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**Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, presents
Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body
Opening Celebration September 17, 6-8pm
(On View September 17 – December 14)**

Wellesley, MA – This fall, the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College will open a major exhibition that explores the historical roots of a charged icon in contemporary art—the black female body. *Black Womanhood: Images Icons and Ideologies of the African Body* was organized by the Hood Museum of Art and will be on view from September 17 to December 14, 2008. The exhibition explores the complex perpetuation of icons and stereotypes of black womanhood through the display of over one hundred sculptures, prints, postcards, photographs, paintings, textiles, and video installations by artists from Africa, Europe, America, and the Caribbean. Presented in three separate but intersecting sections, *Black Womanhood* reveals three different perspectives—the traditional African, Western colonial, and contemporary global—that have contributed to current ideas about black womanhood. Providing an in-depth look at how images of the black female body have been created and used differently in Africa and the West, the exhibition explores themes such as ideals of beauty, fertility and sexuality, maternity and motherhood, and women's identities and social roles. Collectively, these overlapping perspectives penetrate the complex and interwoven relationships between Africa and the West, male and female, and past and present — all of which have contributed to the inscription of meaning onto the black female body.

The first section of *Black Womanhood* balances traditional African art objects made by both male and female artists. While some of the objects made by men are used

predominantly by men, others are used by women to represent, for example, ideal female beauty, such as a Mende mask, while others teach young boys about womanhood and fertility, such as a Makonde breastplate. African women's traditional arts, which are generally non-figurative, often evoke women's body painting and scarification, which are reproduced as motifs on pottery from the Kabyle, Kurumba, and Ga'anda cultures, for example. As also with men's art forms, women's art forms mark a woman's passage through stages of her life, such as an Iraqw skirt made by a female initiate preparing for marriage and a Zulu apron worn by a pregnant woman. Viewed together, objects made and used by both men and women give us a more balanced understanding of the different ways in which gender defines how African womanhood is expressed in traditional cultural milieus.

Juxtaposing traditional African with Western colonial-era images of African women, the second section of the exhibition reveals how the female form was used in photographic medium during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to promote and disseminate racist notions about African women and black womanhood. Visitors will encounter historic photographs and postcards of the black female body created by both Western and African photographers, whose images of African and African-descended women conveyed racist messages, especially when shown out of context in the West. Ranging from ethnographic depictions of sexualized racial "types" to "mammie" figures, from *Josephine Baker in Banana Skirt* to an African mother carrying a child on her back, the perpetuation of such colonial icons in the Western imagination contributed to the negative black female body images that continue to impact people today.

The third section of *Black Womanhood* features works by contemporary African and African-descended artists from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States. New works by emerging South African artists Zanele Muholi, Senzeni Marasela, and Nandipha Mntambo will be exhibited for the first time in this country, as will a new sculpture created especially for this exhibition by the African American artist Joyce Scott. Also featured in the exhibition are well-established contemporary artists living in Africa and Europe such as Hassan Musa, Ingrid Mwangi Robert Hutter, Etiyé Dimma

Poulsen, Sokari Douglas Camp, Emile Guebehi, Magdalene Odundo, Berni Searle, Fazal Sheikh, Angèle Esseмба, Malick Sidibé, Penny Siopis, and Maud Sulter. African and African-descended artists living in the United States include Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Lalla Essaydi, Wangechi Mutu, Kara Walker, Alison Saar, Carla Williams, Carrie Mae Weems, and Renée Cox.

By contrasting historic representations of the African female body with contemporary representations of black womanhood, the exhibition peels back the layers of social, cultural, and political realities that have influenced the creation of stereotypes about black women. Over the last two centuries, representations of the black female body have evolved into obstinate stereotypes, leaving behind a trail of romanticized, eroticized, and sexualized icons. For example, since the end of the nineteenth century the Mangbetu woman, with her elongated forehead and halo-like coiffure, has been an icon of the seductive yet forbiddingly exotic beauty of African women. This is due both to the Western colonials who portrayed the beauty of Mangbetu women in widely disseminated photographs and postcards, and to the innovative Mangbetu artists who capitalized on this European fascination by decorating their non-figurative arts, such as musical instruments and pottery, with the sculptural form of the Mangbetu female head. Today, contemporary artists such as Magdalene Odundo and Carrie Mae Weems are recycling African and Western representations of Mangbetu women from the colonial era to comment on different aspects of black womanhood.

The exhibition is not an attempt to present a survey of images of the black woman throughout human history, nor is it a survey of black female artists. Rather, *Black Womanhood* offers a focused examination of a selection of iconic representations of the black female body that reveals how these images have affected artists of African and African descent. In this manner, the exhibition promotes and encourages a deeper understanding of the various ways in which ideas about and responses to the black female body have been shaped as much by past histories as by contemporary experiences. Curator Barbara Thompson states, “The exhibition provides the opportunity to raise awareness about the history of stereotypes of black womanhood and the continued impact they have not just on artists today but on all of us living in the global community.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a 370-page illustrated catalogue published by the Hood Museum of Art in association with the University of Washington Press in April 2008. Curator and contributing editor Barbara Thompson has compiled essays on representations of and ideologies about the black female body as presented through traditional African, colonial, and contemporary perspectives and written by artists, curators, and scholars including Ifi Amadiume, Ayo Abiétou Coly, Christraud Geary, Enid Schildkrout, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, Carla Williams, and Deborah Willis. More than two hundred historical and contemporary images illustrate the essays that reveal the multiple levels through which social, cultural, and political ideologies have shaped iconic images of and understandings about black women as exotic “Others,” erotic fantasies, and super-maternal Mammies. The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue make a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions of race, gender, and sexuality, promoting a deeper understanding of past and present readings of black womanhood, both in Africa and the West.

The exhibition was organized by the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, and is generously funded by a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the visual Arts. The Davis venue is funded in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council Wellesley College Friends of Art.

NEXT TRAVELING VENUE: San Diego Museum of Art, January 31–April 26, 2009

DAVIS MUSEUM AND CULTURAL CENTER HOURS AND INFORMATION

Public Tours: Wednesday 1pm; Sundays 2pm led by museum docents. Free.

Museum Hours: Tuesday–Saturday, 11am–5pm, Wednesday until 8pm, and Sunday 12noon–4pm. Closed Mondays and holidays. Admission is free.

Location: Wellesley College campus, 106 Central Street in Wellesley, Massachusetts

Parking: Free and available in the lot behind the museum. Additional parking is available in the Davis Parking Garage.

Docent tour information: 781-283-3382.

Accessible: The museum, Collins Café and Collins Cinema are wheelchair accessible and wheelchairs are available for use in the Museum without charge. Special needs may be accommodated by contacting the Director of Disability Services, Jim Wice at 781-283-2434 or at jwice@wellesley.edu.

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