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“Sea Warriors”: A Public Art Project in Lower Manhattan

Opening: September 19, 4pm, Cannon’s Walk, South Street Seaport

On September 19, eleven historical pirates will invade the South Street Seaport as part of an exciting public art exhibition in conjunction with the Seaport Marketplace and is a sponsored project of the New York Foundation for the Arts. Sixteen historical lampposts will be adorned with flags displaying Francis Drake, Captain Kidd, Blackbeard, and others, including four women pirates who lived between 230BC and 1930. In Cannon’s Walk, a little-known historical part of the Seaport, a site-specific installation will feature long flags, window stencils, and original artwork depicting local pirates. The exhibit will run through October 18.

Bowne & Co., the antique letterpress shop of the South Street Seaport Museum, will be running a letterpress demonstration on September 19 featuring a custom die designed by Michelle Vaughan; the shop will also be selling limited-edition prints related to the exhibition.

The project takes place just a few blocks away from the Metropolitan Correctional Center, where Abduwali Abdukhadir Muse is currently being held in solitary confinement – the first time in many decades that a pirate has been jailed on US soil. One of the pirates in the exhibition, Captain William Kidd, was also an inhabitant of New York’s jails, after living on Wall Street and helping to build Trinity Church. His story – which gave rise to many of the romantic aspects of privateering and piracy – will be told with ten others as part of the exhibition, which is based on a major suite of paintings (eleven portraits, eleven coats of arms, and one timeline) by artist Michelle Vaughan.

“Sea Warriors” will help to inform the debate over the phenomenon of piracy, both past and present. Sir Francis Drake, for instance, was considered by the British to be an epic sea captain, while to the Spanish he was known as "The Dragon" and damned as one of the worst pirates alive. Captain Kidd had close ties with many political figures in both America and England, but in the end was used as a pawn and hanged at Execution Dock in London. Koxinga was the son of a pirate who defended the Ming Dynasty and defended Taiwan from the Dutch – but was a rebel to the Qing Dynasty: a pirate to some and a hero to others.

In contrast to the pirates of centuries ago, who came from countries of wealth and power, today’s piracy reflects the desperation of small impoverished countries. The current rise in Somalia has been a product of a ten-year civil war, high levels of poverty, the pollution of Western countries, and international fishing companies that deplete Somalia’s fish population – all on the vast coastline of a highly populated trade route.

“Sea Warriors” takes place alongside a show of historical maps at the South Street Seaport Museum, and the "Henry Hudson 400" celebrations of the 400th anniversary of the discovery of New Amsterdam. Taken together, they will be instrumental in reconnecting New Yorkers with an area of great historical importance.

Michelle Vaughan, the artist who conceived the “Sea Warriors” exhibit, is available for interviews; short descriptions of the pirates in the exhibit follow.

Queen Teuta: An Illyrian Queen from 230BC who was known as the "Terror of the Adriatic". She pushed out Greek colonies and intercepted merchant vessels of Rome. Teuta proudly extended her piratical forces throughout the Ionian Sea until Rome declared war against the Illyrians. She is remembered as a hero in Croatia.

Barbossa: An icon in Greece, Barbossa was born on the island of Lesbos in the 1470s. After a career as a mighty sea captain and then a disagreement with the Sultan of Tunis, he moved to Algiers, defending that territory. He spent several years on the offensive, successfully attacking Spanish warships.

Sir Francis Drake: Known to the Spanish as "El Draque" (the dragon), Sir Francis Drake terrorized the high seas under Queen Elizabeth during the late 1500s. He is hailed as a great explorer and hero in England, but wreaked havoc throughout Spanish Europe and the Americas.

Koxinga: Born in Japan to Chinese and Japanese parents in 1624, Koxinga's family were Ming supporters when Manchurian forces spread throughout China. Koxinga attacked them at every opportunity and successfully defeated the Dutch in Taiwan. Today he is worshiped by some as a god throughout the South China seas.

William Kidd: Of Scottish heritage, William Kidd was a controversial pirate who had close ties with England's King William III and the Earl of Belmont of Massachusetts. He helped build Trinity Church and lived on Pearl Street. Folklore surrounds his hidden treasures, and he was hung at London's Execution Dock in 1701.

Anne Bonny: Daughter of an Irish lawyer in South Carolina, Anne Bonny fled with Calico Jack and Mary Reade on sloop William in 1719. They plundered small vessels until captured by the Navy in 1721. Anne pleaded her belly on trial, gave birth and then escaped. Her fate is unknown.

Mary Reade: Born in England, Mary Reade ran away from her home to join the British army. She dressed as a boy and worked as a seaman until her ship was captured by pirates. Mary thieved ships with Anne Bonny throughout the Caribbean, but died in childbirth in jail during 1721.

Lai Choi San: A highly profitable pirate, Lai Choi San's name translates as "Mountain of Wealth". In the 1930s, she sailed 12 fully armed junks in Macao waters and was tight with local officials. Feared and respected by villagers, they either paid for her "protection" or found their ships on the ocean floor.

Blackbeard: Edward Teach (aka Blackbeard) was the most notorious pirate of all time. To prove his lunacy, Blackbeard twisted pieces of slow burning match into his hair and lit them for grand effect. His last battle was fought in a bloody hand-to-hand fight with Captain Maynard of the Royal Navy. Blackbeard's decapitated head was hung from the bowsprit of his sloop in 1719.

Calico Jack: A small time pirate, Calico Jack became famous for choosing to sail with Mary Reade and Anne Bonny. In 1720, a naval ship chased down his sloop William and fought Pirates Mary Reade and Anne Bonny while Calico Jack was below deck drunk. He was tried in Port Royal, Jamaica, and hung in 1721.

Jean Lafitte: This complex figure was a French Jewish sea captain involved in the slave trade through New Orleans. Lafitte was friendly with both Napoleon and Andrew Jackson. He served as a privateer when his country called on him during the war of 1812, but was generally known as a pirate and is said to have died somewhere in Mexico.