

# Fowler

## MUSEUM AT UCLA

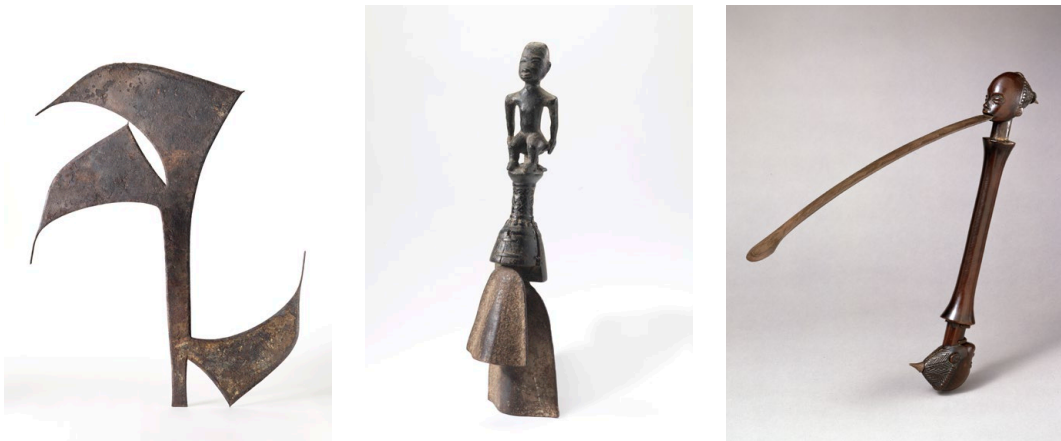
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 1, 2018

[LINK TO IMAGES](#)

Contact: Erin Connors, Fowler Museum, 310.825.4288, [erinconnors@arts.ucla.edu](mailto:erinconnors@arts.ucla.edu)

Carolyn Campbell, Campbell Communications, 310.659.5427, [carolyn@campbellcomm.biz](mailto:carolyn@campbellcomm.biz)

Fowler to Debut the International Traveling Exhibition  
***Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths***  
225 Objects of Utility, Empowerment, and Spiritual Potency  
June 3–December 30, 2018



**Los Angeles**—The Iron Age revolutionized Africa and forever altered human civilization practically and symbolically. *Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths*, organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and on view June 2–December 30, 2018, reveals the histories of invention and technical sophistication that led African blacksmiths to transform one of Earth’s most fundamental natural resources into objects of life-changing utility, empowerment, prestige, artistry and spiritual potency.

The exhibition, which will travel internationally after its debut at UCLA, features more than 225 works of art, including blades and currencies in myriad shapes and sizes, wood sculptures studded with iron, musical instruments and elaborate body adornments.

Technologies of iron smelting and forging, which likely began on the African continent around 2,500 years ago, were ardently sought and protectively guarded. Their control could promote a king’s ambition, enhance a soldier’s fortune, and secure a community’s well-being. Iron tools and weapons enabled Africans to forage, hunt, and till the soil, assuring prosperity and protection. Nowhere else in the world are there more diverse and accomplished forged iron forms than in Africa, and *Striking Iron* is the most comprehensive exhibition on this material to date.

Most of us take for granted the fact that iron keeps us alive and that there would be no Earth as we know it. Iron is in our blood, making it red. It is in the earth’s core and rocky crust. Popular culture embraces the strength and power of iron with such phrases as “iron will,” “iron grip,” and even “heavy metal.” The superhuman attributes endowed by iron are the stuff of Marvel’s *Iron Man*, while the centrality of Vibranium to *Black Panther*’s technologically advanced Wakanda is surely a metaphor for the centrality of iron in many African cultures.

The majority of objects in *Striking Iron* date from the 19th and 20th centuries and are drawn from the Fowler's extensive collection or borrowed from 49 U.S. and European public and private collections. Works have been selected to highlight blacksmiths' virtuosity and to introduce the ways forged iron objects harness the powers of the natural and spiritual worlds; ensure prestige, status, and endurance; assist with life's challenges and transitions; and enhance the efficacies of sacred acts such as ancestor veneration, healing, fertility, and prophecy. Blacksmiths' work and participation in community life continues to be indispensable today.

