Africa Galleries

Did you ever wonder how objects from the African continent made their way to the Penn Museum? The upcoming renewal of the Africa Galleries will trace object histories, exploring hidden stories behind the collection.

Many of the objects from the Penn Museum collection were acquired while Africa was colonized. Interpreting these objects in their proper social context and seeing them from new perspectives, the Galleries will highlight the creativity of African cultures and bring to light connections across the continent and around the world. Led by innovative curator Tukufu Zuberi, Ph.D., Lasry Family Professor of Race Relations and Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, the Galleries will cover topics related to design, spiritual meaning, ceremony, wealth, and exchange.

“The Africa Galleries will showcase this collection as never before, exploring colonialism, global trade, missionary work, and tourism, among many other themes this diverse collection illuminates. It is hoped that the items presented here will stimulate discourse and more reflection on African material culture.”

—Dr. Tukufu Zuberi

LEFT AND BELOW: The multiple meanings of some objects and the complicated stories of who these pieces were made for will be explored. For example, two nkisi power figures will be on display, one that was used by the source community (left) and one made for the European market (below). PM objects AF5361 and 29-59-11.

BELLOW: This exquisitely carved ivory box from the Benin Kingdom shows two Portuguese soldiers fighting alongside a pangolin or scaly anteater. PM object 29-93-6A,B.
Mexico & Central America Gallery

The transformed Mexico & Central America Gallery will hold more than 2,000 years of the region’s history, from early Mexico and the Olmec culture to living people today.

New cases will highlight objects from the Museum collection and beyond, and will tell stories of the great city of Teotihuacan, the Aztec empire, and Penn’s work in the Maya world, including our excavations at Tikal, Piedras Negras, and other sites. Some objects, such as tiny, carefully crafted gold figures from Costa Rica, have not been on display in more than 20 years. Throughout this updated space, rulers and deities of ancient Mexico will be highlighted. We will also look at the ways in which the cultures of the region were intertwined.

LEFT: A Maya polychrome vessel from Guatemala depicts seven human figures accompanied by glyphs. PM object 38-14-1. BELOW: This gold bird pendant from Costa Rica, over seven cm in height, will be included in the reinstalled Mexico & Central America Gallery. PM object SA2782. RIGHT: This mold-made ceramic rabbit is an effigy vessel from Veracruz in the Mixtequilla region of Mexico. PM object 68-30-1.