

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**LARGE-SCALE SCULPTURES BY GHANAIAN ARTIST PAA JOE
ON VIEW AT HIGH MUSEUM OF ART THIS SPRING*****Works represent Gold Coast fortresses connected to African slave trade***

ATLANTA, Dec. 12, 2019 – This spring, the High Museum of Art will present “Paa Joe: Gates of No Return” (Feb. 29–May 31, 2020), an exhibition organized by the American Folk Art Museum featuring a series of seven large-scale, painted wood architectural sculptures representing Gold Coast fortresses, which served as way stations for millions of Africans sold into slavery and sent to the Americas and the Caribbean between the 16th and 19th centuries.

The sculptures were created by Ghanaian artist and master craftsman Joseph Tetteh Ashong (b. 1947), also known as Paa Joe, who is the most celebrated fantasy coffin maker of his generation. Recalling his figurative coffins—or abeduu adekai (“proverb boxes”)—these architectural models allude to the lives of the dead in their forms and motifs. Though not actual coffins, the sculptures in the exhibition refer to the fortress sites as embodying vessels of death. Once enslaved people were forced through these “Gates of No Return,” they started an irreversible and perilous journey during which many perished and those who survived suffered the spiritual death of permanent displacement and dehumanization.

The seven imposing sculptures selected for the exhibition are among a group of 13 models that were commissioned from Paa Joe in 2004 and 2005 by the late artist, collector and art dealer Claude Simard. The generous scale and high contrast of these sculptures evoke the style of Paa Joe’s fantasy coffins. The artist created this body of work after several visits to each of the Gold Coast sites, which include the Christiansborg Castle in Accra and Fort Gross-Friedrichsburg in Princes Town.

In addition to the seven sculptures on view, the exhibition features archival documents and recordings that provide context for the artist’s creative process and give points of entry into the history of these charged historical sites, including photographs and short films by award-winning filmmaker Benjamin Wigley and art historian Nana Oforiatta-Ayim, curator of Ghana’s 58th pavilion for the 2019 Venice Biennale.

As the first venue for this critically acclaimed exhibition in the American South, the High will also present programs and information that connect Paa Joe's haunting sculptures with the region's history of slavery.

"In a sculptural language informed by his many years of making fantasy coffins, Paa Joe has made it possible for our audiences to encounter places whose histories may not be as well-known as they should be," said Katherine Jentleson, the High's Merrie and Dan Boone curator of folk and self-taught art. "Standing before his replicas is an experience that will be an emotional one for our audiences, especially as we strive to connect these places with the historic sites related to the transatlantic slave trade that surround us in the southeastern United States."

"Paa Joe: Gates of No Return" will be presented on the second level of the High's Anne Cox Chambers Wing.

About the artist

Paa Joe was 15 years old when he began a 12-year apprenticeship in 1962 with his mother's cousin Kane Kwei (1922–1992), who is known to be the first to popularize the use of figurative coffins for burial. Still active, Paa Joe is based in the greater Accra region and has been building coffins since the 1970s, gaining recognition as being the most celebrated living artist of Ghana in the genre. In 2018, the Detroit Institute of Arts honored him with the 2018 African Arts Recognition Award, which underlines his contributions to contemporary culture. Paa Joe has received international recognition in exhibitions since the 1980s, including the 1989 seminal "Magicians of the Earth" at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and other presentations at the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Brooklyn Museum, among others. In 2016, he was the subject of a documentary film, "Paa Joe & The Lion" (Benjamin Wigley, ARTDOCS Ltd). Some of his coffins from American collections were featured in the 2018 exhibition "Shapes of the Ancestors: Bodies, Animals, Art, and Ghanaian Fantasy Coffins" at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Exhibition Organization and Support

"Paa Joe: Gates of No Return" is organized by the American Folk Art Museum, New York, and its Curator of Self-Taught Art and Art Brut Valérie Rousseau. This exhibition is made possible by Premier Exhibition Series Sponsor Delta Air Lines, Inc., and Invesco; Exhibition Series Sponsors Northside Hospital and WarnerMedia; Premier Exhibition Series Supporters the Antinori Foundation, Sarah and Jim Kennedy, Louise Sams and Jerome Grilhot, and wish foundation; Benefactor Exhibition Series Supporter Anne Cox Chambers Foundation; Ambassador Exhibition Series Supporters Tom and Susan Wardell, and Rod Westmoreland; and Contributing Exhibition Series Supporters Lucinda W. Bunnell, Marcia and John Donnell, W. Daniel Ebersole and Sarah Eby-Ebersole, Peggy Foreman, Robin and Hilton Howell, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter Jones, Margot and Danny McCaul, Joel Knox and Joan Marmo, Elizabeth and Chris Willett, and The Ron and Lisa Brill Family Charitable Trust. Generous support is also provided by the Alfred and Adele Davis Exhibition Endowment Fund, Anne Cox Chambers Exhibition Fund, Barbara Stewart Exhibition Fund, Dorothy Smith Hopkins Exhibition Endowment Fund, Eleanor McDonald Storza Exhibition Endowment Fund, The Fay and Barrett Howell Exhibition Fund, Forward Arts Foundation

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About the High Museum of Art

Located in the heart of Atlanta, Georgia, the High Museum of Art connects with audiences from across the Southeast and around the world through its distinguished collection, dynamic schedule of special exhibitions and engaging community-focused programs. Housed within facilities designed by Pritzker Prize–winning architects Richard Meier and Renzo Piano, the High features a collection of more than 17,000 works of art, including an extensive anthology of 19th- and 20th-century American fine and decorative arts; major holdings of photography and folk and self-taught work, especially that of artists from the American South; burgeoning collections of modern and contemporary art, including paintings, sculpture, new media and design; a growing collection of African art, with work dating from pre-history through the present; and significant holdings of European paintings and works on paper. The High is dedicated to reflecting the diversity of its communities and offering a variety of exhibitions and educational programs that engage visitors with the world of art, the lives of artists and the creative process. For more information about the High, visit www.high.org.

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