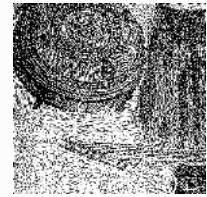


Woven, Inscribed, Enfolded, Encased: Adinkra from Kumase to the British Museum

Article by **Adrian Anagnost**



Abstract

This article traces the nineteenth-century circulation of Asante material culture from Kumase to the British Museum, exploring how the intersecting imperial strategies of the Asante and British empires are manifested in collecting practices. Rather than tracing object biographies *from Africa to Europe*, this text foregrounds Asante imperial collecting, which appropriated diverse visual and material forms from Akan, Dagomba, Hausa, and Islamic communities as a means of asserting imperial power and cosmopolitan identity. As diplomatic exchanges gave way to looting, the Anglo-Asante Wars, and colonial possession over the nineteenth century, European museums redefined Asante material culture. This article analyzes how early nineteenth-century European museum displays and publications, especially writings by the aspiring English diplomat Thomas Edward Bowdich, constructed a reductive narrative of “African art”. Additionally, by centering Asante cosmopolitanism, the article underscores the dynamic and adaptive strategies that defined Asante imperial visuality.

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Cohen-Aponte, Christopher Maxwell, and Adrienne Rooney. Invited interlocutors were Gaiutra Bahadur, Pamela Fletcher, Aaron Kamugisha, Catherine Molineux, José Lingna Nafafé, and Kerry Sinanan.

From Imperial Appropriations to “African Art”: Asante and British Collecting Practices

In 1831 a group of objects acquired in the Asante Empire and Gabon entered the British Museum collections (fig. 1).¹ These items—perhaps the first art from sub-Saharan Africa to enter the British Museum—include clay pipes, colorful glass beads, an iron lock and key, an iron and brass blade and a brass-wrapped wooden sheath, a leather cushion with kapok fiber stuffing, a tasseled leather bag, a stringed instrument, sandals, a carved wooden stool, plain woven cotton, and stamped *adinkra* cloth. Although the British Museum formally added them to their collection only in 1831, these objects had been at the institution since 1818, when the Englishman Thomas Bowdich presented them to the museum.² Bowdich had acquired these items while on an 1816–18 “mission” sponsored by the British-chartered Company of Merchants trading to Africa—the African Company—centered on an 1817 journey to the Asante capital of Kumase (Coomassie).³



Figure 1

Page spread from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *An Essay on the Superstitions, Customs and Arts, Common to the Ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians and Ashantees* (Paris: J. Smith, 1821), 70–73.

Lithograph by Sarah Bowdich, based on watercolors by Jane Landseer. Digital image courtesy of La Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Located near the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa, the Asante Empire was formed out of conquests and consolidation in the late seventeenth century. It was a multiethnic polity dominated by Twi-speaking Akan people—the Asante—with inhabitants from Hausa, Dagomba, other Akan, and additional ethnic groups.⁴ Asante's capital, Kumase, was located in a forested region of the interior, at a geographical nexus of inland trade routes reaching northward toward the Sahel and east–west along the forest–savanna interface. Kumase was some distance inland from the Gold Coast. There, West African ethnic groups such as the Fante and Ga competed to dominate overseas trade in captive Africans, gold, ivory, and other goods.⁵ In the eighteenth century, Asante expansion from the forest toward the coast ousted many intermediaries, with the result that Asante representatives increasingly dealt directly with European coastal traders and Euro-African trade agents at ports such as Elmina, Cape Coast, and Accra.⁶ Furthermore, in the early nineteenth century, the *de jure* ending of the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved people by the Danish (1803), British (1807), and Dutch (1814) governments spurred efforts to transition to “legitimate commerce” across this region.⁷ In the wake of abolition, African and European entities sought new models for commercial relationships, reaching from Kumase in the interior and its Sahelian trade partners, through entrepôts along the Gold Coast, and overseas to Europe. It was in this context of shifting trade and diplomacy that Thomas Bowdich visited Kumase in 1817.

From the Asante point of view, selling or gifting objects from the cosmopolitan city of Kumase to European visitors could smooth diplomatic relations and lay the groundwork for future commercial transactions—building on long-standing regional practices of trade, diplomatic gifting, and pageantry.⁸ Moreover, the Asantehene (Asante ruler), Osei Tutu Kwame Asibey Bonsu, appeared to be motivated by the goal of placing objects on display in a European museum as a way to communicate Asante imperial power abroad, which paralleled his own local practices of collecting and display.⁹ When Bowdich informed the Asantehene of the British Museum, the ruler presented him with six items of goldwork for the museum; Bowdich noted that “I had interested the King [Asantehene], by my account of this national repository”.¹⁰ The Asantehene's early nineteenth-century donation of goldwork contrasts sharply with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British Museum acquisitions from the

region, which were largely rooted in the punitive logic of the Anglo-Asante Wars.¹¹ Where Bowdich presented these items to the British Museum to establish his own capabilities as a colonial agent and scientific explorer, the Asantehene sought enhanced trade and the promotion of Asante imperial power internationally.¹²

This article traces the intersecting aims of dual imperialisms, with the Asante Empire's practices of imperial collecting eclipsed by those of the British Empire, as the items collected in Asante entered the British Museum. The relocation of objects from the Asante Empire to the British Museum was both a political and economic maneuver by Asante elites and the Asantehene, and an ideological framing of museum collections through the lens of Britain's emerging global empire. In the early and mid-nineteenth-century British Museum, the objects acquired in Kumase were labeled: "All from Ashantee. Presented by T. E. Bowdich, Esq. and described in his Travels".¹³ While it is true that Bowdich obtained (most of) the items during his time in the Asante Empire, the phrase "all from Ashantee" conceals a great deal of complexity (figs. 2 and 3). For one, Asante Empire material culture and collections incorporated objects from across Europe as well as from West and North Africa, but Bowdich's collecting process did not include European items.¹⁴ Additionally, the Asante Empire was culturally diverse. While recognizing the challenges of defining ethnic categories, we can understand the Asante as the coming together of several subsets of the Akan ethnic group who organized into a federation just before 1700.¹⁵ The Asante imperial consolidation across the forest zone went on to encompass diverse Akan and non-Akan groups, and Asante imperial arts overtly appropriated varied arts and material culture into a cosmopolitan visuality.¹⁶

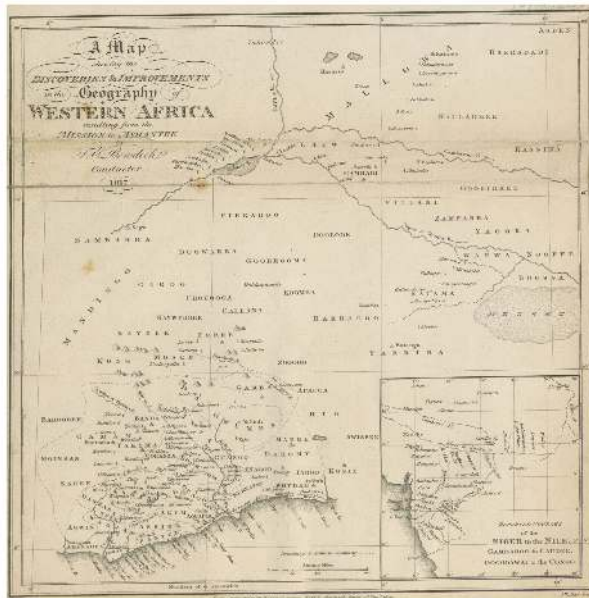


Figure 2

“A Map shewing the Discoveries & Improvements in the Geography of Western Africa resulting from the Mission to Ashantee by T. E. Bowdich, Conductor, 1817”, from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: John Murray, 1819), frontispiece. Collection British Library (HMNTS 983.d.16.). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia.



Figure 3

“A Map shewing the Discoveries & Improvements in the Geography of Western Africa resulting from the Mission to Ashantee by T. E. Bowdich, Conductor, 1817” (detail), from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: John Murray,* *1819), frontispiece. Collection British Library (HMNTS 983.d.16.). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia.

By incorporating items from across a broad geographical range, the Asante Empire exemplified how “nineteenth-century imperial power structures provided a fertile breeding ground for cosmopolitanism”.¹⁷ As Malcolm McLeod, former keeper of the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum, and the art historian Fiona Savage have shown, Asante gifting and collecting practices reveal how royal authority depended on appropriating exogenous visual and material culture.¹⁸ While Asante strategies emphasized cosmopolitan appropriation, the early nineteenth-century British Museum display crafted a different geography for these objects. The British Museum obscured the multiethnic character of objects by Akan, Hausa, Dagomba, and other artisans behind the internationally known political entity of the Asante—and under Bowdich’s name. Extending the museum’s generalizing of categories, Bowdich further reframed these works in a second book that proposed a pan-African art history.

Adinkra exemplifies these simultaneous Asante and British imperial strategies. *Adinkra* cloth is a stamped textile that is regarded as a quintessentially Asante

cultural form, yet its formal and material roots are in diverse communities throughout the Asante Empire. *Adinkra* cloth was originally made from cotton woven in long strips on small foot looms, and sewn together into large swathes decorated with repeated patterns arranged in a grid (fig. 4).¹⁹ The repeated patterns on the cloth, each of which was associated with an Akan proverb or saying, were traditionally stamped using small calabash gourds carved in relief, using an ink made from boiled badie tree bark and, sometimes, slag trailings left over from iron smelting or smithing.²⁰



Figure 4

Asante/Dagomba (Ghana), Cloth (*adinkra*), 1817, cotton and ink, 276 × 202 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1818,1114.23). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

As the art historian Allison Martino has noted, *adinkra* cloth was used as a mourning garment by elites, and then popularized across the social ranks in other contexts throughout the Asante Empire and in Akan areas of the British Gold Coast colony during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²¹ Initially handwoven and hand-printed by male artisans, *adinkra* textiles were later produced as machine-printed cloth by British companies (figs. 5 and 6).²² While oral accounts of *adinkra*'s origins center on *textiles*, the term *adinkra* is more broadly understood to mean the printed motifs on the cloth: *adinkra* symbols linked to Akan proverbs and other Akan oral expressions including songs, riddles, and prayer.²³

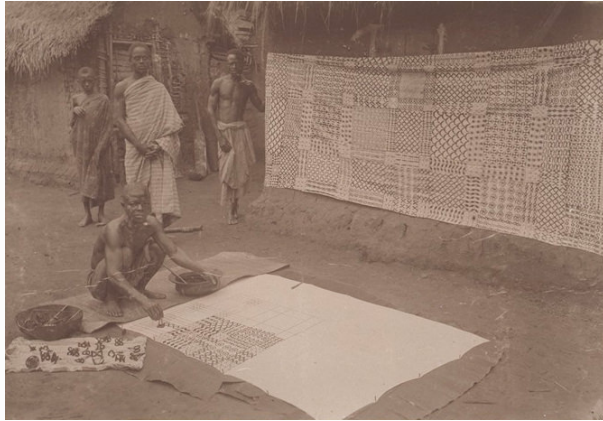


Figure 5

Friedrich August Louis Ramseyer, Two stages of printing cotton for mourning cloths (*adinkra*), 1888–95. Digital image courtesy of Basel Mission Archives, Basel, Switzerland (D-30.22.012).



Figure 6

Friedrich August Louis Ramseyer, Two stages of printing cotton for mourning cloths (*adinkra*), 1888–95. Digital image courtesy of Basel Mission Archives, Basel, Switzerland (D-30.22.013).

Developed in dialogue with Islamic talismanic calligraphy and metalwork, reliant on Dagomba textile expertise, and steeped in Akan orality, *adinkra* is quintessentially Asante *because* of its cosmopolitan composition.²⁴ However, emergent modern museological frameworks flattened the difference. At the early nineteenth-century British Museum, Asante works, like many other artworks from outside Europe, were understood according to an ideal of homogeneous polities. *Adinkra* was one of several items that stood in for the Asante Empire, alongside object sets from other sites where British “expeditions” were paving the way for imperial intervention. Once placed in the museum and abstracted

from its diverse origins, *adinkra* could be reframed according to the logics of art historical study. Through formal analysis and reduction of the *adinkra* to constituent patterns, Bowdich's second book reinterpreted *adinkra* through a comparative examination of what he called "arts common to the ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians, and Ashantees"—an early diffusionist proposal for the field of African art.

Adinkra fabric and other objects from Africa were decontextualized and reauthored in British Museum displays, then fragmented in the space of the printed page. Each stage of *adinkra*'s shifting geography offered a new comparative framework, from the Asante Empire and its borderlands to the cosmopolitan space of Asante's capital, Kumase, to the imperial framing of the British Museum. The historian Makhroufi Ousmane Traoré has described similar modes of spatial reconfiguration as *disenclavement*, "that is, an act of ending the isolation of a given geographic zone—beyond the already familiar regions".²⁵ Traoré's focus is the opening up of an "ethnic state [in Africa] to a global economy (the Atlantic system)", and how connections to the Atlantic Coast trade and beyond reshaped patterns of circulation around trans-Saharan routes.²⁶ In the case of *adinkra*, this opening up to different circuits saw *adinkra* patterns move across the complex visual and material matrices of multiethnic trade centers, cosmopolitan Kumase, and the British Museum.

I take these Asante objects, especially *adinkra*, as a case study for understanding how art from Africa entered European collections under conditions of imperialism. I ask two intersecting questions. First, how can we connect African objects in European museum collections to their origin sites, understood not as static and unchanging but as dynamic and heterogeneous? This article thus takes up the model posed by Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Peter Mark to "articulate the process whereby the objects were removed from the society of their creation and, ultimately, redefined as 'African art'".²⁷ This requires an analysis of two different imperial projects—the Asante and the British—and an examination of distinct strategies for confronting and absorbing exogenous cultural forms. While Malcolm McLeod points out that "it has become a cliché ... that much of Asante material culture had its origin outside Asante," and he cautions that, "This view overlooks completely the fact that cultures have a preexisting system of classification and evaluation, a pervasive cosmology which influences

the utility and attractiveness of the new items”.²⁸ The first half of this article thus traces Asante approaches to incorporating “foreign” cultural forms into imperial imaginaries, arguing that Asante imperial power was predicated on its ability to appropriate and mobilize diverse metaphysical and technical powers into an Asante imperial imaginary. *Adinkra* cloth and *adinkra* symbols were enmeshed in ensembles of visual, oral, and material culture that presented cosmopolitanism as a feature of the Asante Empire.

Second, how can we understand the processes by which institutions such as the British Museum and Western art history have constructed their objects of study? *Adinkra* textiles entered museum collections in the Global North when European museums were concluding their shift from a cabinet of curiosities model to the model of a modern disciplinary institution. At the British Museum early displays promoted an “expeditionary” narrative of explorers gathering fascinating objects from potential imperial conquests. However, the museum’s display practices and Bowdich’s publication would soon subsume these objects—including *adinkra*—under emerging definitions of “African art” and ethnography. The second half of this article analyzes how the British Museum and Bowdich’s books reinterpreted *adinkra* and other objects from the Asante. Following Bosc-Tiessé and Mark, studies of African objects in museums should bring together an understanding of how museums have conditioned interpretations and, at the same time, reject the notion of a pure and authentic origin.

This is not merely a question of ameliorating the decontextualization enacted by the museum, of deploying object biography to reverse an object’s journeys and return it to an “original” meaning. As Dan Hicks has written in an earlier issue of *British Art Studies*, “the notion of object biography has served to fix the boundaries of things rather too firmly by tending to overestimate physical constancy in the face of movement between shifting human contexts”.²⁹ At the same time, I contend that forensic practices for recapitulating the violences and losses of looting, advocacy for the return of discrete objects, and contemporary interventions in museums are insufficient. These approaches often limit historical accounts to European imperial points of view that reaffirm the problematic neglect of premodern African histories and art histories. However, this period also reveals intersecting imperialisms, including non-European

imperialisms. Rather than defining Asante material culture as a coherent and timeless entity, we should instead recognize how imperial strategies within West Africa incorporated and transformed exogenous artistic traditions into distinctly Asante forms at a particular moment in Asante history. By understanding these dynamics, art historians can better account for empires where European powers were not the protagonists, and appreciate African agency as a force that shaped expansive material and artistic worlds—beyond the reactionary frameworks that are tied to European hegemony.³⁰ Where museums of the Global North have tended to emphasize exemplary, singular works of art authored by a single figure or ethnic group, these works demand to be understood in the context of arrays of visibility, material culture, and spatial orders from dynamic societies.

