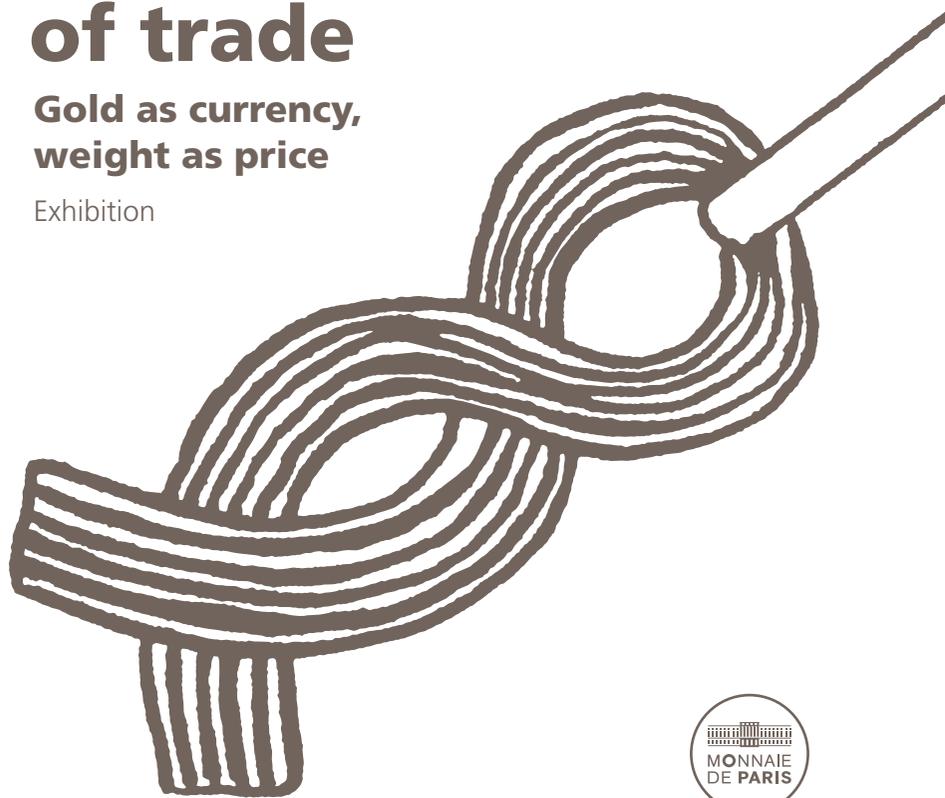


Until
February 28, 2021

Akan, the values of trade

Gold as currency, weight as price

Exhibition



Graphic design: Amélie Boutry – Translations: Chris Atkinson

AROUND THE EXHIBITION

Wednesday, September 9th, at 7 pm
Conference by Guy Van Rijn,
in partnership with Parcours des mondes
(in English)

Wednesday, October 14th, at 7 pm
Guided tour of the exhibition by
Dominique Antérieur, curator (in French)

PARTNERS OF THE EXHIBITION



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Monnaie de Paris
11, quai de Conti, 75006 Paris

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Wednesdays until 9 pm
Closure of the ticket office 30 minutes
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Inhabiting the tropical rain forest zones of the Ivory Coast and Ghana, the Akan peoples – the Asante in particular – used gold as a means of payment until the imposition of colonial currencies during the 20th century. This gold was carried in powder form in small boxes and was weighed by means of scales and an astonishing variety of weights. More than 2000 of these weights feature in the collections of the Monnaie de Paris, thanks to various bequests and donations, the first in 1979 by Henri Abel, a civil servant who for ten years built up a collection in a territory that today corresponds to Côte d'Ivoire, and the most recent of which was made in 2018.

The exhibition *Akan, the Values of Trade*, covering the period of the 15th to the 20th century, aims to explain the origins and unique characteristics of these small bronze forms that plunge us into the daily life of this region of Africa. Beyond weighing gold for the purpose of trade, these weights have much more to recount than just a simple price! This universe – far from the Western metrological vision – is contextualized within the rich Akan culture and the relations that linked Africa – most notably the Gold Coast – with the Muslim and Christian worlds.

1. Africa and the West

In the middle of the 15th century Europe needed gold. It was required to fulfil monetary needs in particular. African gold was known at the time, but Arab merchants from North Africa, who obtained their supplies using the trans-Saharan routes, monopolized the trade. The Portuguese set out in search of this gold by navigating the western coast of the continent. When they arrived in 1474, the oceanic route and trade with the Christian world opened up. In exchange for their gold, the Akan obtain objects made of copper alloys.

From the 17th century onwards, the Asante kingdom affirmed its superiority to the extent that by the end of the 18th century it extended from its capital Kumasi over a large part of the Akan world. In 1874, following a memorable war, the Asante were defeated by the British. The English became the new masters of what had come to be known as the Gold Coast. The Asante territories were declared a British Crown Colony in 1901, at the same time that the northern territories became a protectorate.

