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For Immediate Use
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Fowler Museum at UCLA to present
Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas
April 6–August 10, 2008



Mami Wata (circa 1987) by
Zoumana Sane

Beautiful and seductive, protective yet dangerous, the water spirit Mami Wata (Mother Water) is celebrated throughout much of Africa and the African Atlantic world. Often portrayed as a mermaid, a snake charmer, or a combination of both, she and a “school” of related African water spirits all honor the essential, sacred nature of water. *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*—a traveling exhibition debuting at the Fowler Museum at UCLA on Apr. 6, 2008—explores five hundred years of visual cultures and histories of Mami Wata through a dynamic presentation of the wide array of both traditional and contemporary arts surrounding her—sculpture, paintings, masks, altars, and more from west and central Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States. The exhibition will be on display through August 10, 2008.

“Mami Wata has been the object of my affection (and study) for more than thirty years. I guess I took to heart the words in a famous song by the Nigerian musician Sir Victor Uwaifo: ‘If you see Mami Wata oh, never you run away!’” says guest curator Henry John Drewal, Evjue-Bascom professor of Art History and Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and adjunct curator of African Art at the Chazen Museum of Art, UW-Madison.

Sources and Currents: Who is Mami Wata?

The exhibition opens with a large video projection by artists David and Hi-jin Hodge called *Watertime*, to bring the ocean—so sacred to Mami Wata—into the gallery. Against this backdrop a selections of key object provide an overview of movements, images, and ideas that have played major roles in the arts for Mami Wata. These include African images celebrating ancient and indigenous water spirits, as well as global examples that demonstrate the trans-cultural nature of Mami Wata.

Near the start of the exhibition several masks from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and elsewhere—featuring elaborate carvings of mermaids, snakes, and marine life—attest to the pervasiveness of water spirit imagery in Africa. Although the wellsprings of Mami Wata’s visual culture and history remain conjectural, evidence indicates that the concept of Mami Wata has its source in the first momentous Euro-African encounters in the fifteenth century. As such, a fifteenth-century bronze medallion bearing a double-tailed mermaid appears here. Mermaids may have also been introduced in the form of figureheads on European ships, such as the beautiful gilded example displayed in this section.

Like the mermaid, images of snake charmers also merged with African water spirits. Not long after its publication in Hamburg, Germany, circa 1887, a chromolithographic poster of the Samoan snake charmer Maladamatjaute reached West Africa, likely via African sailors or European merchants. A later edition of this iconic image is displayed in this section. In Africa, the poster had a dramatic and almost immediate impact. By 1901, the snake charmer had already been interpreted as an African water spirit, translated into a three-dimensional carved image, and incorporated into a water spirit headdress in the Niger River Delta region of Nigeria. Examples of this snake charmer/ Mami Wata hybrid appear on glass paintings and prints displayed here, as well.

By the early twentieth century traders from Lebanon and India began to arrive in Africa. Images in Indian books, pamphlets, films, and popular devotional chromolithographs came to have a profound impact. The popularity of the snake charmer poster and the Indian presence in West Africa led to a growing fascination with prints of Hindu gods and goddesses. Some Mami Wata devotees began to interpret these deities as representations of a host of *mami* and *papi wata* spirits associated with specific bodies of water.

Using these prints as guides, they expanded the pantheon of water spirits, fostering a growing complexity in Mami Wata worship, which came to include elements of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and other faiths. This complex fusion of beliefs and images is exemplified by paintings, sculptures, and prints in this gallery, such as a headdress from Sierra Leone representing a local water divinity, featuring a Hindu forehead mark (*bindi*), and with snakes piled on the head recalling Mami Wata’s snake charming attributes, as well as her mermaid’s fishtail.

More recently, Ghana has become the site of a burgeoning film and video industry that often reflects the dramatic rise of Pentecostal Christianity and its concern with satanic forces. In this context, Mami Wata is recast as a demon working with the devil. Often depicted with a muscular, aggressive appearance, in this guise Mami Wata is perhaps designed to evoke fear, as she condenses the eroticism of the forbidden, yet compelling, pleasures of modern urban life. Several paintings and a movie poster in this area show this menacingly seductive—and sometimes demonized—version of Mami Wata.

