Kongo Art on Display, Have We Moved Forward?

The Kingdom of Kongo was located in West Central Africa in what is present day Angola, the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 1483 Portuguese explorers lead by Diogo Cão landed in the kingdom beginning communication with Europe. From this time in history Kongo art and artifacts made their way to Europe and today are being displayed in museums globally.

My interests reside in two exhibitions that opened in the past year which focus on art from the former kingdom. The Metropolitan Museum is currently showing, *Kongo: Power and Majesty* from September 2015 to January 2016. The Harn Museum toured *Kongo Across the Waters* from 2014 to 2015. Both exhibitions highlight relationships developed between the complex Kingdom of Kongo, Europe and America.

For my senior thesis I will evaluate these two exhibitions. I will analyze their design techniques and content to place them in conversation with the problems of African art and display. African art has been on display in private and public collections since Europe and Africa began communication. I believe there are ethical problems with displaying African artworks since they were not created to be viewed in a museum. But now that these works are shown in museums how are they being presented? For my senior thesis I will focus on *Kongo Across the Waters* and *Kongo: Power and Majesty*. Through my research I will prove that *Kongo Across the Waters* appropriates Kongo artworks by relating them to American artworks, while attempting to
make them relevant to the public. I will also prove that *Kongo Power and Majesty* romanticize the relationships between the people of Kongo and Europeans from the first moment of contact.

I will conduct personal research on *Kongo: Power and Majesty* by traveling to New York City to see the exhibition first hand. By viewing *Kongo: Power and Majesty* I can analyze the display techniques used by the Metropolitan Museum. *Kongo Across the Waters* is no longer on display, but by considering installation photos and contacting members of the Harn Museum I will have an understanding of the methods of display used.

My senior thesis provides an opportunity to use methods in the field of Art History. When I first entered University of North Carolina-Charlotte I knew Art History was going to be my field of study, but I had no idea my interests in art would take me this far. I transferred to University of North Carolina-Charlotte in the fall of 2014. Since then I have conducted research on various art history topics. I look forward to the places *Kongo Across the Waters* and *Kongo: Power and Majesty* will take me in my senior year.