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2018

Alfred J. Tulk Exhibition Brochure

Fairfield University Art Museum

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LIBERIA, 1931-33

THE COLLECTIONS OF ALFRED J. TULK



SEPTEMBER 14 - DECEMBER 14, 2018

FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Liberia, 1931-33: The Collections of Alfred J. Tulk

A lfred James Tulk was born in London on October 3, 1899. As a young man he moved with his family to the United States, where, in 1923, he earned a degree in studio art from Yale University. Tulk went on to study painting at the Arts Students League in New York with Max Weber, a Russianborn painter who is best known for introducing Cubism into American art. Tulk spent most of his adult life in Connecticut, residing first in Fairfield County from 1934 to 1965, and then in North Haven from 1965 until his death in 1988.

Soon after graduating from Yale, Alfred Tulk married Ethel Chapman in 1923. They lived in a studio/apartment in New York's Greenwich Village, where they raised two boys, Duncan and Alan, while Tulk was employed as a commercial artist. In 1931, the Tulk family embarked on a journey to West Africa – a journey that would become for Alfred Tulk a pivotal moment in his artistic life and profoundly impact his painting practice. The Tulks spent eighteen months at a Methodist mission in Liberia, which had been established by Tulk's longtime friend Dr. George W. Harley. Alfred Tulk and his family returned to the United States in 1933 with a small cache of African artifacts, as well as a sizeable portfolio of oil paintings, watercolors and drawings which documented the people and cultures Tulk had encountered in Liberia.

Beginning in 1934, Tulk's primary focus as a professional artist was in the area of public art, including murals,



Fig. 1

stained glass windows and large-scale mosaics. He painted over 300 murals in theaters, churches, hotels, restaurants and private homes in the United States. Some of Tulk's most important mural commissions include New York's Waldorf Astoria Century Room, the **Empire State Building Observation** Tower, the lobby of Rockefeller Center, Harlem's Apollo Theater, and a pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. During World War II, Tulk supported the war effort by painting portable altars, folding triptychs with Biblical scenes and images of the Cross, which were installed in naval ship chapels and transported onto the battlefield.

In 1954 Tulk lost many of his artworks in a devastating fire that gutted his North Stamford studio. He eventually rebuilt the studio but suffered deep emotional and financial setbacks as a result. After completing, at age 64, a master's degree in fine art at the University of San Miguel in Mexico, Tulk returned to the United States in 1965 to fully embrace the tenets of Abstract Expressionism,

through which he mainly explored the relationship between art and music. Many of his paintings from this period, such as *All Stops Out or Full Organ* (fig. 1), incorporate through color tonality and abstraction the modern rhythms of jazz and the aesthetics of African dance, music and sculpture – art forms he first encountered decades earlier in Liberia.

Ganta, Liberia

Alfred Tulk first met George Harley in the early 1920s when they roomed together at Yale University. At the time, Tulk was completing his undergraduate degree in studio art; Harley was pursuing a medical degree as part of his broader ambition to become a missionary doctor. A few years after graduating from Yale, Harley set out for West Africa to establish the first mission outpost of the Methodist Church in the remote village of Ganta in northeast Liberia. In addition to providing medical services and preaching the Gospel, Harley worked as an amateur anthropologist in order to better understand indigenous healing practices and belief systems. His ethnographic inquiries introduced him to the "secret" societies, masquerades and initiation rituals of the local Dan/Gio and Mano ethnic groups. By 1931 Harley had begun collecting indigenous art and material culture on behalf of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. Over the course of several decades he would sell to the museum what is considered today to be the most significant collection of Liberian masks and artifacts in the world.

During their first furlough back in the United States in 1930, George Harley and his wife, Winifred Jewel Harley, spent some time visiting with old friend Alfred Tulk and his wife, Ethel, in New York. The Tulks were captivated by the Harleys' remarkable accounts of how they had established and built by hand the mission station at Ganta, and by their exciting tales of traveling across rural Liberia. The Harleys insisted the Tulks spend a year with them at Ganta. Tulk recalled George Harley urging him to come paint the indigenous people and landscapes of Liberia. Tulk agreed. "At the time," Tulk said, "I was offered by the president of the mural painting studio where I was employed a free trip to the splendors of Catholic Italy. I turned it down for Africa" (Tulk 1980).



