by 8½ inches. Musée national du Mali, Bamako. Photo Seydou Camara.

repeated often at the conference on the show's opening day. And the more I looked at these little pieces of glass and earthenware and ceramic, the more I could see that they were part of universal forms. Everybody has to carry water, light lamps, eat off something. And yet these surviving bits and pieces remain singular and authentic, carrying their own history like an aura.

I asked Bickford Berzock how she expected the ordinary museumgoer to imagine the fragments as part of whole objects, whole societies. Nothing in the wall texts tells you precisely how to interpret these odd little specimens, and for a person used to didactic museum narratives the display might be bewildering. The curator responded with two simple questions: What art histories get told in museums, and by whom? It's only when you ask those questions, she said, that you see how this particular art history has been left out of the museum canon *because* it's fragmented. The only way to get medieval African art into the museum is to make an argument for the beauty and intrinsic worth of fragmentary remains, because so few whole objects survive. The exhibition's lighting, the cases, the presentation: these are all signals to the viewer that there is value here, and that if you look closely and hard enough you will start to witness an extraordinary kind of humanity inhering in these bits and pieces. You have to do some work to get there, Bickford Berzock admitted, but that's part of the point.



The Catalan Atlas (detail), designed by Abraham Cresque, 1375, parchment mounted on six wood panels. The king of Mali, Mansā Mūsā, is at center. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

One tiny piece of porcelain, for example, is exhibited on loan from the Institut des Sciences Humaines, Bamako, having been dug out of the ground at Tadmekka. It's glazed in pale, jade-colored celadon. The object has jagged edges, and it looks like nothing, or like trash. But it broke off a shallow bowl made during the Song dynasty (960–1279) in Jiangxi province, China, and made its way into the Malian dirt. Qingbai ware was exported from China in great volume between the tenth and twelfth centuries. As historical surprises go, Chinese pottery in medieval West Africa is very good indeed. Just across the same room sits an ivory Madonna from thirteenth-century France, carved from the tusk of an elephant we know came from sub-Saharan Africa, because only that kind of elephant has a tusk large enough for a carving that is 6½ inches wide. Like the Qingbai ware, the Madonna-tusk prompts a fascination that lies not in the *look* of the object, but in the new questions that frame it. What is the material history of this thing, and who brought the tusk across that enormous desert? How does that material history speak to the Madonna's aesthetic form? What do elephants have to do with medieval Catholicism, and what does Chinese porcelain have to do with Mali?

By pushing the rest of the world to the margins of "Caravans of Gold," the Block has succeeded in centering Africa according to the logic that Dipesh Chakrabarty once called "provincializing Europe." In his book of the same name, Chakrabarty wrote: "The Europe I seek to provincialize or decenter is an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *clichéd or shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of thought." Such paradigms, he argues, inevitably affect scholars' attempts to write about other regions of the world. Ideas like "democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on" are all burdened by their own history in the European Enlightenment and the nineteenth century. When we use them to describe, say, political modernity in South Asia, we are using language that is both "indispensable and inadequate": indispensable because we have no alternative vocabulary, but inadequate because the words' own histories limit their application.[1]

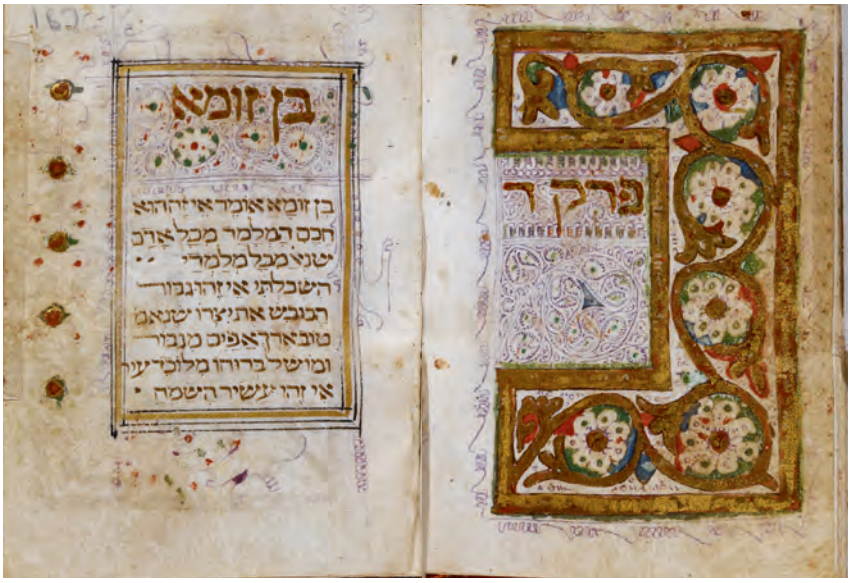
The same is true of the word "medieval." Derived from the Latin for "middle" and "age," it supposedly denotes a period of some centuries but in practice conveys "clichéd or shorthand forms" of historical narrative: the middleness between antiquity and the Renaissance, or a certain stage in the involvement between Christianity and nation states. As with a word like "democracy" or "sovereignty," therefore, "medieval" is an idea that automatically centers Europe, unless Europe is forced out. "Medieval" is indispensable, because it is the only way to refer to the eighth to sixteenth centuries that "Caravans of Gold" covers. It is inadequate, because the "middleness" of trans-Saharan history is geographical and economic, not chronological.