"There are many stories to tell in *Striking Iron*, and each one brings respect and admiration to the time-honored and even divine work of smelting and forging iron in Africa," says Marla C. Berns, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director at the Fowler and exhibition co-curator. "The ambition of *Striking Iron* lies in its scope—with diverse works made by over 100 ethnic groups living in 19 countries, mostly south of the Sahara—and in showing how, through their mastery, blacksmiths have invested great cultural importance and meaning in the objects they make."

Tom Joyce, the exhibition's lead guest curator, added, "When iron is heated in a charcoal fire to white-hot temperatures, skilled African blacksmiths move the metal like clay. Using hammers as an extension of their hands, they can model any shape they desire upon their anvils. With astonishing technical prowess these artists have, for over 2,500 years, created the essential and the conceptual, the visually compelling and the sublime. It is a privilege to share their masterful achievements."

To fully tell such visually rich and complex histories, the exhibition is organized around eight thematic sections and uses a range of interpretive components, including a seven-stop video tour with Joyce, an internationally acclaimed sculptor whose knowledge and experience in forging iron brings the blacksmith's work to life. The exhibition's thematic approach offers a layered and comparative view of forms, materials, and uses of iron.

### **Curatorial Team**

*Striking Iron* is based on decades of research by its curatorial team, led by artist Tom Joyce, a MacArthur Fellow trained in the art of forging iron, and including 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, Evjue-Bascom Professor of Art History and Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Seven additional advising scholars bring their specific areas of expertise to the project. Short curator biographies can be found in the **Exhibition Backgrounder**.

### **Tour**

Following its presentation in Los Angeles, the exhibition will travel to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. (February 13—October 20, 2019), and the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris (November 2019—March 2020).

## Publication

The Fowler Museum will publish an illustrated, multi-author scholarly publication to accompany the exhibition.

## Opening Weekend Programs

### Opening Night Lecture: Potency Conveyed with a Hammer's Blow | Saturday June 2, 6–7pm

Lead curator and artist Tom Joyce reveals the skills and innovation of African blacksmiths in transforming one of the earth's most basic natural resources into objects of utility, empowerment, and beauty. Trained in the art of forging iron, MacArthur Fellow Joyce illuminates the subject through a fiery lens.

### Opening Party with Mbira Performance | Saturday June 2, 7–9pm

Celebrate Striking Iron with African music spun by Tom Schnabel of KCRW's Rhythm Planet. At 7:30 enjoy an mbira ensemble led by ethnomusicologist Ric Alviso. Afterwards try your own and at playing the mbira, or "thumb piano," an African instrument with iron keys. Mix and mingle with cocktails in the Davis Courtyard.

### Gallery Tour | Sunday June 3, 1pm

Curatorial team members Tom Joyce, Allen F. Roberts, Marla C. Berns, William J. Dewey, and Henry J. Drewal lead a walk-through of exhibition highlights.

### Drop-in Family Program: Sculpting, Molding, Forging | Sunday June 3, 1–4pm

Families are invited to find inspiration in *Striking Iron* as they learn to mold clay using techniques derived from forging.

Visit [fowler.ucla.edu/events](http://fowler.ucla.edu/events) for exhibition-related lectures, films, and family programs.

## Credit

*Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths* is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA. It is made possible by major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities\* and in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Generous support is also provided by the Martha and Avrum Bluming Exhibition Fund with additional funding from the Fowler Exhibition Fund, Cindy Miscikowski, the Ethnic Arts Council of Los Angeles, Lee Bronson, Andrew Adelson, Richard Scheller and Susan McConnell, and Richard and Susan Ulevitch.

The publication is supported by the Ahmanson Foundation on the recommendation of the late Foundation Trustee Emeritus Lloyd E. Cotsen. Education programs are made possible in part by The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation.

