

Grand Valley Lanthorn

'Art of Africa' exhibit to open door to African cultures

By Brandy Arnold (GVL A & E Editor) 1/23/2008 6:56:55 PM

The United States has mandated February as the month when Americans take time to remember the history and culture of black Americans. However, the African continent to which blacks from this country will forever be linked is rarely examined.

Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park will open a new exhibition Friday, which will give visitors an opportunity to explore the continent's people and their cultures through art. "Art of Africa: Objects from the Collection of Warren M. Robbins" contains more than 80 objects representing the rituals and religious ceremonies of approximately 30 cultures of sub-Saharan Africa.

The Gardens and Sculpture Park has looked for an exhibition such as this one for several years, said Joseph Becherer, director and curator of sculpture.

"It's always a great opportunity to look at other cultures and how they make art," he said. "There is a broad representation of work and cultures within this exhibit. People will see many things that are unfamiliar to them. But once the background is explained, they will understand."

Helping guests as they make their way through the exhibition will be four films about African culture shown in the art gallery, education center and auditorium. There will also be a gallery guide provided.

While other smaller exhibits have explored African culture, one of this size is a first for West Michigan, Becherer said. Since the beginning of the 20th century, African art's influence in western culture has grown as more people began to collect it and closely study its significance, he added.

Jacques Mangala, Grand Valley State University assistant professor, said he is planning a trip to visit the exhibition for his AAA 202: African Diaspora class.

"Such exposure is key if one wants to fully appreciate cultural continuation of African forms in the new world," Mangala said, who is also the director of the African/African American Studies program. "The arts are what remains when everything else is gone. Just look at what happened to all great civilizations. We remember them mostly through the art."

People do not need to be knowledgeable about Africa to enjoy this exhibition because art is a "universal language that speaks to our humanity," he said.

To see the art in person brings a new appreciation of the level of craftsmanship needed to make the pieces, Becherer said.

"There was no industrial technology used, it was all done by hand," he said. "The connection you get from seeing the hand work done for these pieces is very moving."

The most fundamental aspect to visiting the exhibition is to see art in the same way it is viewed in Africa, he added.

"In the western world people see it as something you put on your walls or in a gallery," he said. "People in Africa see it as an integral part of life. To develop an appreciation of that concept is important. This exhibit will broaden horizons."

Mangala said he is looking forward to seeing the "monolithic" creativity and diversity of African cultures.

"Many people are not aware of African influences on western culture," he said. "Such an exhibit may contribute to the dialogue of civilizations."

"Art of Africa" runs until May 4. Events coinciding with the exhibition will run through March at the Gardens and Sculpture Park. Kendall College of Art and Design will begin at 2 p.m. today. The African Art Road Show featuring George Bayard, local gallery owner and African art expert, will be on Sunday at 2 p.m. Clothing and Culture of Ghana featuring Georgia Farr, owner of Creations by Georgia, will be on Feb. 2 at 2 p.m., and on March 11, Becherer will give a guided walk through of the exhibit at 7 p.m. For more information, visit <http://www.meijergardens.org>.

