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Akan Goldweights: Masterpieces in Miniature

La Salle University Art Museum

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La Salle University Art Museum

March 22-May 24, 2000
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Masterpieces in Miniature

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Cover photo: Akan Goldweights from the Nitecki Collection at Glenbow, Glenbow Collection, Calgary, Canada
Today the African continent has over fifty independent nations. Many of these countries are home to a variety of tribes. In some areas, there have been long-established and relatively peaceful tribal federations. In other areas, there are groupings of rather hostile tribes, a result usually of arbitrarily drawn boundaries by colonial rulers in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In West Africa, the nation of Ghana—the former Gold Coast—was the first independent nation in the modern continent (1957). It was populated largely by the Fanti and Ashanti tribes but has had a comparatively stable development over the centuries. It was a tribal confederation of states that flourished from the 9th to the 12th century,
when it was absorbed by the Mali empire to the north but restored by an Ashanti regime in the 16th century. In the early 20th century it fell to British colonial rule.

Ghana’s relative stability could be attributed, then, to a strong social structure of extended families, the direction of village elders and chiefs, cooperative relations with other tribes—and a centralized government of successive kings. What also buttressed its relative prosperity was a tradition of brisk commerce and trade (marred in the 19th century, though, by involvement in the slave trade). Even more important, perhaps, was the discovery in its areas, as early as the 2nd century AD, of gold—and its ability to keep the location of its mines a secret.

The Gold Standard

An account by the Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th century BC describes very early use of gold dust and nuggets as a medium of exchange in coastal Africa:

The Carthaginians also say that there is a place in Libya, and people living in it, beyond the Pillars of Hercules. When they, the Carthaginians, come there and disembark their cargo, they range it along the seashore and go back again to their boats and light a smoke signal. The natives, as soon as they see the smoke, come down to the shore and then deposit gold to pay for the merchandise and retreat again, away
from the goods. The Carthaginians disembark and look; if they think that the price deposited is fair for the merchandise, they take it up and go home again. If not, they go back to their boats and sit there. The natives approach and bring more gold in addition to what they have put there already, until such time as the Carthaginians are persuaded to accept what is offered. They say that thus neither party is ill-used; for the Carthaginians do not take the gold until they have the worth of their merchandise, nor do the natives touch the merchandise until the Carthaginians have taken the gold. (The History, 4.196 Grene, 1987)

While there were land routes across the desert during the Middle Ages to the gold market, it was only in the late 15th century that Portuguese ships stopped at the beaches of what later would be called Guinea and, still later, The Gold Coast, and finally Ghana. They were soon followed by Dutch, English, French, Swedes, and Danes—all eager to trade for gold. Each of the invader-merchant groups built forts along the coast. If not with one another, they generally had good relations with the natives. But they did not, until much later, venture into the rain-forest to the capital Kumasi or find the gold-mines.

As commerce—and taxes from the Ashanti king—increased, there developed standard devices and procedures for calculating amounts of gold. The basic instrument was the simple and ancient balance scale, with a set of weights in an agreed-upon gradation; they had been used in Egypt for millennia before. For much
of their history, the systematized weights were simply chips of stone or metal, some eventually with geometric decoration.

In later village markets, especially, there was no more of the polite hide-and-seek ritual of the beginnings of trade. More likely the villager would have brought his own set of weights to have measured against the seller's—before the haggling began. What eventually added even more interest to such long exchanges, however, was the development of more artistic weights.

*Three young men weighing gold*

Photograph Monnet, 1894
Akan Goldweights

As an essential part of an exchange system in an aggressive trading economy, goldweights were the most abundant form of African art. Probably some four million of these mostly brass miniatures were cast between the 14th and end of the 19th centuries by Akan speaking groups living along the coastal rain forest of West-Africa. Most essentially these were the Ashanti (Asante) living in today’s Ghana and to a lesser extent the Baule tribes living in today’s southeastern Ivory Coast. Dealers in the village market place used these weights—as did the inevitable tax-collectors of the King and the tribal chiefs.

But unlike much African art which was closely associated with court ceremonies or other ritual events, goldweights offer us insight into everyday village life, its surrounding creatures and other natural objects, its symbols, and tools. The goldweights further provide us with allusions to wit, proverbial wisdom, and ethical standards which dominated village life. Thus, though goldweights were basically utilitarian, their more serious implications and fine artistry have often been overlooked.

The production of goldweights was dominated by male artists in court goldsmith guilds, where son succeeded father in learning to sculpt figures and cast metal according to the lost wax method. Occasionally the weights were cast directly from small natural objects
such as insects, seeds, plants, or stones. In either case the weights were cast in brass and ranged in size from three millimeters to ten centimeters.