\*Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this {article, book, exhibition, film, program, database, report, Web resource}, do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



## About the Fowler Museum

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on works from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. Also featured is the work of international contemporary artists, presented within the complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

## Fowler Museum at UCLA

308 Charles E Young Drive N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu)

Admission is free | Hours: Wed 12–8pm and Thu–Sun 12–5pm

Parking available in UCLA Lot 4, 398 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd (\$12/day)



@fowlermuseum #strikingiron

Captions, left to right:

Artist unknown (Ndengese peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Throwing knife-shaped currency (*oshele*), 19th century

Iron

H: 80.65 cm

Private collection

Image © Fowler Museum at UCLA . Photograph Don Cole, 2018

Unknown artist (Asante peoples, Ghana)

Double clapperless bell (*dawuro*, *nnawuta*) with handle carved by Kwaku Bempah

(active early 20th century, Asante peoples, Ghana), ca. 1920

Iron, wood

H: 57.5 cm

Fowler Museum at UCLA, X87.1312; Gift of Elizabeth Lloyd Davis

Image © Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph Don Cole, 2017

Artist unknown (Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Ceremonial adze, 19th century

Iron, wood

H: 34.3 cm

Collection Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 1999.06.112;

Gift of Lawrence Gussman in memory of Dr. Albert Schweitzer

Photograph courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

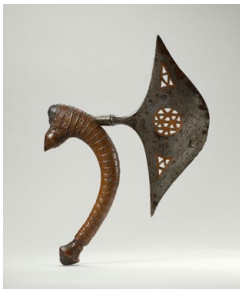
## **Striking Iron**

### **Exhibition Backgrounder**

Highlights from Eight Thematic Sections and Curator Biographies



**I. Introduction: Iron from the Macro to the Micro** begins the exhibition with a reminder of the essential presence of iron in the universe. Projected onto the ceiling and walls of the entrance's immersive, tunnel-like space are multiple images: the galactic swirl where Earth's iron was forged in the furnaces of stars, close-ups of sparks at a blacksmith's forge, and blood pulsing through human veins. These are set against the rhythms of the human heartbeat and the pounding of hammer on anvil. Following the multimedia panoply is an installation of five singular artworks that are tour-de-force achievements by blacksmiths.



**II. Iron's Material Transformation: Masters of Furnace and Forge** invites visitors to learn about the complex processes of smelting and forging by showing these technologies' tools alongside large-scale photographs of towering furnaces and dramatic film sequences of blacksmiths at the forge. Virtuosity is illustrated by three objects—a lavish oil lamp, a small figurine, and a prestige blade—that make vivid blacksmiths' command of both metal- and woodworking skills.



**III. Africa's Iron Origins** begins with a brief summary of some of the archaeological evidence used to reconstruct the history of iron-working in Africa and then turns to the ways iron's early histories are understood through cosmologies. Communities use stories to reveal and explain the brilliant inventions and innovations of blacksmiths, who release iron from rock to transform it into life-changing objects, as represented by present-day Dogon and Bamana peoples of Mali.



**IV. Sustenance from the Anvil** looks at the kinds of iron tools that enabled African peoples to survive and thrive, especially via agriculture. Hoes, sickles, adzes, and axes are the inspiration for a range of ritual and ceremonial objects that take their power from the essential work such tools accomplish. Dance wands and staffs carried in ceremonies to mark social passages show the brilliant originality of individual smiths. Iron adornments worn on similar occasions are associated with the way that iron is "born" through smelting, and in this way linked with women and their fertile status.



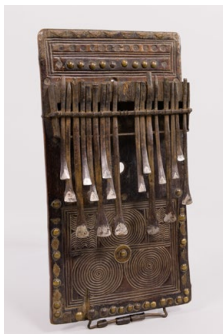
**V. Iron's Empowering Roles** explores how the presence of iron has served as an activator of spiritual power. Shrines are studded and graves bedecked, masks are clad and sculptures bristle—all with the activating presence of iron. As masters of the transformative process of making iron from earth, blacksmiths are often charged with making the very objects used to invoke and mediate divine forces. To show how iron is used to direct spiritual agency to pressing community needs, this section spotlights Yorùbá, Fon, and Edo peoples of west Africa; Songye, Kongo, and Luba peoples of central Africa; and Karagwe peoples of east Africa.



