

Particular Histories: Provenance Research in African Arts

July 10–November 13, 2022 | Contact: Erin Connors, 714-270-6426, erinconnors@arts.ucla.edu

An exhibition of African works highlights the findings of a three-year initiative to trace the movement of objects collected during the colonial era

Provenance research—a process rarely laid out of the public—is the crucial first step in linking objects with the communities that made and used them

Los Angeles—The Fowler Museum at UCLA presents *Particular Histories: Provenance Research in African Arts*, an exhibition of early 20th-century African objects and accompanying archival materials that came to the Fowler in 1965 from the collection of **Sir Henry Wellcome** (1853–1936). This project is part of a three-year initiative generously funded by the Mellon Foundation. Five case studies—spotlighting a Nigerian helmet mask, a brass figure group by a Dahomey court artist, a carved wooden throne from Cameroon, a series of gold weights from West Africa, and a carved wooden house post from Nigeria—are presented alongside Wellcome Collection archives. Each grouping takes visitors through the process of tracing the history of these works, a journey that reflects their changing cultural contexts, and sheds light on shifting perceptions of their value.

“*Particular Histories* invites audiences to experience the challenge of reconstructing an object’s provenance when its history has been lost and or even omitted from past records,” said exhibition curator **Carlee S. Forbes**. “It is an exciting moment to redirect conversations about collections and collecting.”

While provenance is defined as a history of ownership, the research on view at the Fowler extends beyond a list of names and considers the complexity of objects’ trajectories across global political, cultural, social, and economic systems. Employing a combination of **conservation, material science, archival research, and curatorial methods**, the Fowler team unravels the histories of African works in the collection. In the process, they begin to reckon with the legacy of European colonization and its influence on the objects’ uses and evolving notions of worth.



The Five Case Studies

- In the first case study, a visual analysis of structural breakages and writing inside a carved wooden mask provide contextual clues about its movements and possible **acquisition by military personnel**. In the absence of further archival evidence, this example highlights the difficulty of determining whether such works were looted, purchased under coercion, bought on an open market, or some combination of the above.
- The second and third studies challenge the classifications of **authenticity and value** (including monetary, cultural, or art historical). By examining auction and acquisition records, we see how descriptive terms oscillate between rare, authentic, valuable, mundane, fake, or cheap, and how such interpretations shift over time. In the case of the brass figure procession, the research team reconsiders a piece formerly deemed “tourist art”—intended for non-African audiences—and discusses how African artists developed sculptural innovations aimed specifically at European clientele. In the case of a wooden throne from Cameroon, its unlikely origin story was invented in part to increase the work’s value and give it a rare and “authentic” pedigree.
- The fourth and fifth modules look for details in the myriad **markets** through which some objects passed as they moved within their communities on the continent and then abroad, their meanings shifting between commissions, religious objects, souvenirs, war loot, scientific specimens, curiosities, or artworks. The function of the West African gold weights in this section changed over time due to new colonial policies, shifts in audiences, and altered aesthetic preferences. Meanwhile, the *opo* (carved house post) in this section contains several clues about its collectors, but is ultimately representative of thousands of works that left Africa as a result of European expeditions, their histories lost in the process.



Provenance research is the crucial first step in helping to contextualize the circumstances under which valued belongings entered the Fowler's collection. When materials can be linked to the communities which made and used them, these connections may open doors to conversations, collaborations, and possible returns. The Fowler sees this ongoing initiative as an obligation and an opportunity to share provenance findings with the public and other institutions. To this end, extensive research on each object in the exhibition is also available online via [StoryMaps](#). These resources provide a plethora of additional information to augment the works on view:

[African Objects, Colonial Collecting, and Materiality](#)

[Flimsy card archives](#)

[Case Study: Brass Cast Procession](#)

[Case Study: Opo \(veranda post\)](#)

[Case Study: Gold Weights](#)

[Case Study: Palace Workshop at Kedjom Ketinguh](#)

[Case Study: Egungun or Oro Society Mask](#)

Credits

Particular Histories: Provenance Research in African Arts is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and curated by Carlee S. Forbes, Mellon Curatorial Fellow. The exhibition is made possible by a generous multi-year grant from the Mellon Foundation. Project team members include Erica P. Jones, Marci J. Burton, Kate Anderson, Rachel Raynor, Gassia Armenian, Isabella Kelly-Ramirez, Jeanette Saunders, Christian de Brer, and Matthew H. Robb.

To date, the Mellon Foundation has provided \$1M in support of the [Fowler's African Arts Research initiative](#), including an award of \$400,000 in June 2022.

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.

Museum Information

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | fowler.ucla.edu
Parking in UCLA Lot 4, 198 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd, \$3/hr or \$14 max/day
Rideshare drop-off address: 305 Charles E Young Dr N, Los Angeles, CA 90024

Hours: Wed–Sun, 12–5pm

Admission to the Fowler is free

Complete guidelines are listed at fowler.ucla.edu/visit

CAPTIONS

Page 2, left to right:

Attributed to the family of Sokan Akinyoke (Ikoto Quarter, Abeokuta, Nigeria), Egungun or Oro Society mask, before 1911; wood, pigment, laundry bluing, metal screw; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.8237; Gift of the Wellcome Trust

Unidentified artist (Dahomey, Republic of Benin), figure group, before 1931; brass, wood; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.5793; Gift of the Wellcome Trust

Page 3, left to right:

Unidentified artist (Kedjom Ketinguh, Cameroon), throne, before 1908; wood; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.1624; Gift of the Wellcome Trust

Unidentified artist (Akan, Ghana), head-shaped weight for measuring gold, before 1904; copper alloy, lead fill or repair; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.9558; Gift of the Wellcome Trust

Unidentified artist (possibly Ekiti or Efon-Alaye, Nigeria), *opo* (veranda post), before 1925; wood, pigment; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.1393; Gift of the Wellcome Trust