

FRESH PERSPECTIVES *on the Permanent Collection from* DARTMOUTH'S STUDENTS

A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE

CHECKLIST

Unknown artist, Fulani peoples, Northern Cameroon
Armlet
19th–20th centuries
Copper alloy
Gift of Arnold and Joanne Syrop; 984.46.26407

Unknown artist, Fang peoples, Gabon
Torque necklace
19th century
Brass
Gift of Arnold and Joanne Syrop; 998.54.30441

Unknown artist, Verre peoples, Northern Nigeria
Woman's hip ornament
19th–20th centuries
Copper alloy and cotton cloth
Gift of Arnold and Joanne Syrop; 985.7.26434

Unknown artist, Maasai peoples, Kenya
Woman's iron wire necklace ornament
19th–20th centuries
Iron
Gift of Ira H. Morse; 40.35.7569

Unknown artist, Mbole peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo
Massive brass anklet/medium of exchange
Late 19th century
Cast copper alloy and brass
Gift of Arnold and Joanne Syrop; 992.16.29006

Unknown artist, unknown peoples, Nigeria
Manilla-type bracelet
17th–19th centuries
Brass
Gift of Arnold and Joanne Syrop; 998.53.30404

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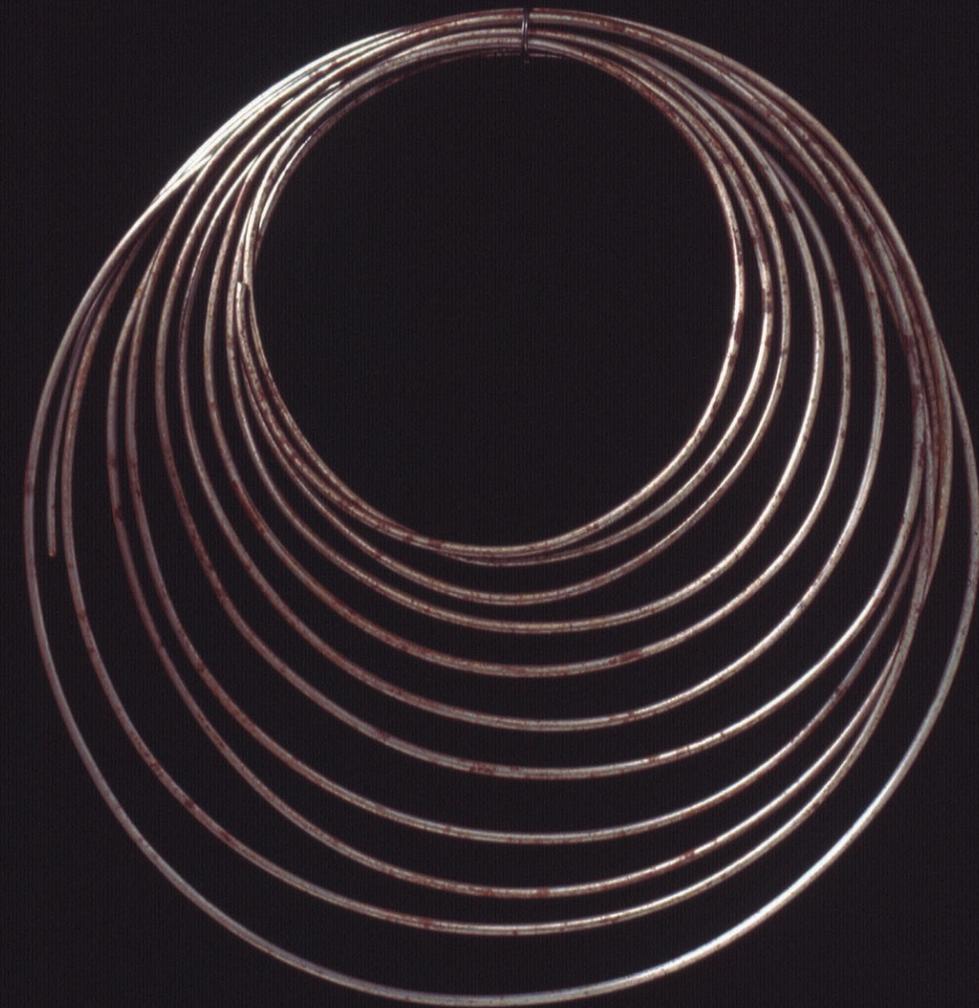
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HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

Designed by Christina Nadeau, DPMS



Unknown artist, Maasai peoples, Kenya, woman's iron wire necklace ornament, 19th–20th centuries, iron.
Gift of Ira H. Morse; 40.35.7569

BEAUTY MARKS

African Metal Body Adornment



Unknown artist, Mbole peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo, massive brass anklet/medium of exchange, late 19th century, cast copper alloy and brass. Gift of Arnold and Joanne Syrop; 992.16.29006