In the 17th and throughout the 18th century, the peoples of the interior (the Asante in pole position) supplied gold, playing on the competition between European buyers, imposed their own conditions of sale and prices. The same was true of the coastal peoples, who acted as intermediaries between the Europeans and traders from the interior. They fixed rights of passage that enriched local sovereigns and indigenous "brokers". The Europeans did not have access to the interior and therefore depended on coastal chiefs for their settlements, and were reliant on the relations between the different branches of Akan royalty. Consequently, the Akan people obtained firearms and ammunition in far greater quantities than any other African people at the time.

4. A universe of small weights

Unlike gold, copper was rare in the Akan lands. Because of this, the re-casting of European brass objects became common. In 1819, Thomas Edward Bowditch described the making of a mould: "To make a model of the object to be created, a piece of wax is placed on a flat block of wood, positioned near a fire on which a container filled with boiling water sits. A kind of wooden spatula is dipped into the water and used to soften (and carve) the wax. When the model is completed, it is surrounded by a mixture of wet clay and powdered charcoal, which is pressed onto the wax to form a mould that is subsequently left in the sun to dry. This mould is finished with a kind of small funnel at the top." After having made a small hole at the bottom of the mould to drain the wax, it is placed on the fire.

The following stage involves the smelting of the subject: the mould is placed, with its funnel at the bottom, in a small crucible made of the same materials and filled with the brass to be melted. The whole is then covered

in a layer of clay (porous, in order to let the gasses produced escape) that holds the whole thing together. The mould is then placed in the oven with the crucible at the bottom. A change in the colour of the flames (due to the escaping gasses) indicates that the metal has melted. Using a pair of pincers, the smelter turns the mould over, pouring the metal into the mould. Once the mould has cooled, it is broken and the subject is removed, trimmed, and freed of its funnel and drain. The weight is finally "stripped down" in a boiling solution of alum, salt-peter and sometimes lemon and then dried. Mammals, reptiles and fish are all joyfully readapted. As well as their function as weights, they all refer to proverbs or qualities attributed to the chief, which were to be obeyed under all circumstances. "He who follows the path of the elephant will not be soaked by the morning dew" is a way of affirming the chief as the protector of the clan. For its part, the porcupine evokes the Asante people themselves, whose warriors are like the porcupine's quills: if a thousand fall, the same number will reappear".

2. Encountering the Akan people

The inhabitants of south-western Ghana and south-eastern Ivory Coast are related through their Akan roots; the Akan ethnic group being organized into separate kingdoms. The Bono-Mansou kingdom, which dates back to the 14th century, was located in the area of the sources of the Tano River (considered sacred), where both alluvial gold and kola were abundant. During the same period, the Fanti kingdom began to prosper in the coastal area. Numerous rivalries brought the different Akan kingdoms into conflict. In the final years of the 17th century, the Asante king, through the use of "magic", brought down the *Golden Throne* from the heavens, at a moment when the chiefs of the main Akan clans were gathered around him. Although politically diverse, the Akan world is on the contrary deeply united in all other aspects (religious, social and cultural). This fact allowed the Akan to resist European advances for a long period. Today this population makes up an extremely dynamic part of the Ivorian and Ghanaian states.

5. Sika, the gold of the Akan

Gold – used, as money, for *regalia* or for decoration – is an essential element of the Akan world. Whether mined or alluvial, this gold enriched the Akan and it was the Asante, who cleverly made the most of it. As early as the 17th century, the *Asantehene* – the Asante sovereign – had taken control of both deposits and commercial outlets, while at the same time uniting other royal branches around him thanks to carefully chosen political marriages. The treasure of the Asante kingdom sits in the royal palace in Kumasi. Like the assets held by families in their *dya*, it is in the form of gold dust and is placed under the guard of the chief weigher.

Beyond the chests of treasure, and drawing on cultural influences from the northern trade routes, the Asante decorated all their royal *regalia* with gold (parasol handles, canes, sword pommels...), which were worn with great ostentation. In 1989, Josette Rivallain wrote: "During the ceremonies, the sovereign is draped in sumptuous garments and adorned with a great proliferation of jewellery, essentially

3. Gold as currency, weight as price

In the Akan territories, trade and exchange has since the 19th century involved gold-dust that is weighed against seeds as well as weights made of copper alloys. Scales, boxes for the gold and spoons make up the panoply necessary for any transaction. The Akan system of exchange appealed to Western ethnologists because each system could, even when used in the same place, differ according to usage. For example, weighing used for commercial trade might show significant differences from that used for the settlement of a debt. Henri Abel, who bequeathed his collection of 1,060 Akan weights to the Monnaie de Paris, put forward a theory of heavier and lighter weights, allowing transactions at constant prices on the basis of variable weights. The innumerable designs adorning the geometric weights that Abel tried to decipher, still escape our understanding.

in gold, distributed over his headdress, around his neck, arms, fingers and decorating his sandals. Each piece exalts the king's qualities and this accumulation is a symbol of wealth, power and health, the necessary attributes for the proper exercise of his duties".

For the Akan, gold is endowed with a strong and redoubtable spirit as nothing can attack or alter it. It brings strength and vitality and balance, peace and health within a society. It is therefore important to wear it and show it off. The stages of life – birth and death –, rites of passage – marriage –, political ceremonies, are the most fitting occasions for this.

With gold weighing, the values of the exchange go far beyond a simple price.

*Commissaire: Dominique Antérion
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