Shaky Foundations: Cultural Classifications in Museum Collections Management Systems and the Endurance of Colonial-era Terminology

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Abstract

This article uses two musical instruments with attached ancestral remains and labeled as “Asante” from the Fowler Museum at UCLA to consider effects of style-based cultural classifications that appear in museum databases today. We highlight the sway of past classifications over our current understanding of objects that is prolonged by the problem of confirmation-bias in museum collections management systems. We then indicate how working across disciplines stimulated a more nuanced understanding about the complexities of artistic styles for musical instruments with attached human remains in the Akan-speaking region of West Africa.

Résumé

Cet article étudie deux instruments de musique incorporant des restes ancestraux et étiquetés « Asante » par le Fowler Museum de UCLA, afin de considérer les conséquences des classifications culturelles fondées sur le style dans les bases de données des musées. On y souligne l’influence de ces anciennes classifications sur la compréhension actuelle des objets, prolongée par le problème du biais de confirmation dans les systèmes de gestion des collections des musées. On montre ensuite comment une approche interdisciplinaire permet une vue plus nuancée des complexités stylistiques des instruments de musique contenant des restes humains de la région de langue Akan en Afrique de l’Ouest.

Erica P. Jones is the Senior Curator of African Arts and Manager of Curatorial Affairs and Carlee S. Forbes is the Curatorial and Research Associate, both at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. They are collaborating on a 6-year project at the Fowler to research African objects donated to the museum from the Wellcome Trust, focusing on the works’ makers, use, materiality, movement, and provenance.
As curators working with arts from Africa acquired during the colonial period, we endeavor to remain mindful of markers of imperialist collecting practices, terminology, and ethos that have often permeated understandings of the works.¹ Such markers can be overt and covert. Journalistic and academic writing, photographs, auction house tags, and incised text on objects, to name only a few examples, serve as sources revealing ideologies of twentieth-century European and American collection, classification, and sales practices. Less obvious and more insidious links to the colonial period appear in language about historical African arts in the forms of naming conventions, object-type categorization, and descriptions. African actors are frequently absent from written records, as recorded provenance histories typically include only the names of European or American travelers, administrators, scientists, and missionaries, rarely noting names of previous African owners or circumstances of collection.² Out-of-date terms, some blatantly racist, and imagined or inflated circumstances of collection pepper archival documentation about the items, further complicating efforts to construct fuller and more nuanced object histories. Linguistic relics, outdated classifications, historical inaccuracies, and glaring lacunas in object records continue to impact the study of African arts today. Untangling object records and addressing the long-lasting ramifications of the histories we tell are necessary steps for understanding African material within an anti-colonial framework.

Since 2019, a multi-disciplinary team at the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) has been engaged in imagining and realizing possibilities for research of material collected from Africa in the early twentieth century. One focus of this project is to flag incorrect, anachronistic, or racist data from the museum’s records, and incised text on objects, to name only a few examples, serve as sources revealing ideologies of twentieth-century European and American collection, classification, and sales practices. Less obvious and more insidious links to the colonial period appear in language about historical African arts in the forms of naming conventions, object-type categorization, and descriptions. African actors are frequently absent from written records, as recorded provenance histories typically include only the names of European or American travelers, administrators, scientists, and missionaries, rarely noting names of previous African owners or circumstances of collection.² Out-of-date terms, some blatantly racist, and imagined or inflated circumstances of collection pepper archival documentation about the items, further complicating efforts to construct fuller and more nuanced object histories. Linguistic relics, outdated classifications, historical inaccuracies, and glaring lacunas in object records continue to impact the study of African arts today. Untangling object records and addressing the long-lasting ramifications of the histories we tell are necessary steps for understanding African material within an anti-colonial framework.