Fig. 2

Paintings and Drawings

Sailing aboard the German cargo vessel *S.S. Wahehe*, Alfred and Ethel Tulk, along with their two young boys, landed in Liberia in December 1931. After a treacherous six-day journey by foot from the port of Monrovia, they finally arrived at Ganta where they joined George and Winifred Harley and their sons (fig. 2; Harleys on left, Tulks on right). Alfred Tulk quickly built himself a small mud-thatched hut to serve as his art studio on the grounds of the mission station. At first, Tulk recalled, many individuals were reluctant to sit for their portraits. "It is believed by the people,"

he reported, "that if a duplicate of themselves is made, it, the copy will receive the soul and the real person will die" (1980). Tulk eventually convinced Paramount



Fig. 3

Chief Reppo, a man of great power and influence in the region, to sit for an oil portrait. When completed, Tulk hung the painting (fig. 3) in his studio to



Fig. 4

demonstrate to anyone who entered that Chief Reppo had not been harmed by having his likeness captured on canvas.

In his diary, Tulk reflected upon the goals of his artistic pursuits in Liberia. He wanted to record, with ethnographic accuracy, the people he encountered and the daily routines of village life (fig. 4). But Tulk also wanted to achieve a deeper understanding of Africa, and to illustrate through his paintings the impact this journey was having on his own artistic trajectory and sense of self. In April 1932 he wrote: "I am full of the old academic realism. I cannot forget the actual seen

form of things. I have nearly lost the power to feel the mood or emotion of things – it is not a record of Africa that is needed, but a living aesthetic reaction. Above all, it means that emotion shall be the guide – not realism in the bibliographic sense" (Tulk 1931-33). In a video interview conducted late in life at the North Haven Memorial Library in 1986, Tulk spoke about having to "unlearn" the lessons of the Renaissance and the Beaux-Arts tradition to which he had been introduced as an art student at Yale University. Even though he attended college nearly two decades after Picasso had been so profoundly influenced by African art. Tulk was astonished in hindsight that he had never once been shown a work by Picasso in any art class (Tulk 1986). In this sense, Tulk's encounters with African art in Liberia did not reconfirm what he had already been taught about modernist primitivism, rather, his discoveries in Africa were unfiltered and independent.

It wasn't until the Tulks traveled outside of Ganta on several short trips along the boundary lines between Côte d'Ivoire, (French) Guinea and Liberia that Alfred Tulk uncovered the spark that would transform his art from mere ethnographic realism to a deeper and



Fig. 5





more authentic aesthetic vision. On these road trips the Tulks saw for the first time African dances, masquerades and acrobatic stunts presented by local performers and itinerant troupes. In one village, the Tulks witnessed a memorable performance by Dan/Gio stilt-dancers (fig. 5). In his diary Tulk wrote:

The masks were made of string nets with a peculiar appurtenance coming out of a mouth hole and made of colored strings, like a spurt of fire or gushing water, high peaked hats made of various odd pieces of colored cloth – a coat and enormous long trousers covered most of the rest of the figure they danced for us [and] posed for photos. (Tulk 1931-33)

On another trip, the Tulks attended a masked dance performance in the town of Dã. They were mesmerized by what they saw. Tulk wrote with great excitement in his diary:

The figures danced – each in turn and all together, rhythmically in tune with the



Fig. 7

drums – energetic, almost ferocious, beating the sticks on the ground as they went – twirls, runs pairing – in a circle, in serpentine formation in line and again individually – until the dancers, completely exhausted literally dropped flat on the ground No matter how sure you were that they were 'just people dressed up,' the intensity of it inspired a sense of mystery. The effect was marvelous. (Tulk 1931-33)

