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**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

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**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 43(1)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

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**Publication Date**

2022

**DOI**

10.5070/F743156323

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## **PART IV**

### **Arts**



# **Asking Different Questions: Case Studies in Collaborative Research from the Fowler Museum at UCLA**

Erica P. Jones and Carlee S. Forbes

In 2019, the Fowler Museum at UCLA began a three-year project, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to research a subset of a collection that was gifted to the museum from the Wellcome Trust in 1965. At the heart of this project is the intention to conduct collaborative, interdisciplinary research that embraces the multivocality of African arts—objects’ roles and meanings, materiality, and provenance. By compiling detailed, complex historical narratives for hundreds of objects collected in the colonial era, the project engages with challenges faced by museums around the world in regards to documenting and discussing the histories of their collections, the lives of the objects, and their responsibilities to communities of origin. Our methodology brings together research gathered through three distinct disciplinary models of inquiry—archival, conservation, and curatorial—that allow us to consider a multitude of questions and imagine new types of conclusions.

## **Methodology**

To provide a foundation for the curatorial and conservation research, we began our project by amassing the available archival and historical records related to the objects donated by the Wellcome Trust. We began by consulting the 3-by-5-inch cards that accompanied many of the objects when they came to the Fowler. These cards—which often provide a short object description, measurements, past owners, and previous Wellcome organizational numbers—proved to be a useful starting point to move forward and seek out additional sources. We then examined the historical documentation, correspondence, images, and ephemera. Though the depth of information varied greatly from record to record, the cards and additional archival documents have provided the textual links to determine chains of ownership. Occasionally, objects

can be linked back to owners and/or makers in Africa, though most can only be traced to sales in Europe prior to their eventual acquisition in London by the wealthy pharmaceutical magnate, Sir Henry Wellcome, their final stop before the donation to the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

The second prong in our approach has been to acquire knowledge through conservation techniques and material analysis. Methods of conservation—those used for the physical care and technical study of objects—have allowed us to identify and examine previous material interventions, such as repairs or additions, made to the objects' forms. Our studies allow us to observe and better understand patterns of use that have left physical traces, and, in some cases, determine how objects looked prior to damage incurred as a result of use or the passage of time. We have used non- to minimally-invasive material analysis techniques to investigate and identify original African and, later, European restoration materials. Methods include: ultraviolet (UV) imaging, X-radiography, microscopy, and X-ray diffraction. These findings can be particularly useful in clarifying connections between the object and its community of origin and determining the physical impact of changes in ownership.

Our final approach to analyzing this collection of objects has been through art historical inquiry, based on visual analysis of style and method of creation in comparison with other known objects.<sup>1</sup> Much of our research has been based on questioning past art historical assumptions about objects based on style, as we will see in the case study below on gold weights. In this short article, we will present preliminary findings from three case studies in order to demonstrate the possibilities of this method and the benefits of a team-based model in which knowledge from one avenue informs questions in another.

### **Case Studies and Initial Outcomes**

The first two cases draw from sets of objects that, because of their ubiquity in collections, do not typically receive research attention. These examples will highlight how a robust interdisciplinary approach allows frequently overlooked objects in museum collections to tell important stories about historical time periods, the movement of people/arts, and museum priorities.

### *Gold Weights*

Colloquially called gold weights, our first example is a collection of small copper-alloy objects. (Figure 1) Historically, they were used to weigh gold in Akan-speaking communities in Western Africa. At the outset of the project, we had not anticipated researching these because they are so common in museum collections, and we did not expect that there would be much new to say about them. However, in the course of our archival research, Fowler Curatorial Research Associate, Gassia Armenian, uncovered a series of interesting provenance histories. About half of the 396 weights donated by the Wellcome Trust came from three known collectors; this known provenance has allowed us, at the very least, to project likely or possible dates for when they were acquired in what is today Ghana. One set of weights was purchased or otherwise acquired during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> while the other two sets were purchased around 1902 and before 1911.

