

GOLDWEIGHTS FROM WEST AFRICA

World Cultures collection

Many British museums have Asante goldweights in their collections. Until 1957 Ghana was a British colony known as the Gold Coast, so it is not surprising that many Ghanaian artefacts found their way into UK museums. Goldweights were particularly collectable as they are small and portable, and at one time anyone dealing or trading in the Asante Empire needed their own set of weights. Gertrude Benham travelled to almost every part of the British Empire between 1904 and 1935, including the Gold Coast. From there she brought back a collection of Asante goldweights which now form part of the Benham Collection.

Gold as a Currency

Gold has been panned and mined throughout West Africa, including in the Asante Confederacy area of Central Ghana. Here gold dust was used as currency because of its durability, portability, divisibility and resistance to counterfeiting.

Using gold dust as a currency required a complex kit of tools – scales, containers, shovels, utensils and above all, weights. As the influence of the Asante Empire grew, so did the need to master the use of gold as currency.

Akan communities, including the *Asante* people, living in what is now Ghana, began trading gold northwards in the 1300s. In order to deal with the traders who came to buy the gold, the *Akan* dealers needed a means of weighing it accurately in units the incoming traders understood. So they developed some weights based on the 'Islamic ounce', which fitted the system the traders used. When the Portuguese arrived in the late 1400s, *Akan* traders needed new weights in a system familiar to the Portuguese. Likewise, when the Dutch took over much of the coastal trade from 1600 onwards, the brass casters made another set of weights based on the heavier 'troy ounce' used in northern Europe.

The *Akan* traders also had their own indigenous system, based on the *damma* seed (*Abrus precatorius*) and became adept at using all four systems. They eventually merged them into a single series of about 60 different units. This meant that there were up to 1,900 different weights in use at various times from the 1400s. In the late 1800s the use of gold dust as a currency was replaced by colonial coinage.

Manufacture of Goldweights

Goldweights are unique because each one is made from a wax model and then cast in brass or a similar copper alloy. The wax is covered in clay to form a mould. The molten metal is then poured into the mould so that the wax melts. This is called the 'lost wax method', although the wax is not actually lost because it is collected and re-used over and over again. When the metal solidifies, the mould is broken away to reveal the casting. Sometimes inaccuracies occur, so to make the weight correct, small pieces of metal are added or removed.

Early Period Goldweights

These designs go back as far as the 1400s, but the weights could have been made as late as the 1800s.



The triangular pyramid was one of the earliest designs.



This swastika has an Islamic connection and is not related to the similar Indian form. The ancient swastika symbol was widely used in many parts of Europe and Asia, with positive meanings, before it was appropriated by the Nazi Party.



This example has had extra metal added to make up the weight.

Late Period Goldweights

These weights are not likely to have been made before 1720, and as before, they could have been made any time up to the 1900s. Each design has been carved into a flat bed of wax, which indicates a date of 1700 – 1850.



Ram's horn design, which symbolizes growth, was a popular motif in the 1700s.



This example is more roughly made, and applied wax strips were used in its manufacture. This suggests a later date of 1800-1900.

The figurative weights below are all from 1750 – 1900, and are often associated with sayings or proverbs. The symbolism shown in these designs is deeply rooted in Asante thought and culture.



This weight depicts the framework of a shield and refers to the saying: 'Even when the shield wears out the frame remains'. This is a reminder of the importance of remembering and honouring tradition.



This represents the tails of two fish, probably mudfish. It may possibly refer to the story of the headless fish, which warns about the disruption to society caused by favouritism. The story tells of a man who caught a fish and gave the inedible head to his older wife and the remaining edible body to his younger favourite wife. The older wife, grief-stricken by the insult, killed herself.



Probably a man climbing a tree to harvest palm nuts or to collect the sap for palm wine. This is most likely an everyday scene, and unrelated to a proverb.

Research by: Len Pole, independent curator