
Encounters with Africa: Cheltenham's collections revealed

No.1 Introduction



It is easy for a museum curator to fall into the trap of reinforcing stereotypes of Africa - a savage and remote land with a 'Heart of Darkness' which has remained unaffected by the economies of the 'Developed World'. This is a mythical country, a product of Western imaginations.

For many people, however, there is a real and strong connection with the continent. According to the 1991 census about 2% of us in England claim African - Caribbean descent. Many others will have relatives, friends or partners who have lived or worked in Africa, an increasing number will have visited the country.

▲ *Doll from Turkana or Maasai people of East Africa (1974.108)*

This exhibition tells the stories of encounters between Africans and Britons. Most have a local connection, not the least of which is the fact that the objects displayed in the gallery were donated to Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, mostly between the First and Second World Wars. This is the period when British Colonial rule was ending and new nation states were emerging. On their return home to Britain many people brought back indigenous artefacts as 'souvenirs' which were later passed to museums.

The stories told in the exhibition are spread over at least six generations and chart a changing relationship between Africa and Britain; through armed conflict and commercial exploitation to the first signs of mutual appreciation and co-operation. They also show a geographical spread from the Sahara desert in the north, to the Cape in the south.

You will soon notice a particular emphasis on the west of Africa, especially the countries of Ghana and Nigeria. This link is evident in the lives of the two most prolific donors, Captain Wild and Colonel Beasley, who travelled to this part of the continent on very different missions.



Wooden Asante figure, from West Africa (1960.17.1) ▶

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No.2 Cetshwayo



In 1908 a case of artefacts was presented to the museum by a relative of Major Arthur Gibbings. The brass plaque on the case explained these were the belongings of the great Zulu king, Cetshwayo, which were taken at the time of his capture.

But what events lie behind this story? And why did the great king have such meagre possessions?

▲ **Wooden head-rest, Zulu, collected in 1879 (2001.67.6)**

Cetshwayo was born in 1826, and became King of the Zulu nation, (South Africa) in 1872, a time of great political change. The Boers in Transvaal and the British in Natal, both sought new territory at the expense of the Zulu people. Treaties were made and then broken, and cattle-raiding occurred on both sides of the border. When Cetshwayo was ordered to disband his army, his patience finally snapped and he unleashed 40,000 well-trained, well-organised warriors on the British.

On 22 January 1879 an entire British regiment was destroyed at Isandhlwana. The Zulu army continued to cut a swathe through the British, and only heroic resistance at the famous battle of Rorke's Drift, prevented further disaster. The British Government was shocked at these humiliations and sought revenge. A reinforced army finally defeated Cetshwayo at Ulundi, but the King escaped.

Cetshwayo was finally captured on 28 August 1879 in the remote Ngone Forest. The Zulu king was marched out into exile between two captains of the Dragoon Guards, one named Gibbings. In 1882 the Zulu king travelled to London to speak with Queen Victoria, in the process he became a celebrity among the British public. Cetshwayo was finally granted his wish to return to Zululand, but he never regained power. He died in 1884.



Beaded snuff container, Zulu, collected in 1879 (2001.67.14) ▲

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No.3 Shaykh al-Din

The tunics on display come from the museum's costume collection. Stitched onto one is a label with the words SHAIKH EL-DIN written on it. Who was this man and how did this tunic end up in Cheltenham?



The story starts in 1881 with the rise of the Mahdi, a Muslim leader who united the people of Sudan to overthrow their government which was run by Egyptians and Turks, backed by Britain. In 1885 the Mahdi seized Khartoum and his troops killed the British hero General Charles Gordon. The troops of the Mahdi, and his successor, the Khalifa, were known as *Ansar*, 'helpers'. They wore a particular type of patched cotton tunic, or *jibbeh*, based on the ragged clothes worn by the Dervishes or *darawish* meaning 'poor men'. It signified their holiness.

