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RAM Showcase: African Adornment

May 13, 2026 – February 20, 2027

Implying a body whether or not one is present, adornment speaks to the human condition regardless of where, when, or by whom it was created or worn. People choose to adorn their bodies for a multitude of reasons. How and with what they do it speaks volumes—forming a complex web of meaning linked to material or social value, luxury, fashion, emotions, status, wealth, and commerce. Not all societies approach these issues from the same perspective, but adornment can play a pivotal role in reflecting these concepts.

This exhibition is comprised of objects with layered and potentially uncomfortable histories. Specifically, these works are from a collection of incised metal bracelets and neckpieces from West Africa that span the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. Objects like this were used as currency, often within a trade or barter network, in exchange for local agricultural and luxury products. However, they were also often used in transatlantic slave trade negotiations.

Recognizing the complexity of this kind of work and sensitive to its compelling history, RAM staff wanted to find an informed and authentic context to share it. To that end, RAM engaged contemporary jeweler Tanya Crane, who addresses historical connections and layers of existence in her own work, to respond to what she sees within these pieces. Crane's exhibition in a nearby gallery—on display throughout 2026—features neckpieces, brooches, and bracelets that she created, reflecting both her aesthetic style and the influence of the African metalwork as well as other patterns connected to global Indigenous communities.

RAM's collection has a large concentration of art jewelry—wearable and decorative pieces that express ideas and explore materials and design. While some pieces of art jewelry are designed to be worn, other works are conceptual explorations that are not meant for everyday settings, if even wearable at all. The framework of contemporary art jewelry production—rooted in theory and experimentation—is very different than the one that supported historical African adornment. These pieces—donated to RAM by a coinage and currency collector—still connect to concepts of value and social status, albeit in a way that is different than the art jewelry in the rest of the collection.

Arriving at the museum with only countries of origin and approximate dates noted, these objects cannot be distinguished by the names of the makers or those who wore them, however important these things are to their history and life prior to their time in a collection. Tanya Crane's response serves to ground these historical examples in a

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continuum of making and provides a context that empowers both makers and wearers, even over time and distance.

There are challenges in displaying objects like these historical examples. Some meaning has been obscured or lost to time, raising some questions. Who crafted these pieces? What forms of trade or barter were they involved with? Is the information associated with them accurate?

Another challenge is that some may question the intent of showing potentially unsettling content in a museum context. Why do it? In this instance, contextualized with examples of contemporary art jewelry in other gallery spaces, the adornment serves to reframe how wearable pieces could connect past and present. How does a contemporary jeweler respond to historical work? What stories can be told that illuminate and inform as well as build bridges to a fuller understanding of how adornment can function in various societies?

Objects such as these—that were used as currency—could have been made in Africa with different tribes preferring different materials or patterns. Or, when associated with the slave trade, they were more likely produced in Europe and introduced into Africa. In either case, this form of adornment can be associated with tribal status. For example, a woman might wear numerous metal bracelets or leg bands to reflect a husband's wealth. Their large-scale use as currency began to be phased out in the twentieth century, yet these designs are still often produced in contemporary jewelry.

About Manillas (a term applied to historical bracelets used as currency):

Manillas are a form of commodity money, usually made of bronze or copper, which were used in West Africa. They were produced in large numbers in a wide range of designs, sizes, and weights. They are usually horseshoe-shaped, with endpoints that face each other. Manillas were prized for the sound they made when hit.

Manillas were used in many different ways as currency and within daily life, including:

- to trade or barter
- to purchase land, livestock, or other market purchases
- to display status or social position
- to pay for the expense of significant life events such as births, coming of age, marriages, or burials
- to pay for fines
- as a way for nomadic people to travel with small amounts of portable wealth

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- as a form of adornment
- as amulets containing considerable spiritual power, especially if they were made for a specific purpose following the advice of a medium or shaman, and were also said to prevent disease or accidents, bring wealth, increase fertility, or have other special powers

The name manilla is said to derive from the Spanish word for a "bracelet," the Portuguese for "hand-ring" (*manilha*), after the Latin *manus* (hand) or from "monilia," plural of necklace (*monile*).

Owing to their smaller size and easy portability, bracelets were the most common metal trade objects.

Africans of each region had names for each variety of manilla, probably varying locally. They valued them differently and were very particular about the types they would accept in trade.

Manillas were produced and used for centuries. A formal ban as currency was put in place in the early twentieth century, and in the 1940s and 1950s, there was a push to collect and melt down such objects for other uses. This history interweaves Indigenous tradition with strategies of colonial settlement and economic control.

Establishing with certainty the origin of many pieces is extremely difficult. Many of the tribal peoples who made these objects were nomadic traders throughout many regions—large tribal groups and sub-groups also appeared in multiple regions. Additionally, designs were often reused and widely circulated throughout West Africa. Although bracelets were the main form of West African trade currency, other lesser forms of trade and payments included textiles, ivory, other metal items, and cowrie shells.

Further Resources

Vanishing Arts Gallery, *Manillas: Former West African Trade Currency*

Ashmolean Museum, *A Brass Manilla*

History @ Portsmouth, *An African slave trading commodity washed up off the Isle of Wight*

Michael Backman Ltd, *African Manilla Currency*

Wikipedia, *Manilla (money), History*