As we looked at the dates and started comparing and contrasting visual qualities of the physical objects, we noticed that there were distinct differences in production quality, signs of wear, and design motifs between the earlier pieces in our focus group and the Fowler's larger collection, which had been collected at a later date. These physical changes did not seem to be addressed in other studies, which have mostly discussed the weights' various types and shapes and their use in weighing gold or communicating proverbs during an economic exchange.<sup>3</sup> Another subset of articles took a scientific or mathematical approach to the weights, attempting to determine systems of weights-and-measures and how they correspond to the weights' physical mass and visual traits.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, these analyses did not seem to address the possibility that colonialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century could have impacted the utility or visual qualities of such objects.

Considering the effects of colonialism is particularly salient because in 1889, the British colonial government decreed the British Pound Sterling as the colony's official currency of economic exchange and legal tender, diminishing the use of gold in everyday transactions.<sup>5</sup> While past studies have focused on the weights' original function in society, few, if any, mention how their use (or physical characteristics) changed over time as a specific result of the seismic shifts to the region's economy brought by colonialism. Prior to 1889, the weights facilitated economic exchange, whereas after

this moment, they themselves became objects of exchange. Foreigners working in Ghana frequently purchased weights as souvenirs, and later, the weights become markers of Akan heritage. This change in use likely facilitated a reimagining of gold weight production. Owners sold their collections of weights and, concurrently, artists continued to make new products for the souvenir market. Most new products replicated the forms and style of the previously functional weights. The new weights no longer needed to conform to the standards of measurement or style, thus freeing artists to innovate and (we assume) utilize different metals. With the established dates and visual observations regarding the weights' forms and casting qualities, the history of use for these objects becomes compelling for our overall project. The weights possibly span the transition from their original function in monetary exchanges to their later use as collectable souvenirs and markers of Akan heritage. Our question then became: are there specific material or visual markers to distinguish weights made for these different functions?

Our interdisciplinary method of inquiry provided several avenues to explore these questions. On the material science and conservation side, we used portable X-ray fluorescence (pXRF) to quantify the metallic compositions of each weight. Furthermore, we recorded other aspects that may help understand material differences, such as the mass and magnetic qualities (or lack thereof).<sup>6</sup> Art historical observations consider the shape and visual variations. We cataloged and classified the weights by shape (geometric versus figurative) and sub-types of shape, and recorded modifications that indicate use. Additions of lead or copper alloy, or the removal of segments are indicative of interventions that were made after the original casting to increase or lessen, respectively, the weight of the object and ensure it matched the local weight system. Seeking a larger sample size, we expanded to the entire Fowler collection of 1,542 gold weights, which includes many weights collected in Ghana in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The expanded data set allows us more room to consider trends in the metallic composition, physical traits, dates of collection, and physical qualities, and to analyze how the weights changed over time. Although this work is ongoing, our initial findings suggest that further study of these objects should consider the history of gold weights as souvenirs versus functional objects, which we will explore in future publications.

*Henri Pareyn and Radium*

Our second case study considers an instance of apparent contradiction between findings from archival research and material analysis. The objects in question are weapons, likely from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, purchased in 1928 in Antwerp from a large auction of Belgian collector Henri Pareyn's holdings. Wellcome and his staff purchased a majority of the auction lots. Traces of the auction are found on the objects today, as many retain the stickers, tags, and cards that indicate the Pareyn auction dates and lot numbers. A small group of tags are aesthetically different from the majority of the labels: on one side, the lot number appears in a decorous hand-written script, with "Vente Pareyn" (Pareyn Sale) and the dates printed on the other side (Figures 2 & 3). What caught our eye in this subset of tags is a tiny stamp near the tag's base that reads "RADIUM 10."

Radium is a highly radioactive alkaline earth metal that is silvery white in color and can decay into radioactive alpha-particle emitting radon gas. Due to the dangers of possible exposure to this hazardous material, it became imperative to research these blades further. The primary question was: is there really radium on these weapons? If so, why would someone add radium to the weapons? Lastly, how do we care for potentially radioactive objects in our collection and protect the staff who may be working with them? Radium paint was easily available in the early twentieth century and had many possible applications beyond its well-known function to illuminate watch dials. We had few hypotheses to explain the potential presence of radium, but due to the prevalence of radium paint and the common practice of arranging African weapons in aesthetic wall displays, it seemed plausible that the weapons were painted to create a heightened visual experience.