▲ *Patched cotton tunic, or jibbeh, worn by the Mahdist forces (2002.36)*

The fall of Khartoum had given the British a thirst for revenge; by 1898 an Anglo-Egyptian force was advancing on Omdurman to face the Khalifa and his *Ansar*. The battle that took place at Karari was disastrous for the Sudanese who lost about 11,000 troops compared to less than a 100 from the Anglo-Egyptian force. The Khalifa escaped with his son, named 'Uthman Shaykh al-Din, and some of his troops, but he was tracked down by Sir Reginald Wingate. In November 1899 the Khalifa was killed and his son was captured and later died in an Egyptian prison cell.

Sudanese sword or kaskara, used by the Mahdist forces (1938.365.8) ▼

Most of the Sudanese artefacts in the exhibition were donated by Dr Curling Hayward MBE. In a letter written to the museum in July 1933, he explained that the artefacts came from Wingate, the man who had captured Shaykh al-Din. It seems likely that Wingate had given the *jibbeh*, along with the other artefacts, to Dr Hayward who passed them to the museum in the 1930s. Its significance has only recently been recognised.



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No.4 Peoples of West Africa



Ghana's population is about 19 million people, made up of ethnic groups such as the Mossi-Dagomba, Ewe and the largest the Akan, who make up 44% of the population. The Akan themselves are made up of a number of related groups including the Asante, who, in the 18th century became the dominant military and political power in the area.

▲ *Wooden stool, Asante people, Ghana, about 1920 (1927.57.9)*

Contact with Europeans at the Atlantic ports opened up trade routes across the world for the Asante, who received manufactured metal goods, firearms, cloth and slave workers, in return for their natural resources, in particular gold. Today the Ghanaian economy is based on commercial mining as well as crops like maize, plantain, yams and ground-nuts. Many Asante are Christian or Muslim, but also keep up traditional religious practices.

Nigeria is a vast country of about 122 million people coming from more than 250 ethnic groups, such as the Ibo, Ibibio, Yoruba, Tiv, Nupe and Jukun. The people are mostly Christian in the south and Muslim in the north, although many still maintain traditional religious practices. The two peoples best represented in the exhibition both come from the north of the country. They are the Hausa, Nigeria's largest ethnic group who make up about 21% of the current population, and the Fulani who make up about 9%.

Head-dress, covered in seeds, Jukun people, Nigeria, early 20th century (2000.333) ▼

The Hausa are an agricultural people, who for much of their history have relied on the trans-Saharan trade routes. The Fulani are part of one of the world's largest nomadic groups.

The Hausa and Fulani peoples' contact and trade with the Arab world since the Medieval period, led to a gradual conversion to the Islamic faith. In the 19th century Hausaland was part of a Fulani Empire which was divided into smaller units, each ruled by a local Emir. It was the Emirates who opposed British attempts to impose their rule at the beginning of the 20th century.



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No.5 Beasley and the Knights of the Nigerian Savannah



Robert Beasley was born in 1878, and attended Cheltenham College from 1892-97. In 1899 he obtained a commission in the Gloucestershire Regiment and departed for South Africa to fight in the Boer War. He was seconded to the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) from 1901-06 and took part in campaigns in northern Nigeria. It was during these years that he acquired his collection of edged weapons, armour and domestic items used by the indigenous peoples of the region. These were presented to the Museum in 1933.

▲ *Portrait of Robert Beasley, taken at Jhansi, India about 1928 (1999.136)*

Sir Frederick Lugard had been entrusted with establishing British Government over the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, yet the Emirs of Bornu, Bauchi and Yola openly defied Lugard's authority. The newly formed WAFF, made up of a small band of British officers like Beasley, and a rank-and-file of Yoruba, Hausa and Nupe people from Nigeria, was sent out to subdue the Emirates' forces. The setting for the conflict was the Savannah of northern Nigeria. The heat was intense, soldiers were plagued by mosquitoes, flies, fever and dysentery; if that was not enough the WAFF faced a fearsome enemy in the Emirates' elite troops.