Since 2019, a multi-disciplinary team at the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) has been engaged in imagining and realizing possibilities for research of material collected from Africa in the early twentieth century. One focus of this project is to flag incorrect, anachronistic, or racist data from the museum’s records and then contextualize or update this information. Our research has centered exclusively on works from Africa included in a large gift that the Wellcome Trust in London offered to the Fowler between 1965–67, when the UCLA museum was known as the Museum and Laboratories of Ethnic Arts and Technology.³ The gift was part of the Trust’s efforts to disperse the extensive collections from Henry S. Wellcome’s Historical Medical Museum (WHMM) and library, formed from the early twentieth century until his death in 1936.

In this article, we consider two works from the 1965–67 gift that are now in the Fowler’s collection. Both examples are musical instruments with attached ancestral remains. While in Wellcome’s collection, each work was classified as an Asante cultural product—originating in modern-day Ghana—and input as such in the Fowler’s records. One features a carved and polished elephant tusk trumpet with leather and plant-fiber straps joining a human skull and jawbone to the center of the instrument (X65.5794A–C). A friable red-orange pigment coats the skull and jawbone. The other is a goblet-shaped wooden drum with a cranial vault, or upper portion of a cranium or skull without facial bones, attached to the instrument, and an accompanying mallet (X65.1387A–K). Focusing on these two examples, we investigate enduring effects of the twentieth century style-based classification as “Asante” on our interpretations of the objects.

Designating the cultural group as “Asante,” based on artistic style, implies that the Wellcome employees who cataloged these objects assumed that the makers and users also identified as Asante.⁴ We examined written and visual resources, assessed physical aspects of the instruments and remains, and consulted with experts in a range of disciplines. The findings of our multidisciplinary approach underscore the necessity of looking beyond the scope of a single academic field. Given that these object types ceased to be made and used in the colonial

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¹ The research presented here was made possible by two generous grants from the Mellon Foundation. The authors (also with Marci J. Burton) presented a draft-in-progress at the UC African Studies Working Group meetings at UC Berkeley, March 10–12, 2022.
³ Founded in 1963 as the Laboratory of Ethnic Arts and Technology, in 1965 it became Museum and Laboratories of Ethnic Arts and Technology. In 1971 it was re-named UCLA Museum of Cultural History; in 1992 with the opening of the building it became UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, and in 2006 the name was shortened to Fowler Museum at UCLA. Throughout this article, we use Fowler for ease of reading.
period, the original accounts of their function necessarily pre-date more contemporary methodological approaches and working with colleagues in adjacent disciplines reveals some limitations of our own. Most importantly, it has highlighted the untold sway of late nineteenth and early twentieth century style-based classifications over our current understanding of objects and cultural groups that is prolonged by the problem of confirmation-bias in museum collections management systems. Our collaborative approach helped to prompt new questions about the two works’ makers, use, and history. Our efforts have stimulated a more nuanced understanding about the complexities of artistic styles for musical instruments with attached human remains in the Akan-speaking region of West Africa. And ultimately, our inquiry leads us to the more troubling question: how trustworthy is much of the data that museum professionals rely on?

Limitations of Data Management

Art historians Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yaëlle Biro have remarked on the issue of monolithic classificatory systems for the arts of Africa that are based in early-twentieth century European ideologies in their *African Arts* essay from 2019. The authors succinctly note how labeling has long “hinged on colonial concepts of race and purity,” a well-known issue within the field of art history.5 Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles for moving beyond this issue in the museum sphere is the necessity of collection management systems (CMS) to catalog and organize information. CMS depend on lexicons, largely based on the aforementioned flawed labeling conventions, in order to be functional resources.6 Selected terminology largely relies on stylistic attributions or the word of a vendor or previous owner to identify and place value on African arts. When retrieving information from a database, a user may find that the resulting terms appear authoritative. Moreover, the content regularly conforms to what art historians have been taught to expect in terms of the canonical classifications of African objects’ artistic style, use, materials, and provenance. With such authority and confirmation, we often accept such information without question. But how do we record when such terms were added and note when terms have an air of uncertainty around them? While we are not claiming to be data scientists or information specialists with solutions for these complex data storage questions, our critical look at the use of a cultural term at the Fowler demonstrates the difficulties of reconstructing object histories when certain terminologies become authoritatively attached to works.

