

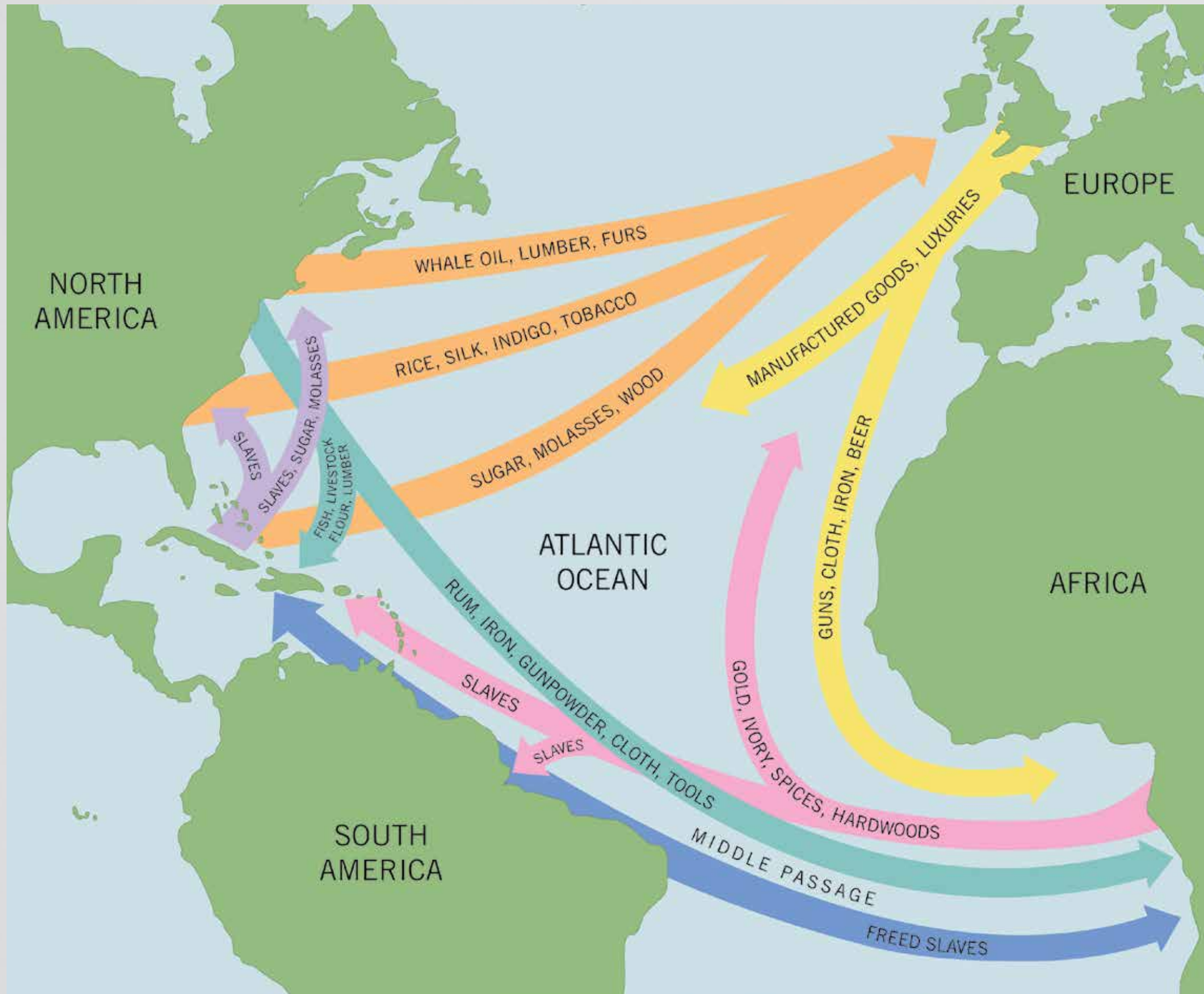


SPIRITED THINGS

SACRED ARTS OF
THE BLACK ATLANTIC

TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE

IA&A INTERNATIONAL
ARTS AND ARTISTS



INTRODUCTION

The ruthless triangular trade that flourished between the continents of Europe, Africa, and the Americas brought millions of enslaved Africans to the Americas, where African priests—assimilating some of the practices and beliefs of the radically new cultures they encountered—gradually adapted their ancestral religions to their people’s new and dire circumstances. The Afro-Atlantic religions are products of Africans’ long-running cosmopolitanism, and represent a complex, syncretic response to the tragic beginnings of globalization. This exhibition explores a family of religions that emerged from the centuries-long turmoil and diaspora of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.