The British used soft-nosed, 'dum-dum' bullets, illegal by the 1899 Hague Convention in 'civilised' warfare, but deemed fit to use on so-called 'savages'. The Emirates used poisoned arrows and spears in contradiction of Islamic Law. Their justification was that the poison was prepared by their non-Islamic neighbours.

By the time that Beasley left Nigeria in October 1906, the country had been 'subdued'. In 1914 the north and south formed to become the country of Nigeria which gained its independence from Britain in 1960. Beasley, who acquired the nickname 'Bronco', survived his west African exploits to serve in Ceylon, and in World War I, earning a DSO with two Bars. He went on to command the 2nd Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment and died in October 1954.

Beasley's boots made by a Hausa leather-worker (1933.59.40) ▲



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No.6 Robert Wild and the Asante gold rush

Robert Wild was born in 1882, he attended Repton School, and then the Camborne School of Mines in 1902; by which time he was registered at a Cheltenham address. Following graduation he worked at various Cornish mines before his career was interrupted by the First World War.



▲ *Portrait of Robert Powley Wild (1882-1946)*

Wild joined the Gloucestershire Regiment and fought in France, until 1916 when he was wounded. He went on to become a staff instructor for the army based in Ireland. In 1920 Wild was appointed as Inspector of Mines in the Gold Coast, now part of Ghana. His duties involved monitoring the extraction and export of gold from mines in the Asante region, particularly at Tarkwa and Obuasi. It was a time of great change for the country as railways were built to link the mines with the port of Sekondi, allowing winding gear and machinery to be brought in, and gold to be shipped out.

The miners tended to be local men who had learnt the old ways of finding and removing gold. The concession at Obuasi was held by the Ashanti Goldfields Corporation (AGC) which had its roots in the enterprise of two indigenous men Joseph Ellis and Joseph "Tarkwa" Binney. By the 1930's the Asante goldfields were producing annual exports worth £1.2 million. AGC is now one of the world's most successful mining companies and a vital part of the Ghanaian economy.

Wooden female Asante figure donated by Wild in 1923 (1923.2.5) ▼

Wild realised there was more to the Gold Coast than just gold. He was fascinated by the people and their crafts. He purchased baskets, wooden figures, leather goods and textile equipment and also acquired archaeological specimens which he carefully labelled.

Wild's objects can now be found in some of the world's best museums, but he did not forget his home-town museum. Robert Wild had a long connection with Cheltenham museum, he wrote a geology catalogue in 1920, and started donating African objects soon after. He also gave geological specimens, local crafts and decorative art objects. He died in 1946.



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No.7 Ladi Kwali: new ideas for traditional ceramics



The techniques of west African pot making were learnt by young girls, but tended to be set aside while they brought up families to be picked up again in middle age. Traditionally pots were built using coils of clay which were drawn up to form thin walls. The pot was dried to a leather-hard consistency, then decorated and burnished, before firing in a bonfire-type kiln.

▲ *Traditional west African wares, coil-built with burnished exteriors (2002.94.1 & .2)*

The pioneer potter Michael Cardew first became interested in African ceramics after a chance encounter with a Ghanaian potter in Cheltenham in 1936. By the 1950s he was working in Nigeria for the Government reporting on the decline of the local pottery industry. People were ignoring traditional pottery preferring imported factory-made wares which were glazed and more waterproof. In 1951 Cardew visited the Emir of Abuja who introduced him to the best of the local potters, a woman called Ladi Kwali. She was born in 1921 in the Gwari village of Kwali, northern Nigeria. In common with many west African women she had learned to become a skilful potter, and rather than raise a family she had chosen to continue making pots.

Ladi Kwali demonstrating her techniques at Winchcombe Pottery, 1962 (On Loan) ▼

Cardew established workshops at Abuja to train local potters in new techniques to help them compete with the imports. Instead of abandoning the traditional styles, Ladi Kwali managed to adapt the motifs of reptiles, fish and birds on flat-bottomed jars with glazes. This pottery became the most sought after of the Abuja products.