Seeing firsthand these powerful dances and masquerades had a profound impact on Tulk's appreciation for African aesthetics. Tulk sketched and photographed the dancers, and he took notes on the choreography of gestures and movements. It was only after these experiences that he began to paint complex scenes of African masks and dancers in motion (figs. 6 and 7). In other cases, he repainted images he had made earlier. One good example of this stylistic transformation can be seen when comparing two paintings Tulk made of the same subject. The first, from



Fig. 8

early 1932, depicts women grinding grain in a mortar and pestle painted in the naturalistic style of ethnographic realism (fig. 8). In the second, which Tulk painted later in 1932 after extensive travel in Liberia and careful observation of body language, the image has been transformed into something far more animated and expressive (fig. 9). These later paintings, most of which are either lost or were destroyed in the studio fire, boldly signal the emergence of Tulk's own unique artistic voice.

Collecting Art and Material Culture

During his time in Liberia, Alfred Tulk assembled a small but important collection of masks, statues and other artifacts, including jewelry, musical instruments and household items. Tulk had seen some of the objects Harley was collecting for the Peabody Museum, and was fascinated by the sculptural forms,

by the sacred function of art in society, and by the relationship between African visual art, music and dance. Among the Dan/Gio and Mano ethnic groups in the region of Ganta, art and life were deeply intertwined. Masks served sacred roles within "secret" initiation societies (fig. 10); ceremonial spoons or ladles were key symbols of gender hierarchy and political influence (fig. 11); jewelry was a sign of status and access to wealth and power; carved wooden figures and brass castings were treasured by local patrons as genuine works of art; and finely decorated utilitarian objects spoke to the owner's appreciation of graceful form and aesthetic beauty. Tulk's desire to collect art and artifacts was driven by his admiration for the aesthetic forms and the talent he recognized in the artists. But he also understood that the people and cultures of northeast Liberia were



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

rapidly changing, and through his collecting Tulk sought to preserve what he perceived to be "dying" cultural traditions. Although it was commonly assumed in this time period

that the advance of Western modernity brought with it the "cultural demise" of traditional African cultures, today we would say instead that the men and women Tulk encountered in Liberia were adapting customary beliefs and lifeways to new ideologies and technologies. The peoples of Liberia are still vibrant today, and they continue to adapt to change and cultural transformations.

One of the principal catalysts of change in Liberia during the 1930s was the impact of the cash economy on local populations. As a means of coercing cheap labor for a growing number of cash-crop enterprises – most notably the American-owned Firestone Rubber Plantation – the central government in Monrovia



Fig. 1

imposed steep property taxes on the inhabitants of the interior. Taxes could only be paid in paper and coin currency, and there were few opportunities for cash income other than working on the export-crop plantations. One alternative, however, was to sell artifacts to foreign buyers. Thus, objects that may never have been shown to outsiders in the past were surfacing on the local market, especially around the time tax payments were due (Adams 2009).

In his diary, Tulk recounts several instances in which objects were offered for sale by a chief or other property owner who needed to raise cash for a tax payment. Once, while traveling to the east of Ganta in February 1933, Tulk was offered a grand ceremonial spoon (fig. 12) by a chief in need of cash:

We were visited by all the dignitaries of the town, all wearing an air of some gravity. The chief came – spread a cloth on the ground – put on the cloth a very large old wooden spoon I realized what was up. I had promised I would help [Chief] Bli Mi with his tax palaver if he could find me something I liked to buy. So – some sort of speech was made whereupon I took the spoon and examined it – then [so did] Ethel. We both felt the thing was worth about £2 but



Fig. T

since the tax debt was f_{2-10} we agreed to be generous and pay the larger sum. I stated the case and the chief and everyone were very happy. However, the woman. Bli Mi's head woman in whose charge the spoon had been, demurred a little - some discussion took place but no objection was made to my price. I had counted the shillings and placed them in the spoon. Chief again counted and placed [the spoon] in its bag – However, so that all should be well I added 5 shillings "on top" – and even the woman was happy. (Tulk 1931-33)

