

The Fowler Museum at UCLA Permanently Returns Objects to the Asante Kingdom in the Republic of Ghana

The Fowler's unconditional ethical return contrasts with the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum's six-year loan of looted objects

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KUMASI, Ghana, February 5, 2024—The Fowler Museum at UCLA, a renowned museum dedicated to global arts and cultures with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Indigenous Americas, has announced the permanent and voluntary ethical return of royal objects to the Asante Kingdom in the Republic of Ghana. The Fowler Museum, which recently celebrated its 60th anniversary, is a leader in [repatriation to Native American tribal communities](#). This historic international return marks a significant milestone in the Fowler's long history of restitution.

On February 5, 2024, Silvia Forni, the Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum; Erica P. Jones, Senior Curator of African Arts and Manager of Curatorial Affairs; and Rachel Raynor, Director of Registration and Collections Management, personally returned objects to His Majesty, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, the 16th Asante King (Asantehene), on the 150th anniversary of the British looting of Kumasi, a city in the Asante Region of Ghana.

“We are globally shifting away from the idea of museums as unquestionable repositories of art, as collecting institutions entitled to own and interpret art based primarily on scholarly expertise, to the idea of museums as custodians, with ethical responsibility for the collection and towards the communities of origin of these collections,” said Forni.

To ensure the safe and ethical return of these objects, the Fowler Museum has worked closely with the Asante royal palace and Tufts University Professor and palace scholar Kwasi Ampene, who was integral in liaising the exchange.

Thanks to a 2019 grant from the Mellon Foundation, the Fowler was able to conduct extensive research into their colonial-era African collection. Among the objects in the collection were seven pieces that were either looted or extorted from the Asante in 1874 during the Sagrenti War (also known as the Third Anglo-Ashanti War). Before this research initiative, the Fowler's database had no data linking these objects and the war. Once the Fowler confirmed their histories, they immediately sought to return the objects to the Asante. This process took years and required the generous support of many people, including colleagues in the United States, Asante palace officials, and the Asantehene himself.

The returned objects include a *sika mena* (elephant tail whisk), two royal stool ornaments, a *gorget* (royal necklace) or stool ornament, bracelets and/or anklets, and an *asipim* (ornamental chair). According to the Fowler Museum's research, four objects were taken on February 5, 1874, and three were part of the indemnity payment that was made after the Treaty of Fomena.

The pieces returned to Ghana on February 1, 2024, and arrived at the Asante palace on February 5, 2024, the 150th anniversary to the day of the Sagrenti War where the objects were taken by British Forces. A [durbar and symposium](#) will be held on February 8 to commemorate the anniversary.

One object—a royal stool ornament—was in the personal collection of Asantehene Kofi Karikari (reign: 1867–1874). According to records, it was transferred to the British forces as part of the indemnity payment outlined in the February 13, 1874, Treaty of Fomena. The treaty required Asantehene Kofi Karikari to pay 50,000 ounces of gold. The object was later sold in the United Kingdom at the sale of objects from the “Ashanti Indemnity” at Garrard & Co. in March or April 1874. The ornament was eventually purchased by pharmaceutical entrepreneur and artifact collector Sir Henry Wellcome at an auction at Glendining & Co., Ltd. on November 30, 1928.

Another object — the *sika mena* (elephant tail whisk) — was also in the court collection of Asantehene Kofi Karikari. Records suggest that on February 5, 1874, while serving under Lord Wolseley, Captain J.E. Audley Harvey of the Black Watch looted this elephant tail whisk from the palace in Kumasi. It was later purchased by Wellcome at an auction at Glendining & Co., Ltd. on November 30, 1928.

After Wellcome's death in 1936, the Wellcome Trust dispersed his collection, some of it still in unopened crates. The British Museum received the largest gift while the Fowler Museum received 30,000 objects—including the seven returned objects—in 1965.

[The British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum have announced that gold and silver treasure looted from west Africa by the British army in colonial wars are to be lent to Ghana in a six-year deal.](#)

The Fowler Museum, however, has imposed no conditions on the returned objects. Whether they are installed in the museum, placed in the palace treasury, or used in public celebrations is entirely up to their stewards. They are museum pieces and also functional objects that could be used in a ceremonial setting. The Manhyia Palace Museum in Kumasi, for example, is a place where many objects have dual functions.

“At the Fowler Museum, we think of ourselves as temporary custodians of the objects in our collection,” said Jones. “In the case of pieces that were violently or coercively taken from their original owners or communities, it is our ethical responsibility to do what we can to return those objects. It is a process that will occupy generations of Fowler staff, but it is something that we are unwavering in our commitment to accomplish.”

This ethical return is one example of the Fowler Museum’s commitment to responsible stewardship and the preservation and exploration of global arts and cultures.

Prior to their return, the objects were 3D-scanned, with permission from the Asante royal palace, and replicas have been commissioned by Ghanaian artists so that the Fowler can continue to display objects related to this history and tell the story of the Sagrenti War of 1874 in the Fowler’s galleries. This commission is also an opportunity to highlight the ways in which there is a direct continuity between then and now as there are still incredible gold workers employed by the palace and local individuals. The Fowler Museum is honored to include the contemporary replicas in their collections and exhibitions with credit to the contemporary artists.

About the Fowler

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on 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.

The Fowler’s current exhibition, [*The House Was Too Small: Yoruba Sacred Arts from Africa and Beyond*](#), on display through June 2, 2024, features more than 100 works from Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, and the United States. This exhibition highlights pan-Yoruba theological principles as expressed through a variety of art forms including sculpture, beadwork, and ritual costume design. Artist and abolitionist Patrisse Cullors contributed a live performance and an installation titled *Free Us*, a multimedia work that unveils the resilience of these pan-Atlantic Yoruba divinities.

Fowler staff extensively worked with a collective of religious practitioners, academics, activists, and artists to develop this exhibition of masterworks from the Fowler collection. Community advisors also authored a selection of labels for personally meaningful objects. These texts offer uncommon insights gleaned from religious training, scholarly research, artistic vision, and lived experience.

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Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90095 | fowler.ucla.edu/visit
Admission to the Fowler is free
Hours: Wednesday, 12–8 pm
Thursday–Sunday, 12–5 pm

CAPTIONS

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Silvia Forni, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum at UCLA sits with Ivor Agyeman-Duah Director of the Manhyia Palace Museum in Kumasi Ghana, to sign over the permanent return of seven objects to Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II. Photo: Erica Jones

Unidentified member(s) of gold workers' guild (Asante peoples, Kumasi, Ghana), Royal necklace (*gorget*) or stool ornament; Before 1874; gold; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.8525; Gift of the Wellcome Trust