SPIRITED THINGS

SACRED ARTS OF THE BLACK ATLANTIC

Spirited Things explores a family of religions that evolved in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. At its root are the ancestors of the Yorùbá people and their gods, called òrìṣà (in Yorùbá), *orichas* (Spanish), *orixás* (Portuguese), or *orishas* (English). West African monarchs and merchants invoked the òrìṣà in rituals of healing and for the protection of their interests in the coastal trade with their European counterparts. Later, West Africans enslaved in the Caribbean and South America adapted these same gods to their own, more existential needs of mutual assistance, healing, and spiritual uplift, often in defiance of their captors' attempts to suppress their ancestral traditions. They disguised and amplified their continued worship of African gods by combining them with similar Roman Catholic saints and indigenous spirits. This blending of African, European, and Native American iconography and practices is a hallmark of the religions of the African diaspora, which include Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería (also called Regla de Ocha), Brazilian Candomblé, and Caribbean Spiritism.

In the 1500s and 1600s, European traders arriving on the West African coast labeled the religious objects of the cultures they encountered “fetishes,” thus deriding

Africans for their alleged attribution of miraculous powers or excessive value to material things that Europeans valued little. It was soon a common metaphor used by Europeans—from religious leaders to Enlightenment thinkers—to dismiss their European ideological foes as “fetishists,” with the implication that their rivals were as foolish as Africans were presumed to be. Today, scholars have redefined the “fetish” as a charged material object from any culture that mediates between people with contradictory interpretations of the object and conflicting views about the social relationships in which the object plays a part.

The spirited things of Afro-Atlantic religions thus embody ongoing debates about the relationships between Europeans and Africans, buyers and sellers, priests and worshipers, husbands and wives, masters and slaves, and teachers and students. An introduction to the exhibition lucidly illustrates how objects familiar to us have been the subjects of similar disagreements in ways we may not realize. Four altars anchor the exhibition, and demonstrate how adherents of Black Atlantic religions create gods and mediate relationships by empowering objects through food, water, light, prayer, music and dance.

1. *Shoulder-Borne Sculptures of the Yoruba God Eshu*, wood.
Photo courtesy of the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Project,
Duke University.

LIVING ALTARS

“Four altars anchor the exhibition and demonstrate how adherents of Black Atlantic religions create gods and mediate relationships by empowering objects through food, water, light, prayer, and dance.”

J. Lorand Matory, Curator

CUBAN SANTERÍA - BIRTHDAY THRONE

The *trono de cumpleaños*, or “birthday throne,” is made for the anniversary of a priest’s initiation. The priest’s *orichas*, typically in the form of soup tureens (*soperas*) filled with sacred materials, are brought out, arrayed according to their familial relations to each other and their personal importance to the priest, and dressed up in their richest finery.



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2. Willy Zapata, *Cuban Santería Altar*, installation shot. Photo courtesy of Chris Dissinger, the Fleming Museum of Art.



HAITIAN VODOU ALTAR

This altar features eight living gods (*lwa*) in the form of *pakèt kongo*—bundles of spirit-activating ingredients richly dressed in ribbons and feathers. The gods are saluted with candles, perfumes, and their favorite beverages—often in decoratively sequined bottles—as well as sequined flags called *drapo*, which are used to lead public processions in honor of the gods.

YORÙBÁ GODDESS YEMOJA

Nigerian Yorùbá altars, as points of communication with and embodiments of the divine, are considered the face or countenance of the gods. The Nigerian Yorùbá altar is primarily devoted to Yemoja, the goddess of the River Ògùn, though it includes things consecrated to other, related òrìṣà as well.

