

The Artistry of AFRICAN CURRENCY

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Throughout history, many different objects have been used to facilitate trade for goods and to measure wealth. Today, we usually think of dollars and coins when we define what we regard as money, although much commerce is carried out without any physical currency at all. Value is counted by entries in bank and credit card accounts, and the transfer of money often takes place through electronic impulses between computers. Objects have served the same purposes as well, in other times and places.

Throughout Africa's past, many objects have served as money—salt, shells, beads, metal, indigenous coins, European coins, jewelry, woven cloth, weapons and tools. The keys to understanding why a particular object came to be used as currency are acceptability and value. Acceptability encompasses such aspects as familiarity, usefulness and artistic expression, which add to the intrinsic value of the medium itself. Thus, while the scarcity of copper might have caused it to be exchanged on that basis alone, its use was further validated through the forms into which it was cast. Iron was more ubiquitous in African societies, but refining, forging, forming and decorating similarly increased its value.

Economists and financial historians writing about mediums of exchange typically define currency as a durable, divisible and accepted means of measuring and storing value. Governments and laws largely define acceptance today, but over the course of history, acceptance was more often conferred by broader cultural currents, including religion, myth and beliefs about the nature of the universe. In Africa, where few extensive nation-states existed, the needs of trade and commerce depended on commonly held beliefs or values that spanned great geographical distances and an almost unimaginable diversity of activities. Consequently, the currency needed for even the simplest daily transactions was backed by shared beliefs as much as by the intrinsic value of the currency itself. Transactions that involved significant life events—marriage, procreation, health and death—were validated by objects with high intrinsic, symbolic and artistic values.

This exhibition is a celebration of the art of the currencies used in Africa. It also explores the beliefs that supported the monetary systems of African societies and led to the elaboration and transformation of plain currencies into objects of beauty.

To provide a context for these currencies, this exhibition includes a selection of objects commonly used as mediums of exchange, such as cowrie shells, beads and bundled and woven textiles. The metal currencies, which are the focus of this exhibit, range from conventional forms to highly valued complex designs executed with considerable technical skill and artistic sensibility in rare and precious metals.