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VMFA to present *Congo Masks: Masterpieces from Central Africa*
Exhibition features more than 130 rare masks from the 17th to 20th centuries

Richmond, Virginia —The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts brings to life the fascinating and timeless sights and sounds of Africa’s vast Congo region in *Congo Masks: Masterpieces from Central Africa* from Nov. 10, 2018 through Feb. 24, 2019. This world-class collection of Congolese art features more than 130 rare and unique masks dating from the 17th to 20th centuries, with more than a dozen masks showcased in their complete ceremonial ensembles. The spectacular works of art in the exhibition represent not only the artisans and performers who created these masks and brought them to life, but also the various communities, belief systems and natural resources involved in their creation.



Face Mask with Feathered Collar, second quarter of the 20th century, Nyindu culture (Democratic Republic of the Congo), wood, pigment, rooster feathers, 15.3 in. high. Private Collection. Photo: Paul Louis

The exhibition is curated by the legendary Marc Leo Felix, founder and director of the Congo Basin Art History Research Center in Brussels, Belgium. Over the past five decades, he has amassed one of the finest private collections of rare and important Congolese masks in the world. A world-renowned art historian, linguist, curator and collector, Marc Leo Felix has conducted extensive field research across the Congo Basin since the 1960s and authored dozens of books and articles on the ritual arts of Central Africa. With *Congo Masks*, many renowned objects from his and other important collections will be on display for the first time in the United States, with some examples in the exhibition being among the only known and finest in existence.

The exhibition provides a rich setting with original field photographs and film footage of the masks being worn and performed in ceremonies or rituals, as well as audio recordings and a selection of Congolese musical instruments. The vast majority of masks are used to dance to music that is performed by visible and invisible instruments, some of which are secret and sacred.

“We are thrilled to share Marc Leo Felix’s world-class collection of masks from the Congo region, along with other important examples from private collections, with our visitors,” says Alex Nyerges, VMFA director. “I was fortunate to see Marc’s collection on display in China and knew that it presented a wonderful opportunity for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to continue to ‘bring the world to Virginia’ by highlighting the artistry and beauty of these traditional masks. There is so much to learn about the Congo region, its history, and its diverse cultures through these objects.”

“In the Congo Basin, masks function as performance objects in rituals, ceremonies, worship and entertainment,” explains Marc Leo Felix, the exhibition’s curator. “Masks fill a variety of important roles, representing local aesthetics, mythologies, histories, social structures, and aesthetics. Each demonstrates its own innovation in artistic excellence and beauty. *Congo Masks* presents a comprehensive look at Central African masking practices through breathtaking examples that showcase the artistic vision, craftsmanship, and dynamism of these amazing works of art.”

The immense Congo Basin stretches almost 1.5 million square miles across Central Africa and contains within it the nearly 3,000-mile-long Congo River. This expansive region has been home to human civilization for thousands of years, offering not only a wealth of resources, but protection and artistic inspiration to its hundreds of cultural and ethnic groups. *Congo Masks* features an immersive and innovative multimedia design to emulate a journey

along the Congo River and its many tributaries, linking together areas that represent the region's climate, topography and cultural landscape. Dense rainforests in the center and north are contrasted by wooded savannas and grasslands to the south. These environmental variations are seen in the materials and construction techniques of the masks themselves. Placed deliberately high, the displays correspond with the wearers' physical heights to evoke the objects' original performances and settings.

Visitors will explore *Congo Masks* through 11 stylistic zones established by Marc Leo Felix and based on his five decades of research. "In each of these 11 zones the various cultural entities [tribes or peoples] make masks that have a number of things in common," said Felix. "This 'thing' can be the mask's exact function(s), the persona depicted, the sculptural style, and the materials or pigments used on their masks. These stylistic zones can also pertain to different geographic and ecological settings across the region."

The masks in this exhibition represent the creative expression of more than 40 different Congolese cultural groups. The masks' face coverings are made of carved wood, fiber, resin, hide, or metal. Body coverings are constructed from knitted fiber, hide, bark, leaves, grasses and feathers. Depicting humans, animals, spirits and combinations of the three, masks are active instruments in spiritual ceremony and storytelling. Some more recent masks even depict figures such as Jesus Christ and Elvis Presley. The inclusion of these masks, like so many aspects of this groundbreaking exhibition, is designed to challenge pre-existing assumptions about African masks, thus making this an innovative, educational, once-in-a-lifetime experience for VMFA's visitors.

Accompanying the exhibition is a lavishly illustrated 392-page catalogue, featuring groundbreaking new scholarship from a dozen of the field's leading experts. In addition to curator Marc Leo Felix, eminent scholars Viviane Baeke, Arthur P. Bourgeois, H. Kellim Brown, David A. Binkley, Rik Ceysens, Pol Pierre Gossiaux, Manuel Jordán, Constantine Petridis, Zoë S. Strother and Julien Volper, the best in their field, have provided detailed information, research and references for each of the more than 130 masks in the exhibition, making this catalogue one of the best and most comprehensive resources available to the general public. It can be ordered online (vmfa.museum/shop/) or by calling the VMFA shop at 804.340.1525.

Sponsorship Information

Congo Masks: Masterpieces from Central Africa is presented by Dominion Energy as part of their long-standing commitment to supporting African art at VMFA. In addition to previous exhibition sponsorships, the museum's Dominion Energy Galleries house one of the strongest public collections of African art in the United States.

Congo Masks: Masterpieces from Central Africa is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in partnership with the Congo Basin Art History Research Center and Tribal Arts, S.P.R.L., Brussels, Belgium, and Ethnic Art and Culture Limited, Hong Kong. The exhibition program at VMFA is supported by the Julia Louise Reynolds Fund. It is presented by Dominion Energy. Additional sponsors are The Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans Exhibitions Endowment, The Julia Louise Reynolds Fund, Virginia H. Spratley Charitable Fund II, Mr. Michael Bakwin, Ed and Beverly Jennings, Margaret and Thomas Mackell and Don and Mary Shockey.

Tickets

Tickets for the exhibition are now on sale. The exhibition is free for VMFA members, children ages 6 and under, state employees and teachers, as well as active-duty military personnel and their immediate families; \$16 for adults; \$12 for seniors 65+; and \$10 for youth 7–17 and college students with ID.

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Media Contacts

Jan Hatchette | 804.204.2721 | jan.hatchette@VMFA.museum
Lillian Dunn | 804.340.1517 | lillian.dunn@VMFA.museum
Ellie McNevin | 804.204.2680 | ellie.mcnevin@VMFA.museum
200 N. Boulevard, Richmond VA 23220

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect,

preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 40,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804-340-1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.