Woven: Asante Consolidation

Throughout Asante campaigns of conquest and consolidation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Asante material culture and oral histories show an openness to “foreign” artisanship, an incipient cosmopolitanism at the root of Asante imperial rule.³¹ This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the Asante came together at a nexus of multiple key crossroads of regional and global trade. Prior to the Asante Empire, emergent Akan polities were poised at the heart of a gold- and kola nut-producing forest region inland from the Gold Coast, at a hub of trade routes from the Sahel–savanna interface to the forest in the south; from Assinie in present-day Ivory Coast in the west, through areas of Allada/Ardra (later Dahomey) into Benin in the east; and bridging the forest–coast divide (fig. 7).³² As the entry of European weapons into the area disrupted the regional political balance, Akan groups seeking to establish control over trade pushed both south- and northward.³³

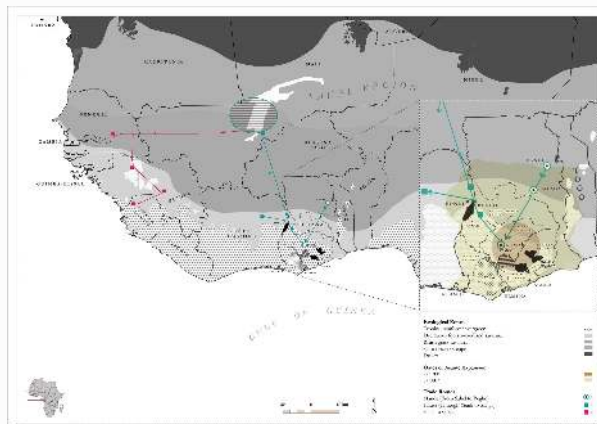


Figure 7

Map showing ecological zones and trade routes around the Asante Empire, circa eighteenth century. Digital image courtesy of *British Art Studies*. CC-BY-NC 4.0.

Even before the Asante came together as a federation or empire in the mid-seventeenth century, some sources distinguished between Akan groups that were known for their martial and mercantile expertise and other Akan groups that were skilled in artisanship such as textile manufacture. An early seventeenth-century Dutch map, for example, enumerates dozens of West African polities, including “great acanij ... rich in slaves”, the principal gold merchants of “acanij”, an undistinguished “akan” group, the “bonnoe” who are “simple” and have no forest, and a locale with no gold called “insoco” (fig. 8). The map label for Insoco describes how its “cloths woven like carpets” were highly esteemed by the “acanisten”—potentially encompassing all the various Akan groups to the south, including the pre-Asante Akan polities of Acanij and Great Acanij.³⁴ These distinctions in expertise—military, mercantile, and artisanal—were linked to particular trade and production centers. One such center was the inland market of Insoco, or Bɛo-Nsokɔ (historical Begho), active from around the fourteenth century through its abandonment in the late eighteenth century.³⁵

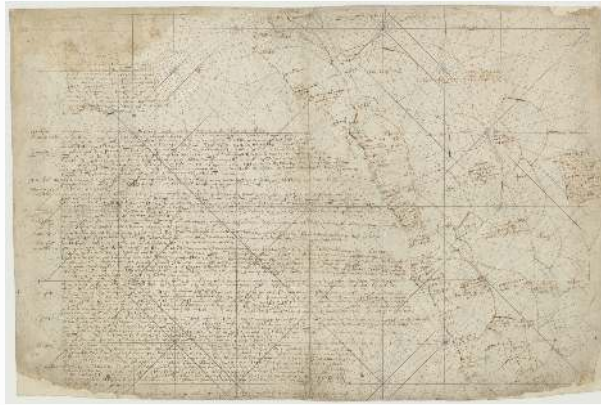


Figure 8

Caerte des Lantschaps van de Gout Kust in Guinea
(Map of the Landscape of the Gold Coast in Guinea
from Atsyn/Axim to Ningo), 1629. Digital image
courtesy of The National Archives of the
Netherlands, The Hague (NL-HaNA_4.VEL_743).
CC0 1.0.

As a key junction between Saharan caravan trade routes and Akan forest regions to the south, Bɛo-Nsokɔ's inhabitants included the Bono (Brong) Akan people, Mande-speaking Dyula traders (some of whom were Muslim), and diverse communities of craftspeople.³⁶ Linguistic evidence and archaeological evidence, such as seventeenth-century spindle whorls and dye tools, substantiate an inland center of cotton textile production at Bɛo-Nsokɔ, situated in the savanna–forest ecotone at the north-northwest boundaries of the region that would become Asante.³⁷ Additionally, around 1700, a French apostolic prefect visiting Assinie, farther west along the coast, noted that traders from inland brought “Turkish carpets”, along with “fine cotton fabrics striped with red and blue silk” from “Enzoko” (Bɛo-Nsokɔ).³⁸ Thus, from this early period, textile expertise is located northwest of the Asante heartland.

While the Asante would develop indigenous modes of textile production at the heart of empire no later than the eighteenth century—most famously, kente cloth—evidence points to a consistent practice of importing important textiles and textile techniques from the edges of empire.³⁹ Since cotton grows in the savanna region but not the forest, it is understandable that textile technologies would come to the Asante from the north.⁴⁰ Narrow band, or strip, weaving on small looms may have been introduced into Akan border regions such as Bɛo-Nsokɔ by Mande-speaking Dyula traders from even farther to the north, with

the textiles produced there then traded south into Asante Akan areas.⁴¹ Asante weaving practices may also have been influenced by neighboring trade goods such as Quaqua cloth from the present-day Ivory Coast and strip-woven cloth from Ouidah, Allada, and Benin.⁴² Weaving was certainly firmly established by 1817, when Bowdich observed people in Kumase using a foot loom, an example of which he sent with other items to the British Museum.

Asante Akan ruling powers did not try to hide the foreign origins of their paradigmatic symbols. The Asante drew from the Denkyira Akan for a class of ritual executioners called *tɔprɛfoɔ*, who introduced musical instruments such as the *tɔprɛ* drum and *aworoben* horn, as well as forms of dance, to the Asante Empire.⁴³ The Denkyira diviner *Ɔkomfo Anokye* founded Asante's Nsumankwaa division (department of medicines), a group of powerful spiritual advisers drawn largely from outside Asante, who were able to effect material transformation.⁴⁴ After the Asante war with Techiman in the 1720s, Osei Tutu's successor, Asantehene Opoku Ware I, demanded that "fetish priests and medicine men" in Techiman join the Nsumankwaa.⁴⁵ As the art historian Ray Silverman has shown, the Asante appropriation of "exotic goods and ideologies [was] a strategy for enhancing social, political and religious presence and power".⁴⁶ Asante power thus relied on appropriating esoteric knowledge from beyond its material boundaries—here Denkyira and Techiman—making the formation of the Asante Empire a spiraling process of drawing the edges in toward a center.

For the philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, this embodies an Akan understanding of creation—not as emerging from nothingness but as a process of continual transformation.⁴⁷ Similarly, to select Kumase as the location of the Asante capital, some oral history relates, the Denkyira diviner *Ɔkomfo Anokye* planted kum trees in three locations: Kumase was chosen because it was where the trees grew best rather than because it was an ancestral origin site.⁴⁸ Asante courtyard compounds would thus be anchored by a *gyase dua* (courtyard tree), or a representation of a tree, referencing settlement after a tradition of migration.⁴⁹ Asante narratives frame power in terms of a transformative appropriation of exogenous practices rather than of inception and autochthony.

The Asante interest in strategically absorbing external influence—an imperial incorporation of the periphery into the center at Kumase—is evident even in canonical stories of the Sika Dwa Kofi, or gold stool, the preeminent material sign of Asante kingship.⁵⁰ According to oral histories, Osei Tutu I established Asante Akan sovereignty (around 1700) with the support of Okomfo Anokye, a priest-diviner from the Denkyira Akan kingdom and not from Asante (see Dankara in fig. 2).⁵¹ The outsider Okomfo Anokye magically crafted, or called into being, a new royal stool for Asantehene Osei Tutu I that would unify the diverse groups that constituted the nascent Asante Empire.⁵² The creation of the gold stool exemplifies how Asante power emerged not from autochthony but from the strategic adoption of external expertise and ritual authority.

While ceremonial stools were a common emblem of political organization in many Akan states, this narrative of Asante and its royal stool is distinct for its explicit narrative of origins *outside* Asante.⁵³ In contrast, Bono Akan accounts describe their royal stool emerging from a hole in the earth along with the first ancestors, while the Denkyira Akan tell of a mother ancestor who discovered their stool or heralded its arrival from the sky.⁵⁴ The origins of these stools are narrated through stories of foundational figures to support *place-based* territorial claims and vertical arrival—from holes in the ground or descending from the sky.⁵⁵ In contrast, the Asante gold stool concretizes Okomfo Anokye and Osei Tutu's savvy post-conquest invention of collective symbols to exercise authority over diverse communities under Asante's centralizing administrative state.⁵⁶

Asante imperial power lay precisely in aggregating diverse polities, ethnicities, and traditions without needing to completely erase their exogenous character, and absorbing them into emphatically Asante practices.⁵⁷ While this may be seen as drawing on the longer history of Akan matrilineal societies, which absorbed outsiders through intermarriage and descent, these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century strategies emphasized esoteric and spiritual knowledge.⁵⁸ For example, Asante's esteemed sheep wool, goat hair, or camel hair textile known as *nsaa* also originated outside the Asante heartland, in regional trade routes spanning the forest and Sahel.⁵⁹ On the advice of the priest Okomfo Anokye that the gold stool should never touch the ground directly, the stool sat on an expanse of *nsaa*.⁶⁰ More generally, *nsaa* cloth has been used in Akan societies to mark the

boundary between sacred and profane: beyond keeping the gold stool from touching the ground, it might cover the threshold of an Asante stool room, drape a royal palanquin, or provide a barrier between a sacred relic and the ground within a priestly shrine.⁶¹ Like the gold stool, *nsaa* fabric came from beyond the Asante heartland, thus binding a non-Asante group into the core of Asante courtly traditions as the empire expanded.

There are also examples of the Asantehene seeking to appropriate European techniques from the southern edges of the empire, although these lacked the sacred significance of objects and techniques from the north and west. In the early eighteenth century, a Danish merchant described how Asantehene Opoku Ware I sought to establish “factories” (*Fabriken*) for the production of goods in Asante.⁶² Seeing potential profits in alcohol, he solicited Dutch soldiers from Elmina Fort to initiate a brandy distillery in Kumase. The soldiers began collecting equipment and setting up the distillery, but were called back south to the fort to be punished for desertion. While the brandy distillery was thwarted, the Asantehene “had another idea”: to spin and weave cotton, incorporating unraveled European taffeta and wool to make patterned cloth in Asante.⁶³ Here too foreign materials and techniques were—literally—interwoven with Asante practices.

The invention of *adinkra* cloth demonstrates how the Asante Empire openly appropriated foreign technical expertise as a sign of imperial power. Oral histories surrounding *adinkra* fabric recognize, and even foreground, precisely these processes of overtly absorbing the margins of empire into the center. As the historical Asante Empire was consolidating—so Akan oral histories tell—artisans from defeated polities introduced designs and dye techniques for *adinkra* cloth to the Asante victors.⁶⁴ Some accounts date the Asante acquisition of *adinkra* textiles to the reign of Asantehene Osei Tutu I or perhaps Asantehene Opoku Ware I, in the early eighteenth century, as the Asante were in the process of establishing their militarily powerful empire.⁶⁵ One oral history of this early eighteenth-century period relates that the Asante under Osei Tutu I gained the knowledge of *adinkra* from the defeated Akan state of Denkyira, southwest of the Asante—the source of the gold stool.⁶⁶ Another oral history centers on the rule of Opoku Ware I, which began around 1720, with *adinkra* originating in the Bono (or Brong) Akan homeland around Bonomanso, northwest of the Asante

core, along the forest–Sahel trade routes leading from Kumase toward the historical textile production site of Begho.⁶⁷ Perhaps the most commonly circulated account of *adinkra* today describes how the Asante acquired *adinkra* a century later, as a result of the Asante–Gyaman War of 1818.⁶⁸ Gyaman was a diverse state led by Bono Akans who had moved westward in successive displacements and migrations—northwest of Bonomanso, west of Begho—to center on the multiethnic town of Bonduku located at the edge of the savanna in present-day Ivory Coast (see Gaman and Buntooko in fig. 2).⁶⁹ Although Asante *adinkra* certainly predates this 1818 war, such narratives implicitly recognize the Asante Empire’s continued expansion and open incorporation of exogenous practices, particularly those from the north.

This absorption of the edges into a political center may seem a strategy characteristic of all empires. As a visual demonstration of the Asante Empire’s acquisition of exotic techniques, *adinkra* could be interpreted as a parallel to the British Empire’s acquisition of an object such as the Koh-i-Noor diamond from India and set into the United Kingdom’s Crown Jewels in the mid-nineteenth century. However, where the Koh-i-Noor is a singular, spectacular marker of conquest, a raw material recut and set within British imperial visibility, Asante rulership redeployed the Denkyira gold stool and rituals, Dagomba *nsaa* cloth, Techiman medicine, and European textiles as part of a cosmopolitan array. The power of the Asante Empire lay not simply in seizing goods and physically possessing them but also in acquiring esoteric knowledge and mastering the ability to deploy it in the service of imperial unity. Asante authority, therefore, extended beyond material conquest to epistemic dominion. The empire’s strength lay not merely in marking conquest through possession of singular trophies but in its ability to transform external influences into elements of Asante cosmopolitanism.

Inscribed, Enfolded: Esoteric Knowledge between North and South

How did *adinkra* function as esoteric knowledge within Asante society? In other words, what significances are lost once objects such as *adinkra* cloth enter museums in the Global North as solely Asante, without acknowledgment of its complex, multiethnic genealogies? *Adinkra* emerged from a context of cultural exchange and appropriation within and beyond Asante society during the

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Certainly, *adinkra* is, ultimately, deeply Akan, with specific forms tied to Twi proverbs in a rich cross-medial matrix that combines orality, image, and materiality.⁷⁰ At the same time, oral history narratives situate the development of *adinkra* and other Asante textiles in border areas, through conquest of Akan polities including Denkyira, Bonomanso, Gyaman, and Techiman. Although these accounts are less explicit about the influence of non-Akan groups, northern and Muslim traders and artisans were also instrumental in the Akan development of *adinkra* and related visual culture.⁷¹

Located at a crossroads of trade, Asante Akan groups had engaged in exchange with Muslim groups to the north for centuries. In addition to the spread of weaving techniques from north to south (and across an east–west axis), Asante Empire artisans were familiar with Islamic ornamentation and Arabic inscriptions from Mamluk brassware and goldwork, Islamic calligraphic amulets, and other material culture traded across Sahel routes. As Raymond Silverman notes, Asante brass lost-wax *kuduo* basins and bowls feature ornamentation that echoes the compositions and Arabic inscriptions of fifteenth-century Mamluk metalware (figs. 9 and [10(#aanagnost-fig10)]), likely acquired through Asante conquest of a northern Bono Akan state.⁷² It is thus unsurprising to see visual similarities between floral motifs on Mamluk metal vessels, Akan *kuduo* decoration, and *adinkra* symbols such as *ananse ntontan* (spider’s web/shrewdness), or between Arabic calligraphy on Mamluk metalwork, curved patterns on Akan *kuduo* vessels, and repeated *Osram* (scales/the moon/endurance) *adinkra* symbols (fig. 11).⁷³ Additionally, the *adinkra* symbol *dweninmmen* (ram’s horns / strength) visually resembles a ram’s head and references the northern Islamic festival Tabaski (Eid al-Adha) at which a ram is sacrificed, while the *nsaa* (artisanship) *adinkra* symbol refers to the northern textile used in Asante sacred spaces.⁷⁴ These parallels point to sustained Asante engagement with the north as a source of visual forms and sacred power.



Figure 9

Arabic-inscribed basin, or *ayaa kenten kumah*, Nsoko, Brong Ahafo, diameter 43 cm, from Raymond A. Silverman, "Material Biographies: Saharan Trade and the Lives of Objects in Fourteenth and Fifteenth-Century West Africa", *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 389. Digital image courtesy of Raymond A. Silverman.



Figure 10

Basin-shaped *kuduo*, diameter at rim 26.6 cm, from Raymond A. Silverman, "Material Biographies: Saharan Trade and the Lives of Objects in Fourteenth and Fifteenth-Century West Africa", *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 389. Collection National Museum of Ghana (72.1463). Digital image courtesy of Raymond A. Silverman.



Figure 11

Asante, *Kudoku*, nineteenth century, brass,
9 × 14 × 14.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of The
Trustees of The British Museum (Af1947,13.19).
CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Even as the expansionist Asante Empire was reorienting toward coastal trade and Atlantic networks during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the north remained important as a place of potent esoteric learning and expertise, particularly around textiles.⁷⁵ Akan groups often regarded objects originating in the north as having sacred associations.⁷⁶ Throughout this period, the north had a specific valence in Asante culture, not simply as a borderlands area but with a sense of the exotic and ritually powerful. For example, the *nsaa* (artisanship) *adinkra* sign refers to the sacred *nsaa* wool cloth that came to Asante as tributes from sites in northern vassal states, such as Salaga in the Dagomba kingdom, and which was valued for its northern origins (see Sallagha and Dagwumba in fig. 2).⁷⁷ Additionally, oral histories recount the origins of the Asantehene's wardrobe mistresses in the Asante conquest of the northwestern Akan kingdom of Techiman.⁷⁸ Furthermore Allison Martino points out that the materials for making *adinkra* stamps and dye also traditionally came from north of Kumase, reinforcing the association between *adinkra* and the north.⁷⁹ Oral histories of *adinkra* note that it was integrated into Asante culture on the direct say-so of the Asantehene, through the acquisition of textile technologies and their associated sacrality as a form of war booty.⁸⁰ We should also note that, like the British Empire, the Asante Empire was engaged in the trafficking of enslaved people—both domestically and through transatlantic routes—and key artisanal

techniques were sometimes appropriated from the individuals enslaved by the Asante in conquered regions.⁸¹ Through conquest and migration as well as trade, Asante associations with the north encompassed goods, technical and artisanal skill, esoteric practices, and expert practitioners.