The need for currency also drove some artists to make objects intended specifically for sale rather than for local indigenous use. Although in the 1930s tourism in West Africa was far more modest than it is today, there was a rapidly growing market in art made



Fig. 14

expressly for outsiders, or what is now referred to as "tourist" art (Steiner 1994). Tulk appears to have been keenly aware of the difference between what he called the "genuine article" and objects that were being made for sale. In describing

his purchase of two carved standing figures (fig. 13), for example, Tulk wrote in his diary in September 1932, "these are better carvings than many,



Fig. 13

but [they are] new and made for sale perhaps some of our friends will like them" (Tulk 1931-33).

The Legacy of Alfred J. Tulk

Shortly after his return to the United States from Liberia in 1933, Alfred Tulk wrote a series of letters to American museums, auction houses and art dealers asking whether they would be interested in purchasing the artifacts he had collected. His inquiries were motivated by a genuine desire to share with a wider audience the thrilling objects he had discovered in Liberia. But as a young artist who had been away from work for over a year, he was also urgently in need of money. It is ironic, of course, that Tulk had acquired his collection from people selling art to pay their taxes and now found himself needing to dispose of these very same objects because he was strapped for cash. In a letter addressed to the director of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University in October 1933, Tulk underscored his financial predicament:

> I am writing to you as I am aware the museum has a growing collection of West African things including Dr. Harley's additions. I, however,

cannot donate these things due to the large personal expenditure I made and can but ask if the museum is interested and what money is available. (Tulk 1933)

Tulk photographed the objects he had collected and circulated the images along with his inquiries to potential buyers (fig. 14; note the two larger spoons/ ladles are those in figs. II and I2). The Peabody Museum did ultimately acquire a handful of artifacts (some of which are included in this exhibition), but it wasn't until 1980 that Tulk was finally able to sell the bulk of his collection to some African art collectors and dealers who recognized its artistic and historic value. Although the whereabouts of many objects from Tulk's collection are today unknown, the works assembled for this exhibition represent some of the most important material he collected.

Alfred Tulk never returned to Africa. He did, however, complete a commission in

1941 for a large stained-glass window for the auditorium of the College of West Africa in Monrovia—a seminary and high school run by the United Methodist Church, which oversaw the operations at Ganta Mission (fig. 15). The inscription on the side window panels, "Though a thousand fall, let not Africa be given up," is a quote from Melville B. Cox, the first missionary of American Methodism, who had arrived in Liberia a century earlier, in 1833. Although the quote refers directly to the unwavering dedication of missionaries in Africa, the sentiment may indirectly suggest the enduring impact of Africa on the art and life of Alfred Tulk, who never forgot or "gave up" his passion, admiration and respect for the peoples and cultures of Liberia.

> Christopher B. Steiner, PhD Lucy C. McDannel '22 Professor of Art History and Anthropology Connecticut College



Fig. 15



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to Sheila Tulk Payne for sharing with me her father's diary, correspondence, artworks and field photographs. Heartfelt thanks also to Lou Wells for generously granting access to his archive of documents relating to George Harley and Alfred Tulk. Sincerest gratitude to Samir and Mina Borro for their loan of two magnificent objects, and to their daughter, Najwa Borro, for her extraordinary generosity in delivering personally the pieces from Belgium. The following individuals and museums were kind enough to loan objects to the exhibition: the Karob Collection, Boston; Margarete Wells; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University; Samir and Mina Borro; and one anonymous collector. I am enormously grateful to Linda Wolk-Simon for inviting me to curate the exhibition, and for all the support she and her staff, Carey Mack Weber, Michelle DiMarzo, and Lauren Williams, have provided along the way. Acknowledgement is also due to faculty liaison Dr. Scott Lacy, Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Fairfield University. My thanks, finally, to Rebecca C. Steiner for her careful editorial comments that greatly improved this essay.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING

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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Objects Collected by Alfred J. Tulk in Liberia, 1932-33

Mask (Deangle). Dan/Gio, Liberia. Wood, kaolin. 8 inches height. Private collection. (front and back covers)

Mask (Tankagle). Dan/Gio, Liberia. Wood, brass, kaolin. 8½ inches height. Collection of Samir and Mina Borro. (fig. 10)

Female Figure. Dan/Gio, Liberia. Wood, canvas, brass, cowrie, vegetable fiber. 17 inches height. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. 34-34-50/251.

