

## BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART TO PRESENT MAJOR EXHIBITION EXPLORING MOTHERHOOD AND AFRICAN ART

### *Nearly 40 Artworks from Matrilineal Communities Explore How the Visual Iconography of Motherhood Was Used to Give Objects Power*

BALTIMORE, MD (February 20, 2020)—Throughout the matrilineal societies of 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century Africa, symbols of motherhood were used to imbue artworks with moral, cultural, and spiritual authority, or “mother power.” While individual artworks from this region and the anthropology of maternal kinship (when a person’s identity and authority is determined by their mother’s bloodline) have been studied in depth, the wider relationship between artistic creativity and maternal kinship has been largely unexplored. The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) brings this subject to light with *A Perfect Power: Motherhood and African Art*, an exhibition that demonstrates how this powerful visual iconography played an important role in the functioning of these states and societies. On view from April 5 through July 12, 2020, the exhibition includes nearly 40 artworks drawn from public and private collections. *A Perfect Power* is presented as part of the museum’s *2020 Vision* initiative to explore the wide-ranging contributions of women artists as well as historic representations of women in art from many times and places.

*A Perfect Power: Motherhood and African Art* is curated by Kevin Tervalá, BMA Associate Curator of African Art; Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, Professor of Sociology, Africana, and Women’s Studies at Stony Brook University; and Jennifer Kingsley, Director of the Museums & Society Program at Johns Hopkins University (JHU). Additional support was provided by JHU undergraduate students Michael Harper, Hae In Kim, Maria Kyriakakos, Clara Leverenz, and Andrea White, who participated in the Spring 2019 Curatorial Practicum. Their research and perspectives were instrumental to the development of the exhibition, from the checklist to the installation plan to the text used to describe featured works.

“*2020 Vision* provided the opportunity to consider the BMA’s collection through a new lens that has long fascinated me,” said Tervalá. “By bringing objects from our collection into dialogue with important loans from institutions across the country, the tremendous extent to which motherhood and power are synonymous in the visual vocabulary of matrilineal states and societies becomes clear. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí’s vision and perspective has been essential to the development of this exhibition as well. Her rich, theoretical perspective provided a new framework through which to explore motherhood as an essential metaphor for power, and I hope that it will encourage audiences to consider motherhood from a new vantage point.”

The exhibition opens with an exploration of the five most common symbols artists and craftspeople used to signify “mother power”: pregnancy, prominent breasts, scarification, a bold gaze, or the presence of a child. While an impregnated womb was the clearest sign of the ability to create life, prominent breasts were used by artists to signal the ability to sustain and nourish it. Decorative scars, particularly around the womb, were used to draw attention to the site of the origin of life. Confident gazes demonstrated the strength of mothers, while the presence of children in sculptures represented the healthy futures of not only families but whole communities.

Highlights of the exhibition that demonstrate “mother power” include the BMA’s own *D’mba* (Great Mother Headdress) from the Baga culture in Guinea, which will be presented fully dressed for the first time, appearing as it would have when it was used during ceremonies. This intricate wooden headdress, one of the finest examples of its kind, represents a woman at the height of her power, created to honor women, inspire girls, and reflect the belief that Baga culture was created and sustained by mothers. Another highlight is the *Singiti* (Commemorative Portrait

of a Chief) where the male chief that the sculpture represents appears pregnant. The Hemba artist in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) who sculpted this wooden figure chose to mark the importance of the chief's achievements by depicting him with the most direct sign of power, the ability to create life. Another outstanding example is an intricately carved wood *Kipona* (Throne) from the Luba region of the DRC. In this work, the body of the male leader is depicted as being supported by the figure of a woman. So associated were women with royal power in the Luba kingdom that it was believed when the king died his spirit moved into the body of a woman, who was then known by the title *Mwadi*.

*A Perfect Power* also demonstrates how artworks used maternal symbolism to provide protection, assist in initiation ceremonies that transformed boys into men, and stabilize communities amidst the horrors of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The *Phemba* (Mother and Child Figure) from the Yombe region of the DRC was created as part of *Mpemba*, a society which commissioned artists to carve mother and child sculptures to provide spiritual protection to mothers and pregnant women during the rapid and violent depopulation of the Kongoles society. *Mukudj'* (White Masks) from the Punu region of Gabon were danced during serious periods of social unrest.

"With *2020 Vision*, we wanted to offer our audience a wide cross-section of experiences. In addition to presenting the formal and conceptual contributions of female-identifying artists to the dialogues and narratives of art, it was equally critical that we examine some of the ways that women have shaped cultural histories and traditions," said Christopher Bedford, BMA Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director. "*A Perfect Power* presents an opportunity to look afresh at the idea of motherhood through a framework incredibly different from Western and contemporary notions, thus enhancing our wider understanding of its significance across time and place. We look forward to engaging our visitors not only with the concepts in *A Perfect Power* but also the exceptional works of art that it features."

### **THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART**

Founded in 1914, The Baltimore Museum of Art is a major cultural destination recognized for engaging diverse audiences through dynamic exhibitions and innovative educational and community outreach programs. The BMA's internationally renowned collection of 95,000 objects encompasses more than 1,000 works by Henri Matisse anchored by the famed Cone Collection of modern art, as well as one of the nation's finest holdings of prints, drawings, and photographs. The galleries showcase an exceptional collection of art from Africa; important works by established and emerging contemporary artists; outstanding European and American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts; significant artworks from China; ancient Antioch mosaics; and exquisite textiles from around the world. The 210,000- square-foot museum is also distinguished by a grand historic building designed in the 1920s by renowned American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of 20th-century sculpture. The BMA is located in Charles Village, three miles north of the Inner Harbor, and is adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University. General admission to the BMA is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

### **VISITOR INFORMATION**

General admission to the BMA is free. Special exhibitions may be ticketed. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m.–5 p.m. The museum is closed Monday, Tuesday, New Year's Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit [artbma.org](http://artbma.org).

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