Western cultures have marveled over the colorful beadwork and elaborately woven textiles of many African cultures for centuries; however, the aesthetic and cultural significance of metal body adornment has been largely misunderstood and underappreciated. In every African society, ornamentation is synonymous with status. Throughout Africa many cultural groups use a vast range of materials to create beautiful body decorations that mark a person's ethnic identity and role in society. Intricate systems of body ornamentation help to express whether an individual is wealthy, powerful, old, young, religious, married, widowed, indebted, or fertile. For example, among the Maasai peoples, a pastoralist culture in Kenya and Tanzania, delicate glass beads strung over one's neck communicate one's stage in life as well as one's ethnic and family affiliations. Among the Tuareg cultures of the middle and western Sahara Desert, a practical item such as a turban becomes a status symbol based on its height on one's head. Such outspoken symbolism through ornamentation is part of everyday life.

Most African metal ornamentation consists of necklaces, bracelets, hip adornments, and anklets typically made of copper or brass and often massive in size and weight. Because of their physical characteristics, these adornments can complicate daily chores. For example, during the colonial period the Baule women of Côte d'Ivoire wore anklets that forced them to walk with their legs wide apart. The Fulani women of the same region, on the other hand, wore armllets that made it difficult to rest their arms against their bodies. Why might an African woman want to wear an anklet that only hinders her work? As in other parts of the world, African men and women go to great lengths to enhance their attractiveness, announce their eligibility, and express their social and economic status. For example, these burdensome metal adornments can increase one's sex appeal: the metal's weight alters the wearer's gestures and movements, often causing one to walk or rest in a more sexualized manner. The tight grasp of the metal on the skin also produces beautiful contours on the body, creating a geometry that is shadowed by the ornament's shape as it pushes into or outlines the skin.

Metal body adornment has played a central role in African commerce and cultural identities. It is not known exactly when Africans began wearing body adornment or when it first was used as a form of exchange. However, there are recorded observations of manilla-like body ornamentation (cast brass or copper open bracelets) dating back to the twelfth century in the arid regions of the medieval kingdom of Ghana (now southern Mauritania). The earliest documentation of African metal exchange points to Fezzan in the northern Sahara and dates back to 950 CE. Clearly, based on its longevity and continuing role in commerce, metal ornamentation has always been a prominent part of many African cultures. Copper, brass, or iron very often are thought to spiritually and physically aid women with reproduction by allowing them access to ancestral powers, producing enhanced fertility, or bringing protection from disease. In some African cultures, women wear very large forms of metal body adornment in hopes of greater reproductive success. The most massive metal body adornment can be found among various cultures of equatorial Africa, especially near the middle Congo and Ubangi Rivers; among the Mbole peoples, women wear collars weighing up to thirty pounds.

These remarkably heavy body adornments communicate not only an image of beauty and sexuality but also leisure and great wealth. The person wearing metal adornments displays his or her inability to manage small physical tasks and therefore suggests the luxury of having others work for them. As evidenced by archaeolog-

ical findings of these items in the graves of African royalty and dignitaries, the size and amount of copper or brass metal one uses have long indicated high social status and wealth. During the first few decades of the sixteenth century Europeans capitalized on the high value that many African cultures placed on copper. In particular, the west coast of Africa became known by Europeans as the Gold Coast (now Ghana) for their eagerness to trade gold, which was abundant in that area, for copper or brass. Nicknames such as "Golden Guinea" began appearing in European accounts of the West African maritime commerce. In a seventeen-month period between 1505 and 1506 almost ninety-five tons of European-produced manillas flowed into the warehouse of Axim on the Gold Coast from countries such as France, Britain, Portugal, and Holland. For the next five hundred years, until the late nineteenth century, manillas were the most common type of currency along Africa's west coast. In this case personal adornment not only was used as a symbol of power and prestige but also literally translated into monetary wealth. Although in America we typically do not wear our currency, it is clear that wearing large diamonds today, like a manilla bracelet in pre-colonial Africa, communicates money, status, and power.

The dual purpose of these metal objects as currency and body adornment enabled bronze, copper, iron, or silver not only to signify an individual's prosperity but also to identify their community affiliations and cultural beliefs. These metals, like gold or platinum in the West, rank among the most valuable precious metals in many African cultures. Although the forms of these metal adornments greatly differ regionally, they have an underlying importance as expressions of political, social, economic, aesthetic, and spiritual status. Hence, the beauty and significance of a five-pound, nine-inch-wide manilla bracelet, for example, becomes profound.

Jennifer Peterson
Public Relations Intern

Unknown, Verre peoples, Northern Nigeria, woman's hip ornament, 19th–20th centuries, copper alloy and cotton cloth. Gift of Arnold and Joanne Syrop; 985.7.26434