The first step was to determine whether the objects actually had radium on them. We first looked at several of the blades using UV energy. On some, but not all, of those identified by the tags, either the metal inlay in the handle or the blades fluoresced a bright green or blue-green (Figure 4). This fluorescence is consistent with the luminescent properties of radium. However, other materials can fluoresce similarly with UV energy, and when we ran the same tests on weapons from the broader Fowler Museum collection with similar inlay in the handle, we found that these also fluoresced. UCLA's Department of Environmental Health



and Safety conducted readings with a Geiger counter, a tool that measures radioactive particles such as radium, near each of the identified objects, and took swabs of the surfaces. The readings revealed no more than the expected atmospheric levels of radioactive particles. Radium takes several thousand years to decay, and if it had been present on the blades, it would certainly still be detectable after a mere century. Thus, we can say with some certainty that radium is not present on these objects, and it is likely some non-radioactive material in the paint, coating, or treatment of the material that makes them fluoresce.

These readings leave us with a confounding set of questions. Why mark the tags with “radium” if there is no radium present? What would cause some portions of the objects to fluoresce without radioactive materials present? And if the added material does not fluoresce and is not visible to the naked eye, then what was its function? These contradictory findings leave us with a broader set of questions: Were other fluorescing paints, with significantly shorter half-lives, marketed as radium during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? Are there other examples of art dealers utilizing radium or other similar paints during this period? Have other institutions with objects from this auction encountered similar tags on objects in their collections, and do those objects show similar responses when examined using UV energy? As with so many of our case studies, the findings on these objects have resulted in many additional questions.

### *Two Grave Figures*

Two figures from the Democratic Republic of the Congo present an interesting final case, in which our collaborative method did not reveal any new information about the objects (Figure 5). The figures in question were sold in London at separate Stevens' Auction Rooms LTD sales in 1922. Wellcome's representatives purchased the male figure on May 23 and the female figure on July 4. Although they were sold at different auctions, the difference between the dates is not large. It is unknown where Stevens' Auction Rooms acquired them, and it seems possible that they may have come from the same source. Similarities in the style (particularly in the manner for depicting the eyes and facial features) and materials suggest that these two may have been made by the same artist or in the same workshop. Materially, something that seemed to set these figures apart from other examples of a

similar type is the pigment, which has a slightly sparkly appearance. Using a micro-sized pigment sample and polarized light microscopy, it is possible to see small bits of material, possibly quartz or mica, worked into the pigment. We had initially thought that this possible use of quartz might help to further pinpoint the place of manufacture; however, unlike marble (whose qualities are distinguishable between quarries), these materials' generalized structure does not vary. While it still seems likely that the figures originated from the same workshop, we will need to utilize further techniques to come to any conclusions. Other ideas include identifying the wood (to see if the sculptures are composed of the same wood type and compare structural qualities of the wood), finding more comparison pieces in other museum collections, and conducting additional material studies of the pigments.

## **Conclusions**

The three research projects discussed above demonstrate the many exciting possibilities of our collaborative research method. The expansive amount of historical and material data that we have been able to assemble on the gold weights has resulted in our ability to critically question accepted wisdom. The complex nature of the numerical data has forced us to go back to the physical objects and look at the forms in different ways. The "radium" research, and lack of radium in our findings, has led us to the important reminder about jumping to conclusions based on historical and archival sources. It has also opened up a series of new questions pertaining to what material is fluorescing, and why it would be added to an object if it is not visible to the naked eye. These are questions that will require research tools from all three of our interdisciplinary approaches. Finally, with the two figures from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, our findings have sent us back to the drawing board, forcing us to be more creative with our questions, and possibly, looking to other disciplines for answers.

No matter the outcome, in each instance, there is one commonality: a close look at materiality, the objects' physical features, and associated archives allows us to update, correct, and add to the existing records in our museum database. Although often not publicly discussed, this is a vital part of any museum's documentation and collections care process. Updating records allows us to

move closer to the goal of sharing the collections in a more transparent way with the public, making what information we have available and inviting further commentary from others.

