“The Kingdom of Kongo in American Museums”

The Kingdom of Kongo was an advanced civilization located in West Central Africa in present day Angola, the Republic of the Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo. By 1483 the kingdom entered European history when Diogo Cão, Portuguese explorer landed in the Kongo. There he planted padrões, limestone standards, with the Portuguese seal in the name of King João II. This began complex relationships between the Kingdom of Kongo and European powers. One of the results of these complex relations and over 500 years of cultural exchanges are exquisite works of Kongo art. Today, Kongo works of art are held museum collections around the world.

Recently in America there has been two exhibition which center around the Kingdom of Kongo and the various art forms created there. From September 18, 2015 until January 3, 2016 the Metropolitan Museum of Art showcased Kongo: Power and Majesty. This exhibition was developed by Alisa LaGamma, curator of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. This exhibition highlights Kongo’s artistic tradition from the fifteenth century through the nineteenth century, while presenting the kingdom’s relationships with European powers. The second exhibition, Kongo Across the Waters traveled from October 22, 2013 until May 25, 2015. Kongo Across the Waters was a collaboration between the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art and the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tevuren, Belgium. The curatorial team was comprised of Susan Cooksey, curator of African Arts at the Harn, Dr. Robin Poyner, professor of African Art History at the University of Florida, and Hein Vanhee, curator at the Royal Museum of Central
Africa. This exhibition highlighted artistic and cultural traditions from Kongo, while tracing its influence across the Atlantic world.

My intent is to analyze how the curators of *Kongo Power and Majesty* and *Kongo Across the Waters* presented the history of the kingdom to an American audience. In this paper I argue that *Kongo: Power and Majesty* was an object-centered exhibitions that favored the aesthetic qualities of the artworks. This object-centered exhibition emitted a great deal of information on the true relationship between European powers and Kongo, romanticizing these relationships. *Kongo Across the Waters* was an ambitious exhibition that attempted to present too many topics at once, that lead to an unfocused exhibition. For my study of *Power and Majesty* and *Across the Waters* I have analyzed floor plans, exhibition catalogues, display photographs, press releases, exhibition reviews, interviews, and facts sheets. I had an opportunity to visit the Metropolitan Muesum of Art to see *Kongo: Power and Majesty*. I was unable to attended *Kongo Across the Waters*, fortunately Susan Cooksey curator at the Harn provided me with curatorial records for my analysis.

African works of art present difficult questions to curators and scholars. These works of art are foreign in museums and exhibitions. African arts were not created to be displayed in Western art institutions and are no longer in the hands of the original creators. The identity of classical African artworks are now in the hands of curators who craft and present African history to the public. It is essential to understand and analyze how curators are crafting African histories through art works.