

The Art of Weapons: Selections from the African Collection

HOOD
MUSEUM OF ART
www.hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu

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Hood Museum of Art Exhibits African Weapons Collection for First Time



Hanover, N.H.—April 8, 2014—Prior to colonialism in Africa, weapons served important purposes in multiple and overlapping contexts, including combat, hunting, and ceremonial activities. *The Art of Weapons* marks the first time that the Hood Museum of Art has featured highlights from its rich and extensive collection of African weapons. Fashioned from iron, brass, copper, bronze, animal hide, wood, and plant materials such as raffia, these objects are characterized by impeccable craftsmanship, beauty, and elegance. Some have intricate designs and geometric and linear patterns on their surfaces; others have beautifully carved anthropomorphic or zoomorphic handles. Altogether, the objects represent artistic traditions from East, West, Central, North, and Southern African sub-regions.

“The *Art of Weapons* exhibition explores African weapons as works of art and objects of powerful significance,” said Michael Taylor, Director of the Hood Museum of Art. “In line with the teaching mission of the Hood, the exhibition presents the cultural context and history of these objects. It demonstrates how they have passed from the hands of the craftsmen who created them to the warriors who deployed them and the Western collectors who gathered, displayed, and donated them to the College.”

“This exhibition considers the significance of weapons as purveyors of artistic traditions, sociocultural organization, and identity in traditional African societies,” explains Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, Curator of African Art. “These objects represent the legacy of creative practices and worldviews from nearly forty cultural groups. Through its installation design and didactic emphasis, the exhibition explores cultural interpretations of masculinity and warriorhood as embodied in African weapons and Western display practices in the historical past as well as the museum’s present.”

Symbolically, weapons conveyed authority, political leadership, strength, identity, divine power, life, and death. Some were part of the insignia of royalty and were displayed in imperial courts. Because of the high value attached to certain weapons, they were used as currency for trade and commerce in several cultures in this era. With this focus on arms and armament, *The Art of Weapons* presents a less familiar albeit important aspect of the broader field of the classical canon in African art. It explores the narratives possessed by these weapons as extensions of cultural ideas of masculinity, warriorhood, and ideal male beauty in traditional African societies.

It also presents an important context within which to consider Western ideas of masculinity and self-presentation, as conveyed by the collection of these objects by European military officers, colonial administrators, explorers, Christian missionaries, and big-game hunters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Hood is delighted to offer its audiences a glimpse

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into these complex cultural issues, and we invite everyone to the spring and summer programming associated with the exhibition, including a gallery talk with curator Smooth Nzewi. See our website for more details.

About the Hood Museum of Art

The mission of the Hood Museum of Art, as a teaching museum, is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. This dynamic educational and cultural facility houses one of the oldest and largest college collections in the country, with more than 70,000 objects acquired since 1772. Among its most important works are six Assyrian stone reliefs that date from around 900 BCE. The collection also presents art from other ancient cultures, the Americas, Europe, Africa, Papua New Guinea, and many more regions of the world. The Hood seeks to inspire and educate through direct engagement with original works of art and offers access to the rich diversity of its collections through ongoing highlights displays, special exhibitions, an online collections database, and a wide array of programs and events.

About Dartmouth

Founded in 1769, Dartmouth is a member of the Ivy League and consistently ranks among the world's greatest colleges and universities. Dartmouth has forged a singular identity for combining its deep commitment to outstanding undergraduate liberal arts and graduate and professional education with distinguished research and scholarship in the arts and sciences and its three leading professional schools—the Geisel School of Medicine, Thayer School of Engineering, and the Tuck School of Business.

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Image caption: Unknown artist, Songe peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central Africa, ceremonial axe, insignia of rank, wood, iron, and copper. Gift of Claire E. and Dr. Frederick R. Mebel, Class of 1935; 991.48.29012.