Figure 12
Gonja or Dagomba (a vassal of Asante to the north), *Kitāb al-balagh al-minan* (The book of attaining destiny), numerology work, nineteenth century. Digital image courtesy of the British Library (MS Or. 6576, fols. 33v–34r).

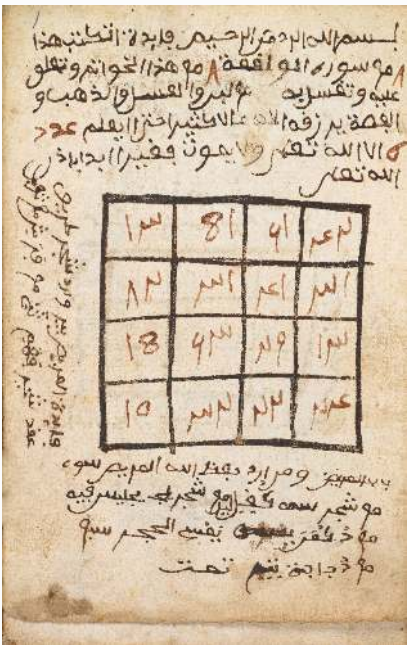


Figure 13
Fā'idah instructions for the preparation of an amulet for blessing and wealth with supplementary note in another hand. Collection of Arabic material from the Asante Kingdom, Kumasi, Ghana, nineteenth century, vellum, 16 × 10 cm. Collection British Library (BL7314380, Or. 6559, fol. 1r). Digital image courtesy of the British Library Archive / Bridgeman Images.

Beyond materials and techniques, engagement with the north also introduced visual forms, particularly Islamic motifs and talismanic structures, that informed *adinkra* cloth's compositional logics. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the Asantehene invited Dyula (Juula) and Hausa merchants and artisans, Muslim scholars, and Islamic diviners to settle in Kumase, where the ruler relied on some of them as court scribes, advisers, and crafters of amulets and talismans (figs. 12 and 13).⁸² These amulets were often in the form of paper with Quranic inscriptions arranged in grids or other regular arrays, folded and encased in a pouch of leather, cloth, or embossed gold (fig. 14). Additionally, *adinkra* seems to draw on West African protective talismanic garments, which displayed Quranic verses as blocks of Arabic text along with magic squares and other protective diagrams (figs. 15 and 16).⁸³ Given that the north was the origin of these amulets and talismanic objects, the Asantehene was thus harnessing the power of associations with the north to absorb esoteric power from the fringes of empire into the center—within Asante cosmopolitan practice.



Figure 14

Asante amulet case, before 1874, gold, repoussé, punched, and sewn, 3.60 × 7.2 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1874,0518.2). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 15

Burkina Faso, Talismanic initiation shirt, early twentieth century, cotton, 69 × 65 cm. Digital image courtesy of Textile Museum of Canada, Gift of Victoria Henry (T91.0091).

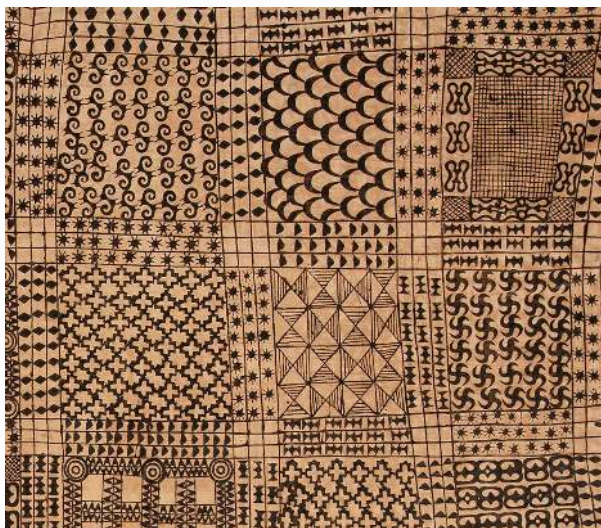


Figure 16

Asante/Dagomba (Ghana), Cloth (*adinkra*), detail, 1817, cotton and ink. 276 × 202 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1818,1114.23). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

For Asante users, Islamic amulets were particularly useful as protective wear in wartime, supplementing Akan talismans and regalia to create visual arrays that expressed metaphysical power.⁸⁴ Even though these amulets had their origins in Islamic traditions, the archaeologist Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann explains that Muslim scribes “satisfied non-Muslim Asante concerns, needs, and desires, by

tailoring Islamic talismans to market demands” in Kumase and elsewhere in the Asante Empire.⁸⁵ An image from Joseph Dupuis’s British diplomatic mission to Kumase in 1820 shows a *caboceer*, or Asante military leader, with a horse blanket covered in Arabic inscriptions (fig. 17). In one of Bowdich’s images, an Asante captain wears a cloth smock or vest “covered with fetishes and saphies in gold and silver; and embroidered cases of almost every colour ... and they held a long iron chain between their teeth, with a scrap of Moorish [*sic*], writing affixed to the end of it” (fig. 18).⁸⁶ The Asante captain looks to be wearing a *batakari*, or Asante war shirt, with numerous amulets affixed to it in a rough grid formation (fig. 19). The protective efficacy of these objects lay in Islamic and Akan visualities in an imperial display.



Figure 17

James Wyld, "A Caboceer of Ashantee Equipt for War", engraving from Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee, comprising notes and researches relative to the Gold Coast, and the interior of Western Africa, chiefly collected from Arabic mss* (London: H. Colburn, 1824). Digital image courtesy of New York Public Library Collections (b11722606).



Figure 18

Captain in his war dress, 1818, hand-colored aquatint, 28 × 21 cm, from Thomas Edward Bowdich, **Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa ** (London: John Murray, 1819), plate 1, page 32. Digital image courtesy of Library Company of Philadelphia (12983.Q).



Figure 19

Asante war tunic, 1850–1927, cotton, leather, and fur, 104 × 125 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1978,22.309). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

This connection to Islamic motifs is not fundamentally about the significance of individual *adinkra* symbols, nor only about the transformation of script into abstract artistic forms, but about overall compositions. As Savage points out, the symmetric geometries of amuletic inscriptions inform the arrangement of amulets affixed to batahari shirts and *adinkra* cloth design.⁸⁷ Across Mamluk metalwork, *kuduo* vessels, inscribed amulets, gold amulet cases, and architectural relief, the motifs are contained by frames that situate each symbol —often repeated— within a broader matrix. With *adinkra* cloth too, the symbols are arrayed in meaningful juxtapositions, with narrower bands of repeated patterns between larger cells. Whether or not selected *adinkra* motifs can be traced to individual motifs in Islamic metalwork, scripts, or talismanic forms, these traditions share a gridded spatial logic, repetition, and emphasis on positionality in broader visual and material contexts.⁸⁸ This esoteric knowledge intersects with spatial ordering in that sacred effects derive from, and are reinforced by, compositional logics of the grid, geometries, and framing.

Unfolded: Asante Architectures

Adinkra motifs function as a reservoir of imagery deployed across textiles, amulets, goldwork, and Asante architecture.⁸⁹ In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Kumase, red earth foundations and *adampan* reception rooms reflected

traditional Akan architecture, while abstract wooden window screens (*nkyimkyim*) and architectural decorations originated in the Islamic north (fig. 20).⁹⁰ Hanging talismans signified Asante’s cosmopolitan connections to the foreign prestige of Dyula traders and court scribes, while the *nkyimkyim* screens puncturing Kumase’s earthen facades incorporated references to Islamic script to harness the “apotropaic power of foreign elements” on the scale of an entire building.⁹¹



Figure 20

“The king’s sleeping room, Kumasi”, from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: John Murray, 1819), before page 309. Digital image courtesy of the British Library Archive (146.f.17).

Additionally, Asante architecture featured handmade decorative reliefs incorporating motifs that echo *adinkra* forms and Islamic ornamentation, juxtaposed with the *gyase dua* tree, marking Asante settlement (see fig. 17). In *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, Bowdich described the production of these reliefs:

The walls still soft, they formed moulds or frame works of the patterns in delicate slips of cane, connected by grass. The two first slips ... projected the relief, commonly mezzo: the interstices were then filled up with the plaster, and assumed the appearance depicted. The poles or pillars were sometimes encircled by twists of cane, intersecting each other, which, being filled up with thin plaster, resembled the lozenge and cable ornaments of

*the Anglo-Norman order; the quatre-foil was very common, and by no means rude, from the symmetrical bend of the cane which formed it. I saw a few pillars, (after they had been squared with the plaster) with numerous slips of cane pressed perpendicularly on to the wet surface, which being covered again with a very thin coat of plaster, closely resembled fluting.*⁹²

For the architectural historian Labelle Prussin, these “arabesque” surface motifs showed the Asante Empire’s emphasis on Arabic script as a way of visually reinforcing the architectural qualities of “enclosing arts”, or the building as a protective envelope.⁹³ For Prussin, the “visual, magical efficacy of the written word which historical development carried in from the north” was “incorporated into the existing wattle-and-daub structure” of Asante architecture and “became a catalytic agent in the transformation of an aesthetic”.⁹⁴ Similarly, Savage calls the transfer of talismanic forms from paper to earthen architecture and textiles a form of protective “social wrapping”.⁹⁵ Both scholars point to the protective power of amulets worn on one’s person, and of talismanic garments that enfold the body, expanding to the surrounding buildings. These enveloping principles also shaped Kumase’s imperial architecture.

As the Asante Empire consolidated, imperial power was materialized in ways that combined wrapping or enveloping techniques with public-facing architectural formats. Rather than Asante architecture’s traditional interior-facing, raised reception rooms, Prussin writes, Kumase’s *adampan* reception rooms began to face outward: “This architectural reversal, reflecting the increasingly complex functions of the capital ... politically instituted festivals, and the ritual formalities associated with them, ushered in a new system of visual communication”.⁹⁶ As visualized in Bowdich’s drawing of Adoom street, the architectural historian Kevin Dumouchelle describes this as part of Kumase’s “hyper-Asante” architecture: buildings are “raised on a platform marked by its distinctive, ochre slip. A profusion of abstract decorative reliefs draws the eye across the surface of the buildings”, and the *adampan* are unusually public-facing and feature “exaggeratedly high roofs” (fig. 21).⁹⁷ In these overstated architectural details and atypical openness toward the city, Dumouchelle sees a performance of Asante identity in the service of establishing national unity: “Literal stage sets upon which political discourse and the administration of empire was daily performed, these structures served as

architectural tools of national cohesion”.⁹⁸ Moreover, Prussin argues, like the Arabic script openly worn by the war captain, these architectural decorations bring secret, enveloped amuletic powers into open view.⁹⁹ Northern-inflected artisanship in architectural decoration, talismans, and textiles operate in cross-medial dialogue to show Asante cosmopolitan accumulation as a visual demonstration of imperial power predicated on formal strategies of surface composition. These strategies also unfolded at the scale of the city.



Figure 21

Part of Adoom street, Kumasi, from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: John Murray, 1819), between pages 308 and 309. Digital image courtesy of the British Library Archive (146.f.17).

Through the streets of Kumase, varied aesthetic forms, craft expertise, and technical skills—displayed on the walls of its buildings, adorning the bodies of its inhabitants, and on show in the marketplace—demonstrated the geographical reach of the Asante Empire and its harnessing of exogenous powers. What was unique about the Asante Empire, as the historian Kwame Arhin has written, was not a specific innovation but the drawing together of diverse inhabitants, “and the consequential cross-fertilization of the skills imported from the different sources”. Arhin describes the objects that made up the visual and material culture of the city, including blacksmith’s wares, goldwork, leather sandals and sheaths, ceremonial whisks and cushions, dyed cloth, and vibrant umbrellas.¹⁰⁰ This was evident in the marketplace, as Bowdich’s book shows: his image of Adoom street features a man weaving, a “fetish woman” carrying horses tails, and a woman holding gold scales with clay pipes on her sales mat (figs. 22–25).

Extending this imperial visuality to the city space, we can see nineteenth-century Kumase as a place where objects from the corners of the Asante Empire came together in a visual interplay that emphasized the city's cosmopolitanism and the Asantehene's imperial reach.



Figure 22

Part of Adoom street, Kumasi (detail), from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* * (London: John Murray, 1819), between pages 308 and 309. Digital image courtesy of British Library Archive (146.f.17).



Figure 23

Asante pipe, 1817, pottery, 10 × 7 × 13 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1818,1114.32). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

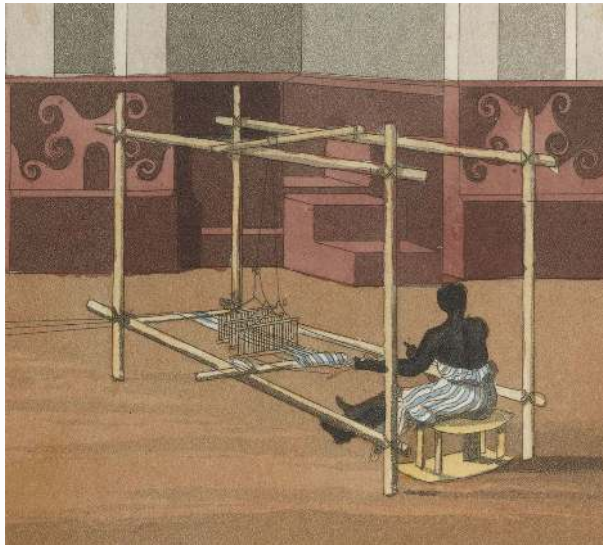


Figure 24

Part of Adoom street, Kumasi* *(detail), from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: John Murray, 1819), between pages 308 and 309. Digital image courtesy of the British Library Archive (146.f.17).



Figure 25

Asante loom and unfinished textile, 1817, wood and cotton, 71 × 15 × 6 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1818,1114.18.a). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

As a mourning fabric, *adinkra* cloth would presumably be present only intermittently in these urban contexts. Yet even if *adinkra* textiles were not everyday garments, they were present and visible enough for Bowdich to observe their production—albeit perhaps from a distance—as he claimed they were painted with a feather rather than stamped. Bowdich’s discussion of *adinkra* cloth, “principally manufactured in Inta [Gonja] and Dagwumba”, also suggests that he may have *commissioned* the painting of the *adinkra* design in Kumase: “There will be a very fair specimen in the British Museum, the price of painting which was one ackie”.¹⁰¹ This helps explain the limitations of

Bowdich's interpretations of *adinkra*, since he encountered the textile as a commodity rather than in the context of its use as mourning attire. Because commerce was the primary goal of Bowdich's mission, he sought to acquire objects that exemplified technical developments and local manufacturing processes.¹⁰² Yet *adinkra*'s visual vocabulary extended well beyond portable commodities such as cloth.

Visible in molded decorations on buildings and other objects, *adinkra*'s broader image trove permeated Asante.¹⁰³ Prussin argues that the association of *adinkra*, architecture, and talismanic protective enveloping is supported by how *adinkra* symbols refer to architectural principles such as *aban* (two-story house, or seat of government) and *mframadan* (wind-resistant house).¹⁰⁴ The links between architecture, Islamic amulets, and *adinkra* fabric can be seen in late nineteenth-century photographs of the northern town of Bonduku (likely founded as a successor to the Dyula trade town of Begho, and located in the present-day Ivory Coast) that show an interplay of textile, architecture, gold weights, and practices of inscription (figs. 26 and 27). Individuals clothed in patterned textiles—including a man dressed in *adinkra* cloth—handle gold weights whose forms may echo the fabric on which they rest, or inscribe paper (perhaps with talismans) while sitting beside a stool with carved patterns, in architectural surroundings decorated with further permutations of abstract forms. Talismanic inscriptions came into being in dialogue with their surroundings, mapped out into orderly gridded squares before being concealed in folded and wrapped containers. Similarly, the *adinkra* symbol *nsaa* can be seen in an *adinkra* stamp, a *nsaa*-shaped goldweight used to sell gold, Kumase architectural relief, and a Dagomba-style leather bag that Bowdich collected—items that could have been seen in public places around Kumase (figs. 28–31; see fig. 2).



Figure 26

Gold seller weighing gold, circa 1901. Collection The National Archives, Kew, Records of the Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, London (CO 1069/34/50). Digital image courtesy of The National Archives (Open Government Licence v3.0).



Figure 27

A scribe of Bimtukku (Bonduku), circa 1901. Collection The National Archives, Kew, Records of the Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, London (CO 1069/34/65). Digital image courtesy of The National Archives (Open Government Licence v3.0).



Figure 28

Asante *adinkra* stamp in the shape of *nsaa*, between 1850 and 1927, wood, 5.5 × 5 × 0.7 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1978,22.342). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 29

Asante gold weight in the shape of the *adinkra* symbol *nsaa*, eighteenth to twentieth century, brass, 0.2 × 2.9 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1922,1027.257). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 30

Part of Adoom street, Kumasi (detail), from Thomas Edward Bowdich, **Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa ** (London: John Murray, 1819), between pages 308 and 309. Digital image courtesy of the British Library Archive (146.f.17).