**VI. Blades of Power and Prestige** introduces several of Africa's key weapon types as it explores the continent's most elaborately forged blades, axes, spears, and staffs. Intended to communicate ideas about prosperity, prestige, and authority, these objects exemplify the links between virtuosity, beauty, and efficacy. Among the distinctive genres highlighted are throwing knives, axes and adzes with blades that take the form of iron tongues emerging from beautifully sculpted heads or figures, and staffs and scepters that resulted from encounters and exchanges with outside forces such as Christianity and Islam.



**VII. Blades of Value** shows how iron currency tokens—forged in astoundingly complex shapes and unwieldy sizes—are among the most stunning designs of blacksmiths. Historically, their value resided in the quantity of iron and considerable labor required to produce them. Currencies were used in the exchanges that mattered most in life, marriage, but also in litigation, as ransom, or to obtain various esteemed commodities. A concluding segment looks at how, starting in the 15th century, Europeans sought trade in African-produced iron and, in the colonial period, mass-produced replicas of African currency tokens to destabilize local economies.



**VIII. Sounding Forms** addresses how the act of striking iron produces rhythmic sounds in a forge, where red-hot metal is hammered as bellows pump air to elevate the temperature of the fire. Striking iron also produces music from forged instruments made completely or partially of iron. Two hoe-shaped blades can be welded together to make a bell; multiple forged clappers or pods used as rattles; and the iron keys of "thumb pianos," often called mbiras after their Zimbabwean name, plucked. Such iron instruments often call forth ancestors and other spirits. Visitors exit the exhibition to the rhythms and resonances of iron's sonorous orchestrations.



## Backgrounder Captions

I. Artist Unknown (Central Pende peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Adze, early 20th century  
Wood, Iron, pigment; H: 44 cm, W: 12 cm, D: 24 cm  
Felix Collection; Photograph Dick Beaulieux, 2005

II. Artist Unknown (Chokwe/Lunda peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Ceremonial axe, 20th century, before 1948  
Wood, iron, copper; H: 38 cm, W: 26.6 cm, D: 2.5 cm  
Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris 71.1948.15.29  
Photograph Thierry Olivier  
Image © musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Dist. Rmn-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY

III. Artist Unknown (Dogon peoples, Mali)  
Ritual figure, 19th century  
Iron; H: 25.4 cm, W: 7.62 cm, D: 5.08 cm  
Dr. Jan Baptiste Bedaux

IV. Artist Unknown (Ga'anda peoples, Nigeria)  
Ritual sickle (*wanshipta*), mid-20th century  
Iron; H: 54.5 cm, W: 28 cm, D: 1.5 cm  
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2008.16.1; Museum Purchase  
Image © Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph Don Cole, 2017

V. Artist Unknown (Songye peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Nkishi figure, mid to late 19th century  
Wood, iron, copper alloy, cowrie shell, horn; H: 28.5 cm, W: 12 cm  
Collection of the MAS, Antwerp, Belgium (AE.0720), Gift of Louis Franck, Antwerp, 1920  
Image © MAS | Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerpen  
Photograph Michel Wuyts, 2016  
Provenance: Field collected in 1920 by Louis Franck (1868-1937). Selected for the Belgian Pavilion at the New York World's Fair of 1939, nicknamed "the man with iron hair."