Gagliardi and Biro outlined the three core issues that continue to influence the ways in which African arts are presented and discussed today, and all of them play a clear role in difficulties the Fowler team faced when trying to reconstruct the histories of the objects presented in this article. The issues are: the categories and language that museum and art historical fields rely on were developed by European and American collectors and professionals; European and American markets played a large role in the early circulation and labeling of African arts; and scholars have long placed emphasis on making African art relevant to European and American audiences, thus privileging language that does not necessarily emanate from the communities where the objects were made.7

Through the examples we address in this article, we consider the aforementioned issues most pointedly through our interrogation of the motivations and ramifications of successive European owners’ and vendors’ labeling of works. One linguistic challenge we encountered stemmed from the seemingly unquestioned labeling of the objects as Asante (also spelled “Ashanti” during the colonial period), a classification that refers to the cultural group and

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7 Gagliardi and Biro, “Beyond Single Stories,” 2.
kingdom of the same name in present-day Ghana. The Asante group is also part of the larger Akan complex of languages and cultures. We observed an absence of Akan language terms for object types in favor of English language approximations in the objects’ records. Thus, for objects identified as Asante, we sought terms in Twi, the Akan language spoken in Asante areas of present-day Ghana.

When first looking at the records for these case studies in the Fowler Museum’s collection management system, both objects were labeled as Ashanti, and, in both instances, the reason for this labeling was absent from the record. Furthermore, both instruments were described using generic English language terms—trumpet and drum—at no point offering any Akan language terms that could have specified the instruments’ intended use. At the outset, we questioned the use of the term “Asante” to label the objects. Asante appeared in the “culture” field of our collection management system, a designation that infers that the makers and users identified as Asante. How do we actually know that these objects were made by someone who identified as a member of the Asante cultural group or was made for someone in the Asante kingdom? Could not neighboring cultural groups use the same style of objects, or could an artist working elsewhere not make intentional references to the Asante style in their own work even if they did not identify as Asante? Or could a European auction house have labeled a generic object type as Asante in order to increase its value because of the relative status of that cultural group amongst others in the region? Questioning their attribution as Asante, we sought terms in Twi, the Akan language spoken in Asante areas of present-day Ghana.

Archival Research
Apart from offering the cultural classification, object name (in English), and dimensions for each instrument, the Fowler Museum’s records provided us with very little information about the works. Consequently, the research team turned to other documentation in the hopes that auction houses or Wellcome’s staff had recorded information as the instruments changed hands and entered the WHMM collection, perhaps retaining details relevant to the instruments’ original context or use. When the Wellcome Trust transferred material from London to UCLA in the late 1960s, the Trust also shared 4- by 6-inch notecards for many of the works with the Fowler. Made at the WHMM, the detail on the cards varies, but each card tends to include: an object’s description, measurements, prior cataloging numbers, information about where and when the work was acquired, and also sometimes references to similar objects in the collection. For works that did not have accompanying notecards, we traced prior collection numbers—which Wellcome’s staff physically painted on objects or attached via paper tags—in the Wellcome’s extensive archives of registration logs, catalog cards, and auction catalogs.

The Wellcome Trust provided no notecard for the ivory trumpet with attached cranium, yet we connected the previous cataloging numbers with WHMM archival records, which identified the work as a “very large Ashanti ivory horn with fetish scroll attached and bell.” The notecard for the drum with attached cranium characterized lists the work as a “single-skinned drum . . . with beater and human skull charm attached” attributed to “Ashanti, Gold Coast.” The WHMM’s staff’s classification of the two instruments as Ashanti draws on the information from the auction catalogs that listed the sales at Stevens’s Auction Rooms in London. The WHMM records indicate that the trumpet was purchased as lot 272 at a sale on

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8 “Asante” is the Akan spelling with “Ashanti” being the most common variation in English and most common throughout the colonial period and British sources. Although our sources range in their use, we choose to use Asante throughout this article. Both examples discussed here were labeled as Ashanti within the Fowler’s collection database. Daniel P. Biebuyck, Susan Kelliher, and Linda McRae, African Ethonyms: Index to Art-Producing Peoples of Africa (New York: Prentice Hall, 1996): 17; David Ansah, Historical Dictionary of Ghana 4th edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014): 53.