Figure 31

Dagomba bag showing *nsaa adinkra* symbol (detail), circa 1817, leather, 56 × 37 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (Af1818,1114.26). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

By the early nineteenth century, when Bowdich visited Kumase, the appropriation of foreign elements had extended to European practices. European guns hung on the Kumase palace walls, which Savage proposes were acting in parallel with amulets to cast a protective envelope around the royal residence

(fig. 32).¹⁰⁵ The illustration shows European weaponry displayed as part of an ensemble of earthen architecture adorned with abstract designs, while the soldier standing before the building wears blue-and-white-striped cloth that may have originated in Benin, Bonduku, or India, or be a locally rewoven assemblage.¹⁰⁶ Since the Asantehene's power was predicated in part on maintaining the ability to carry out trade, this abundance in the marketplace is also a form of imperial display.¹⁰⁷



Figure 32

Part of a piazza in the palace, Kumasi, from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: John Murray, 1819), facing page 148. Digital image courtesy of the British Library Archive (146.f.17).

Beyond the marketplace, palace architecture also demonstrated imperial reach. When Bowdich came to Kumase and spoke of a museum, an institution that gathered impressive objects from all over the world to place them on display at the center of the British Empire, it would have been intelligible to the Asantehene and in keeping with the cosmopolitan character of the capital city itself.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps prompted by Bowdich's accounts of his homeland, the Asantehene began planning a European-style stone building, which would later house the Asante imperial collections. Bowdich remarked that “the King made frequent enquiries about the architecture of England, of which we gave him some idea by drawings”.¹⁰⁹ A few years after Bowdich's visit, the British consul Joseph Dupuis observed the construction of Kumase's new European-style stone palace complex. “I am building”, the Asantehene is quoted as saying,

*a fort like Cape Coast Castle; but I shall make it very high that I may look out and see all the town ... That building you see is to be made very grand. The inside shall be gold, ivory, and brass ... all the black countries may know I am a great king here. Now white men know me, I must live in a great house as white kings do.*¹¹⁰

The resulting multistory stone structure, named the Aban likely from the Mande term *al banna* (based on an Arabic term for builder), was built by (possibly enslaved) Fante masons contracted through Dutch middlemen. While one British visitor called it “Moorish in its style”, the Asantehene asserted that it emulated the European architecture along the West African coast.¹¹¹ As evidenced in text and images by British visitors, and reported statements by the Asantehene, the Asante imperial imaginary synthesized diverse forms of artisanship into a pageant of consumable objects.¹¹²

By the early nineteenth century, Kumase’s urban and architectural landscape was demonstrating how the Asante Empire had gathered and synthesized diverse artisanship, material forms, and protective symbolism—from Islamic talismans and northern strip-weaving to European firearms and architectural models—to project authority, unity, and cosmopolitan reach. These objects and visual practices were not only performative within the city but also circulatory: they could be mobilized, displayed, and exchanged beyond Asante territory. The Aban drew not only on northern and Islamic influences but also on European ones along the Atlantic Coast and beyond, and its contents would ultimately include items from North Africa and Europe as well as from closer neighbors. This was a cosmopolitanism akin to Traoré’s *disenclavement*.¹¹³ Reorienting away from the north, and toward the Atlantic Coast and beyond, Asante’s empire building expressed its shifting imperial geographies visually and materially.

Bowdich’s mission to Kumase, aimed at acquiring local artisanship for potential European trade, reveals how Asante material culture was already legible as both a marker of imperial power and as a commodity within global networks. Once these objects entered British possession, however, they were reframed according to a different logic of empire, transformed from instruments of Asante authority and cosmopolitan display into objects of curiosity at the British Museum.

Encased: In the British Museum, of the Global Empire

On returning to England in 1818, Bowdich presented many of the objects he had collected in Asante and Gabon to the British Museum, where they were installed in glass cases alongside items collected on other expeditions or military operations across the globe (figs. 33–35). It is not clear how, or even whether, the objects from Asante were displayed immediately after they entered the collection, but by 1832 they were housed in Room 1 of the generically named Upper Floor of the British Museum at Montagu House. On the lower floor was the Gallery of Antiquities, then expanding with the construction of a tailor-made room for the Parthenon marbles, alongside the museum’s collection of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman sculptures; ancient and modern coins and medals; and prints and drawings, including the Cracherode collection of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century works by Dürer, Claude, Holbein, Rembrandt, Rubens, and Marcantonio, among others.¹¹⁴ There was a clear spatial division between the artistic items in the Gallery of Antiquities and the natural and artificial “curiosities” and minor arts in the section labeled simply “Upper Floor”.



Figure 33

George Scharf, Six East Indian figures looking at a case in the Mineral room of the British Museum (detail), 1844, watercolor over graphite, 14.1 × 23.4 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (1862,0614.1061). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 34

George Scharf, Staircase of the old British Museum in Montagu House (detail), 1845, watercolor, 24.2 × 28.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of The British Museum (1862,0614.629). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

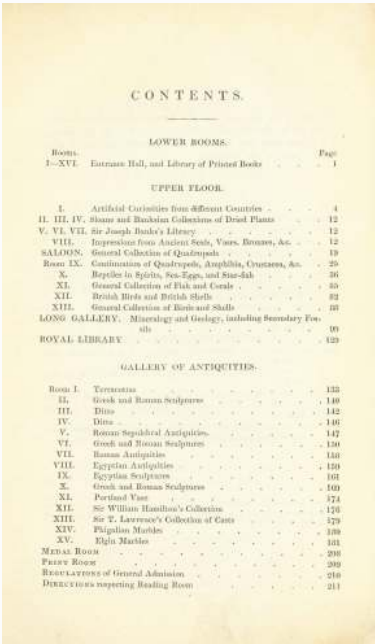


Figure 35

The Egyptian Room, *The Illustrated London News*, 13 February 1847, 108. Digital image courtesy of Look and Learn / Peter Jackson Collection.

Within this Upper Floor, there were further divisions, with collection categories including “Artificial Curiosities from different Countries”, as well as botanical volumes, ancient seals and bronzes, and collections of reptiles, fish, and corals (fig. 36).¹¹⁵ The items from Asante were located in Room 1, alongside other “artificial curiosities”, meaning human-made items (as opposed to “natural curiosities”) from far-flung locations.¹¹⁶ Asante items were displayed in cases between a Fula cloak, Kawésqar or Yahgan birch bark-and-reed baskets from Patagonia, and other items organized according to the donor, many of them ship’s captains or named explorers such as Captain Cook. These displays presented objects as evidence of far-flung exploration in the service of British imperial expansion. Room 1 case labels sometimes noted the ethnic or group identities of the objects’ creators, while in other instances only the collection location was given. Many of the individual donors mentioned were officers in the Royal Navy on “expeditions” in the Arctic, South America, or South Pacific; this demonstrated the links between British museum collections and British military operations.¹¹⁷ Others were connected to one of the English mercantile companies, including Bowdich, who aspired to a position with the Africa Company in Asante, and G. A. Princep, a business owner and the son of an East India Company shareholder in Mumbai.¹¹⁸ The “artificial curiosities” room

offered a geographic snapshot of Britain’s imperial ambitions in the early nineteenth century, with Asante as one node of the nascent empire.¹¹⁹



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Figure 36
Table of contents from *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*, 26th ed. (London, G. Woodfall, 1832). Digital image courtesy of Internet Archive.

The “artificial curiosities” in Room 1 were differentiated from other objects not only by geography, but also according to the primitivizing organizational logics of the British Museum. Art from India, for example, was more easily assimilated to antiquarian art objects, such as Egyptian, Greek, and Roman items in “lesser” materials such as terracotta, glass, and metal.¹²⁰ In contrast, an 1832 guide to the British Museum called Room 1’s contents—including the Bowdich donation—“artificial curiosities from the *less civilized* parts of the world”.¹²¹

This foregrounding of origins was somewhat different from a parallel project occurring at the Musée Napoléon in France around the same time. In addition to the well-known plunder of North African sites such as Dendera, the Napoleonic army’s military looting led to the acquisition of myriad objects for the French state from European sites such as Kassel, Spanish Naples, and The Hague.¹²² As the art historian Bénédicte Savoy has concluded, the inventory at the Musée Napoléon—perhaps the first modern museum database—worked to obscure the origins of objects. Rather than geographic origins, cultural authorship, or

aesthetic categorization, the inventory emphasized the site of military confiscation, thus naturalizing the objects' appropriation and nationalization by the French state.¹²³ In the British context, however, guidebooks and synopses of the collections did not conceal so much as blur the longer provenances of objects with their far-flung origins, highlighting how the nascent empire was being stitched together.

As the British Museum expanded its collection in the early nineteenth century, each addition provoked a new configuration of objects, with categories reconceptualized according to the shifting geographies of natural history, ethnography, and fine arts. Changing categorizing systems and understandings of objects unfold across different editions of *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum* spanning the first half of the nineteenth century. Across this time, objects from West Africa, as well as human-made objects gathered on expeditions and “artificial curiosities from the less civilized parts of the world”, were included among minerals and fossils.¹²⁴ Beginning in the 1840s, objects obtained in Asante were housed in what was newly labeled as the “ethnographic room”, alongside cases with objects from China, northern India, Afghanistan, French Guiana, and (Indigenous) North America, among others, and by 1860 Asante items were rarely mentioned.¹²⁵ This shift simultaneously shows Britain's imperial expansion and the shift in framing of African works from curiosities to ethnographic objects.

By moving from a cabinet of curiosities model toward a museum with distinct zones for ethnography and the fine arts—later divided between different museums—the 1840s British Museum display was catching up with Bowdich's 1819 book, *Mission*, which combined ethnographic attention and mercantile assessment of craft, and pointed to the excellent examples of artisanship he was setting aside for the British Museum. Images in the book reaffirmed this frame by showing a weaver at his loom (artisanship) and a woman with wares set out at the market (commerce) (see fig. 22). Bowdich also discussed the potential for gold mining in the interior, noted the local demand for guns and powder, and suggested that Manchester cotton might fulfill a market niche in Asante.¹²⁶

As Savage and McLeod point out, the range of objects that made their way from Kumase to the British Museum were artificially narrow—excluding items of

European manufacture commonly owned and traded in Kumase at the time.¹²⁷ Yet they also revealed the Asante Empire's links across the Sahel and Sahara to the Mediterranean and North Africa. Bowdich explained in his book that many of the objects he had obtained were produced wholly or in part outside the Asante Empire, or were crafted by non-Asante artisans in Asante; for example, "The locks they use are from Houssa [Hausaland] ... one will be sent to the British Museum ... White cloths, which are principally manufactured in Inta and Dagwumba [Dagomba], [the Asante] paint for mourning with a mixture of blood [*sic*] and a red dye wood ... There will be a very fair specimen in the British Museum".¹²⁸ (Additionally, the dagger and sheath, also included in "all from Ashantee", may actually be items Bowdich purchased from Ongom/Bakele artisans in Gabon on his way back to England from Kumase.¹²⁹) During his travels, Bowdich did not simply document everything he encountered in Kumase but actually omitted European objects in favor of Asante's complicated geographical entanglements within Africa. Once these objects entered the British Museum, however, they were reduced to "all from Ashantee"—first as evidence of an expeditionary framework related to "negotiation with our new allies, the Ashantee", and then as an ethnographic museum strategy.¹³⁰

Flattened: In the Art History Book

In addition to contributing the first substantial group of works from sub-Saharan Africa to the British Museum, Bowdich also produced what is perhaps the first proposal for a pan-African history of art—albeit with a problematic diffusionist narrative. Just two years after his first book, Bowdich published *An Essay on the Superstitions, Customs and Arts, Common to the Ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians and Ashantees*, in which he seeks to historicize Asante arts as an outgrowth of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia (Abyssinia): "this little Essay will prove, by a variety of curious evidence, that Abyssinia is not the only part of Africa which has been partly civilized by an intercourse with colonists and emigrants from ancient Egypt".¹³¹ Notwithstanding the pejorative diffusionist framework, namely the idea that Asante culture originated with "the civilized Ethiopians of Herodotus and Diodorus", Bowdich seriously considered the art of multiple African cultures and their histories across an expansive geography.¹³²

To make his argument, Bowdich needed to move away from the ethnographic style of *Mission*, which depicted the objects from Asante within a complex web of visual and behavioral associations.¹³³ Instead, *Superstitions* adopted the conventions of early-nineteenth-century scientific illustration.¹³⁴ Through his wife, Sarah, Bowdich enlisted the artist Jane Landseer to visit the British Museum and produce close-up watercolors of the objects “from Asante”, after which Sarah Bowdich redrew them in preparation for print.¹³⁵ The result is a page spread of objects floating on blank backgrounds.

The formal arrangements of the *Superstitions* images foreshadow the standardized, neutral backgrounds of modern museum photography, as seen in twenty-first-century images of these same objects in the British Museum collection (fig. 37). Scattered across a blank page at disparate scales are lithographic images of these items, plus a design labeled as “part of the pattern of a painted mourning cloth”, that is, *adinkra* (annotated in the image with a “13”).¹³⁶ The following pages depict “Ashantee Architectural Ornaments” as linear forms, with gradations of line weight to suggest slight relief on a blank background (fig. 38). (The book illustration omits several additional items Bowdich presented to the British Museum, including gold discs and amulet cases, additional lengths of cloth, a foot loom, a parasol, and arrows.)

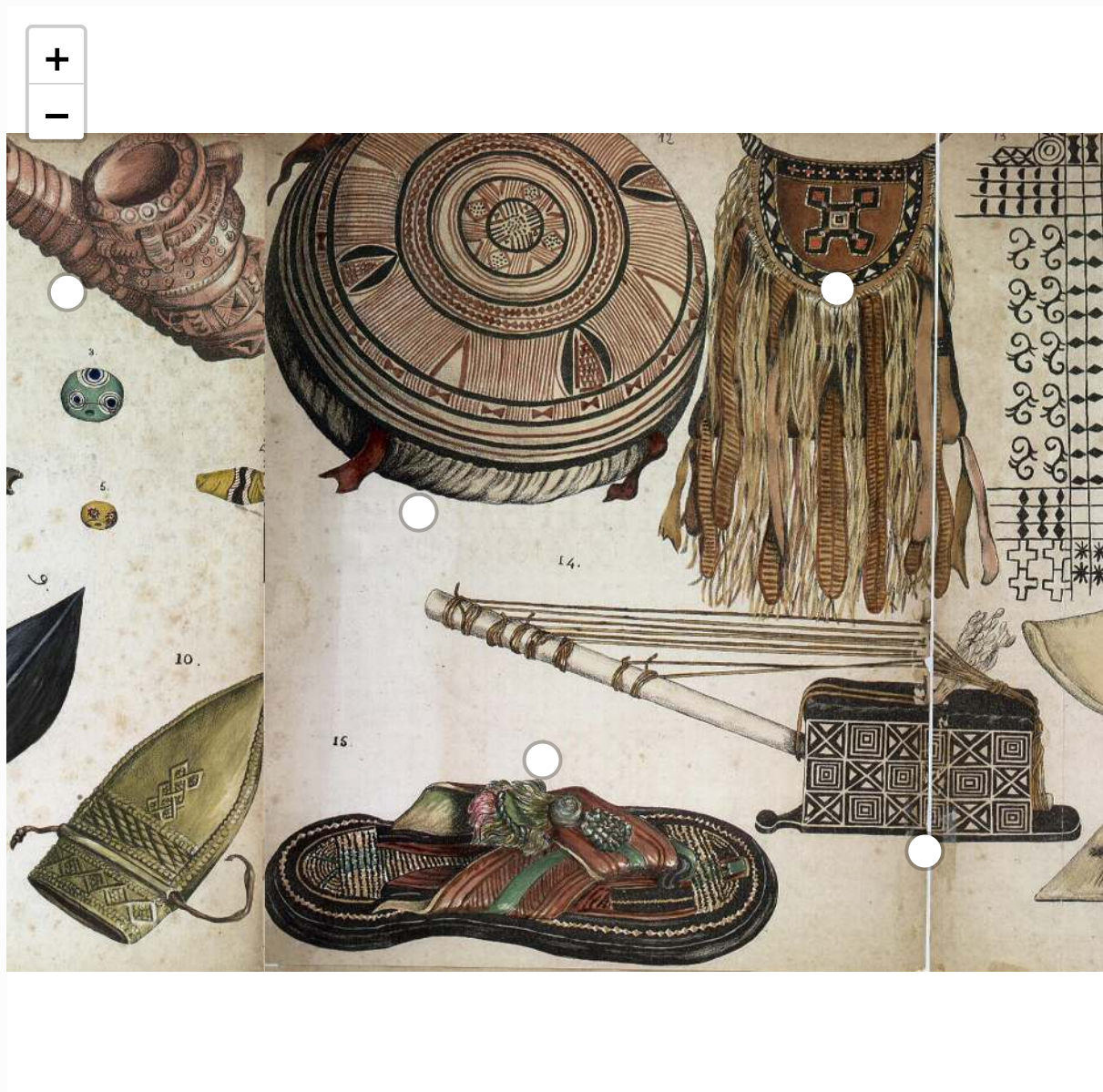


Figure 37

Annotated watercolour depicting Asante artefacts held in the collection of the British Museum, London. Digital image courtesy of the British Museum.