Mami Wata in Cultural Context

Mami Wata and the innumerable *mami* and *papi wata* spirits have many faces, and their identities rarely remain constant. As conditions change, so do the attributes, personalities, and actions of these fascinating and enigmatic water spirits. Case studies presented in this section

reveal striking differences, as well as remarkable similarities, in the beliefs and expressive arts for Mami Wata and her cohorts in Africa.

First, a selection of Mami Wata headdresses and masks made during the 1970s and 1980s for Jolly masquerades in Freetown, Sierra Leone shows how young men at that place and time were concerned about the spiritual and economic powers of women, who had increasingly entered the workplace. Because women were thought to have greater powers than men, men sought the help of Mami Wata in their dealings with the opposite sex. Representations of Mami Wata in Freetown take the form of dramatically sensual masquerades with ornate headpieces.

In Côte d'Ivoire the educational and humorous performances of Baule and Guro entertainment masquerades often give Mami Wata a place of prominence. Baule artists use her image to symbolize novelty, fashionable elegance, and modernity. This is especially true in portrait masks displayed here that praise the beauty and status of the mask's female owner. In private ritual contexts, images of Mami Wata can represent a person's "spirit spouse," the spiritual guardian/partner of a man or woman. Several such "spirit spouse" sculptures appear in this section.

The peoples who inhabit the coastal region from Ghana to Togo and Benin have an intimate association with the sea and with water divinities. They worship a vast pantheon of spiritual entities, of which Mami Wata is one. Works honoring Mami Wata, such as the handmade wooden and terra cotta figures in this gallery, are placed in shrines and temples, to seek her protection and healing. An actual shrine is recreated to show how such objects would function *in situ* to propitiate the spirit.

Ensembles from a Brazilian-inspired masquerade in Ouidah, Benin show the role that Mami Wata plays in this fascinating masquerade among the Agudas, descendants of a multi-ethnic mix of liberated and repatriated Africans from Brazil. A video of this event as well as sculptures and masks from the Ibibio and Igbo peoples of southeastern Nigeria illustrate Mami Wata's role in their cultures, while numerous popular paintings from Democratic Republic of the Congo suggest how Mami Wata plays an important role in central African urban culture and spiritual practices.

Mami's Sisters in the African Atlantic

Africans taken to Haiti aboard slave ships brought with them strong traditions of fish-tailed and water-related spirits, which were incorporated into Vodou, a complex and sophisticated religion honoring spiritual entities known as *lwa*. Water enters the Haitian Vodou cosmology in many ways. Marine spirits like the mermaid Lasirèn symbolize the *lwa* of the water, and are represented in this section on glittering sequined flags, sculptures, paintings, and elaborate mixed-media altars.

A recreation of the altar for Santa Marta la Dominadora in the Dominican Republic, as well as a video of one in use, illustrate the evolution of Mami Wata's image as she crossed the Atlantic. In this altar, the black or African Saint Martha is strong and domineering, surrounded by snakes and serpents. She inverts the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden as *she* controls the snake and embodies extraordinary female power over negative, destructive forces.

Meanwhile, every February 2nd along the northeast coast of Brazil, descendants of enslaved Africans, as well as many others, turn their eyes and thoughts toward the watery horizon and pray to the “Queen of the Sea,” “Mother Water,” the “Mother of Fish,” Yemanjá, seeking her love, support, protection, and guidance. This gallery features a range of objects associated with Yemanjá’s festival, including beautiful ensembles and regalia for a priestess, as well as a video of the celebration.

Mami Wata as Artists’ Muse

In addition to their influence in Africa and its diasporas, Mami Wata and other African and African Atlantic water spirits have gained an even wider audience, as well as new meanings and import, by capturing the imaginations of contemporary artists. The final gallery of the exhibition features the work of several artists—men and women from Africa, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean—who have found in Mami Wata and her cohorts a highly intriguing subject matter. Works here include paintings, etchings and sculptures by artists including Alison Saar, Sonya Clark, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Twin Seven-Seven, Claudette Schreuders and Edouard Duval-Carrié.