9 Kasfir, “One tribe, one style?” 168.

10 The term “scroll” is a typo for the word “skull,” as evidenced by the lot description in the January 7, 1919 Stevens’s Auction Rooms sale catalogue, where the same phrasing appears but with the word “skull” instead of “scroll.” Stevens’s Auction Rooms Ltd., A catalogue of Ancient Indian and other Weapons, collection of Central and West African curios . . . and various other curiosities, (January 7, 1919) (London: Andreas Printing & Publishing Co, 1919), 14; Fowler Museum collection records X65.5794; Wellcome Collection archives WA/HMM/CM/Inv/A.160, A128848.

11 Fowler Museum collection records, X65.1387A–K.
January 7, 1921, but we have not been able to locate a record of this sale to help us know what information Wellcome’s employees received from the auction house when they purchased the horn for the Wellcome’s collection. An auction catalog shows that Stevens’s Auction Rooms listed the drum in its October 8, 1930 sale as lot 612, an “Ashanti carved war drum with human skull attached to side, similar to specimen in the British Museum.” Stevens’s Auction Rooms may have based its classification of the object as Ashanti either on information from consignors, or the auction house may have determined the identification as a result of early twentieth-century art-historical practices that relied on formal stylistic elements to assert place of origin.

To confirm the classificatory data for the two instruments from the WHMM and Stevens’s Auction Rooms, we compared their forms with other known Asante-style objects, focusing on ones with documented textual or photographic evidence of their origins in Ghana and contextual data about the use of musical instruments in Asante practice. Our detailed comparison of visual elements to known Asante works illuminated several formal anomalies for the instruments now in the Fowler’s collection and led us to question whether they were made by or for an Asante audience, may have been assembled for the international art market, or represented rare examples with little to no representation in the historical record.

**Art Historical and Material Analysis**

**Ivory Trumpet with Human Remains**

Our study of the ivory trumpet with an attached cranium questioned the assumption that the work was made or used by someone identifying as Asante and revealed alternative possibilities about the work’s creation, significance, and movement prior to entering Wellcome’s collection. The publications on Asante trumpets we consulted reference only one type of ivory trumpet with human remains, known as an *mmọdwe-mmọdwe*; a form that is no longer produced. In the Twi language, *mmọdwe* is the plural of the term “jaw,” and, as Reverend Peter K. Sarpong, Archbishop Emeritus of Kumasi and Asante cultural specialist, has noted, *mmọdwe-mmọdwe* indicates an ivory trumpet with multiple jawbones attached. Linguistically, the addition of a skull to the trumpet in our case study may indicate that this is another type of object entirely.

To inquire if other types of ancestral remains beyond jawbones could be attached to *mmọdwe-mmọdwe* the team looked to historical images as well as other Akan arts and objects in other museums’ collections. *Mmọdwe-mmọdwe* in other museum collections are somewhat rare, but six (including four examples in the British Museum, one example in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and one in Berlin’s Ethnologisches Museum) have human remains attached. In each example, the remains are jawbones.