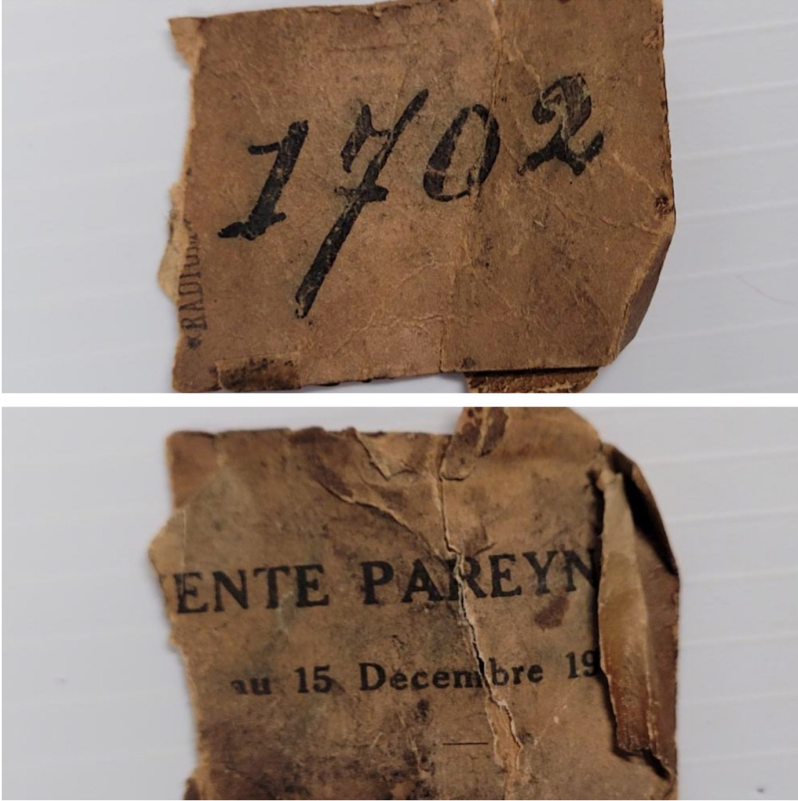
In reflecting on the research process thus far, perhaps the most poignant lesson we have learned is about communication and working together: sometimes this method works and sometimes it does not. Sometimes we learn that we do not need to be worried about our objects being painted with radioactive materials, and sometimes we end up knowing just as little about a pair of figures as when we started. Asking questions will push both the conservation and curatorial fields forward. To be frank, there has and continues to be a sense of fun in imagining the possibilities of research. Not knowing the limitations of another field—what has already been researched and is considered “known” or “knowable”—has allowed us to ask questions that may not typically be asked. These questions, we hope, will result in answers that will challenge not just what we know, but how we go about determining what we know in the future.



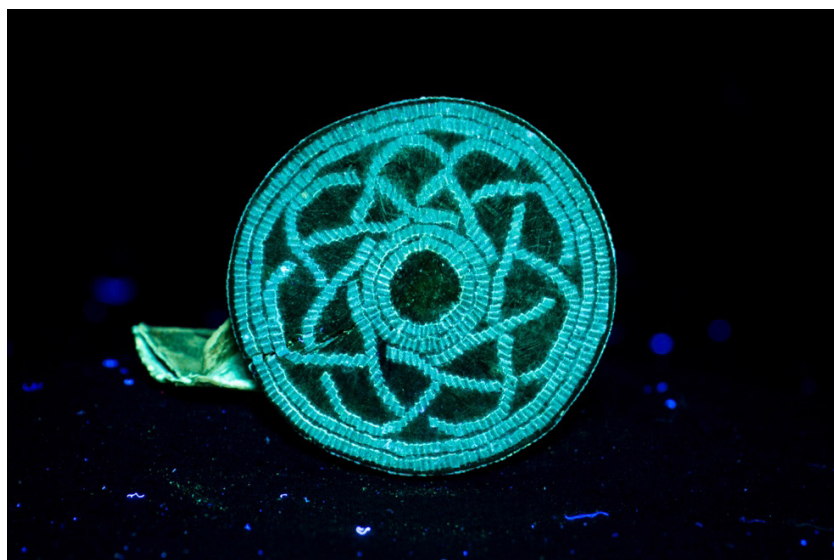
**Figure 1:** Artist unknown (Akan, Ghana); Selection of weights collected by an Officer in the West India Regiment, before 1902; copper-alloy; Fowler Museum at UCLA, (from left to right) X65.9559, X65.9765, X65.9304, X65.9580, X65.9558, X65.9553 X65.9549, X65.9731, X65.9774; Gift of the Wellcome Trust © Fowler Museum. Photo by Don Cole