Additional Information

After debuting at the Fowler Museum, *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* will be on display at the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison (Oct. 18, 2008–Jan. 11, 2009); the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Apr. 1–July 26, 2009); The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia (Jan. 29–Aug 16, 2010); and the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University (Oct 6, 2010–Jan. 2, 2011).

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The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$8 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Related Programs

Saturday, April 5, 2008 5 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture: Henry J. Drewal

Mermaids, Snake Charmers, Sirens and Saints: The Many Faces of Mami Wata

Curator and art historian Henry Drewal traces the history and evolution of water spirits known as Mami Wata, a Pidgin English rendering of “Mother Water.” Drawing on art and imagery from Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil and the United States, Drewal identifies the many sources—African deities, European mermaids, Hindu gods and goddesses, snake charmers and Christian and Muslim saints—that have merged through the years to embody this celebrated figure of the African and African-Atlantic world.

6–8:30 pm

Members' Opening and Preview Party

Dive into a vibrant nighttime undersea adventure, when the Fowler Museum is transformed into a beguiling, seductive world of larger-than-life sea creatures and mischievous water spirits. Celebrate the dynamic creative power of *Mami Wata* with surprises to tempt all your senses. Sea-life inspired costumes encouraged! RSVP by Friday, March 28th: 310/206-0306 or fowlermembership@arts.ucla.edu. Not a member? Join online at fowler.ucla.edu.

Sunday, April 6, 2008 12–5 pm

Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas

Opening Day

1–4 pm

Kids in the Courtyard: A Mermaid's Tail

Get ready for the festival, *Splash! A Celebration of Mermaids and the Sea*, by fashioning watery wear perfect for a merfolk masquerade at this drop-in art workshop.

2–4 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Panel: Mami as Muse

The work of contemporary artists from Africa and the Americas demonstrates the power and continuity of *Mami Wata* as a source for creative inspiration. Visual artists Bolaji Campbell, Eve Sandler and Sonya Y. Clark, along with filmmaker Giovanni Savino, discuss their works in the Fowler's current exhibition in this conversation led by curator Henry Drewal examining the relationship between *Mami Wata* devotion and artistic expression.

Saturday, April 19, 2008 11:30 am – 3:30 pm

Festival: Splash! A Celebration of Mermaids and the Sea

The Fowler welcomes all ages to a fun-filled day celebrating art, mermaids, the environment, and more! Enjoy unforgettable performances by dance sensation Viver Brasil and the L.A.-based, Congo-inspired group Balobi Bandeko; fabulous art workshops; water-science attractions including sea creature touch tanks (provided by community partner Heal the Bay); and a variety of food and vendor booths. Dress up as a group or on your own, and take part in our merfolk procession honoring *Mami Wata*. For a detailed schedule or to download a parade application, visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Sunday June 1, 2008 2 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture: Marilyn Houlberg

From Seduction to Death and Beyond:

The Lure of Lasiren, the Mermaid Queen in Haitian Vodou

Anthropologist and art historian Marilyn Houlberg discusses the water spirits of Haitian Vodou including: Lasirèn, the beautiful but potentially deadly mermaid; *Mami Wata*, the snake charmer; and other spirits ranging from snakes to winged dragons. Houlberg will consider how Lasirèn—who lives beneath the surface of the sea in a bejeweled domain, and others, who manifest themselves in violent storms, waterfalls and even quiet dew—are depicted by artists in beaded

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and sequined ceremonial flags, temple mural walls, altars, as well as through dance, in documentaries and Hollywood films.

Sunday, June 29, 2008 1–4 pm

Kids in the Courtyard: Charmed by a Snake

Search the exhibition for Mami Wata as a snake charmer and then get up close and personal with live pythons and their reptile friends, brought to the Fowler by World Famous Lizard Boy's Mobile Zoo.

4 pm

Summer Sunset Concert

Details to be announced.

KidsMuse Summer Art Camp 2008

Art-making activities and more in conjunction with *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*

Session I for 6–8 year olds July 14–18, 2008

Session II for 9–12 year old July 21–25, 2008

Members \$100; Non-members \$150. Information: 310/825-7325

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