They were then used as counterweights in a complex measuring system influenced by Islamic and later Portuguese, English and Dutch traders. Their development is typically divided into two periods: Early (1400-1700) in which abstract geometric forms dominated and the Late (1700-1900) to which most of the human figures, animals and other objects in this exhibition belong. With the passing of time the weights became increasingly naturalistic, complex in design, and technically refined.
While many weights have been attributed to a particular tribe such as the Ashanti, they are often merely identified here as belonging to the Akan speaking peoples. In our selection there are two main groups: human figures and, then, other creatures, both mythical and real, including fish, reptiles, birds and insects. A few in geometric form are also included. This large repertoire of African subjects eventually expanded to include items brought in by North African Islamic and later European traders. It should be mentioned, too, that the subject of the weight had no relationship to its prescribed value.

**Allusions**

Perhaps because the Ashanti tribe had no written system for its language until recent centuries, it inclined to a visual art with strong implication. At least, there appear to be frequent allusions in their goldweights to proverbial commonplaces—"Birds of a feather flock together," for instance, in a weight of a tree where several birds are roosting. In other instances, the reference may be to common experiences in the family or workplace, to traditional wisdom, moral values, or spiritual insight. For some pertinent examples see the check list in the exhibition brochure.

Thus a casting of a village herbalist scraping bark from a tree by himself might allude to a saying about refusing help when you need it. Or a figure of a man holding a snake by the neck might refer to the proverb: "If you catch
the enemy’s leader, his followers will be helpless.” And a bird looking behind itself might suggest using the wisdom of past experience.

There is, however, often some difficulty in pinning down one particular allusion to a weight where several might be appropriate—or where one proverb seems applicable to different weights. Moreover, the particular allusion to a weight frequently changed over time and place. One suspects that seller or buyer in the marketplace was adept at utilizing the best references for the occasion. In any case, the message or thought inherent in the goldweights played a vital role in emphasizing core values needed to sustain Akan communities.
But Is It Art?

As we have seen, goldweights are unusual in the variety of their functions and values. Unlike African masks and sculpture, they were in ordinary and daily use. Their usefulness in the markets was not simply as measuring gismos, but also as conversation pieces in the leisurely give-and-take of bargaining—about as far from the dispatch of today’s e-commerce as can be imagined.

Their implications, therefore, go beyond specific proverbial associations to tell us how the people worked, produced their goods, interacted socially. With the help of modern anthropology, we learn too, about their ethical standards and religious beliefs. There are, of course, some echoes of tribal warfare, grim taboos, or animal sacrifice. But overwhelmingly the mood they evince is amiable, joyful, and propitious.

Interestingly, too, goldweights were used as ornaments on festive occasions. Kings or chiefs might sometimes have their weights cast in gold—as also their breast-plates, ceremonial swords or whatever—to impress or intimidate. But it is reassuring that ordinary citizens had upbeat uses for their weights and that collections of them became prized family inheritances. There is real appreciation here for realistic depiction and good workmanship which takes the weights substantially beyond the cute trinket or bracelet charm, beyond even imagi-
native decoration or the art of jewelry.

In the end, though, we may ask whether the weights—having lost their practical functions when colonial powers dropped gold as the medium of exchange—are not now simply amateurish "folk" art. Picasso and other modernists answered that question by their wholesale adaptation of African styles early in the last century. They have broadened the horizons of our appreciation ever since. In museum exhibitions especially, what we are now likely to be responding to are the clever design, the play of serious implications, the unaffected ebullience of the goldweights as works of art, indeed as masterpieces in miniature.

Brother Daniel Burke
Director

Caroline Wistar
Curator
Special Exhibition Room
Check List

Unless otherwise noted all the weights are cast in brass by Akan peoples typically by the Ashanti. A related proverb, followed by its traditional significance, is also noted where known.

Lenders key
(C) = Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, New York City
(G) = Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada
(P) = University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

1. Paramount Chief Nana Akyano Akowuah Dateh II. Kumasi, Ghana

1a. Henry Hondius (17th century), Dutch
   *African Nova Tabula* 1631
   Hand colored engraving
   Given by Jay R. Stiefel, Esq.

2. Kente Cloth
   Ghana
   Lent by Dr. Theopolis Fair

3. Wood Fertility Doll
   Ashanti, Ghana
   Lent by Dr. Theopolis Fair

4. Wood Ladle
   Guro, Ivory Coast
   Given by Margaret Webster Plass

4a. Gold weighing
   Photograph, 1894
5. Wood Mask  
Baule, Ivory Coast  
Given by Margared Webster Plass

6. Wood Fertility Doll  
Ashanti, Ghana  
Given by Margaret Webster Plass

7. Kente Cloth Reproduction

8. Gold casting by lost wax method among the  
Ebrie Anna, Côte d’ Ivoire, photograph

9. Cotton African Textile  
Lent by Rose Lee Smith

10. Margaret Plass being welcomed in the  
royal compound by a wife of the Chief of  
the Mashonga tribe, 1950’s photograph

11. Kente Cloth, Ghana

12a. Wood Ladle  
Guro, Ivory Coast  
Given by Margaret Webster Plass

**Center Case**

Left to Right

12.(P) Sankofa bird  
“When it lies behind you, take it.”  
Use the wisdom of the past.