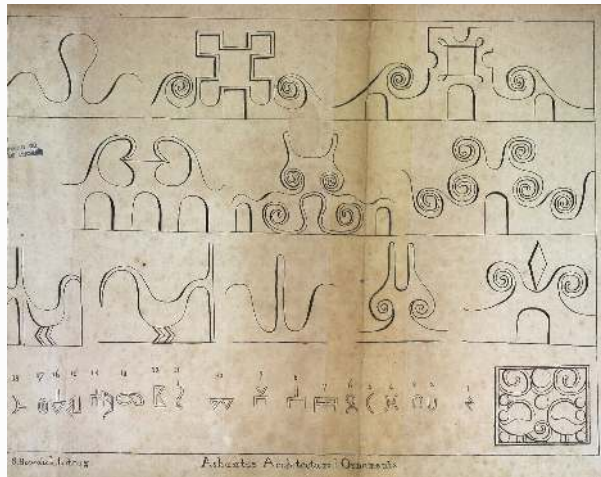


Figure 38

Ashantee architectural ornaments, from Thomas Edward Bowdich, *An Essay on the Superstitions, Customs and Arts, Common to the Ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians and Ashantees* (Paris: J. Smith, 1821) between pages 38 and 39, lithograph. Digital image courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

This decontextualization of objects from Asante is most blatant in the case of the *adinkra* cloth. As Savage has shown, Sarah Bowdich composed the lithograph in Bowdich's book by combining Landseer's watercolor images of single isolated objects.¹³⁷ In Landseer's watercolors objects are oriented horizontally or vertically as if placed on a table or shelf, and usually include shadows. However, in the book the objects float askew at various scales, with shading omitted to remove any sense of the objects' spatial context. The *adinkra* textile, for example, is not only plucked from its setting, but becomes a fragmented set of isolated forms applied directly to the page, with no edges, denied even the semblance of materiality. The *adinkra* design is also removed from any relationship to the bodies of people who may have worn it, just as the architectural decorations are excerpted from larger patterns on buildings.

In one sense, Bowdich's book enacted a familiar process of modern Western scholarship, of withdrawing objects from their lived context and placing them against a supposedly neutral backdrop to appreciate their scientific data or their formal, aesthetic qualities. The philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe has described the integration of "primitive" art into the "Western tradition" as precisely this two-step process: first, ethnologization, "isolating a datum from its real context" and

analyzing it, which renders it capable of being “subsumed to the grids of ethnographic study”; then, aestheticization, whereby a work is “localized on a chronological scale determined by Western experience”.¹³⁸ For the art historian Kobena Mercer, African objects in Western collections are continually undergoing a “process of decontextualization set in motion by colonial uprooting”, which is perpetuated in the space of the museum.¹³⁹ Mercer focuses on the aestheticization of the modernist white cube museum space, but this decontextualization had already begun in the earlier institutional spaces of the museum and the (proto-)art history book.

The objects from the Asante Empire entered the British Museum prior to a hardening of conventions of collection and display for “non-Western” objects.¹⁴⁰ At the early nineteenth-century British Museum, objects were clustered in the museum’s glass-fronted wooden cases, sometimes according to their function but often according to geography and even specific expeditions, more in line with a cabinet of curiosities model than with the emerging modern museum.¹⁴¹ These objects entered the space of a British Museum that was still being formed, with collections not yet divided into orderly categories of natural history, ethnography, and art, each with its own internal conceptual logics, partitions, and exhibition design. The objects set against the neutral background of Bowdich’s blank page did not anticipate a white cube museum space—the British Museum was then housed in a building adapted from a seventeenth-century aristocratic mansion—nor did they match the clusters of objects on shelves in the British Museum cases.¹⁴² Instead, Bowdich’s book functioned as one proposal for how these objects might enter British intellectual life. Still, Bowdich relied on the museum’s decontextualizing logic: foregrounding his authorship of the Asante collection allowed for the label “Asante” to assume greater importance than the individual attributions.

Formally, Bowdich modeled his book on contemporary archaeological reports such as Frédéric Cailliaud’s investigation of Thebes, which removed isolated objects from their settings and depicted them at disparate scales on blank backgrounds (figs. 39 and 40; see figs. 37 and 38).¹⁴³ Bowdich was particularly struck by Henry Salt’s voyage through Abyssinia, which served as a direct model for his investigation of architectural ornamentation in Asante (figs. 41 and 42).¹⁴⁴ Bowdich followed Salt’s model in page spreads of decontextualized

architectural ornaments, and in *Superstitions* he laid out a typology of Asante architectural motifs, which he compared to an array of inscriptions in stone at Axum, Ethiopia, in the lower part of the image (see fig. 38). While it was most likely Sarah Bowdich who composed the individual images, Bowdich's text shows that he thought strategically about how images could be used as evidence and was instrumental in crafting the overall book structure. Generally, he sought to emulate Salt's studies and to contribute to broader intellectual debates around cultural diffusion across Africa. To do so, he proposed this formal argument about the relationship of Asante ornamentation to Egyptian precedents:

*The freedom and simplicity of the larger ornaments of the Ashantee architecture are truly Egyptian, originating from the calyx or corolla of a flower, as Denon suggests, or from the young leaves of those immense palm-like filices, representing, at their birth, the voluta of the Ionic capital, of which they are supposed to have furnished the idea.*¹⁴⁵



Figure 39

Frédéric Cailliaud and Bernardino Drovetti, *Voyage à l'Oasis de Thèbes et dans les déserts situés à l'Orient et à l'Occident de la Thébaïde fait pendant les années 1815, 1816, 1817 et 1818*, ed. Edme-François Jomard (Paris: L'Imprimerie Royale, 1821), plate 38. Digital image courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

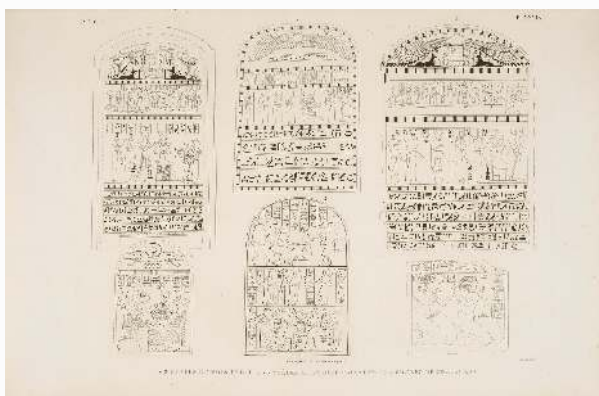


Figure 40

Frédéric Cailliaud and Bernardino Drovetti, *Voyage à l'Oasis de Thèbes et dans les déserts situés à l'Orient et à l'Occident de la Thébaïde fait pendant les années 1815, 1816, 1817 et 1818*, ed. Edme-François Jomard (Paris: L'Imprimerie Royale, 1821), plate 39. Digital image courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 41

Page from Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia, and Travels into the Interior of That Country ... in the Years 1809 and 1810* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1814), page between 408 and 409. Digital image courtesy of Wellcome Collection.

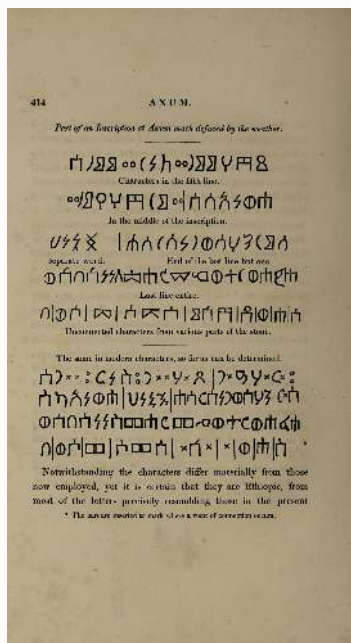


Figure 42

Page from Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia, and Travels into the Interior of That Country ... in the Years 1809 and 1810* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1814), 414. Digital image courtesy of Wellcome Collection.

While Bowdich emulated expeditionary journals by archaeologists, his discussions of patterning also seem to presage the decontextualized modes of nineteenth-century Western design theory and the formalist art history later formulated by Alois Riegl, among others.¹⁴⁶ In Riegl's theoretical text *Stilfragen* (1893), for example, in which he advanced a theory of stylistic development, much of his evidence is offered as decontextualized line drawings of forms excerpted from relief sculptures and architectonic complexes (fig. 43).¹⁴⁷ Bowdich used the tools of formalist art history, *avant la lettre*, to support a historical lineage from Ethiopia to Asante.

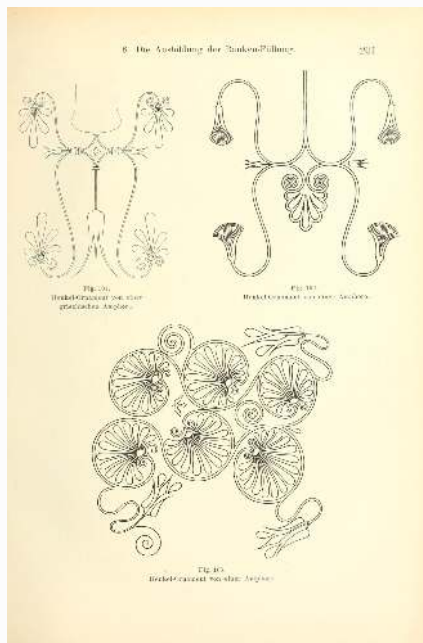


Figure 43

Page from Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (Berlin: G. Siemens, 1893), 201. Digital image courtesy of Internet Archive.

Bowdich's *Mission*, the objects he presented to the British Museum, and *Superstitions* thus broadly map out the museological and art historical trajectory described by Mudimbe and Mercer. Where non-Western works were first reframed by the modern museum according to imperial cataloging and systems of display, decontextualized forms were later widely disseminated in pattern books. Nineteenth-century designers and architects assembled repertoires of “exotic” forms for deployment as isolated motifs and in formalist art-historical methodologies. Contrary to some conventional understandings of formalism,

this is not simply a path toward the neutralization of origins and identities in favor of a universalist interpretation of form. As Margaret Olin, Éric Michaud, and others have shown, formalist methods of comparison are contingent on attributions according to perceived origins or identities (e.g., “Greek” versus “Egyptian” approaches to foliage), which often have racial implications.¹⁴⁸

While *Mission* carefully discerned the creator of each object across the Asante Empire’s multiethnic subjects, Bowdich’s next book, *Superstitions*, simply credited everything he saw in Kumase to Asante Akan makers within an argument about pan-African cultural forms. Admittedly, *Mission* similarly genericized the individuals using, wearing, or making the objects but, still, it showed objects in use with some identifying details.¹⁴⁹ In contrast, *Superstitions* removed objects from the social, political, economic, and environmental contexts in which they had been produced and used, and even from their underlying material matrices of woven cloth and plastered wall. While the earlier volume had worked to promote his successes as an Africa Company bureaucrat, the second was published after he had left the company. Even while it reiterated his expertise on the Asante Empire, it was intended to position him as an independent scholar working at the nexus of the museum and the field.

Bowdich’s argument relied not only on works being removed from their origins and entering the European museum, but also on the museum’s reshuffling of categories toward simplified geographical origins. Subsequently, Bowdich worked from images of the objects, reproducing them as disembodied forms in the pages of a book—in support of a unified history of African art. This is perhaps most evident in relation to the geometric patterning found as architectural details and on *adinkra* fabric, whose repeated iconic forms are particularly vulnerable to material mutability and spatial mobility. Recognizing that origins and identities are themselves constructed and contingent, we can understand the displacement of these objects from Kumase to the British Museum as only one in a sequence of recontextualizations.

Epilogue: Photographing *Adinkra*

The early nineteenth-century translocation of Asante objects, particularly *adinkra* cloth, from Kumase to the British Museum does not only exemplify a

shift from one imperial context to another, but also shows how “African art” was invented through the collision of multiple imperialisms. From Kumase to London, imperial collections evinced changing political conditions in both the Asante and British empires. In the early nineteenth century, the Asante Empire leveraged intra-African networks and external connections to elevate its profile on the global stage. British imperial officials recognized the Asante Empire as a trade partner, if not as a potential equal. This dual imperial dynamic meant that, while Bowdich’s collected objects exemplified the multiethnic Asante Empire, the British Museum’s classification systems tended to restrict Asante objects to ethnographic rather than artistic categories. By the late nineteenth century, however, European expansion in Africa was threatening Asante authority. This would come to a double climax in 1874, when British forces invaded and burned Kumase, and in 1896, when British forces deposed and exiled the Asantehene.¹⁵⁰ As trade goods, spoils, or collections, the objects “from Ashantee” demonstrate dual imperial aspirations and legacies.

The cosmopolitanism of Asante, even during its transition to the British Gold Coast colony, continued to challenge the notion of a static, monolithic African culture assumed by British imperial forces. For example, the Aban that the Asantehene had discussed with Bowdich and Dupuis in the 1810s and 1820s, was serving as what we understand to have been the Asantehene’s imperial museum (fig. 44). The Aban housed Asante’s heterogenous imperial collections and was open to visitors to Kumase, including European visitors to the city—until English imperial invasion and looting beginning in the mid-1870s. One account by a British participant in the 1874 Anglo-Asante War described the contents of the Aban:

Books in many languages, Bohemian glass, clocks, silver plate, old furniture, Persian rugs, Kidderminster carpets, pictures and engravings, numberless chests and coffers. A sword bearing the inscription “From Queen Victoria to the King of Ashante”. A copy of the “Times”, October 17, 1843. With these were many specimens of Moorish [sic] and Ashante handicraft, gold-studded sandals such as only the king and a few great chiefs may wear, with, strange to say, Arabic writing on the soles; leopard-skin caps lined with yellow velvet and adorned outside with beaten gold like that of Cashmere, and a plume of the same precious metal; saddles of

*red leather, magnificent canopies or state umbrellas of velvet and satin, baskets or cradles in which Ashantee chiefs are accustomed to be carried on the heads of slaves, with other curious and tasteful things too numerous for me to describe or even catalogue.*¹⁵¹

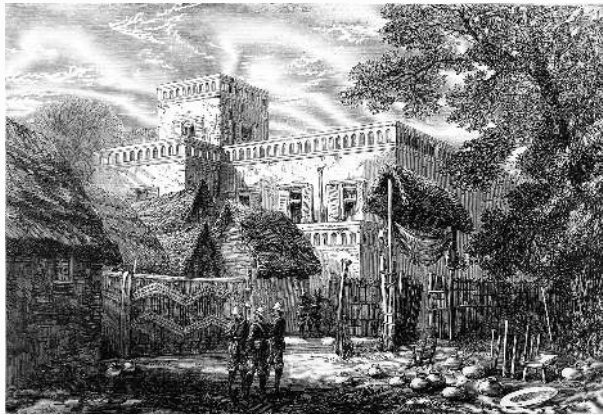


Figure 44

“The King of Ashantee’s Palace at Coomassie, Viewed from the East”, *Illustrated London News*, 25 April 1874, 393. Digital image courtesy of Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo.

As the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, this was a “splendidly cosmopolitan” collection.¹⁵² Asante’s practice of empire building encompassed a city and a collection that expressed its imbrication with counterparts across North and West Africa and Europe visually and materially. Yet, just as Bowdich ignored the European material culture present in Kumase when he gathered objects “from Ashantee” for the British Museum, the looters and recipients of Anglo-Asante War indemnity were not interested in Asante cosmopolitanism. Indeed, they had an even narrower view than Bowdich and valued only Asante goldwork.

Over the decades of British repression of Asante forces and the absorption of Kumase into the British colony of the Gold Coast, the British Museum reframed Asante objects yet again. British Museum guidebooks from the 1870s and 1880s almost completely omitted the objects Bowdich had collected, naming only a single wooden stool or “carvings, cloths, etc.”, leaving out *adinkra* cloth entirely.¹⁵³ By the late 1890s, after British looting and the beginning of punitive compensatory payments of gold imposed on the Asante, British Museum guidebooks separated a vague account of Asante “carvings, cloths, etc.” in the

Africa ethnological gallery from “gold and silver ornaments ... from Ashanti” in a room of “ornaments from various countries”.¹⁵⁴ *Adinkra* cloth and other forms of Asante material culture were displaced by dazzling—and fungible—goldwork in British Museum presentations of Asante.

As Asante transitioned into a de facto British colony, the framing of *adinkra* fabrics shifted again as it was shaped by missionary activities. By the early twentieth century, the Basel Mission had been in the Gold Coast region for almost a century, and had been collaborating with the British colonial administration for much of this time; it provided some supplies and support for the British penetration into Kumase in 1874.¹⁵⁵ Thus, in the early twentieth century, *adinkra* cloth would still have been on display in Europe but not in the art museum. At the 1911 Exposition of the Basel Mission in Geneva, a Swiss missionary to Asante stood before a table and wall brimming with objects of all kinds, including several carved gourd *adinkra* stamps and an *adinkra* textile (figs. 45 and 46).¹⁵⁶ Here, we return to the visual logic of the cabinet of curiosities, in which functional items such as pots and combs intermingle with examples of wood carving and textile work.