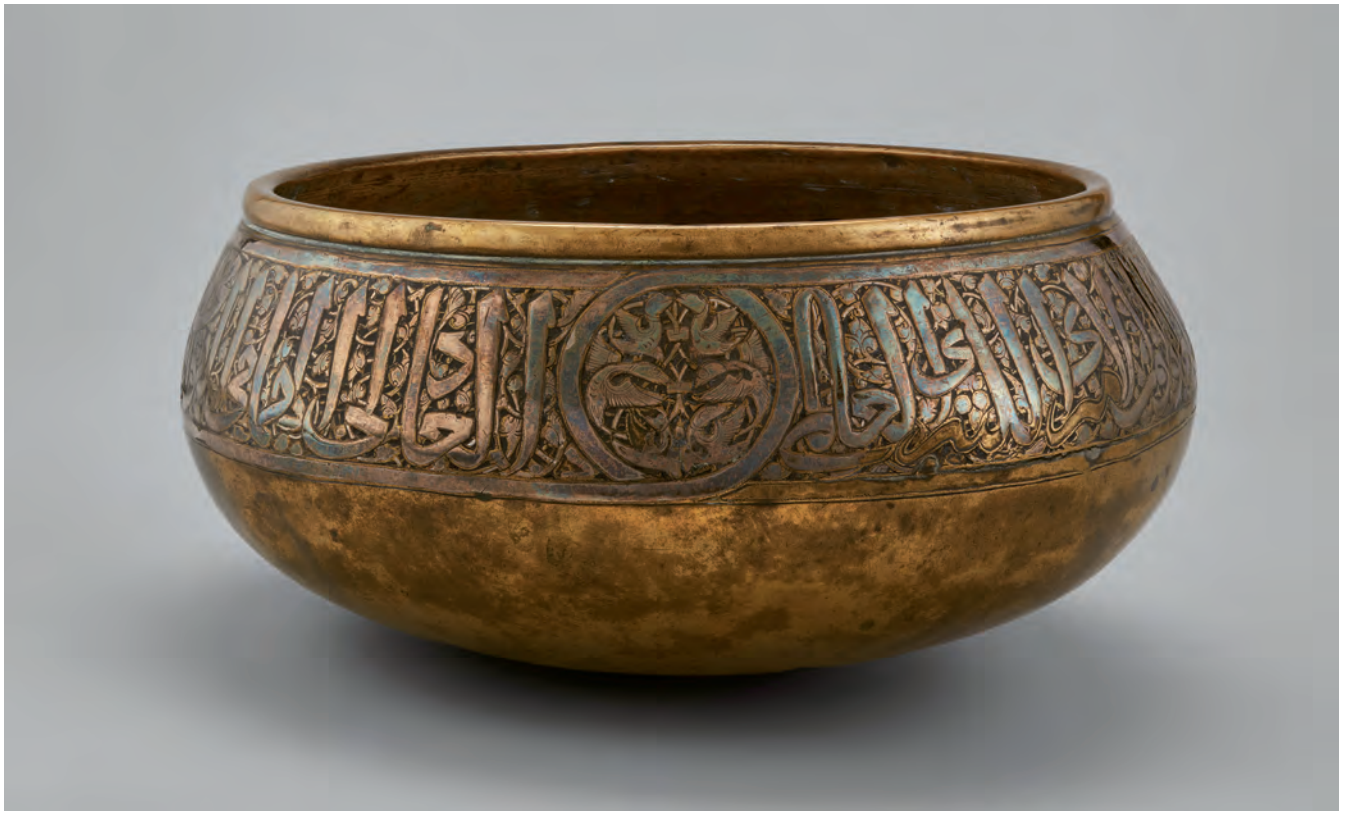
ALL IT TAKES is a simple look into other regions and other centuries for us see that Europe, while a world

economy, was just *one of* the world econom*ies* in the medieval period, and all its aesthetic and political cultures coexisted with a global web of relationships. In the medieval global trade system, ports and trading cities brought people and goods together from immensely long distances via sea lanes, rivers, and long overland routes, mediated by exchange points that broke up the journey. As the economic historian Janet Abu-Lughod has written of the global economic system of the medieval period: "No single power could be said to be hegemonic; the participation of all was required for its perpetuation."[2]

"Caravans of Gold" teaches precisely that lesson in historical economics, which makes it a postcolonial medieval show that intervenes in the old narrative of capitalism's inevitable culmination in Western hegemony. There are many more stories of cultural exchange to tell from the medieval period, and even now Eurocentrism underwrites every discussion of postcolonial theory that treats the spread of capitalism as its starting point. "Caravans of Gold" tells stories of exchange and of beauty, bringing African artisans, travelers, and tradespeople into the role usually occupied in our culture by heroic knights of medieval fiction. It replaces a vision of the Sahara as an empty space with the truth of the Sahara as a venue for movement and the generation of wealth. It replaces the blank spots in our historical vision with the simple fact of African people's existence in and relevance to the medieval world. If this is the only lesson visitors take away with them from the Block out into the contemporary world and every museum they visit afterward, it will have been enough. History is a very big place indeed, but the gold always had to come from somewhere. ○

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference-New Edition,* Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 3–4.
2. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 37.





Siddur (prayer book), Lisbon, late 15th century, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on parchment. Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.

Bowl, Egypt, 11th century, luster-painted fritware, 7⅞ inches in diameter. Aga Khan Museum.