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13 It seems that Stevens also received descriptions from consignors to his sale. See note from introduction to November 28, 1911 sale “Mr. Stevens wishes to say that he is not responsible for the description of many of the lots in this sale as the Catalogue is printed from Vendor’s own lists.”
16 Sarpong acknowledges that his study received funding and support from the Asantehene, had help from the Asantehene’s linguist, and spoke with many horn-blowers. Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *The Ceremonial Horns of the Ashanti* (Accra: Sedco, 1990): 1.
17 The University of Southern California (USC) Library provides links to two records of the same image in their archives showing two musicians holding *mmọdwe-mmọdwe* with jawbones attached (UC1751123 and UC1776487). One of the records lists a source for the original publication of the image, stating: “Published as no 52 in the album Achtzig Ansichten von der Goldküste (Westafrika) nach Originalaufnahmen des Missionars Fritz Ramseyer” (= “Eighty pictures of the Gold Coast (West Africa) photographed by the missionary Fritz Ramseyer”), Neuenburg 1895. The caption in the publication reads: “The Chief’s orchestra. Every chief has his band. The instruments are mostly drums of different sizes and shapes which they beat with drum-sticks shaped like mattocks. The main drum, which is carried on someone’s head when they are on the move, is decorated with human skulls. Two horn-blowers, right”; Gustav Herrmann Meinecke, *Deutschland und seine Kolonien im Jahre 1896*; amtlicher Bericht über die erste Deutsche Kolonial-Ausstellung (Berlin, D. Reimer, 1897): 248; Doran H. Ross published a 1975 reproduction of a photo titled “Pante royal trumpeter blowing ivory horn adorned with human jawbones from defeated enemies” from the State treasury of Mankessim in Ross, “More than Meets the Eye,” 145.
commonly depicted in copper-alloy weights used in the past to measure gold. To our knowledge, the small weights depict horns with jawbones attached, not crania.29

When we compared the trumpet in the Fowler’s collection with the examples listed here, we realized that the attachment of a cranium rather than jawbones distinguished the work we were studying. This finding prompted the research team to consider whether the skull had been added to the trumpet and for what purpose. The seemingly anomalous quality of the skull’s presence led us to investigate whether the object was a type of instrument rare enough not to be mentioned in texts about Asante musical instruments. We also considered whether the skull was added to the trumpet directly before sale while it was still in Ghana or after it left Ghana, in both cases perhaps in an attempt to increase its monetary value. Whether possibly created for the market in Ghana or abroad, these hypotheses about possible assemblage emerge from our familiarity with Europeans’ macabre collecting practices that accompanied physical conquest throughout the nineteenth century. As European empires expanded, bones entered collections, both as specimens and as war trophies.20 African and European sellers were well-aware of European collecting preferences and could fabricate works to meet demand.21

In seeking to identify the place of, and motivation for, the work’s assembly, we focused first on the ancestral remains themselves and considered the age, sex, race, and cause of death of the individual from whom the remains came. For over two hundred years, travelers to the Asante region of present-day Ghana and scholars of the area have referred to human remains attached to Asante musical instruments and explained their purpose, particularly in court settings. Ethnomusicologist specializing in Akan musical practices, Kwasi Ampene describes the taking of a jawbone as equivalent to attempting to seize one’s speech.22 Art historian Doran H. Ross further argues that horns adorned with human jawbones “produces a symbolic effect of having the chiefs’ praises sung from the mouths of both elephant and enemy.”23 Yet when Kaminski conducted interviews with trumpet ensembles and court musicians in 2001, he was not able to verify Ross’s explanation.24 Nana Owusi, chief of the nkontwema trumpet ensemble in Frankyenebra (near Kumasi), told Kaminski that mmọdwe (jawbones) are sacred and kept in shrines because the attached remains transferred the power of the defeated enemy. Owusi’s assertion is similar to one that British traveler T. Edward Bowdich in 1819, when he claimed that Asante kings kept the remains of defeated enemies to contain the enemies’ strength.25 The combination of an early nineteenth-century statement and more recent reports led us to expect to find that the remains attached to the trumpet had belonged to a male who might have died in battle.

We sought the input of two forensic anthropologists who could tell us more about the skull. First, archaeologist Tom A. Wake confirmed that the remains were human, and he recommended we consult with osteologist Karimah Kennedy Richardson. After Richardson performed her initial assessment

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22 Ampene, Asante Court Music and Verbal Arts in Ghana, 183.