VI. Artist Unknown (Sudan)  
Acid-etched scepter, 19th century  
Iron, leather, wood; L: 70 cm  
Fowler Museum at UCLA X65.3646; Gift of the Wellcome Trust  
Image © Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph Don Cole, 2017

VII. Artist Unknown (Budja peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Bridewealth bundle (*adjenge*), late 19th century  
Iron, plant fiber cordage; H: 58 cm, W: 25 cm, D: 7 cm  
Felix Collection; Photograph Dick Beaulieux, 2005

VIII. Artist unknown (Chokwe peoples, Angola)  
Lamellophone (*chisanji*), late 19th century  
Wood, iron; H: 36.2 cm, W: 18.7 cm, D: 5.1 cm  
Musical Instrument Museum 2013.56.1  
Image © courtesy Musical Instrument Museum; Photograph Troy Sharp, 2016

## Curator Biographies

**Tom Joyce** brings to the project an encyclopedic knowledge of African iron works from collections around the world along with in-depth knowledge of the history and impact of forging across the Continent. His field research includes African ironwork, sculpture and blacksmithing traditions, most recently in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, and Bénin. The recipient of a 2003 MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, Joyce's work can be found in more than 27 public collections around the world. Since 1981 his sculptures have been exhibited in 152 solo and group exhibitions including at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Detroit Institute of Art, Boston Museum of Fine Art, and Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, along with major commissions from museums and sculpture parks across the country. In his work, Joyce re-examines the social, political, economic and historical implications of using iron, infusing his pieces and commissions with inherited histories and material memories. He serves as lead curator of the exhibition and an editor and author of the accompanying publication.

**Allen F. Roberts** received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Chicago and is now Professor of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA. He is a renowned scholar of the arts and humanities of Francophone sub-Saharan Africa, and his many books and exhibitions include *The Rising of a New Moon: A Century of Tabwa Art* (with Evan M. Maurer, 1985, NEH funding); *Iron, Master of Them All* (with Dewey, 1992); and *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous* (with Carol Thompson, 1995, NEH funding). Roberts conducts research and writes with Dr. Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts, and their traveling exhibitions and books include *MEMORY: Luba Art and the Making of History* (1996, NEH implementation) and *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (2003, NEH). Roberts is co-curator of the exhibition and chief editor as well as author of the publication.

**Marla C. Berns** has served as the Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum at UCLA and adjunct assistant professor in UCLA's Department of Art History since 2001. She received her Ph.D. in Art History at UCLA, specializing in African art, and was director of the University Art Museum at the University of California, Santa Barbara from 1991–2001. Her publishing and curatorial work has concentrated on women's arts of Northeastern Nigeria. Berns served as the lead curator of the major international traveling exhibition, *Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley* (2011), and was co-editor and author of its accompanying publication. To celebrate the Fowler's 50th Anniversary in 2013, Berns wrote *World Arts, Local Lives: The Collections of the Fowler Museum at UCLA*. She is project director and co-curator of *Striking Iron* and is an editor and author of its publication. In 2013 Berns received the medal of chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters of the French Republic.

**William J. Dewey** is Director of the African Studies Program and Associate Professor of African Art History at Pennsylvania State University. A recent Fulbright Fellow, he received his Master's degree from Northwestern University and a Ph.D. from Indiana University, both in Art History. Publications on African iron include the exhibition and catalogue, *Iron, Master of Them All* (1992), with Allen F. Roberts, and chapters in the exhibition catalogues *Fatal Beauty: Traditional Weapons of Central Africa* (2009), and *Material Differences: Art and Identity in Africa* (2003). Dewey has conducted extensive field research with blacksmiths in Swaziland, Mozambique, Madagascar, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Zambia, the DRC, and Zimbabwe. Dewey is co-curator of the exhibition and serves as an editor and author of the publication.



**Henry J. Drewal** is Evjue-Bascom Professor of Art History and Afro-American Studies and Adjunct Curator of African Art at the Chazen Museum of Art, both at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. With two Master's degrees and a Ph.D. from Columbia University in African Art History/Anthropology, he is one of the preeminent scholars of Yoruba art and expressive culture. Since 1991, Drewal has contributed to several Fowler exhibitions and catalogues and served as lead curator of the NEH-funded *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and the African Atlantic World*, (2008). He has also conducted extensive field research in the Republic of Bénin, Ghana, Brazil, and now in India on African communities of the Indian Ocean world. For the *Striking Iron* project, he serves as co-curator and editor and author of the publication.