Male and Female Figures. Dan/Gio, Liberia. Wood, cotton. 20 and 20½ inches height. Private collection. (fig.13)

Carved by Zlan. Ceremonial Spoon or Ladle (Wunkirmian or Wakemia). Dan/Gio, Liberia. Wood, fiber, aluminum. 28 inches height. Karob Collection, Boston. (fig. 12)

Ceremonial Spoon or Ladle (Wunkirmian or Wakemia). Dan/Gio, Liberia. Wood, kaolin, aluminum. 18 inches height. Collection of Samir and Mina Borro. (fig. 11)

Cast by Bwaiwehn of Belewali. *Female Figure*. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Brass. $8\frac{1}{4}$ inches height. Karob Collection, Boston.

Cast by Bwaiwehn of Belewali. *Male Figure (Hunter or Soldier*). Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Brass. 10 inches height. Private collection.

Chair. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Wood, brass. 13 x 16 x 14 inches. Karob Collection, Boston.

Man's Robe. Ganta, Liberia. Cotton, silk. 66 x 36 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Margarete L. Wells. 2017.4649.

Bead Necklace with Aluminum "Claws". Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Glass, cotton, aluminum. 11½ inches diameter. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. 34-34-50/289.

Bead Necklace with Brass Ornaments. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Brass, glass, fiber, copper, iron. 11½ inches diameter. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. 34-34-50/285.

Bead Necklace with Brass Pendant. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Brass, copper, glass beads, fiber. 9½ inches diameter. Karob Collection, Boston.

Bead Necklace with Brass Pendant. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Glass, brass, copper, fiber. 15 inches diameter. Private collection.

Hairpin. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Aluminum. 9 5/16 inches length. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. 34-34-50/278a.

Hairpin. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Aluminum. 5 inches length. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. 34-34-50/278b.

Anklet with Bells. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Brass. 4½ inches diameter. Private collection.

Storage Container. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Calabash, rattan, wood. 18 inches diameter, 10 inches height. Private collection.

Utilitarian Spoon with Decorated Handle. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Wood. 15 inches height. Private collection.

Balafon or Xylophone. Dan/Gio or Mano, Liberia. Wood, gourd, fiber, cotton. 36 x 17 x 10 inches. Private collection.

Qur'anic School Writing Tablet. Liberia. Wood, pigment. 21 7/16 x 7 9/16 inches. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. 34-34-50/261.

Drawings, Paintings and Sculpture by Alfred J. Tulk, Liberia, 1931-33

"Nya Koonah" Mano, approx. 14 yrs. Graphite on paper. 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ x $9^{\frac{3}{4}}$ inches. Private collection.

Gkeh-Si, Geh Tribe. Charcoal on paper. 18½ x 13¼ inches. Private collection.

Wey-Bu-Na, Mano. Charcoal on paper. 20 % x 16 % inches. Private collection.

Untitled [Seated Youth]. Watercolor on paper. 14 % x 11 ½ inches. Private collection.

 $Mano\ Woman,\ Ganta,\ Liberia.\ Oil\ on\ Masonite.\ 12\ x\ 14\ inches.$ Private collection.

Frank's Wife, Mano. Oil on canvas affixed to cardboard. 19½ x 21 inches. Private collection.

Untitled [Pounding Palm Nuts]. Oil on canvas. 18 x 25½ inches. Private collection.

Untitled [Woman Spinning Cotton]. Oil on canvas. 20½ x 24 inches. Private collection. (fig. 4)

Untitled [Woman with Mortar and Pestle]. Watercolor on paper. 10 x 20 ¼ inches. Private collection.