23 Ross, “More than Meets the Eye,” 145.


on February 18, 2022, she concluded that the skull is of an African male. Richardson identified in the skull three features predominant in male crania, namely a protruded mastoid process on the temporal bone on the proper right side of the skull; a robust and round supraorbital margin on the occipital bone on the back of the head; and a slightly robust glabella, or the brow between the eye orbits. To determine the age, she looked at the teeth and cranial sutures. The presence of the third, fully erupted molar indicates the man was no younger than 21 years of age. Further, the presence of wear on the crowns of both molars suggests an age of at least 35 years. Richardson’s assessment of the cranial sutures points to an average of 39.4 years. Perhaps the most significant piece of information we learned from the skull is that it displays evidence of sharp and blunt-force trauma with no evidence of healing, suggesting that the trauma happened at death. A one-inch slit penetrating into the surface near the frontal, left brow bone reflects the sharp trauma the individual experienced, perhaps from a knife. An oblique fracture on the proper left supraorbital margin results in a 1-inch x ½-inch dent above the eye orbit, constituting evidence of blunt-force trauma. Pigment covering both areas of trauma indicates that the damage from the trauma existed prior to the application of the coating.

We also investigated the form of the trumpet itself, expecting to conclude that the trumpet was carved in a style consistent with other Asante trumpets and that the trumpet’s manufacture was locatable to southern areas of present-day Ghana, where Asante communities are concentrated. We thought about whether determining the ivory’s specific place of origin would add insight into the site of the object’s making but decided the information would not necessarily help our analysis because elephants have inhabited vast areas across the broader region, carved trumpets appear in a variety of West African contexts, and an active cross-regional trade in ivory means that ivory from one place may have been carved in another place. While we can say from the size and shape alone that the trumpet was carved from an ivory elephant tusk, a stylistic assessment shows the instrument’s origin in the Asante region of Ghana as a little more tenuous. For example, the location of the mouthpiece towards the center of the instrument differs from the location of the mouthpieces on other trumpets recognized as Asante. The diamond shape of the mouthpiece also distinguishes it from the rectangular mouthpieces on other trumpets recognized as Asante. According to Ampene, the distinctive shape and placement of the mouthpiece on the trumpet in the Fowler’s collection suggest the object was made north of Kumasi and beyond the Asante region. Formal features on the trumpet pointed at an origin beyond the Asante region and left open the possibility that someone identified with a different cultural group made the object. Furthermore, the information about the skull and trumpet we obtained did not completely foreclose the possibility that someone joined the two elements in an attempt to increase the object’s monetary value.

But our study of the object took a new turn after team member Kate Anderson identified a typo in the auction date on the WHMM notecard for the work. While the card referred to a January 7, 1921 sale for which we could find no record, with a great amount of perseverance and a little luck Anderson found that Stevens’s Auction Rooms sold the trumpet to the Wellcome Trust two years earlier, on January 7, 1919, as lot 272. The catalog entry for the lot describes the object as a: “Very large old Ashanti ivory horn with fetish skull attached, sounded only at human sacrifices. Collected at the same time as the executioner’s sword.” The referenced “executioner’s sword” belongs to lot 270 in the same

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1919 sale, and the auction catalog explains that the sword “was found by an officer of the expedition in King Prempehl’s compound.” This late find shifted our thinking about the history of the trumpet and the attached human remains. The name King Prempehl may actually be a misspelling of King Prempeh I (r. March 1888–May 1931), the Asante sovereign during a period of conflict between the British and Asante. If so, then the reference to an expedition in the catalog entry likely refers to the 1896 British assault on the Asante capital of Kumasi, often referred to as the fourth Anglo-Asante war and considered the primary British “expedition” to Kumasi during Prempeh’s rule.