Figure 45

Exposition Ethnographique de la Mission de Bâle, Geneva, 1911, from “Exposition ethnographique”, *La Patrie Suisse* 456 (15 March 1911): 70. The arrow points to *adinkra* cloth. Digital image courtesy of Adrian Anagnost.



Figure 46

Rev. Ramseyer lecturing at Exposition Ethnographique de la Mission de Bâle, circa 1885–95, photographic print, 12.5 × 17.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT, International Mission Photography Archive (RG 44).

However, there is an additional piece of visual information. Tacked onto the center of the *adinkra* cloth is a photograph of the cloth being stamped (see figs. 5 and 6). *Adinkra* is no longer a potential commodity as it was in Kumase, nor is it an isolated formal motif as in Bowdich’s *Superstitions*, nor an intriguing object at the British Museum. The photograph, taken by a Swiss missionary, foregrounds artisanal creation within the missionary’s framing of the region as premodern.¹⁵⁷ The Basel Mission exposition thus adopted a similar framework as Asante performances of culture at the 1886 Liverpool International Fair and in the “Ashanti Village” that toured the United Kingdom in the 1890s, staging

seemingly guileless performances of cultural practices that presented the Asante people as susceptible to British intervention.¹⁵⁸ Yet, in addition to these public entertainments, the Basel Mission was also collecting.¹⁵⁹ In the same decades that British looters and colonial agents were obtaining Asante goldwork that would enter the British Museum, while largely ignoring ethnographic objects, the Basel Mission was acquiring ethnographic objects in the service of missionary work, many of which were later donated to Swiss ethnographic collections. In both cases, the effect was to deny the Asante access to modernity—to deny the Asante both modern artisanship, despite the growing prevalence of British machine-made *adinkra*-patterned textiles, and access to its own resources of culture and capital, its gold.

The inclusion of Asante objects at the British Museum was not merely the result of British acquisition through purchase or gift; it was also a calculated strategy by Asante elites and rulers to assert the empire's presence on a global stage. Asante rulers deliberately curated artifacts as expressions of cosmopolitan identity and imperial ambition. However, the British Museum subsumed such works under categories that reduced dynamic political and cultural negotiations to static representations of “Ashantee”, and later “African”, art. The translocation of *adinkra* cloth—with its deep connections to Akan funeral practices, collective memory, and symbolic communication—serves as a striking example of imperial collecting practices. Such practices not only appropriate material culture but can also distort and oversimplify dynamic interplays of culture and identity. This story is not just about the movement of objects but also about the power to define how histories are remembered and told. From Kumase to London, and from the Aban to the pages of Bowdich's books, objects and practices brought together in Asante traveled along networks of empire, commerce, and scholarship—reminding us that the story of African art is not fixed but remains in flux between geographies and interpretations. As the legacies of these imperial entanglements persist in contemporary museums, we must ask: How can we reimagine museum spaces to reveal histories that colonial frameworks have obscured?

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Footnotes

1. For approaches to defining and characterizing the Asante polity in this period, see Kwasi Ampene, *Asante Court Music and Verbal Arts in Ghana: The Porcupine and the Gold Stool* (New York: Routledge, 2020), xxx–xxxiii. In his 1819 and 1821 books, Bowdich mostly referred to the Asante polity as a kingdom, but in the 1819 book he occasionally called it an empire. On the items that entered the British Museum, see Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: John Murray, 1819), 147, 198,

- 268, 306, 309–11, 313, 332; and the plates and captions in Thomas Edward Bowdich, *An Essay on the Superstitions, Customs and Arts, Common to the Ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians and Ashantees* (Paris: J. Smith, 1821), 70–73.
2. See Thomas Edward Bowdich, *The African Committee* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1819), 79; and British Museum, *List of Additions Made to the Collections in the British Museum in the Year 1831* (London: G. Woodfall, 1833), 118–19. In 1820 Bowdich had to request access to the items at the British Museum so that an acquaintance of his could make drawings of them for his 1821 book. Fiona Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle: Anglo/Asante Appropriations, Diplomacy and Displays of Power 1816–1820” (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 2011), 283–84.
 3. On the histories of ownership, donation, and display of these objects, see Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 276–87 and table 2; and Fiona [Sheales] Savage, “Collecting the Asante: African Agency in a Pre-colonial Assemblage”, *Museum Worlds* 3, no. 1 (2015): 37–50. *Asante* has also been spelled *Ashanti* or *Ashantee*, among other variations. The capital city has been written as *Kumasi*, *Kumase*, *Comassie*, or *Coomassie*.
 4. On problems of defining ethnicity and historical toponyms, see note 16 below. See Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Peter Mark, “Towards an Art History of Precontemporary Africa: Preliminary Thoughts for a State-of-the-art Assessment”, *Afriques* 10 (2019), DOI:10.4000/afriques.2651; Claire Bosc-Tiessé, “Le cartel des arts: enjeux d’histoire entre assignations ethnographiques et présentations muséales”, *Afriques* 10 (2019); Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, “Anthropology as Practice: Artists of Africa and the Ethnographic Field in Contemporary Art”, in *Alternative Art and Anthropology: Global Encounters*, ed. Arnd Schneider (New York: Routledge, 2020), 27–34; and Sebastian-Manès Sprute, “Chaos im Museum: Bestandsaufnahme und Wissensordnung”, in *Atlas of Absence: Cameroon’s Cultural Heritage in Germany* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 2023), 284–91.

5. On inland trade, see Kwame Arhin, “West African Trading Settlements in the Asante Hinterland in the Nineteenth Century”, *Institute of African Studies Research Review* 5, no. 1 (1989): 1–20. On Fante trade, see Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011).
6. This was true particularly after 1807, when the Asante embarked on a military campaign against the Fante-led coalition along the coast around the time that the British began establishing a formal colony. Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 10–11; Kwasi Konadu, “Euro-African Commerce and Social Chaos: Akan Societies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”, *History in Africa* 36 (2009): 266–67. On Euro-African factors and trade agents, see Natalie Everts, “‘Because I am an Uitlander’: West India Company Servant Willem Huydecoper’s Clash with His Colleagues”, in *Sources and Methods for African History and Culture: Essays in Honor of Adam Jones*, ed. Geert Castryck, Silke Strickrodt, and Katja Werthmann (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2016), 130.
7. Savage, “Collecting the Asante”, 38. The Danish royal edict that ended the trafficking of enslaved peoples in 1803 was Forordning om Neger-Handelen [Ordinance on the Slave Trade] (Copenhagen: P. M. Høpffner, 1792), <https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/130018500540.pdf>. The parliamentary act that ended Britain’s trafficking in 1807 was the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1807), Public General Act, 47 George III session 1, c. 36, Records of the House of Lords (c1293-2019), Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PU/1/1807/47G3s1n60, 1807, https://archives.parliament.uk/collections/getrecord/GB61_HL_PO_PU_1_1807_47G3s1n60. On the ending of the Dutch trafficking, see Johannes Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 289–91. Despite the end of the transatlantic trafficking, chattel slavery itself, including the kidnapping, capture, purchase, and sale of individuals, continued for some decades. On this transition, see Chima J. Korieh, “The Nineteenth Century Commercial Transition in West Africa: The Case of the Biafra Hinterland”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34, no. 3 (2000): 588–615; Gareth Austin,

Labour, Land, and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956 (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), 46–47; Christopher Leslie Brown, “The Origins of ‘Legitimate Commerce’”, in *Commercial Agriculture, the Slave Trade and Slavery in Atlantic Africa*, ed. Robin Law, Suzanne Schwarz, and Silke Strickrodt (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 138–57; Kazuo Kobayashi, *Indian Cotton Textiles in West Africa: African Agency, Consumer Demand and the Making of the Global Economy, 1750–1850* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 29–80; and Angus E. Dalrymple-Smith, *Commercial Transitions and Abolition in West Africa 1630–1860* (Boston: Brill, 2019).

8. See Eugenia Anderson, “Asante Imperium Expansion: Imperial Outlook and the Construction of Empire”, in *The Asante World*, ed. Edmund Abaka and Kwame Osei Kwarteng (New York: Routledge, 2021), 77, 80–84; Brandi Simpson Miller, *Food and Identity in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Ghana: Food, Fights, and Regionalism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 121–23; Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 277–79; and Malcolm McLeod, “Gifts and Attitudes”, in *The Golden Stool: Studies of the Asante Center and Periphery*, ed. Enid Schildkrout and Carol Gelber (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1987), 184–91. On Asante diplomatic practices in the late 1810s, see Graham W. Irwin, “Precolonial African Diplomacy: The Example of Asante”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8, no. 1 (1975): 84–86.
9. Savage, “Collecting the Asante”, 43–48.
10. Bowdich, *Mission*, 147. On the Asantehene’s intentions that Asante works be exhibited in a European museum, and at the British Museum in particular, see also Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 277; Savage, “Collecting the Asante”; and Claude-Hélène Perrot, “Un musée royal au début du XIXe siècle en Ashanti: l’Aban”, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 39, no. 155–56 (1999): 875–84.
11. “Ashantee Golden Ornaments and Trophies”, *Illustrated London News*, 23 May 1874, 487; British Museum, “Asante Gold Regalia”, Contested Objects from the Collection, The British Museum Story, 20 July 2020,

updated 14 October 2024, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/asante-gold-regalia>.

12. Malcolm McLeod, "T. E. Bowdich: An Early Collector of West Africa", in "Collectors & Collections", *British Museum Yearbook* 2 (1977): 83, 88–91, 93; Sheales [Savage], "Sights/Sites of Spectacle", 151–52, 186–87, 280. While Thomas Bowdich's wife, Sarah Bowdich (later Sarah Bowdich Lee), did not accompany him on the 1817 trip to Kumase, she played an active role in collecting items from her position at Anomabu Fort and Cape Coast Castle from September 1816 through March 1818.
13. Bowdich was no longer mentioned in British Museum guides after 1860. For the British Museum categorization of the objects as "all from Ashantee", see British Museum, *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*, 26th ed. (London: G. Woodfall, 1832), 7, and later guides through the 1850s. Today, however, the British Museum more precisely notes locations and groups for "Made in", "Made by", and "Found/Acquired"; see, for example, "bag", The British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1818-1114-26.
14. McLeod, "T. E. Bowdich", 93–94; McLeod, "Gifts and Attitudes", 184–85.
15. Agnes A. Aidoo, "Order and Conflict in the Asante Empire: A Study in Interest Group Relations", *African Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (1977): 1–36; J. D. Fage, "Upper and Lower Guinea", in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, ed. Roland Oliver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 494–96; Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, "One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art", *History in Africa* 11 (1984): 163–93.
16. On the challenges of defining the term "Akan", see D. Kiyaga-Mulindwa, "The 'Akan' Problem", *Current Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (August 1980): 503–6; and Ivor Wilks, "The State of the Akan and the Akan States: A Discursion", *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 22, nos. 87–88 (1982): 231–49. More generally on ethnicity and historical toponyms, see René Baesjou, "The Historical Evidence in Old Maps and Charts of

- Africa with Special Reference to West Africa”, *History in Africa* 15 (1988): 19–20; Sprute, “Chaos im Museum”, 284–91; and Nii Otokunor Quarcoopome, “Art of the Akan”, *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 23, no. 2 (1997): 135–37.
17. Valeska Huber and Jan C. Jansen, “Dealing with Difference: Cosmopolitanism in the Nineteenth-Century World of Empires”, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 12, no. 1 (2021): 42. See also Hermann W. von Hesse, “‘A Modest, but Peculiar Style’: Self-Fashioning, Atlantic Commerce, and the Culture of Adornment on the Urban Gold Coast”, *Journal of African History* 64, no. 2 (2023): 269–91.
 18. Savage, “Collecting the Asante”; McLeod, “Gifts and Attitudes”.
 19. Allison J. Martino, “Stamping History: Stories of Social Change in Ghana’s *Adinkra* Cloth” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2018), 150. On cotton textile production in West Africa, see Colleen E. Kriger, “Mapping the History of Cotton Textile Production in Precolonial West Africa”, *African Economic History* 33 (2005): 87–116; and Philip Atsu Afeadie, “Beginnings of Ewe and Asante Weaving”, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 15 (2013): 27–38.
 20. G. F. Kojo Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor: (Re)Reading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana* (Legon: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Systems, 2001), 28–29; Nii O. Quarcoopome, “Akan Ceremonial Cloths, Costumes, and Flags”, *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 91 (2017): 61–63; Christine Giuntini, “West African Cloth: Techniques and Tradition”, in *The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design without End*, ed. Alisa LaGamma and Christine Giuntini (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 33; Claire Polakoff, “The Hand-Printed *Adinkra* Cloth of Ghana”, *Design for Arts in Education* 82, no. 1 (1980): 4–11; A. du Plessis, “*Adinkra* Cloth of Ntonso, Ghana”, *De Arte* 29, no. 50 (1994): 21–28; Kathy Curnow, “Kingdom-Based Art”, in *The Bright Continent: African Art History* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland State University, 2018), 4.6; and Emmanuel Osei Boakye and Albert Appiah Larbi, “Origins of Some Akan Art in Ghana” (unpublished manuscript,

- 2021). The badie tree (*Bridelia ferruginea* or *Bridelia micrantha* var. *ferruginea*) is sometimes written as badia or abadee. See Genevieve Naana Yeboah et al., “*Bridelia ferruginea* Benth.; An Ethnomedicinal, Phytochemical, Pharmacological and Toxicological Review”, *Heliyon* 8, no. 8 (2022): 1–18, DOI:10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e10366. On the use of iron slag, see R. S. Rattray, *Religion & Art in Ashanti* (1927; London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 262–63; and Martino, “Stamping History”, 150.
21. Martino, “Stamping History”, 10, 20; Allison J. Martino, “From Kings to Kids: Refashioning Akan *Adinkra* Symbols as “African” Motifs in a Nineteenth-Century British Cloth Design”, *Textile History* 51, no. 1 (2020): 29–59. See also Daniel Mato, “Clothed in Symbols: Wearing Proverbs”, in “Texts in Objects”, special issue, *Institute for Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities* 7 (1994): 4–5, 9, 11–12; and Daniel Mato, “Clothed in Symbol: The Art of *Adinkra* among the Akan of Ghana” (PhD diss., University of Indiana, 1987).
22. Boatema Boateng, *The Copyright Thing Doesn’t Work Here: Adinkra and Kente Cloth and Intellectual Property in Ghana* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 71–72; Martino, “From Kings to Kids”.
23. Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 123; Christine Mullen Kreamer, “Inscribing Power / Writing Politics”, in Christine Mullen Kreamer, Mary Nooter Roberts, and Elizabeth Harney, *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, National Museum of African Art, 2007): 127–30. On calling *adinkra* “symbols” rather than “designs, graphics, or another term”, see Martino, “Stamping History”, 32–33.
24. On Asante cosmopolitanism, see Kevin D. Dumouchelle, “Traditions of Modernity in an African City: Continuity and Change in the Architecture of Kumasi” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2017), 2–7, 72–73.
25. Makhroufi Ousmane Traoré, *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity in Early Modern West Africa: The Ethnic-State of Gajaaga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 13.

26. Traoré, *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity*, 13. This shift from a northward orientation to increased investment in southern and coastal trade can also be seen in archaeological studies such as Ann Stahl, “Making History in Banda: Reflections on the Construction of Africa’s Past”, *Historical Archaeology* 38 (2004): 50–65; and Anne Compton, “Shifting Trade Networks: Sub-Saharan to Atlantic Exchange in Central Ghana, 1355–1725 ce” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2014).
27. Bosc-Tiessé and Mark, “Towards an Art History of Precontemporary Africa”, 5.
28. McLeod, “Gifts and Attitudes”, 184.
29. Dan Hicks et al., “Necrography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum”, *British Art Studies* 19 (2021), DOI:10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-19/conversation.
30. See Bosc-Tiessé and Mark, “Towards an Art History of Precontemporary Africa”; Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, “The Disappearing Study of the Premodern African Past”, *African Arts* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 3–5; and Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yaëlle Biro, “Beyond Single Stories: Addressing Dynamism, Specificity, and Agency in Arts of Africa”, *African Arts* 52, no. 4 (2019): 1–6.
31. Kwame Arhin, “The Structure of Greater Ashanti (1700–1824)”, *Journal of African History* 8, no. 1 (1967): 69; Kwame Arhin, “The Political Economy of the Expansionist State”, *Revue Française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer* 68 (1981): 13–36. On Akan borderlands, see Lisa Hellman and Edmond Smith, “Borders before Nations: Encounters in the Akan and Dzungar Borderlands, 1450–1750”, *Journal of Early Modern History* 27, no. 5 (2022): 418–43; and Dumouchelle, “Traditions of Modernity”, 2–7, 72–73.
32. John Kofi Fynn, *Asante and Its Neighbours* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 13–17; Kwasi Boaten, “Trade among the Asante of Ghana up to the End of 18th Century”, *Research Review of the Institute of African Studies* 7, no. 1 (1970): 33–52; Merrick Posnansky, “Aspects of Early West African Trade”, *World Archaeology* 5, no. 2 (October 1973): 155–57; Kwasi Konadu, “A Manden Myth in the Akan

- Forests of Gold”, *African Economic History* 50, no. 2 (2022): 73–77;
- Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 108–14.
33. Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, “Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, no. 3 (1995): 493.
 34. “In soco, is geen gout noch handel daervan, maer hebben geestijmeerde kleeden, tapijts gewijs gewrocht die seer onder de acanisten geacht zijn”. Quoted in Baesjou, “Historical Evidence”, 68n84. Eighteenth-century European sources distinguished between “Assiantes” and “Akenists”, perhaps reflecting the emergence of the Asante Empire as distinct from other Akan groups. See Ole Justesen, ed., *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana, 1657–1754*, vol. 2, 1735–1754, trans. James Manley (Copenhagen: Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2005).
 35. Baesjou, “Historical Evidence”, 68. On the challenges of identifying and locating Akan groups according to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European maps and textual sources, see Kiyaga-Mulindwa, “The ‘Akan’ Problem”. For an interpretation of the 1629 Dutch map that associates *acani* with Asante, see Boaten, “Trade among the Asante of Ghana”, 33. On Begho, see Ivor Wilks, “The Northern Factor in Ashanti History: Begho and the Mande”, *Journal of African History* 2, no. 1 (1961): 25–30. Cf. Konadu, “A Manden Myth”.
 36. Anne Haour, *Outsiders and Strangers: An Archaeology of Liminality in West Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 70–72; Merrick Posnansky, “Begho: Life and Times”, *Journal of West African History* 1, no. 2 (2015): 99–100. On the conflation of Dyula/Jula/Juula as an occupation—merchant—rather than as an ethnic identity, see Konadu, “A Manden Myth”, 65; Haour, *Outsiders and Strangers*, 54–57; Traoré, *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity*, 38; and Benedikt Pontzen, *Islam in a Zongo: Muslim Lifeworlds in Asante, Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 39–40. See also Holger Weiss, “Processes of

- Islamization in the Voltaic Basin”, *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 105 (2008): 46, 51–54.
37. James Anquandah, “Ghana. Early Towns and & the Development of Urban Culture: An Archeological View”, in *Museums & Urban Culture in West Africa*, ed. Alexis Adandé and E. N. Arinze (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 10–12; Kofi Darkwah, “Antecedents of Asante Culture”, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 3 (1999): 69–70; Afeadie, “Beginnings of Ewe and Asante Weaving”; Kriger, “Mapping the History”, 96–101.
 38. “Quelques uns d’entre-eux ont été jusqu’à Abahiny & à Enzoko. ... J’ai vu à Issyny entre les mains de ces Negres qui ont été en ce païs, des tapis de Turquie, & de fines étoffes de coton rayées de soye rouge et bleuë, qu’ils en avoient apporté, où ils disent qu’on les fait”. Godefroy Loyer, *Relation du voyage du royaume d’Issyny, Côte-d’Or, païs de Guinée, en Afrique* (Paris: Arnoul Seneuze and Jean-Raoul Morel, 1714), 187. See also Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 78.
 39. See Malika Kraamer, “Unravelling Regional and Global Connections: Historical Kente and Related Textiles in Ghana, Togo, and Côte d’Ivoire”, *African Arts* 56, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 14. On pre-eighteenth-century textile production in Akan regions that would become Asante, see Herbert M. Cole and Doran H. Ross, *The Arts of Ghana* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1977), 38.
 40. Darkwah, “Antecedents of Asante Culture”, 70.
 41. Cole and Ross, *The Arts of Ghana*, 38.
 42. Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 22. See also Konadu, “A Manden Myth”, 74–75.
 43. Tom McCaskie, “The Parameters of Asante Historical Consciousness”, *Africa: Rivista Semestrale di Studi e Ricerche* 1, no. 1 (2019): 20; A. A. Y. Kyerematen, *Panoply of Ghana* (London: Longmans, Green, 1964), 36, 68–72; Kwasi Ampene and Nana Kwadwo Nyantakyi III, *Engaging*

Modernity: Asante in the Twenty-First Century (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2016).

44. Emmanuel Akyeampong and David Owusu-Ansah, “Wealth in Knowledge: Spiritual Service and Political Power in Precolonial Asante”, *Journal of West African History* 8, no. 1 (2022): 120–22.
45. René A. Bravmann and R. Duncan Mathewson, “A Note on the History and Archaeology of ‘Old Bima’”, *African Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (1970): 143.
46. Raymond A. Silverman, “Material Biographies: Saharan Trade and the Lives of Objects in Fourteenth and Fifteenth-Century West Africa”, *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 389.
47. Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 121. On the cyclical dispersal and coming together of Akan matrilineal polities such as the Asante, see also Gérard Pescheux, “Centre, limite, frontière dans le royaume Asante précolonial”, *Journal des Africanistes* 74, nos. 1–2 (2004): 180–201. Conversely, there is also a pan-Akan origin story of emergence from the ground or descent from the sky at Adans (supposedly the site to which all Akan can trace their origins), followed by migration. See Gérard Pescheux, *Le royaume asante (Ghana): parenté, pouvoir, histoire, XVIIe–XXe siècles* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 52–54; Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 28–30; and John Parker, *Great Kingdoms of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 228–30.
48. Janet Berry Hess, “Imagining Architecture II: ‘Treasure Storehouses’ and Constructions of Asante Regional Hegemony”, *Africa Today* 50, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 2003): 28; Labelle Prussin, “Traditional Asante Architecture”, *African Arts* 13, no. 2 (1980): 58.
49. Prussin, “Traditional Asante Architecture”, 58.
50. M. A. Kwamena-Poh, *Government and Politics in the Akuapem State, 1730–1850* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 72–73.

51. It is also sometimes claimed that Okomfo Anokye was Ewe (not Akan from Denkyira). A. Kodzo Paaku Kludze, *Chieftaincy in Ghana* (New York: Austin & Winfield, 2000), 3–4.
52. Darkwah, “Antecedents of Asante Culture”, 64–70; Tom C. McCaskie, “The Golden Stool at the End of the Nineteenth Century: Setting the Record Straight”, *Ghana Studies* 3, no. 1 (2000): 62; Tom C. McCaskie, “Komfo Anokye of Asante: Meaning, History and Philosophy in an African Society”, *Journal of African History* 27, no. 2 (1986): 318–19. Sometimes Okomfo Anokye is said to have called the stool from the sky. A. A. Y. Kyerematen, “The Royal Stools of Ashanti”, *Africa* 39, no. 1 (1969): 2–3. However, McCaskie states that “there is no mention of its descent from the sky” in the earliest recorded accounts from the early twentieth century. McCaskie, “The Golden Stool”, 62. Dutch written sources corroborate many aspects of the oral histories around Osei Tutu’s rise to power, although they do not describe the involvement of Okomfo Anokye. McCaskie, “Komfo Anokye”, 319–20.
53. Alfred Kofi Quarcoo, “The Akan Stool Polity: A Political Organization”, in *The Realm of the Extra-human: Agents and Audiences*, ed. Agehanada Bharati (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 105–22; Sharon Patton, “The Asante Stool” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1980), 21, 533–34; Darkwah, “Antecedents of Asante Culture”, 64–65.
54. Various oral histories are recounted in Patton, “The Asante Stool”, 21–23, 533–34; Darkwah, “Antecedents of Asante Culture”, 61–65; Marian Johnson, “M. Bonnat on the Volta”, *Ghana Notes and Queries* 10 (1968): 4; and Augustine Duah Osei, “The Twifo: A Political, Social and Economic History, 1600–1987” (PhD diss., University of Cape Coast, 2020), 214.
55. Kwaku Effah-Gyamfi, “Archaeological Reflections on Ghanaian Traditions of Origin”, in *The Ghana Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Kwasi Konadu and Clifton C. Campbell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 69–75; Konadu and Campbell, *The Ghana Reader*, 18.

56. Arhin, “The Structure of Greater Ashanti”, 69. See also Kyerematen, “The Royal Stools of Ashanti”, 2–3; Patton, “The Asante Stool”, 22–23; and Quarcoo, “The Akan Stool Polity”.
57. Silverman, “Material Biographies: Saharan Trade and the Lives of Objects”, 389. The converse was also true: non-Akan people who became part of the Asante Empire would adopt Akan cultural practices such as the use of Akan political regalia. See René Bravmann, “The Diffusion of Ashanti Political Art”, in *African Art and Leadership*, ed. Douglas Fraser and Herbert M. Cole (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 153–72.
58. Akyeampong and Obeng, “Spirituality, Gender, and Power”, 489–90.
59. Martino, “Stamping History”, 222; Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 203; Bernhard Gardi and Michelle Gilbert, “*Arkilla, Kaasa, and Nsaa*: The Many Influences of Wool Textiles from the Niger Bend in West Africa”, *Textile Museum Journal* 48, no. 1 (2021): 48; Kennedy Atsutse and Wazi Apoh, “A Study of the Akan and Ewe Kente Weaving Traditions: Implications for the Establishment of a Kente Museum in Ghana”, in *Current Perspectives on the Archaeology of Ghana*, ed. James Anquandah, Benjamin Kankpeyeng, and Wazi Apoh (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2014), 230. Atsutse and Apoh call *nsaa* “silk cotton [sic]”.
60. Gardi and Gilbert, “*Arkilla, Kaasa, and Nsaa*”, 48.
61. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 211; Brigitte Menzel, “Textiles in Trade in West Africa”, in *Textiles in Trade: Proceedings of the Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium* (Washington, DC: Textile Society of America, 1990), 83; Kyerematen, “The Royal Stools of Ashanti”, 3; Johannes G. Platvoet, “Commemoration by Communication: Akan Funerary Terracottas”, *Visible Religion: Annual for Religious Iconography* 1 (1982): 120, 122.
62. Ludwig Rømer, *Ludewig Ferdinand Römers Nachrichten von der Küste Guinea* (Copenhagen: Friedrich Christian Pelt, 1769), 171.
63. “Wie dieses Vorhaben nicht gelingen wollte, so bekam er einen andern Einfall: einige von seinen Unterthanen konnten Baumwolle spinnen, und

webten Bân der von dem Garne, so drey Finger breit waren; wenn sie nun zehn bis zwölf, drey Ellen lange Streifen, zue fammen nâhten, so ward ein Pantjes oder Scherpe daraus; das eine Streifgen konnte weiß, und das an dere blau seyn; bisweilen befanden sich auch rothe da zwischen; eine solche Scherpe konnte funfzig Reichsthaler und mehr kosten. Oppoccu ließ seidene Tafte und Tücher von allerhand Farben kauffen; diese Künstler, zogen die Faden auf, so daß sie anstatt der rothen, blauen, grünen, u. f. w. Tafte und Tücher, viele tausend *Ellen wollene und feidene Faden hatten; diese Faden webten sie unter ihre Baumwolle, damit sie vielfärbig würde*” [When this plan failed, he had another idea: some of his subjects could spin cotton and weave strips of yarn three fingers wide. If they sewed ten to twelve strips, each three ells long, together, they would make a waistcloth or sash. One strip could be white, and the other blue; sometimes there were red ones in between; such a sash could cost fifty Reichsthaler or more. Oppoccu had silk taffeta and cloths of all colors purchased. These artisans wound the threads so that instead of the red, blue, green, etc. taffeta and cloths, they had many thousands of ells of woolen threads. They wove these threads into their cotton to make it multicolored. Rømer, *Nachrichten von der Küste Guinea*, 171 (emphasis added; author’s translation). See also Afeadie, “Beginnings of Ewe and Asante Weaving”, 28–29.

64. For accounts of *adinkra*’s origins, see A. K. Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns* (Legon: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1972); Patton, “The Asante Stool”, 87–88; Ida Korkor Kumoji, “*Adinkra*: Integration of African and Western Cultural Visual Vocabulary” (MFA thesis, University of Minnesota, Duluth, 2005), 7–10; and Martino, “Stamping History”, 1–2, 77–79.
65. Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns*; Emmanuel Terray, “Long-Distance Exchange and the Formation of the State: The Case of the Abron Kingdom of Gyaman”, *Economy and Society* 3, no. 3 (1974): 335–37. See also Stahl, “Making History in Banda”, 55–57; and Dumouchelle, “Traditions of Modernity”, 71.

66. Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns*; Kumoji, “Adinkra”, 9–10; Martino, “Stamping History”, 77–79. More broadly on Asante acquisition of treasures and technologies through conquest, see Pescheux, *Le royaume*, 52; and Kwame Arhin, “The Financing of the Ashanti Expansion (1700–1820)”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 37, no. 3 (1967): 283–91.
67. Martino, “Stamping History”, 79; Kumoji, “Adinkra”, 9.
68. Martino, “Stamping History”, 77–79.
69. Timothy C. Weiskel, “Asante and the Akan Periphery: The Baule on the Western Akan Frontier”, in *The Golden Stool*, ed. Schildkrout, 265.
70. The art historian Herbert M. Cole calls this the Akan “verbal–visual nexus”. Cole and Ross, *The Arts of Ghana*, 9. See also Kreamer, “Inscribing Power / Writing Politics”, 127–30.
71. Cole and Ross, *The Arts of Ghana*, 46. Sources on the relationship of *adinkra* to Islamic visual and material culture include Martino, “Stamping History”, 6–8; Cole and Ross, *The Arts of Ghana*, 46; Labelle Prussin, *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 239–45; and Mato, “Clothed in Symbol”, 63–65. More broadly on intersections of Akan and Islamic visual and material cultures, see the essays in Doran H. Ross and Timothy F. Garrard, eds., *Akan Transformations: Problems in Ghanaian Art History* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1983); and Raymond A. Silverman, “History, Art and Assimilation: The Impact of Islam on Akan Material Culture” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1983). See also Raymond A. Silverman and David Owusu-Ansah, “The Presence of Islam among the Akan of Ghana: A Bibliographic Essay”, *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 325–40; and Edmund Abaka and Kwame Osei Kwarteng, “Introduction”, in *The Asante World*, ed. Abaka and Kwarteng, 12–14. See also Konadu, “A Manden Myth”, 73–77.
72. Silverman, “Material Biographies: Saharan Trade and the Lives of Objects”, 378n8, 386–89.

73. See Martha Ehrlich, “Two Akan Gold Ornaments from the Wreck of the *Whydah*”, *African Arts* 45, no. 1 (2012): 40. There are formal similarities too between abstract decorative elements on Asante clay pipes—one of which Bowdich brought to the British Museum, and which also seems to be offered for sale in Bowdich’s illustration of the Kumase market—and the earlier “Ghana cluster” of ivory horns discussed in Luís Urbano Afonso, Carlos Almeida, and José da Silva Horta, “Early African Ivories: The Ghana Cluster”, *African Arts* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 10–19.
74. Prussin, *Hatumere*, 241; Martino, “Stamping History”, 222.
75. On Akan reorientation from connections to the northern Malian-dominated world toward the Atlantic economy, see Parker, *Great Kingdoms*, 232.
76. Gardi and Gilbert, “*Arkill*, *Kaasa*, and *Nsaa*”, 48.
77. Astutse and Apoh, “A Study of the Akan and Ewe Kente Weaving Traditions”, 230. See also Aidoo, “Order and Conflict”, 14.
78. Sandra E. Greene, “Oral Traditions about Individuals Enslaved in Asante”, in *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade*, vol. 1, ed. Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, and Martin A. Klein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15–17.
79. Martino, “Stamping History”, 6.
80. On the Asante acquisition of treasures and technologies through conquest, see Pescheux, *Le royaume*, 52; and Arhin, “The Financing of the Ashanti Expansion”.
81. Trevor R. Getz, “Mechanisms of Slave Acquisition and Exchange in Late Eighteenth Century Anomabu: Reconsidering a Cross-Section of the Atlantic Slave Trade”, *African Economic History* 31 (2003): 75–76. See also Austin, *Labour, Land, and Capital*, 1–3, 12–13, 59, 125–26. On polities caught between two competing empires, the Asante and the British, see Abaka and Kwarteng, “Introduction”, 14–16.
82. On Muslims in Kumase, see Abaka and Kwarteng, “Introduction”, 13; David Owusu-Ansah, *Islamic Talismanic Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Asante* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991);

- Akyeampong and Owusu-Ansah, “Wealth in Knowledge”, 125; and Quarcoopome, “Akan Ceremonial Cloths”, 64–65.
83. Ruba Kana'an, “And God Will Protect Thee from Mankind (Q. 5: 67): A Talismanic Shirt from West Africa”, in *Approaches to the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Zulfikar Hirji (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019): 259–86; Jody Benjamin, “Textiles in West Africa up to the 20th Century”, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), DOI:10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.1117.
 84. Owusu-Ansah, *Islamic Talismanic Tradition*, 11–13.
 85. Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann, “Efficacious Texts: Unraveling Nineteenth-Century Islamic Talismans in Asante (Ghana)”, in *Timbuktu Unbound: Islamic Texts, Textual Traditions and Heritage in West Africa*, ed. Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 108. See also Ivor M. Wilks, “The Positions of Muslims in Metropolitan Ashanti in the Early Nineteenth Century”, in *Islam in Tropical Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (1966; London: International African Institute and Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1969), 144–65. Kwasi Konadu, however, is wary of narratives that root Akan arts in Islamic precedents, seeing in them a pernicious denial of invention, creativity, and authorship ascribed to Black Africans. Konadu, “A Mandan Myth”.
 86. Bowdich defined saphies (*safis*, talismans) as “scraps of Moorish writing, as charms against evil”. *Mission*, 32; see also 108–10. See the compelling discussion of visual redundancy in Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 219–21.
 87. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 215–16.
 88. Sarah Brett-Smith, “Cloth as Amulet”, in Kreamer et al., *Inscribing Meaning*, 75.
 89. Prussin, *Hatumere*, 240–43; Eric Appau Asante, Steve Kquofi, and Stephen Larbi, “The Symbolic Significance of Motifs on Selected Asante Religious Temples”, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 7 (2015), DOI:10.3402/jac.v7.27006.