SPIRITIST – ANCESTRAL

In the Caribbean nations of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, the religion of Spiritism—or *Espiritismo*—encompasses a range of traditions indebted to the foundational writings of Allan Kardec (a.k.a. Hippolyte Léon Denizard) but enriched by a range of allied African-diaspora traditions. Some Spiritists, however, prefer to emphasize their racial, class, and religious differences from the devotees of African gods. The exhibition is a Cuban- and Puerto Rican-style Spiritist Altar for the Ancestors, known as a *bóveda*, or “tomb.”

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3. J. Lorand Matory, *Haitian Vodou Altar*, installation shot. Photo courtesy of Chris Dissinger, the Fleming Museum of Art.

FETISHISM

Europeans and Euro-Americans called the spiritual things of Africans and their descendants “fetishes” as part of a strategy to justify slavery and colonialism and to assert their own superiority. In this section of the exhibition, we examine the evolution of the term, which can now be applied more broadly to material objects from any culture that embody contrasting meanings. The “fetish” acts as a crossroads where different people meet in disagreement and mutual transformation. By introducing the exhibition in this way, we invite you to consider the spirited things on view—as well as objects in your own life—through the lens of the “fetish.”



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- 4. *Monstrance*, brass, glass. Courtesy of the Fleming Museum of Art.
- 5. *Janus-faced votary sculpture of Eshu*, wood. Photo courtesy of Chris Dissinger, the Fleming Museum of Art.
- 6. *Statue of the Afro-Brazilian Goddess Iemanjá*, plaster. Photo courtesy of Chris Dissinger, the Fleming Museum of Art.
- 7. *Resin Statue of the Afro-Cuban Goddess Yemayá*, resin, plastic, metal. Photo courtesy of Chris Dissinger, the Fleming Museum of Art.



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GODDESSES AND GODS

Yemoja/Iemanjá/Yemayá



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In Nigeria, Yemoja is the goddess of the River Ògùn. Her Brazilian counterpart Iemanjá and her Cuban counterpart Yemayá are goddesses of the sea. Certain traits and symbols unite these different avatars of the goddess: she is a woman, she is identified with fish, and her colors are clear, white, silver, and various shades of blue. Interestingly, her iconography—especially in the Americas—includes not only sea creatures but also the equipment of Western sailing ships, including the anchor, the ship’s wheel, and mermaids, such as those seen on the prows of many European trading vessels.

In the Americas, the goddess of the sea is often defined in opposition to Ochún, the goddess of rivers and lakes. For example, in Cuban Santería,

Yemayá is typically regarded as dark skinned, hard working, maternal, matronly, and sullen, whereas Ochún is seen as light skinned, sensual, vain, and both more interested in and more attractive to men. Yet this diametric contrast speaks to the way women everywhere still grapple to some degree with the limitations and role dilemmas imposed on them by society—such as either being motherly or enjoying one’s sexuality (sometimes referred to as the “Madonna-Whore Complex”), or, in the United States, the choice between bodily health and conformity to widely advertised but unrealistic standards of feminine beauty. The Haitian counterparts of these goddesses are Èzili Dantò and Èzili Freda. Many Haitians say that there is a little of each in every woman.

ROYAL GODS: CROWNS AND STAFFS OF AUTHORITY

The gods of Afro-Atlantic religions are often conceived in royal terms, and so royal crowns and staffs perform a significant range of ritual functions. They are worn and carried by priests and priestesses when they are spiritually possessed by their tutelary gods, or are placed atop the vessels embodying the gods. The association in Afro-Atlantic religions between royal and religious authority relates to the Yorùbá culture, in which the *ọba*, the divine monarchs, are not just political leaders but *ex officio* chief priests. While many of the most important religious duties fall to highly trained priests and diviners, certain rites can be performed only by the *ọba*. Because it literally contains the substance of the authority invested in the monarch, the elaborately-beaded conical crowns (*adé*) worn by the *ọba* are among the most sacred objects in Yorùbá culture.



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8. *Crown of Xangô Airá*, sheet metal. Photo courtesy of the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Project, Duke University.
 9. *Staff (opaxoró) of the God Oxalá*, metal. Photo courtesy of the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Project, Duke University.
 10. *Outfit of Candomblé Priestess*. Photo courtesy of Chris Dissinger, the Fleming Museum of Art.