If, without further information, we trust the auction detail suggesting a British officer looted the object from the Asante ruler’s palace in 1896, then more questions arise about the contexts of the object’s making, use, movement, and keeping in the palace. The story of the object may be even more complex than we had initially expected. At the outset, we confronted that the style is incongruous with other works also classified as Asante, leading us to wonder whether someone joined the trumpet and skull in Ghana or in a European country for sale in an international market. Yet, discussions of the physical trauma present on the skull, the mouthpiece’s shape and placement, and the late find narrating possible looting from the Asante palace, seem to point towards a new, nuanced understanding of the range of styles for ivory horns with human remains. It is a more likely story that perhaps the horn came out of an Asante palace, but rather than being made there, Asante royalty acquired the object from an individual or group to the north of the Asante region, thus fitting with Ampene’s assertion about possible origins to the north. It is unclear how Asante royalty acquired the trumpet, although it is possible that the instrument traveled as a result of warfare or diplomacy during the long period of Asante imperial expansion in the eighteenth century.

Our investigation of an ivory horn with attached human cranium demonstrates the possibilities that arise when questioning the works’ “Asante” classification. An argument could then be made that even if the horn was not carved by an Asante artist for Asante use, it still becomes an Asante palace object upon entering its sphere at some point in its history. Such findings and reinterpretations of this one work are the result of a time-consuming process to comb historical sources, identify comparable material, and seek consultations from specialists in other fields.

Drum with Human Remains

Our study of a large wooden, single-membrane drum, shaped like a goblet, with a pronounced foot, attached cranial vault, and accompanying mallet similarly requires attention to individual elements both as separate entities and as a whole, and to draw on knowledge from within and outside of art history. Whereas the study of the trumpet provided a new view on the object’s creation and movement, the example of this drum leads us to new questions that will require further investigation.

The WHMM notecard describes the drum as “carved wood, ribbed; ovoid body on pillar; hide head, painted. With beater and human skull charm attached… Ashanti (similar to specimen in the British Museum).” Missionary archives and other repositories include images of Asante court drums with attached skulls, and the archival photographs we have consulted show large, footless cylindrical drums from the Asante region, known in the Twi language as fɔntɔmfrɔm, with skulls attached to them. For example, the Basel Mission Archive in Basel, Switzerland contains a postcard showing two such tall, upright, footless cylindrical drums with skulls attached to them, with the caption “War Drums, Ashanti.” The photographs we consulted do not show drums of other shapes and sizes or drums

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31 While UCLA received copies of several cards, frequently there are also duplicates in the Wellcome Collection archives. It is often worth comparing Fowler versions with those in London. In this case, the Wellcome version is clearer and easier to read. Wellcome Collection archives, WA/JMM/CM.Inv/A.160, A128848.
33 Basel Mission Archive, D-30.61.049
with a foot with skulls attached to them, leaving us uncertain about whether people attached skulls to other types of drums including ones similar in shape to the one in the Fowler’s collection. The \textit{fɔntɔmfrɔm} in the images we viewed led the team to expect to find a cranium attached to a large, footless, cylindrical drum. And yet we saw a drum with a foot. The drum’s shape was not the only element that did not conform to the archival photographs. Upon seeing a photograph of the mallet, Ampene noted that Akan musicians do not use mallets, and that “mallets are not used in Ghana as drum sticks.”

Our discussions with Ampene underlined the narrow range of drums with attached human remains represented in the photographic record. When Ampene examined photographs of the wooden drum in the Fowler Museum’s collection, with its goblet-like shape, he identified it as an instrument in the categories of drum known in Twi as \textit{atumpan} or \textit{apentemma} or possibly an \textit{asafotwene}. Ampene further explained that more detailed knowledge of how and where the instrument was used would allow for a more specific determination of its type. Ampene also clarified that use of the “human cranium [as attachments] is not only restricted to big drums or the larger \textit{fɔntɔmfrɔm} drums but they may be attached to all kinds of drums and sizes of drums as war trophies, depending on whether they are tribunal drums, war drums, \textit{twenesin} [short drum], etc.” Ampene made clear that the form of the drum does not on its own indicate whether an attached skull was part of the original composition, as we had assumed from the historical visual data.

