

# Fowler

## MUSEUM AT UCLA

### Summoning the Ancestors: Southern Nigerian Bronzes

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**Los Angeles, CA**— *Summoning the Ancestors* explores a comprehensive collection of bronzes— 76 bells and 73 *ọfọ* (small objects derived from wooden staffs of power)—produced in abundance in southern Nigeria by Igala, Igbo, Edo, and Yorùbá peoples. Dating from the 15th to mid-20th centuries, these little-studied works may be related to metalsmithing traditions associated with the famed sculptures found at the archaeological sites of Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, and the Benin Kingdom.

Grouped together by style as opposed to geographic area or maker, the installation underscores the potential of a large collection to demonstrate variations of technique and symbolism within a cultural region. Staged upon a multilevel platform running the length of the Fowler in Focus Gallery, the bells include examples big and small, richly adorned or spare in profile, and some that stretch ideas of what a bell can be. Many appear in multiples, standing like kindred souls, one next to the other; others represent unique forms.

Metalsmiths use the lost-wax casting technique to create these forms, produced with copper alloys of bronze (copper mixed with tin, lead, and trace elements) or brass (copper mixed with zinc and small amounts of other elements). The convention in Nigerian art studies is to apply the generic term “bronzes” for all copper alloy objects. Artist-smiths went to great lengths to individualize the pieces, applying their own stylistic signature to each one through a wide array of raised and incised patterns, including spirals, loops, and dots, as well as floral and animal motifs.

Many of the bronze bells on view were rung to invoke ancestors or nature spirits. Some announced the presence of important members of the living world, such as priests or local rulers. When worn on the body, a bell’s sounds might protect the wearer from malicious influences. The frequent inclusion of bells on shrines and in rituals, dances, and burials underlines a pervasive belief in the efficacy of this instrument.



The use of bronze ɔfɔ, which represent a person's prestige, seniority, and personal integrity, dates back to at least the 15th century. ɔfɔ are kept in shrines and only held in the owners' hand while swearing oaths or offering prayers. The ɔfɔ is a dynamic symbol of one's independent relationship with the ancestors and one's moral authority within the family unit and social group. In form, ɔfɔ likely derive from wire-wrapped bundles of ɔfɔ tree twigs (*Detarium senegalense*) found at shrines. Isoko, Urhobo, Igbo, and Ijo peoples living in the Niger Delta and riverain areas venerate this tree, viewing it as central to ancestral service and political power. Sacred wooden objects are often copied in bronze to enhance their power and prestige.

Across the ages, these cast bronze objects were perceived to possess a unique capacity to communicate, not only with their immediate human audience but also with other, unseen worlds. This collection offers an opportunity to explore this and other untold stories while paying homage to the imagination of artistic metalsmiths forgotten.

### **Credit**

*Summoning the Ancestors* is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and is guest curated by Nancy Neaher Maas, independent scholar, and Philip M. Peek, professor emeritus of anthropology, Drew University, New Jersey. All of the works on view are the promised gift of Mark Clayton.

### **Related Programs**

**Gallery Talk** | Sunday November 4, 1pm

Cast-metal bells from Nigeria are full of secrets that belie their simple forms. How were they made? By whom? Who owned them and for what purposes? Were they always used as sounding instruments or for something else? Guest co-curator Nancy Neaher Maas explores these mysteries and more.

**Culture Fix** | Friday November 9, 12pm

Guest co-curator Philip M. Peek explores the small cast bronze *ọfọ* in *Summoning the Ancestors*, which stand for an adult Igbo man's personal integrity and moral authority, and link him to his ancestors. Used in rituals and kept on shrines, mystery surrounds the makers of these delicate and highly ornamented personal bronzes.

### **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.

### **Fowler Museum at UCLA**

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | [fowler.ucla.edu](http://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. (\$12/day)



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### **CAPTIONS**

Artist unknown (Southern Nigeria)  
Quadrangular bells, 20th century  
Copper alloy  
Promised gift of Mark Clayton  
Image © Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph Don Cole, 2018.

Artist unknown (Southern Nigeria)  
*Ọfọ*, (15th to mid-20th century)  
Copper alloy  
Promised gift of Mark Clayton  
Image © Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph Don Cole, 2018.