Striking Iron

The Art of African Blacksmiths

EXHIBITION GUIDE

NOV. 19TH 2019 – MARCH 29TH 2020
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Found in its natural state on our planet, iron revolutionized Africa about 2,500 years ago, in terms of both its practical and symbolic aspects. Iron guarantees the power of sacred acts, while blacksmiths bestowed with a divine gift, are equally venerated and feared. The exhibition “Striking Iron” organized and previously displayed at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, presents a selection of over 230 works dating from the 17th century to the modern era. These productions, in a variety of genres, have been forged by artists from over 100 different peoples across 15 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Enjoy your visit!

Iron’s Material Transformation
Iron is the African continent’s most plentiful natural resource. It is extracted in the form of ore, from which impurities must be removed by applying intense heat. This creates a malleable mass called a “bloom,” which is heated once more so that it can be shaped using various tools. Shaping iron is often equated to ‘birthing’ life. A male dominated technology, it also involves elements of female power to succeed. Furnaces, which can be considered feminine, are conceived as beings that breathe, eat and give birth to iron.

The numerous techniques used to create this axe (inlaying, chasing, engraving, scoring, etc.) testify to the exceptional skill of an experienced blacksmith. Such an object would be the source of great prestige for both owner and artist.
Africa’s Iron Origins

World history is often categorized as a progression of “Ages,” from the Stone Age to the Copper or Bronze to the Iron. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, where humanity’s shared ancestors first began to make stone tools, the use of such implements continued directly into the continent’s Iron Age. Many African communities use origin stories to reveal and explain the brilliant inventions and innovations of blacksmiths.

Created with secret materials and methods, a boli displays an essential role in Bamana’s spiritual practices. This boli was created around a wooden frame where several layers of sacrificial substances have been applied. The iron contained in the boli, invisible to the naked eye, activates and controls the life force, improving the well-being of the community.

Sustenance from the Anvil

Iron is an essential material in Africa, used to create numerous tools required to forage, hunt and till the soil. Other objects have been made to encourage life-giving rains. Iron thus serves to secure seasonal rains and bring bountiful harvests. Rainmakers are powerful protectors of community survival and they used forged iron wands as part of ritual supplications.

In Nigeria, rainmaker wands are secured in the ground to marshal the earth’s life force or impaled in soft clay inside a ceramic vessel, as here, before being fired. Their zigzag-shape recalls flashes of lightning or the sudden movement of slithering snakes, both thought to presage rain.
Iron’s Empowering Roles
In many religions of Sub-Saharan Africa, plants, animals, humans, soils, rivers, words, gestures, music, dances are alive with spirit.

The term nkisi denotes religious and material relationships that defend communities against misfortune. This sculpture, in the form of a dog, contains numerous materials endowed with powers, including iron nails. The Kongo people believe that dogs are an intermediary between the world of the living and the world of the dead. They can hunt down negative forces thanks to their tracking abilities.

Blades of Power and Prestige
Thoughout the African continent, blades produced as weapons – spears, swords, axes, and knives – have served defensive purposes and achieved warlike ends. Blacksmiths have also transformed such weapons into insignia capable of performing political power. These formidable and often magnificent forgings offered sensual pleasures of handling and also aestheticized power to communicate key ideas about honor, prosperity, prestige, and sophistication.

This scepter belonged to a Mangbetu king. The sickle-shaped blade becomes the extension of the king’s hand, communicating his power. This prestigious object was often magnified by copper, tin or iron wires covering the handle. The Mangbetu people considered copper more precious than iron. Using iron underlined the symbolic role of the blade, more than its violent role.
Blades of Value
Iron tools were valued as objects of prestige and sacred objects, but also forms of payment. They could take the form of bars or blades inspired by iron tools, each reflecting a social and aesthetic identity in its style and execution. Their value depended on their size – some are dramatic in scale – on the amount of iron used, and on blacksmiths’ forging achievements.

Currencies in the form of throwing knives, as seen here, were among the most prized possessions of the Nkutshu and Ndengese elite. They illustrate an intricate manufacturing process that forge-welded three separate pieces together.

Sounding Forms
Musical instruments made with iron hold an important place in Africa. The sounds of iron, by virtue of the spiritual potencies attributed to the metal itself, are sometimes equated with voices from ancestral realms. Some forged iron instruments can be categorised as idiophones. These create sound through the vibrating core of their principal material, without the aid of strings or membranes. Iron can thus be struck, plucked, scraped, or rubbed.

The work presented here is a lamellophone, or “thumb piano,” often used to set the rhythm of narrations and of poetry. The instrument can have more than two dozen iron tines, or keys, that are plucked with the thumbs while holding the instrument in both hands.
WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE EXHIBITION?
/ Take the guided tour (1hr, open to all aged 12 and over, in French)
/ Take a tour with a storyteller to learn about the art of African blacksmiths (1hr, open to all aged 6 and over, in French)
/ International symposium “Archaeology and Techniques in Iron”, 3-4 March 2020 (in partnership with INRAP)
/ Read the exhibition catalogue “Striking Iron” (192 pages, €39, co-published by the musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac and Actes Sud, in French)
/ Consult a selection of works in the Jacques Kerchache Reading Room

OPENING TIMES
/ Tuesday to Sunday, 10.30 am to 7 pm
/ Thursday 10.30 am to 10 pm
/ Closed on Mondays (except during term-time school holidays)
/ Free admission on the 1st Sunday of the month
/ Admission for members from 9.30 am (except on Sundays)

INFORMATION
/ 01 56 61 70 00
/ contact@quaibranly.fr
/ Pedestrian access:
   218, rue de l’Université,
   and 37, quai Branly, 75007 Paris
/ Access for disabled visitors:
   222, rue de l’Université, 75007 Paris

BOOKING
/ 01 56 61 71 72

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Frapper le fer, l’art des forgerons africains (“Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths”) is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA. The curatorial team is led by artist Tom Joyce, a MacArthur Fellow originally trained as a blacksmith, with co-curators Allen F. Roberts, UCLA Professor of World Arts and Cultures/Dance, Marla C. Berns, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director, Fowler Museum; William J. Dewey, Director, African Studies Program and Associate Professor of African Art History at Pennsylvania State University; and Henry J. Drewal, Eyvée-Bascom Professor of Art History and Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The exhibition is made possible by major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. Generous support is also provided by the Martha and Avrum Bluming Exhibition Fund.

With the support of: