

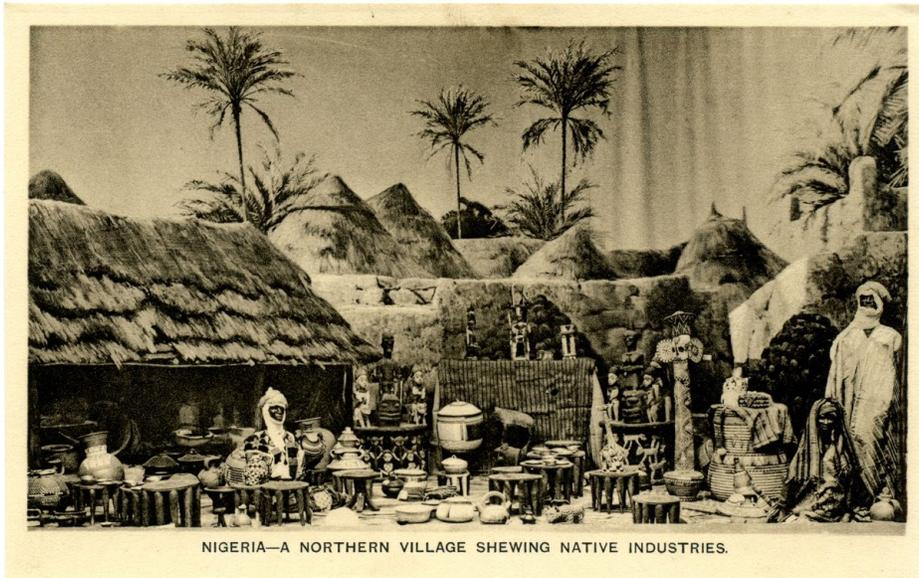
Fowler

MUSEUM AT UCLA

On Display in the Walled City: Nigeria at the British Empire Exhibition, 1924–1925

September 8, 2019–March 8, 2020

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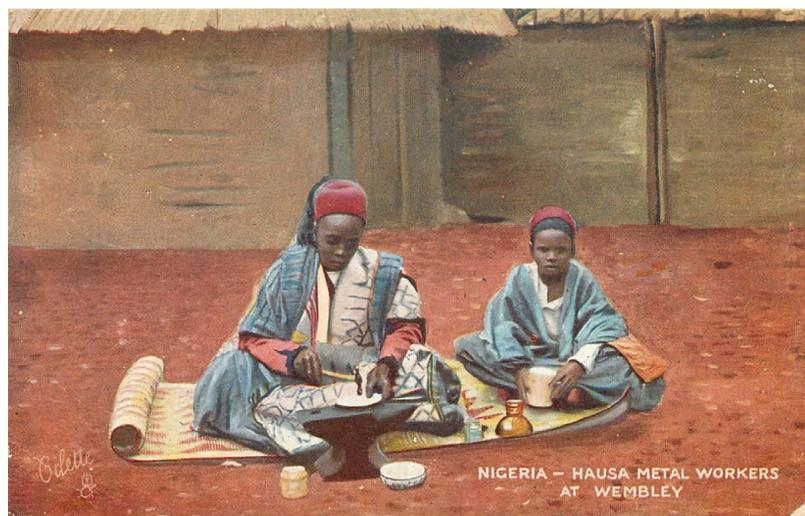
On Display in the Walled City: Nigeria at the British Empire Exhibition, 1924–1925, features 38 objects from the Exhibition staged almost a century ago in the London suburb of Wembley to showcase Britain's wealth and supremacy, and stimulate trade with and among its various colonies. The works on view at the Fowler Museum at UCLA—originally displayed in the Exhibition's Nigerian Pavilion—were acquired by the British pharmaceutical entrepreneur and global art collector Sir Henry Wellcome in 1925 and donated to the Fowler by the Wellcome Trust between 1965 and 1967.

The British Empire Exhibition sprawled over a vast fairground that included pavilions devoted to natural resources, products, and people from 55 of the Empire's 58 colonies, as well as a working replica of a coalmine, a lake, an amusement park, gardens, and restaurants. Electric buses and light rail transported some 27 million visitors through the park over the course of the Exhibition's two-year run. Among the most popular attractions was the "Walled City," containing the pavilions of the West African colonies of Nigeria, Gold Coast (modern day Ghana), and Sierra Leone.

The Fowler exhibition presents some key objects from those pavilions, including a model of a royal altar from the Kingdom of Benin; ritual and prestige objects made by Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, and Kanuri artists; and the doors to living quarters of African artists brought to demonstrate their skills to the Exhibition visitors. *On Display in the Walled City* presents the Fowler's recent research on the Wellcome Collection and offers new insights into the British colonial enterprise.

