



HIGH MUSEUM OF ART ATLANTA

1280 PEACHTREE STREET, N.E. • ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30309

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

HIGH MUSEUM OF ART TO PRESENT LANDMARK EXHIBITION OF WORK BY 19TH-CENTURY BLACK POTTERS FROM THE AMERICAN SOUTH

*Featuring ceramics by potter and poet Dave and rare examples of vessels by unrecorded
enslaved makers alongside contemporary works by Black artists*

**“Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina”
Feb. 16-May 12, 2024**

ATLANTA, Sept. 12, 2023 — Coming this spring, the High Museum of Art will be the exclusive Southeast venue for **“Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina”** (Feb. 16-May 12, 2024), a critically acclaimed exhibition featuring nearly 60 ceramic objects created by enslaved African Americans in Edgefield, South Carolina, in the decades before the Civil War. Considered through the lens of current scholarship in the fields of history, literature, anthropology, material culture, diaspora and African American studies, these 19th-century vessels testify to the lived experiences, artistic agency and material knowledge of those who created them.

The works include monumental storage jars by the literate potter and poet Dave (later recorded as David Drake, ca. 1800-1870) and rare examples of utilitarian wares and face vessels by unrecorded makers, including a ca. 1840 water cooler jug from the High’s collection. “Hear Me Now” will also include work by leading contemporary Black artists who have responded to or whose practice connects with the Edgefield story, including Theaster Gates, Simone Leigh and Woody De Othello. The exhibition is organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

“We are honored to present this exhibition, which recognizes the innovation of Edgefield potters—a practice all the more remarkable given that their work was created under the most inhumane conditions of enslavement,” said Rand Suffolk, director of the High. “It’s an important story, one that not only dovetails with the High’s longstanding recognition and display of Edgefield pottery but one that should also resonate with our regional audiences.”

In the early 1800s, white settlers established potteries in the Old Edgefield district, a rural area on the western edge of South Carolina, to take advantage of its natural clays. Hundreds of enslaved adults and children were forced to work in the potteries, bearing all responsibility for the labor-intensive craft, from mining and preparing clay to throwing vast quantities of wares and decorating and glazing the vessels. By the 1840s, they were producing tens of thousands of vessels each year. The stoneware they made, of varying sizes and forms and essential for food preparation and storage, supported the region's expanding population and was inextricably linked to the lucrative plantation economy. The history of slavery is widely understood in terms of agriculture, but these wares tell the story of what historians call "industrial slavery," where the knowledge, experience and skill of enslaved people were essential to the success of the enterprise.

White enslavers and factory owners often marked the wares with their names, therefore claiming the expertise of the enslaved as their own. Only some of the enslaved makers have been identified so far, and more than 100 of their names are highlighted in the exhibition. One identified maker included in the exhibition is Edgefield's best-known artist, Dave — later recorded as David Drake — who boldly signed, dated and incised verses on many of his jars, despite literacy being illegal among enslaved people at the time. "Hear Me Now" features many of Dave's monumental masterpieces, along with a video featuring Dave's newly discovered descendants Pauline Baker, Priscilla Carolina, Daisy Whitner and John Williams, in which they reflect on his work and their family connections.

Among the other exhibition highlights are 19 face vessels or jugs, which served as powerful spiritual objects and were likely made by the Edgefield potters for their own use. Their emergence in the region roughly coincides with the 1858 arrival in Georgia of the slave ship *The Wanderer*, which illegally transported more than 400 captive Africans to the United States approximately 50 years after the transatlantic slave trade had been outlawed. More than 100 of those individuals were sent to Edgefield, where they were put to work in the potteries. Growing evidence suggests that their arrival brought African-inspired art traditions, religion and culture to the area. The face vessels resemble nkisi, ritual objects that were important in West-Central African religious practices to facilitate communication between the living and the dead.

"Hear Me Now" examines the continuing legacy of Edgefield with works by contemporary Black artists that respond to and amplify Edgefield's story, including Simone Leigh's monumental ceramic work "Jug" (2022); Theaster Gates' "Signature Study" (2020), which references Dave's work; and Woody De Othello's "Secret Safe," a large-scale vessel that the acquired High in 2023.

"Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina" will be presented in the Special Exhibition Galleries on the Second Level of the High's Stent Family Wing.

Exhibition Catalogue

Published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Yale University Press, the accompanying book features essays on the production, collection, dispersal and reception of

stoneware from Edgefield, offering a critical look at what it means to collect, exhibit and interpret objects made by enslaved artisans. The catalogue includes an interview with Leigh, internationally acclaimed artist and the U.S. representative at the 2022 Venice Biennale, where she was awarded the Gold Lion. Additional contributors include the exhibition curators, Ethan Lasser (John Moors Cabot chair, art of the Americas, MFA Boston), Adrienne Spinozzi (associate curator of American decorative arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), and Jason Young (associate professor of history, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor); Michael J. Bramwell (visual artist, doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Linde curator of folk and self-taught art, MFA Boston); Vincent Brown (Charles Warren professor of American history and professor of African and African American studies, Harvard University); and Katherine C. Hughes (doctoral candidate in public history, Middle Tennessee State University, and curator of cultural heritage and community engagement, McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina, Columbia).

Exhibition Organization and Support

“Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina” is organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. This exhibition is made possible at the High by funding from Premier Exhibition Series Sponsor Delta Air Lines, Inc.; Premier Exhibition Series Supporters ACT Foundation, Inc., William N. Banks, Jr., Cousins Foundation, Burton M. Gold, Sarah and Jim Kennedy, Harry Norman Realtors and wish Foundation; Benefactor Exhibition Series Supporters Robin and Hilton Howell; Ambassador Exhibition Series Supporters Mrs. Fay S. Howell/The Howell Fund, Karen and Jeb Hughes/Corporate Environments, Loomis Charitable Foundation, The Fred and Rita Richman Fund, Louise Sams and Jerome Grilhot, Mrs. Harriet H. Warren and Elizabeth and Chris Willett; and Contributing Exhibition Series Supporters Farideh and Al Azadi, Sandra and Dan Baldwin, Mr. Joseph H. Boland, Jr., Ceramic Circle of Atlanta, Mr. and Mrs. Robin E. Delmer, Peggy Foreman, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter Jones, Joel Knox and Joan Marmo, Margot and Danny McCaul, Wade A. Rakes II and Nicholas Miller and USI Insurance Services. Generous support is also provided by 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 Exhibition Endowment Fund, Helen S. Lanier Endowment Fund, John H. and Wilhelmina D. Harland Exhibition Endowment Fund, Katherine Murphy Riley Special Exhibition Endowment Fund, Margaretta Taylor Exhibition Fund and RJR Nabisco Exhibition Endowment Fund.

About the High Museum of Art

Located in the heart of Atlanta, 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 19,000 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 prehistory 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.

#

DIGITAL IMAGES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

Media contacts:

Brittany Mizell

Public Relations Specialist

404-733-4423

brittany.mizell@high.org