International exhibitions were organised, and in 1962 Ladi Kwali visited Britain, demonstrating her techniques at Cardew's own workshop at Winchcombe Pottery. During her lifetime she won much acclaim, being honoured with an MBE in 1963 and the Nigerian National Order of Merit in 1980. Ladi Kwali died in 1984.



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No.8 South African Beadwork



Beadwork has traditionally played an important role in relations between men and women in South Africa. The women of the Xhosa people made beadwork to give to their lovers, and the same thing happened among the Zulu people. The small neckpieces made by the girls have come to be known as Zulu 'love letters'. They used colours and motifs which were specific to a particular kraal or settlement. The pieces were proudly worn by the young Zulu men.

▲ *Collar, icangci, Mpondo or Mfengu people, South Africa, about 1925 (2002.31)*

Coloured glass beads from Europe have been exported to South Africa since the 15th century. At first beaded garments were a sign of status among the Zulu; trade being strictly controlled by the King. It is said that when King, Shaka died in 1828 he owned several tons of beads. The situation had changed by 1854 when Bishop Colenso visited Natal, he wrote that the local women were "*capricious in their taste for beads*" and "*the same pattern will only suit for a season or two*". It is likely that fashion and individuality played a part in the beadwork designs and it is very difficult for the modern Western viewer to separate one from another.

Fringed waistband, isiheshe, Zulu people, about 1900 (1933.46.1) ▼

After the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, settlers and missionaries brought about a change in lifestyle to the Zulu, causing a gradual erosion of traditional dress. By the 1930's the wearing of beads was regarded by some as "un-Christian". The end of apartheid in South Africa has sparked a revival in traditional bead-working and there is a growing appreciation of the great skill of the women who make it.



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No.9 Collection care



Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum has about 2000 objects in its ethnography collection from many different cultures. Most were donated before 1939 and have been in store ever since. A survey in 1997 reported that the collection was in a poor state of repair with objects crowded onto shelves. The majority had only minimal information, generally a tie-on paper label dating to the time of their donation. It was suggested that the collection had great potential in some areas, particularly west African objects.

In 1998 a project started to address some of these problems. This has involved seeking specialist advice, researching objects and their donors, re-packing and in some cases sending objects to specialist conservators.

▲ *View of the interior of the museum stores in 1998*

Ethnography collections can present special problems for conservators. Many of the natural dyes used fade in bright lights, metalwork often contains impurities which can cause corrosion, strings of glass beads are liable to unravel and leather can become dry and brittle.

It must always be borne in mind that we are dealing with cultures other than our own, what to us may appear to be just 'dirt' may be the residue of a ceremonial activity, and therefore a vital part of the object's history.



Leather shoes, Ghana, 1920s. Before & after conservation work (2000.338) ▲

Since 1998 progress has been made. The objects on display in this exhibition have all undergone conservation work, many more have been accessioned and we now know something of the collectors and donors. Storage space remains cramped with limited public access; significant improvements can now only come about with current plans for an extended Art Gallery and Museum on this site.

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No.10 Links and resources

1. Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum's own website contains artefacts from the African collection, click on 'Search the Collection', then on 'World Cultures' and search on Africa.

www.cheltenham.artgallery.museum

2. The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History has a site dedicated to Africa called "African Voices", this provides a wonderful background to the continent and its cultures

www.mnh.si.edu/africanvoices

3. The Guggenheim Museum has a site based around a major exhibition that occurred in the 1990's, called "Africa: The Art of a Continent". This allows you to search by region

www.artnetweb.com/guggenheim/africa

4. Britain's largest African collection is featured as part of the British Museum site. From the World Cultures page, click on Africa to see a selection of objects, or click on COMPASS to search the online database

www.british-museum.ac.uk/world/world.html

5. For some innovative ways of using African collections, check out the "Inspiration Africa!" website which showcases education work based on the Horniman Museum's 'African Worlds' exhibition

www.clothofgold.org.uk