Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

WEST AFRICA G24

Bean Rattles



Percussion instruments, including rattles and shakers are important in traditional West African music. These rattles are made from bean shells, probably from a variety of palm tree - they are not from the cocoa bean plant. They can be worn as a waist belt rattle, or fastened to the ankles on each leg, or held in each hand. When people dance in ceremonies and festivals they have a loud and bright rattle which is able to cut through drumming. Shell cases from other plants can also be used.

Small Skin Phial



Phials like this were used in Ghana for containing a herbal powder used for clearing a blocked nose. The powder was either tipped into the palm of the hand and sniffed, or sniffed directly through the long tube - very like the tubes used in European commercial medicine for clearing a blocked nose! Use of traditional medicines is declining in West Africa today.

Wooden Spoon



This West African spoon was given to the Museum of Reading in the early 1960s. Cooking in the area often involves preparing large pots of food. This spoon would be useful, for example, when preparing foofoo (or fu fu), one of the basic dishes of the region. Foofoo is made by boiling the root of the cassava bush and then pounding the mixture into a glutinous mass with a giant wooden mortar and pestle. It is then heated over a fire and stirred with a large wooden spoon. When it is thick enough it can be shaped into a ball and either topped with a fiery sauce or served as the bland accompaniment to a main dish.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

WEST AFRICA G24

Calabash Bowl



In this case the gourd has been cut in half to make a bowl. The marks on the inside were made when the flesh was scraped out.

Decorated Gourd Bottle and Stand



There are many different varieties of gourd - all of them related to melons, pumpkins, and squashes. The bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), also often called a calabash, is one of the most useful plants in West Africa. It is one of the few plants cultivated in both the New and Old worlds in prehistoric times. Botanists believe the plant may have originated in Africa and then floated across the seas to South America.

Young bottle gourd fruits of certain varieties are eaten as a boiled vegetable. The best are slightly sweet, tender, and free of bitterness. Other varieties are bitter and may contain poisonous substances, although they can still have a use in medicine. As well as providing food their skins can be dried out to make into containers. There are different ways of doing this. One technique is to fill the partially cleaned gourds with clean, dry sand, and cover them with sand in a container. This is heated over a fire for several days, drying out the gourds. Patterns may be cut into the gourds before they are dried, or the shells may be forced into desired shapes, as is the case with this example. Well-treated gourds become durable containers, some of which are very large and are able to hold a large amount of dry or liquid material. The dry hard shells have been used for bottles, milk pots, churns, bowls, ladles, spoons, work baskets, floats, pipes, musical instruments … almost anything you can imagine.

Raffia Tray



The Raffia is native to tropical regions of Africa and South America. The raffia palm has many uses - textiles, ropes, sticks and supporting beams made out of its fibrous branches and leaves, as well as in making baskets, bags and trays such as this. The colours of this example have faded on the upper surface, but something of the original brightness can be seen on the under surface.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

WEST AFRICA G24

Doll



The doll comes from Benin, a relatively small country which is immediately to the west of Nigeria. She is wearing a dress made out of wax print cloth. As in Europe, fashions change but, although this doll probably dates from the late 1950s, long dresses like this one are still popular in many West African countries.

Length of Wax Print Cloth



Batik is a method of dyeing cloth which was developed in Indonesia. Melted wax is applied to cloth before it is dipped in dye. Wherever the wax has seeped through the fabric, the dye will not penetrate. Sometimes the hot wax is stamped onto the cloth to create the designs.

This length of cloth is, strictly speaking, imitation batik - the generally used term is 'wax print cloth'. The dribbles of blue dye that run between some of the patterns are characteristic of wax print cloth. Also, although it was designed to be sold in West Africa, it may well have been made in Europe.

Wax prints have been known in Africa since the turn of the nineteenth Century. The first wax print cloths were made in Holland when Dutch businessmen learned the art of dyeing fabric using wax from their Indonesian colonies. They used industrial methods to produce large amounts of cloth. European cloth was valued in West Africa and was used in trading between Europeans and Africans. Gradually African tastes for bright colours and bold patterns dictated the designs that were produced for the African market. English factories also began to produce cloth specifically for sale in Africa. As African countries gained their independence after World War Two, they began to produce their own cloth, although wax print produced in Europe was still highly valued for its design and quality. There are still some factories in England which produce this kind of cloth for sale in Africa. Today a lot of the wax print cloth that is used in Africa is made in China!