Nigerian Arts on Display

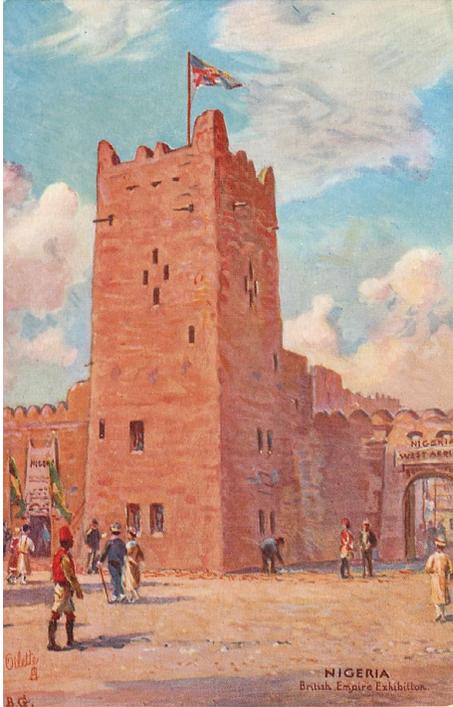
On Display in the Walled City features works in wood, metal, beadwork, and leather displayed at the Nigerian Pavilion in 1924-25 to convey cultural and material riches of various parts of the colony. One key installation was a model of a royal altar from the Kingdom of Benin. Such altars reinforced the legitimacy of the recently departed *oba* (king) and celebrated the long line of rulers who preceded him. The British Punitive Expedition of 1897 had looted many such altars in Benin, sending carved ivory tusks, cast bronze heads and plaques, and other components to London, to be sold or kept in public museums. Subsequent altars erected in Benin perished through fire and looting, but the replica altar commissioned for the Nigerian Pavilion was purchased by Sir Henry Wellcome at the close of the Exhibition. The Fowler show elucidates the complex history of this royal installation.



Nigerian Artists at the British Empire Exhibition

The Nigerian Pavilion “transported” visitors to the colony through design elements inspired by Nigerian architecture, film shot on location, and objects placed on show. Visitors to the pavilion could also watch Nigerian artists at work. More than 20 men, women, and children, brought to the Exhibition, lived in the “Walled City” alongside participants from the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, demonstrating their skills to the attending public.

Many of the artists’ names are known, including Audu Mai Alijeta, the carver of three gourds on view at the Fowler. One gourd, likely engraved for European visitors to the Exhibition, features British motorcars, the Union Jack flag, colonial troops, and a meeting between Nigerian and British women. This decoration would have been exotic yet recognizable to urban British viewers. Engraved tubular gourds (*zungeru*) depict Nigerian experiences colored by the British colonial presence, including such scenes as a British man carried in a palanquin; colonial troops; well-dressed Hausa musicians; women identifiable as Fulani by their hairstyles; and a ballerina. Another gourd contains geometric designs typical of Hausa and Fulani styles, which has helped Fowler curators to confirm Alijeta’s hometown of Jalingo in Gongola state (Taraba state today).



Living at the British Empire Exhibition

The Nigerians, Ghanaians, and Sierra Leoneans brought to the Exhibition resided in a section called the “Native Village” within the “Walled City.” The Exhibition organizers emphasized that the West African artists should be treated as guests, but in reality their freedom of movement was restricted, as was their choice of dress. The public was prohibited from entering the artists’ living quarters, yet regularly intruded into these private spaces. The struggle for privacy inside the “Walled City” is made evident by the doors on view at the Fowler, which still bear the original slips of paper declaring: “Strictly Private, No Admittance” and “Strictly Private Room.” At the close of the Exhibition’s 1925 season, Sir Henry Wellcome acquired not only the art objects showcased in the Nigerian Pavilion, but also many of the doors to the living quarters of the West Africans. The wood for these doors had been imported from West Africa; their construction and carving was completed at Wembley.

Studying the Wellcome Collection

Wellcome had acquired more than one million objects by the time he died in 1936 at the age of 83. The Trust overseeing his collection decided to give away the entirety of its ethnographic holdings in a series of dispersals starting in the 1940s, including the donation of approximately 30,000 objects to UCLA.

In January 2019, the Fowler was awarded a \$600,000 grant by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to conduct interdisciplinary research on a subset of the Museum’s African artworks from the Wellcome Trust donation. The 40-month project includes funding for a full-time Mellon Curatorial Fellow and a full-time Mellon Conservation Fellow who will pursue collaborative curatorial, conservation, and archival investigations. *On Display in the Walled City* showcases the first phase of discoveries to emerge from the Mellon project. By reconstructing detailed histories of objects from the Wellcome Collection, the Fowler will be able to address questions faced by museums around the world, which seek to understand more fully their holdings, shed light on the lives of their objects, and reflect on their responsibilities to communities of origin.

Credits

This exhibition is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and is curated by Erica P. Jones, Associate Curator of African Arts.

About the Fowler Museum

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on works from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the indigenous Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | fowler.ucla.edu

Admission to the Fowler is free

Hours: Wed 12–8pm and Thu–Sun 12–5pm

Parking available in UCLA Lot 4: 398 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd. (\$3/hr; max \$13/day)

Rideshare drop-off: 305 Royce Drive

CAPTIONS

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Nigerian Art Installation in the “Walled City” Postcard: Nigeria—A Northern Village Shewing Native Industries
Printed by W & S Ltd., 1924; © Brent Museum and Archives.

Page 2

Postcard: Nigeria—Hausa Metal Workers at Wembley. Printed by Raphael Tuck & Sons Ltd., 1924.

Page 3

Postcard: “Nigeria at Wembley. The tower of the Nigerian Pavilion at Wembley is a replica of the Mosque in Kano City.” Printed by Raphael Tuck & Sons Ltd., 1924.