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BEADS AND COWRIES

The omnipresence and abundance of beads and cowry shells in Yorùbá sacred and royal iconography hint at the importance of trans-oceanic trade in the history of Yorùbá divine kingship. Afro-Atlantic worshipers define the sea as the foremost source of value, and particularly emphasize the worth of monetary currencies used in trade at the seashore and of goods brought by overseas and other long-distance

trade partners. Beads in general are regarded as a gift from the òrìṣà, specifically from Olókun, the god of the sea. The older the beads, the greater their value—because they have gained àṣẹ, or ritual potency, from the many exchanges, rituals, and relationships in which they have played a part. Yet they also materialize the history of the slave trade.



11. Felipe Villamil, *Calabash (Güiro) of Elegguá*, glass, cloth, cowry. Photo courtesy of the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Project, Duke University.

SLAVE SPIRITS

12. *Statues of male and female African spirits*, porcelain. Photo courtesy of the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Project, Duke University.



Often heard in discussions of Afro-Atlantic religions is the dictum that “hierarchy is everything.” Priesthoods tend to be organized according to seniority, and, like the Abrahamic faiths, these religions often configure divinity in terms of royalty. At the same time, many gods and spirits of the Afro-Atlantic religions are regarded as the spirits of dead slaves or as spirits enslaved by the priest. These slave spirits are seen as not only highly efficacious but also capable of astute bargaining and, when their masters break a promise, fatal vengeance. Indeed, when they manifest themselves in contemporary religious ceremonies, they are often dominant over the spirits of their masters.

The figures of slave spirits exhibited here embody the power, productivity, and revolutionary heroism that the priests of Afro-Atlantic religions attribute to the enslaved—a striking contrast to notions of the slave as a figure of abject powerlessness, helplessness, and inefficiency, which were popularized by (for instance) Karl Marx, the apologists for slavery whom he quoted, and even North American critics of slavery. Much like fetishized objects, enslaved people are subject to radically contrary interpretations, and these interpretations lead to radically different ways of negotiating social relationships among living people.



ABOUT THE CURATOR

J. Lorand Matory is the Lawrence Richardson Professor of Cultural Anthropology and the Director of the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Project at Duke University.

The author of four books and more than fifty articles and reviews, Professor Matory is also the executive producer, content producer, and screenwriter of five documentary films. *Choice* magazine named his *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* an outstanding book of the year in 1994, and his *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* won the Herskovits Prize from the African Studies Association for the best book of 2005. In 2010, he received the Distinguished Africanist Award from the American Anthropological Association, and, in 2013, the German government awarded him the Alexander von Humboldt Prize, one of Europe's highest academic distinctions. In 2008, Professor Matory delivered anthropology's most prestigious annual address, the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture, which resulted in the book *Stigma and Culture: Last-Place Anxiety in Black America* (2015). His latest book, *The "Fetish" Revisited: Marx, Freud and the Gods Black People Make*, was published by Duke University Press in 2018.

Professor Matory is a graduate of Harvard College and the University of Chicago, and he has conducted thirty-five years of intensive research on the great religions of the Black Atlantic—West African Yorùbá religion, West-Central African Kongo religion, Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería/Ocha, and Haitian Vodou. In recognition of his outstanding scholarship, he has served since 2013 as James P. Marsh Professor-at-Large at the University of Vermont, one of the University's highest honors.

13. *9 Metal Tools for the Afro-Cuban God/Goddess Olocun*, metal, plastic, beads. Photo courtesy of the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Project, Duke University.



FRONT *Suit for Yemayá*, cardboard, cloth, lace, metal, plastic, ribbon. Photo courtesy of Chris Dissinger, the Fleming Museum of Art.

BACK *Ceramic-tiled tray of the Afro-Cuban Goddess Yemayá*, ceramic, wood. Photo courtesy of the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Project, Duke University.

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works

270 artifacts

Exhibition Components

200 objects over four altars
and 70 individual pieces

Organized by

J. Lorand Matory and the Fleming
Museum, University of Vermont

Curator

J. Lorand Matory, PhD, Professor of
Cultural Anthropology, Duke University

Approximate size

2,000 square feet

Security

High security

Participation Fee

\$25,000

Shipping

IA&A makes all arrangements;
exhibitors pay outgoing shipping
costs within the contiguous US

Booking Period

12 weeks

Tour

Fall 2020 – Fall 2023

Availability

September 2020 – September 2023

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