



Akan Counterweight. Photograph by Matteo Dawson.

Gold Trading and Crocodiles: Two Miniature African Canoes

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These are two miniature canoes from my personal collection of African art, which focuses on artworks that represent Africans' connections with the water. One of them is Fante and the other is Dogon. Most of the pieces in my collection are Fante (Akan), because of their connection to the ocean. Others are Dogon, both because of their interior fishing and canoeing practices and because their artwork is visually impressive.

Both canoes date to about the mid-20th century, when they were originally purchased by Europeans. Both pieces were made long after Europeans looted African polities, between the 1870s and about 1910, and I purchased these and other pieces specifically because they are not connected to a legacy of violence.

Both of these canoes are bronze and were made using the lost wax method. A wax mold is made, then clay is packed around the mold and a hole left on the top of the clay mold. Melted bronze is poured through the hole, melting the wax and taking the shape of the mold. Both represent centuries-old traditions of exquisite metalworking. But while these two objects may look similar in many ways, their cultural meanings are very different.

Akan Gold Counterweight. Bronze

The mid-20th-century canoe with three men seen at left, is a counterweight of the kind used by gold traders and merchants to weigh gold nuggets. They were also objects that could be displayed, and because of their small size, children played with them. Because of their utilitarian function, counterweights were mass-produced, so there are lots of them out there. They are often colloquially called "gold weights," but they were usually made of brass or bronze and are only rarely made from gold. They can be quite small, weighing less than an ounce, while others weigh up to several pounds. This canoe is 5.25 x 2.25" (13.3 x 5.7 cm) and weighs 8 ounces (28.3 g).

This counterweight was made by Fante craftspeople, and counterweights are locally known as *mrammou*. The Fante are an ethnic group that is part of the larger Akan language-culture in what is now Ghana.

The neighbors of the Fante, the Asante, controlled what came to be known as the Asante/Ashante Gold Fields, which is historically the third most productive gold mine in the world. They provided Medieval Europe with much of its gold,

which was shipped out of West Africa through Timbuktu. Throughout early modern West Africa, gold was the medium of exchange by which all other goods were valued, and it was the most common form of specie.

Counterweights are sometimes displayed in museums, but because of their small size and since most are made of bronze or brass, they aren't considered high-value art. They are valued instead for their pragmatic use and cultural and spiritual expressions.

Counterweights crafted by the Fante, who are a coastal Akan people, often represent their relationships with water and include fish, crocodiles, shellfish, waterbirds, and canoes. Counterweights are still made and used by what are called artisanal gold merchants, who sell gold in market stalls. I have purchased weights from these merchants.

Westerners traditionally called these counterweights "Ashante weights" (Ashante being the British name for the Asante) because the Asante produced so much gold. They are now typically called "Akan" as they were made by several of the Akan ethnic groups. Most were made by either the Asante, who controlled the gold fields, or the Fante, who controlled the surf-ports through which gold was sold to Europeans at slave castles, like Cape Coast and Elmina. It is usually difficult, or impossible, to ascribe counterweights to a particular Akan ethnic group as they were and are traded between gold merchants from the various ethnic groups and come in many different shapes. Since most of mine represent the ocean, they're probably Fante, as the Asante were inland peoples.

Dogon Crocodile Canoe. Bronze

The Dogon ethnic group are from what is now southern Mali and northern Burkina Faso. The Dogon canoe on the next page depicts the story of ancestors—two male and female couples, as well as two canoeists—arriving in what would become Dogon country on the back of a crocodile. Dogon artwork, particularly the elongated stylized faces, influenced Pablo Picasso and other early 20th-century Western artists. The tail of the crocodile curves upward to form a handle. Unlike the utilitarian counterweight, this is a piece of sacred artwork that was displayed and used for ceremonial purposes. The Dogon crocodile canoe is 11.5 x 3.9" (29.2 x 9.9 cm).

Crocodiles figure prominently in a few Dogon creation stories. One is that Kassambara, an ancestor, was traveling through the arid region of what is now Dogon country and was down to his last gourd of water. He saw a crocodile and, knowing it would go to water, followed it to the foot of a mountain with 33 springs, which became the village of Borko. As a reward, crocodiles were regarded as sacred creatures that are not hunted. Another story connected to the Crocodile Canoe is that the Dogon arrived at their current homeland about 1,000 years ago after fleeing southward, as Islam spread into northern Africa and they refused to convert. Another version is that they fled northwestward from the Mendi. In both versions, these ancestors crossed a river on the back of a crocodile, represented by the canoe. Both versions (really all three stories) could be rooted in truth, as the Dogon could be the cumulation of different refugee groups. The Dogon region was a refuge whose natural features offered protection. Many Dogon still live in cliff villages, which are similar to the Pueblo dwellings at Mesa Verde and surrounding areas.



Dogon Crocodile Canoe. Photograph by Matteo Dawson.