**Figure 2:** Artist unknown (Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo); Blade hilt with tag, before 1928; wood and copper-alloy; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.3353; Gift of the Wellcome Trust © Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photo by Carlee S. Forbes



**Figure 3:** Tag (front and back) from December 1928 sale of Henri Pareyn's collection, associated with Fowler Museum at UCLA, object X65.3353; Photos by Carlee S. Forbes



**Figures 4:** Artist unknown (Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo); Blade hilt in normal light and exposed to UV light, before 1928; wood and copper-alloy; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.2763; Gift of the Wellcome Trust © Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photo by Marci J. Burton





**Figure 5:** Artist unknown (Yombe, Democratic Republic of the Congo); Grave figures, before 1922; wood and pigment with inclusions; Fowler Museum at UCLA, X65.8580, X65.5462; Gift of the Wellcome Trust © Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photo by Don Cole

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The limitations of art historical research and flaws inherent to long-standing assumptions about style and type have been well explored. For two examples see: Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow," *African Arts* 25, no. 2 (1992): 40-53, 96-97, Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, *Senoufo Unbound: Dynamics of Art and Identity in West Africa* (5 Continents Editions, 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Wellcome's records indicate that this set of weights entered Wellcome's collection in November 1904 from an "Officer in the West India Regiment," who had been stationed at Cape Castle in modern-day Ghana. It is unclear who this officer was and when he was in Ghana. Given that the West Indian Regiment (WIR) took part in the latter three of the five Anglo-Ashanti wars, the weights could have been collected as early as 1874 or as late as 1902. These wars were responsible for deposing Ashanti rulers and bringing the area under British colonial rule. With this information, we must accept the possibility that these objects could have been spoils of war. Yet, based on the specific indicator that the WIR officer was stationed at the Cape Coast Castle, south of the Ashanti Kingdom, it is reasonable to assume that the weights could have been sold to the officer as souvenirs. Without knowing the officer's name or when he was in Ghana, it is very hard to guess one way or the other. If he participated in one of the battles that was well known for looting the Ashanti capital of Kumasi, such as the 1874 campaign, then it would be more likely the weights were looted. Unless we discover further records in the Wellcome Archives, we are unlikely to be able to learn more about this individual.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Zeller, *Die Gold Gewichte von Asante (Westafrika)* (Leipzig: Baessler Archiv (Beiheft III), 1912); Timothy F. Garrard, *Akan Weights and the Gold Trade* (London: Longman, 1980); G. Njangoran-Bouah, *L'univers Akan des poids à peser l'or*, 3 vols. (Dakar, Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1984-1987)

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Jaques Crappier, Christian Farineto, Pierre Gascou, Carole Maunoury, Franck Manuoury, Gi Mateusen, "The Akan Weighing System Restored after 120 years of Oblivion: a Metrological Study of 9301 geometric-gold weights," *Colligo* 2, Vol. 2 (2019): 9-22; Hartmut Mollat, "A New Look at the Akan Gold Weights of Western Africa," *Anthropos* 98, no. 1 (2003): 31-40.

<sup>5</sup> W. A. Browne, *The Merchants' Handbook of Money, Weights and Measures, with Their British Equivalents*, (London: E. Stanford, 1899), notes it was Ordinance no 9 in 1889 that demonetized gold dust.

<sup>6</sup> The team lead by Jean Jacques Crappier and Pierre Gascou are tracking similar qualities for comparison with the Fowler's data.