13.(P) Butterfly

14.(P) Turtle

15.(P) Birds
16. (P) Scale for weighing gold dust
17. (C) Box for gold dust
18. (P) Spoon for gold dust
19. (G) Man carrying goods
   Baule, Ivory Coast
20. (G) Standing man
21. (G) Man drinking
22. (P) Hornbill

23. (C) Mother with children

Hall Check List
Case 1

Objects read left to right and from top shelf to bottom shelf

1. (C) Woman with drums
2. (C) Woman carrying child and implements
3. (C) Woman nursing child
4. (C) Hunter shooting elephant
5. (C) Hunter with leopard and antelope

6. (C) Elephant
   "One who follow the tracks of the elephant never gets wet from the dew of the bushes."
   Follow an important man and he will protect you in time of troubles.
7. (C) Butterfly
8. (C) Beast with horns

9. (C) Chief on Stool
   "If the elder dies, that is the end of the household."
   No family can survive without a competent head of the family to guide and safeguard it.

10. (C) Woman carrying child and implements
11. (C) Man herding antelope

12. (C) Mudfish

13. (C) Birds on a Tree

("Only birds of the same clan or species play together on the same tree.")

Class consciousness: Birds of a feather flock together.

14. (C) Three leopards on top of a snake

Case II

15. (C) Crocodile with catfish

("If the catfish in the stream grows fat, he does it to benefit the crocodile (who eats him)."

A servant's prosperity is to the advantage of his master.

16. (C) Beetle

17. (C) Porcupine

("When the porcupine is going to visit the porcupine, he does not take any food with him

When one kinsman visits another he will rely on the hospitality of his host.

18. (C) Locust

19. (C) Chameleon

("The chameleon slowly but surely gets to its destination"

Slow and steady wins the race.

20. (C) Bird entering trap

("The bird caught in a trap sings sweetly (so that you release it)"

You flatter a person when you need something badly.

21. (C) Warrior with shield on horseback

22. (C) Warrior with gun riding leopard

23. (G) Hunter caught in the lion's mouth

("Once you catch hold of the hunter, his gun be
comes useless to him"
State of utter hopelessness.
24.(G) Leopard catching mudfish

25.(C) Man with shield
26.(C) Warrior with machete and shield

Case III

27.(P) Birds
28.(P) Snake biting bird
29.(G) Beetle

30.(P) Crayfish
31.(P) Catfish
32.(P) Sawfish

33.(C) Geometric
34.(G) Geometric
35.(C) Geometric
36.(G) Geometric
36.a (G) Geometric
37.(G) Geometric
38.(C) Geometric

39.(C) Antelope
40.(G) Birds on ring
41.(P) Snake with hornbill
"The puff-adder on the ground has caught the hornbill."
A man should not despair of getting anything, however difficult it may seem.

42.(C) Seed pod
43.(G) Man with snake
"If you held a snake by the head what is left is only a string."
If you catch the leader of the enemy his followers will be powerless.
44. (C) Sandals

45. (P) Leopard

"The rain wets the leopard's spots but does not wash them off."

The leopard cannot change its spots; a man's true nature will not change.

46. (P) Buck with bird on back

47. (P) Mythological bird with hat

48. (C) Cicada

49. (C) Royal Ashanti chair

50. (P) Hornbill pendant

"The great hornbill I have lifted myself up, so the smaller ones should bow down."

(Said by the town crier when a paramount chief approaches his subordinate chiefs.)

51. (P) Turtle

"Tortoise, you are also suffering in your shell."

However secure a person seems he has hidden troubles.

52. (P) Scorpion

"When the scorpion stings you mercilessly, you have to kill it in the same spirit."

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

53. (P) Elephant

"One who follow the tracks of the elephant never gets wet from the dew of the bushes."

Follow an important man and he will protect you in time of troubles.

54. (G) Crocodile

"The old crocodile swallows a pebble when the year ends."

Misfortunes come each year, we must accept them as a part of life.
55. (C) Mythological Crocodiles

56. (G) Fish
"If the fish comes out of the water to say that the crocodile is ill, one should not doubt it."
Nobody will doubt what your close friend says about you.

57. (P) Fish
58. (P) Bull pendant
Senufo, Ivory Coast
59. (P) Birds on a Tree
"Only birds of the same clan or species play together on the same tree."
Class consciousness: Birds of a feather flock together.

60. (G) Snake
"The snake that blocks the path is going its own way, yet people run away when they see it."
Once you get a bad reputation nobody will trust, you even when you intend no harm.


Nitecki, A. Equal Measure for Kings and Commoners, Goldweights of the Akan (Calgary, Canada: The Glenbow Museum, 1982)

We are deeply indebted to Dr. Walter Lomax, '53 and Leon Ellerson, '56 for their support of this exhibition and Mrs. Renee Gross for her generous loan of goldweights. Lenders of objects to the exhibition were principally:

*The Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada*

*The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archeology*

*Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, New York City.*

We are also indebted to a collector and scholar of African Art, the late Margo Plass, who began our interest in African art in the 1960s, who contributed many works to our museum in the years thereafter and who coined the subtitle of this exhibition.

*Margo Plass, meeting Chief's wife*