Untitled [Woman with Musical Instrument]. Watercolor on paper. II x 2I inches. Private collection.

Dance of the Gmun. Oil on canvas affixed to particle board. 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15 inches. Private collection.

Untitled [Women with Mortar and Pestle]. Oil on canvas. 26 x 35 inches. Private collection. (fig. 9)

Untitled [Self Portrait], ca. 1950s (painted in Connecticut). Oil on canvas board. 20 x 24 inches. Private collection.

All Stops Out or Full Organ, ca. 1965 (painted in Connecticut). Oil on canvas. 51½ x 61½ inches. Private collection. (fig. 1)

Untitled [Sculpture Inspired by Liberian Art], 1932-33. Wood. 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{6}$ inches. Private collection.

Documents and Field Photographs (all courtesy of Sheila Tulk Payne)

Map of Liberia. War College Division, Washington, D.C., 1916. $27\frac{1}{2}$ x $37\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Owned by Alfred J. Tulk.

Alfred J. Tulk. Handwritten Diary in Spiral Binder, December 1931 - February 1933.

Field Photographs by Alfred J. Tulk, 1931-32. (figs. 2, 5 and 14)

Photo Album with Images of Liberian Artifacts Collected by Alfred J. Tulk, ca. 1980.

Miscellaneous Letters and Correspondence, 1931-1980.

Cover of World Outlook, monthly magazine of the Methodist Church, February 1942. (fig. 15).

Captions

Works illustrated in the text are noted in the checklist with the exception of the following:

Fig. 3. Alfred J. Tulk. *Paramount Chief Reppo*, 1932. Oil on canvas. Dimensions unknown. Location of original painting unknown. From a photograph by Alfred J. Tulk, ca. 1980. Collection of Sheila Tulk Payne.

Figs. 6-8. Alfred J. Tulk. Untitled paintings, 1932-33. Oil on canvas. Dimensions unknown. Original paintings lost or destroyed. From undated photographs by Alfred J. Tulk. Collection of Sheila Tulk Payne.

Generous support for the exhibition is provided by The Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Foundation.

EXHIBITION PROGRAMS

Thursday, September 13, 5 p.m.

Opening Night Lecture: The Artist as Collector: Alfred J. Tulk in Liberia

Dr. Christopher B. Steiner, Lucy C. McDannel '22 Professor of Art History and Anthropology, and Director of the Museum Studies Program, Connecticut College Bellarmine Hall, Diffley Board Room

Part of the Edwin L. Weisl, Jr. Lectureships in Art History, funded by the Robert Lehman Foundation

Opening Reception, 6-7:30 p.m.

Bellarmine Hall, Great Hall and Bellarmine Hall Galleries

Wednesday, October 3, 7-9 p.m.

A Drawing Party

Bellarmine Hall, Bellarmine Hall Galleries and SmART classroom Drawing materials and light refreshments are provided.

Wednesday, October 17, 5 p.m.

Lecture: The Representation of Africa in Western Art

Dr. Scott Lacy, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Fairfield University Bellarmine Hall, Diffley Board Room

Thursday, October 18, 11 a.m.

Art in Focus: Gio/Dan (Liberia) Male Figure, 1933 or earlier

With Curator of Education Dr. Michelle DiMarzo Bellarmine Hall, Bellarmine Hall Galleries

Saturday, October 20, 1-4 p.m. (2 sessions)

Family Day: Arts of Liberia

Bellarmine Hall, SmART Classroom

Tuesday, October 30, 5-7 p.m.

Film Screening: Pray the Devil Back to Hell (2008)

DiMenna-Nyselius Library, Multi-media Room

Tuesday, December 4, 6 p.m.

Gallery Talk: Collecting and Field Work in West Africa

Dr. Scott Lacy, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Fairfield University Bellarmine Hall, Bellarmine Hall Galleries

All events are free of charge and open to the public but advance registration is recommended. Please register at **fuam.eventbrite.com**.





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