90. Dumouchelle, “Traditions of Modernity”, 91–93.
91. Hess, “Imagining Architecture II”, 31. On the apotropaic power of *nkyimkyim* screens inserted into architectural settings, see also Prussin, *Hatumere*, 237–38. On talismans, see Matthew Rarey, *Insignificant Things: Amulets and the Art of Survival in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 38–40.
92. Bowdich, *Mission*, 305.
93. Prussin, *Hatumere*, 238; Prussin, “Traditional Asante Architecture”, 60.
94. Prussin, “Traditional Asante Architecture”, 61.
95. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 25; see especially 25–26, 96, 100, 215–18. Savage borrows the concept of social wrapping from the anthropologist Joy Hendry.
96. Prussin, *Hatumere*, 248. See also Dumouchelle, “Traditions of Modernity”, 89–90.
97. Dumouchelle, “Traditions of Modernity”, 89–90. See also Prussin, *Hatumere*, 248.
98. Dumouchelle, “Traditions of Modernity”, 90–91. See also Hess, “Imagining Architecture II”, 30.
99. Prussin, “Traditional Asante Architecture”, 60.
100. Arhin, “West African Trading Settlements”, 7.
101. Bowdich, *Mission*, 310.
102. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 280.
103. Prussin, “Traditional Asante Architecture”, 60.
104. Prussin, “Traditional Asante Architecture”, 61.
105. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 152.
106. Judith Perani and Norma Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and Art Patronage in Africa* (New York: Berg, 1999), 9; Jane Webster, *Materializing the Middle Passage: A Historical Archaeology of British Slave Shipping, 1680–1807* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 240–44; Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*.

107. Nicolette D. Manglos-Weber, “Innovations in Trust: Patrimonial and Bureaucratic Authority in the Asante Empire of West Africa”, in *Patrimonial Capitalism and Empire* (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2015), 226.
108. Dumouchelle describes this as “a demonstration of controlled cosmopolitanism—from within the empire, and from without”. Dumouchelle, “Traditions of Modernity”, 2.
109. Bowdich, *Mission*, 309.
110. Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee, comprising notes and researches relative to the Gold Coast, and the interior of Western Africa, chiefly collected from Arabic mss. and information communicated by the Moslems of Guinea; to which is prefixed an account of the origin and causes of the present war* (London: H. Colburn, 1824), 137–38.
111. Prussin, *Hatumere*, 240–41; Hess, “Imagining Architecture II”, 31; McLeod, “Gifts and Attitudes”; William Winwood Reade, *The Story of the Ashantee Campaign* (London: Smith, Elder, 1874), 357. On the difficulty of disentangling European- from Akan-style approaches to architecture amid processes of “conscious appropriation”, see Courtney Micots, “Status and Mimicry: African Colonial Period Architecture in Coastal Ghana”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 74, no. 1 (2015): 41–62.
112. Arhin, “West African Trading Settlements”, 7.
113. Traoré, *Slavery, Resistance, and Identity*.
114. Antony Griffith, “The Department of Prints and Drawings during the First Century of the British Museum”, *Burlington Magazine* 136, no. 1097 (1994): 532–33.
115. British Museum, *Synopsis*, 26th ed.
116. British Museum, *Synopsis*, 26th ed., 4–15; Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “*Artificial Curiosities*”: *Being an Exposition of Native Manufactures Collected on the Three Pacific Voyages of Captain James Cook, R.N.* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1978), 5, 15, 37; Stephanie Moser, “Making Expert Knowledge through the Image: Connections between

- Antiquarian and Early Modern Scientific Illustration”, *Isis* 105, no. 1 (2014): 76.
117. On the relationship between the Royal Navy and the British Museum collection, see Neil Chambers, *Joseph Banks and the British Museum: The World of Collecting, 1770–1830* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 17–18. More broadly, see Tim Barringer, “The South Kensington Museum and the Colonial Project”, in *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, ed. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (New York: Routledge, 2012), 11–27; and Henrietta Lidchi and Stuart Allan, eds., *Dividing the Spoils: Perspectives on Military Collections and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
 118. While many of these collecting voyages purported to aim at scientific study, they were also—sometimes even primarily—working toward imperial goals. See Jane Browne, “A Science of Empire: British Biogeography before Darwin”, *Revue d’Histoire des Sciences* 45, no. 4 (1992): 465–66; and Jocelyn Anderson, “Elegant Engravings of the Pacific: Illustrations of James Cook’s Expeditions in British Eighteenth-Century Magazines”, *British Art Studies* 7 (2017), DOI:10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-07/janderson.
 119. The founding of the British Gold Coast colony asserted English control along the coast as early as 1821. Successive Anglo-Asante wars, including the 1874 invasion of Kumase, weakened Asante sovereignty, but Asante would not be formally included in the British Empire until an 1896 expedition that deposed the Asantehene.
 120. Natasha Eaton, “Nostalgia for the Exotic: Creating an Imperial Art in London, 1750–1793”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 2 (2006): 227–28; British Museum, *Synopsis*, 26th ed., 17, 25–26; Anne-Julie Etter, “Collecting Statues in India and Transferring Them to Britain, or The Intertwined Lives of Indian Objects and Colonial Administrators (Late Eighteenth Century to Early Nineteenth Century)”, in *Eastern Resonances in Early Modern England: Reception and Transformations from the Renaissance to the Romantic Period*, ed. Claire Gallien and

- Ladan Niayesh (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 187; Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 73, 75–77, 83–84.
121. Adrian Anagnost, “Constructing Non-Western Histories of Visual Arts”, in *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Visual Culture*, vol. 1, *Histories, Theories, Globalities*, ed. Jane Kromm (New York: Bloomsbury, forthcoming) (emphasis added).
 122. Sharon Waxman, *Loot: The Battle over the Stolen Treasures of the Ancient World* (New York: Macmillan, 2010).
 123. Bénédicte Savoy, “‘Invaluable Masterpieces’: The Price of Art at the Musée Napoléon”, *Journal for Art Market Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 23, DOI:10.23690/jams.v1i1.4.
 124. British Museum, *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*, 26th ed. (London: G. Woodfall, 1832), 4; Henry C. Clarke, *The British Museum: Its Antiquities and Natural History; A Hand-Book Guide for Visitors* (London: H. G. Clarke, 1847), 43–45. See also Adam Kuper, *The Museum of Other People: from Colonial Acquisitions to Cosmopolitan Exhibitions* (London: Profile Books, 2023), 19–20.
 125. Clarke, *The British Museum*, 43–45.
 126. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 187. Bowdich also decried the Spanish continuance of trafficking in enslaved people as injuring British commerce because it disincentivized African traders from producing goods for the European market. Bowdich, *Mission*, 338–44.
 127. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 278–79; McLeod, “T. E. Bowdich”, 79–103.
 128. Bowdich, *Mission*, 306, 310. See also McLeod, “T. E. Bowdich”, 103; and British Museum, *Synopsis*, 26th ed., 7.
 129. “The Kaylees manufacture iron from the ore ... I procured some of the knives and spear heads, of their own iron”. Bowdich, *Mission*, 427. On the invention of the Bakele, or Ongom, see François Ngolet, “Inventing Ethnicity and Identities in Gabon: The Case of the Ongom (Bakele)”, *Revue Française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer* 85, no. 321 (1998): 5–26.

130. The emphasis on negotiation with “our new allies, the Ashantees” came from praise of Bowdich in a dispatch from the Governor and Cape Coast Council to the African Committee. Bowdich, *The African Committee*, 80–81.
131. Bowdich, *Superstitions*, 4.
132. Bowdich, *Superstitions*, 10. See also Tom C. McCaskie, “Asante Origins Egypt, and the Near East: An Idea and Its History”, in *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa*, ed. Derek R. Peterson and Giacomo Macola (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009). On earlier accounts of “African art history”, see Anne Lafont, “Congo Winckelmann: Exploring African Art History in the Age of White Marble”, trans. Olga Grlic, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 52 (2023): 1–17.
133. It should be noted that the *in situ* scenes of objects being used in Bowdich’s *Mission* were also artificial. Their staged appearance likely results from the book’s prints having been based on drawings completed long after Bowdich left Kumase, possibly partly by his wife, Sarah Bowdich, who had not been to Kumase. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 251–59, 262.
134. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 283; Donald deB. Beaver, “Writing Natural History for Survival—1820–1856: The Case of Sarah Bowdich, Later Sarah Lee”, *Archives of Natural History* 26, no. 1 (1999): 19–31; Ulrike Kistner, “Georges Cuvier: Founder of Modern Biology (Foucault), or Scientific Racist (Cultural Studies)?”, *Configurations* 7, no. 2 (1999): 175–90; Mary Orr, *Sarah Bowdich Lee (1791–1856) and Pioneering Perspectives on Natural History* (New York: Anthem Press, 2023).
135. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 283–84. According to the image captions in Bowdich’s *Superstitions*, Sarah Bowdich was the lithographer, but it is unlikely that she actually pulled the prints. See William Finley, “Making an Impression: An Assessment of the Role of Print Surfaces within the Technological, Commercial, Intellectual and Cultural Trajectory of Book Illustration, c.1780–c.1860” (PhD diss.,

- University of Sheffield, 2019), 60–61; and Orr, *Sarah Bowdich Lee*. The stringed instrument is a *seprewa*, called *sanko* by many nineteenth-century Europeans.
136. Bowdich, *Superstitions*, 70–73.
 137. Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, 283–84. Landseer depicted multiple beads on the same page, but otherwise each watercolor shows a single object, for example, a cushion or a lone sandal. For images of Landseer’s watercolors held in a family collection, see Sheales [Savage], “Sights/Sites of Spectacle”, appendix 5, 346–60. According to guidebooks for the British Museum, it may be that the Asante objects were not placed on display until the early 1830s. There is no mention of these objects in British Museum, *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*, 25th ed. (London: G. Woodfall, 1827), 2–3, but they are included in *Synopsis*, 26th ed., 6–7.
 138. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 58–59. See also Anagnost, “Constructing Non-Western Histories”. Generally, objects collected from non-Western sources have been classified in two major categories: “as (scientific) cultural artifacts or as (aesthetic) works of art”, as the historian James Clifford explains. James Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture”, in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 222. See also Ruth B. Phillips, “Where Is ‘Africa’? Re-viewing Art and Artifact in the Age of Globalization”, *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 947. These two strategies coexisted in museums in the early twentieth-century United States, as shown by Kobena Mercer, *Alain Locke and the Visual Arts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 44–48, 52–64. The art historian Ruth B. Phillips thus distinguishes between “modernist display paradigms” of artifacts from art: the former steeped in ethnographic typologies that take “material objects as signs for knowledge and cognition”, while art’s emphasis on singularity presents material objects “as points of access to spiritual and aesthetic experience”. Phillips, “Where Is ‘Africa’?”, 945, 947, 951.

139. Mercer, *Alain Locke and the Visual Arts*, 55. See also Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow”, *African Arts* 25, no. 2 (April 1992): 42; and Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, 58–66.
140. On the origins of the British Museum in the collections of, first, the collector Hans Sloane and, later, various mercantile, exploratory, and colonial expeditions, see, among others, Robert G. W. Anderson, “British Museum, London: Institutionalizing Enlightenment”, in *The First Modern Museums of Art: The Birth of an Institution in 18th- and Early-19th-Century Europe*, ed. Carole Paul (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), 47–71; James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017); Neil Chambers, *Joseph Banks and the British Museum: The World of Collecting, 1770–1830* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Mita Choudhury, *Nation-Space in Enlightenment Britain: An Archaeology of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2019), ch. 4. See also Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020).
141. British Museum, *A Visit to the British Museum: Containing a Familiar Description of Every Object of Interest in the Various Departments of that Establishment* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1838), 8–31; Savage, “Collecting the Asante”, 48–49.
142. On the arrangement of these items from the Asante Empire at the British Museum, see *Synopsis*, 26th ed., 5–6.
143. Frédéric Cailliaud and Bernardino Drovetti, *Voyage à l’Oasis de Thèbes et dans les déserts situés à l’Orient et à l’Occident de la Thébaïde fait pendant les années 1815, 1816, 1817 et 1818*, ed. Edme-François Jomard (Paris: L’Imprimerie Royale, 1821); Bowdich, *Superstitions*, 61.
144. Henry Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia, and Travels into the Interior of that Country Executed under the Orders of the British Government in the Years 1809 and 1810* (London: F. C. And J. Rivington, 1814); Bowdich, *Superstitions*, 37–40. The Axum inscriptions are visible in Salt, *Voyage*, 414. Bowdich or the lithographer seems to have flipped at least one of

- the letters from Salt's book, as the sequence and orientations do not all match.
145. Bowdich, *Superstitions*, 60.
 146. On the complicated reliance of art history's seemingly decontextualized formal analyses on nineteenth-century pattern books and global histories of design, see Jesse Lockard and Meekyung MacMurdie, "Pattern Recognition: Early Formalism's Global Vision", presentation at "Critical Dislocations: Art, Geography, Method", NOMIS-Workshop, organized by Adrian Anagnost and Matthew Vollgraff, Forum Eikones (University of Basel, 10 May 2024). See also René Labrusse, "Islamic Arts and the Crisis of Representation in Modern Europe", in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, ed. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gulru Necipoglu (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1196–217.
 147. Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (Berlin: George Siemens, 1893).
 148. Margaret Olin, "Formal Analysis: Art and Anthropology", in *Ideas of "Race" in the History of the Humanities*, ed. Amos Morris-Reich and Dirk Rupnow (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 89–111; Éric Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 12–13, 115–19. See also Richard Neer, "Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style", *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Autumn 2005): 1–26; and Whitney Davis, "Succession and Recursion in Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History*", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 157–64.
 149. Showing people and objects in their "natural" settings has the pernicious potential to evoke proto-ethnographic study that posits a rigidly essentializing association of person and place. Alternately, nonwhite bodies assume a decorative function. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, Anne Lafont has argued, European painting tended to reduce nonwhite bodies to ornamentation, precisely through "the interweaving of bodies and decors", albeit typically fanciful ones. Anne Lafont, "How Skin Color Became a Racial Marker", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 51, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 100–1.

150. On the 1874 British invasion of Asante and its effects on architecture in Kumase, see Hess, “Imagining Architecture II”; and Tony Yeboah, “Phoenix Rise: A History of the Architectural Reconstruction of the Burnt City of Kumase, 1874–1960”, *Journal of West African History* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 53–82.
151. Reade, *The Story of the Ashantee Campaign*, 357–58.
152. Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Whose Culture Is It?”, *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 2 (9 February 2006): 41.
153. British Museum, *A Guide to the Exhibition Rooms of the Departments of Natural History and Antiquities* (London: British Museum, 1877), 139; British Museum, *A Guide to the Exhibition Galleries of the British Museum, Bloomsbury* (London: British Museum, 1888), 231.
154. British Museum, *A Guide to the Exhibition Galleries of the British Museum, Bloomsbury* (London: British Museum, 1896), 198, 278.
155. Seth Quartey, “Strategic Alliances: Anglo-German Politics on the Gold Coast: 1840–1880”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archaeology* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 111–33. See also Kwame Arhin, “The Missionary Role on the Gold Coast and in Ashanti: Reverend F. A. Ramseyer and the British Take-over of Ashanti 1869–1894”, *Research Review* 4, no. 2 (1968): 1–15.
156. The missionary was Fritz Ramseyer, who had spent time in Asante under the auspices of the Basel Mission. Based on his appearance in the photo, it was likely to have been from the decade before his death in 1914, possibly depicting a talk he gave in Geneva in January 1911. Fritz Ramseyer, “L’Achanti autrefois et aujourd’hui: le lac sacré de Bosomtschvé”, *Le Globe: Revue Genevoise de Géographie Année*, 1911, 59–73. See also Dagmar Konrad, “‘Entfernte Dinge’ — Objektgeschichten aus der Sammlung Basler Mission an Beispielen aus Ghana und Südchina” (fellowship report), Museum der Kulturen Basel, <https://www.mkb.ch/dam/jcr:1971bfe8-aaed-4727-a658-fcffe1e47d43/Entfernte.pdf>.
157. See Zachary Kingdon, *Ethnographic Collecting and African Agency in Early Colonial West Africa: A Study of Trans-imperial Cultural Flows*

(New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

158. Malcolm D. McLeod, “Exhibiting Asante”, *Ghana Studies* 25 (2022): 129–30.

159. See collections accessible via the Basel Portal for African Research Collections (PARC), namely, the *adinkra* cloth in Ramseyer’s photograph: Asante, *tuch (adinkra)*, Museum der Kulturen Basel, https://www.parc-portal.org/en/detail/mkb_1203.

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