As we sought to understand the drum’s form, we also turned our attention to the skull, which we expected to learn was a cranial vault of a West African male. With a few exceptional cases (such as the famed Dahomey kingdom female warriors), most West African warriors were men. As with bones on \textit{mmọdwe-mmọdwe}, crania attached to drums reportedly harness the power of the defeated enemy and increase the power of the instrument. Therefore, we also expected to see evidence of trauma on the skull attached to the drum. Richardson examined the skull attached to the drum as well and determined that the cranial vault belonged to a West African female around 50 years old. According to Richardson, features of the skull that correspond with the female sex include the gracile nuchal crest, smaller and smooth mastoid processes of the temporal bones on its proper left and proper right sides, and the thin rounded glabella. The skull lacked teeth to help in the assessment of age, so Richardson relied on cranial sutures. She noted the age of death as 49.5 years. In addition, Richardson observed that the cranial vault lacks any signs of trauma or visible pathological markers, thus providing no indication for the individual’s cause of death. While we had imagined the skull of a man who experienced a traumatic death attached to the drum, the forensic findings revealed different details.

With our assumptions based on visual records and historical accounts, we are again confronted with the reality that the instrument does not match our expectations. Unlike with the horn, where we are left with a somewhat clear hypothesis about the instrument’s origins, the drum leaves us with more questions than answers. The visual record seems to reflect neither the actual diversity of the drum shape nor a nuanced understanding of the individual skulls attached to the instruments. It was only through consultations in ethnomusicology and osteology that we were able to expand our understanding of the drum and present new questions about its possible creation and use. Perhaps the footed drum is an exceptional case not yet documented in museum collections. Given the skull’s likely African heritage, as well as the kingdom’s long history of prominent women in the court, it is entirely plausible that female remains would hold similar potency to those of powerful men. Or, another possibility, given our

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34 Kwasi Ampene, email correspondence with Erica Jones, September 3, 2021.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
39 Richardson, “Human Osteological Assessment,” 2.
experience of other works fabricated for the market, is that this work was constructed by, or for, a foreign audience for whom the variations from the typical shape and skull would not have mattered. While we have some ideas to explain the age and sex of the skull on the drum, without further provenance data or results from invasive material analysis on the drum components’ composition, these questions are likely to remain unanswered, and we have no further clarification about the use of “Asante” in the Fowler’s records.

Reflections

Much of our work as curators trained as art historians involves confronting and reconsidering the information that we think we know, particularly when collection records seem so clear and definitive. We must ask critical questions about the origins of such knowledge and deconstruct historical biases and blind spots in order to allow new narratives to emerge. The examples described in this article constitute just two of the many cases considered in a multi-year study at the Fowler to analyze the gift received from the Wellcome Trust. In examining the collection on a micro, object-by-object level, and even then, seeking to clarify only a single cultural classification, we have the opportunity to seek evidence that either substantiates or challenges previously accepted data. By interrogating style-based, cultural classification of a trumpet and drum as Asante and considering other information about the instruments, we have opened the possibilities for more nuanced narratives about the instruments’ and ancestral remains’ possible origins.

The case studies discussed here suggest the time-consuming nature of in-depth inquiry across disciplines, and show that often, even after extensive effort, progress in the research results from serendipity. Even with an accumulation of data from different vantage points, our conclusions still rely heavily on educated guesses and inferences, leaving open possibilities for further clarifications. While, at the moment of writing this article, we are fairly confident in our re-interpretation of the horn’s creation and movement as well as the identity and significance of the individual’s cranium, the drum remains in question. Thus far, in lieu of indisputable conclusions that would cause us to change the cultural classification, our method has been to add long “curatorial remarks” to each record in the collections management system. These notes, much like this article, indicate our efforts to trace historical records, identify similar works in other museum collections, seek historical photographs, and consult with experts in other fields. While we have yet to determine a suitable option, aside from the uninformative question mark, for indicating hesitation or uncertainty in the culture field itself, our documentation records a research process and hopefully will provide further information for future researchers.

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Forbes and Anderson, “Taken with Considerable Risk.”