

***Art, Honor, and Ridicule: Fante Asafo Flags from Southern Ghana***

On view Oct. 23, 2022–Feb. 12, 2023 | Contact: Erin Connors, 714.270.6426, [erinconnors@arts.ucla.edu](mailto:erinconnors@arts.ucla.edu)

*EXUBERANT HANDSEWN FLAGS REFLECT CULTURAL, POLITICAL,  
AND SOCIAL FACETS OF CONTEMPORARY FANTE LIFE*

*CO-CURATOR AND INCOMING MUSEUM DIRECTOR SILVIA FORNI DELIVERS  
OPENING NIGHT LECTURE, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22 AT 6PM*



**Los Angeles**—Opening October 23, 2022, the Fowler Museum at UCLA presents *Art, Honor, and Ridicule: Fante Asafo Flags from Southern Ghana*, featuring 46 visually striking, handsewn flags made throughout the 20th century. Produced by the historical and still thriving Fante militia companies (or asafo) since at least the 18th century, the flags come alive in spectacular cultural events—across Ghana’s coastal towns and cities—that celebrate and preserve the memory of the companies’ role as community defenders.

Colorful and conceptually layered, asafo flags are adorned with vivid appliqué images that convey narratives of pride and superiority, visualize proverbial wisdom, and send defiant messages to enemies. Descriptive labels included with each flag on display translate their motifs and meanings, helping audiences to connect with the image and its cultural context. Each narrative textile reveals historical and sociopolitical facets of Fante life—a rich point of entry into the revered arts of Ghana. Asafo flags are highly regarded embodiments of Fante spirit and history, and have provided a generative reference for dozens of contemporary artists including Hank Willis Thomas, Grayson Perry, and George Afedzi Hughes.

The Fante are a subgroup of the Akan—the largest multiethnic group in Ghana—and share in the Akan visual lexicon, renowned for its staggering variety of proverbs, jokes, warnings, insults, and folktales. The flags on view are hung according to recurring themes and motifs, from lions, elephants, and other regional animals; boats, planes and bridges; to more nuanced narratives depicting ownership, technology, literacy, time, and gender.

In addition to 46 flags of similar size (around three by five feet), a single one-hundred-foot flag winds its way through the gallery at visitors' eye level. Many asafo companies have at least one such showstopper, which several performers parade through the crowds in their respective communities. The Fowler installation briefly touches upon the spectacle of community flag performances, incorporating print-cloth costumes, video, and photographs—many taken by exhibition co-curator and incoming Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum, Silvia Forni. During these ritual events, flag dancers flaunt, throw, and roll flags in a choreography that evokes pride and boastfulness, a nod to battlefields of the past wherein companies were in frequent conflict with outsiders and with one another. Today, contemporary asafo companies compete against one another for bragging rights in energetic dance battles grounded in art, honor, and ridicule.



**Kweku Kakanu, Saltpond workshop, Dentsir No. 2 Company Lowtown, c. 1950; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X89.422**

“If the Eagle gets the bone, it is for nothing. It belongs to the dog.” In other words, a rival company may take a motif from another flag or shrine, but it will always belong to the original owner.



**Unidentified artist and workshop, made for Kyirem No. 6 Company Anomabo, c. 1930; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X84.48**

War ships became a common motif on asafo flags after World War I. As Supi R. M. P. Baiden of Kyirem No. 6 Company said, “We control the ocean, we control the seas around our town.”



**Kobina Badawah, Kormantse workshop, Nkum No. 2 Company Kormantse, c. 1970; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X86.1970**

Birds that eat dead animals are seen as obnoxious and unsavory. Here, three men with guns face off against a group of vultures with guns, insinuating their rivals are as objectionable as vultures.

## Credits

*Art, Honor, and Ridicule: Fante Asafo Flags from Southern Ghana* is co-curated by Silvia Forni, senior curator of global Africa, Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, and Erica P. Jones, Fowler curator of African arts, and features flags drawn exclusively from the Fowler collection. This presentation is based on the 2016 [ROM exhibition](#) of the same name, which focused on flags from ROM and was curated by Forni and Doran H. Ross, former director of the Fowler Museum. In 2017, a [publication](#) produced in cooperation between the two museums was published by ROM.

Lead support for the presentation at the Fowler Museum is provided by the Martha and Avrum Bluming Exhibition Fund, with generous funding from Barry and Jill Kitnick, the Doran H. Ross Fund for African Exhibitions, and the Marla C. Berns Exhibition Endowment. Additional support is provided by Sandra Lang.

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## 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 90095 | [fowler.ucla.edu/visit](http://fowler.ucla.edu/visit)  
Parking in UCLA Lot 4: 198 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd, \$3/hr or \$14 max/day  
Rideshare drop-off: 305 Royce Drive

**Hours:** Wed–Sun, 12–5pm  
Admission to the Fowler is free

**CAPTIONS**, page 1, clockwise from top left:

Kobina Badowah, Kormantse workshop, Nkum No. 2 Company Kormantse, 1981; cotton; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X86.1251

Company Abura Kunkwa, c. 1930; cotton, synthetic fabric, silk; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X81.1640

Kwaku Akyeampong, Kormantse workshop, No. 1 Company Egya, c. 1925; cotton, synthetic fabric; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X86.2024

Kobina Badowah, Kormantse workshop, Nkum No. 2 Company Kormantse, c. 1970; cotton, synthetic fabric; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X86.1970