

V&A Africa – Exploring Hidden Histories

15 November 2012 – 3 February 2013



This display of around 100 objects from the V&A's collections looks at the V&A's engagement with and changing view of art and design from Africa since the earliest days of the Museum in the 1850s to the present. It is the first of a series of displays to highlight the V&A's significant holdings of art and design from Africa, and the first time many of these objects will be shown.

Exploring Hidden Histories will reveal some of the stories which lie behind the acquisition of the V&A's African objects which include jewellery, textiles and sculpture. The display is the result of a seven year Museum-wide research project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, with additional support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council for research into African textiles.

Traditional distinctions between 'art' and 'ethnography', and between North Africa and sub-Saharan regions, led to many African objects being represented only in anthropological collections in Britain. Where the V&A has collected sub-Saharan African objects it was because they demonstrated excellence in a particular material or technique. To highlight these historic distinctions between 'art' and 'ethnography', the display opens with 36 black and white photographs by Walker Evans commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1935 to document its first ever exhibition of African art. Some are framed as fine art photographs and others are shown as they originally appeared bearing ethnographic labels detailing the object type and place of origin.

The V&A has an extensive collection of North African jewellery because culturally North Africa was viewed as part of the Middle East and its decorative arts were highly prized and actively collected. A number of these pieces will be shown alongside jewellery created in Ethiopia in the 19th-century and Asante gold ornaments from Ghana.

The display will reflect the growing interest in African art and culture of the 1950s and 60s as many African countries were gaining independence. Metalware, sculpture and textiles collected and toured to colleges and museums all over Britain during this period will be shown.

Contemporary African works including a film of excerpts from Athol Fugard's landmark play *The Island* (2000) and photographs by Zanele Muholi and Santu Mofokeng acquired in 2010 following the V&A's exhibition of photographs by contemporary South African artists will illustrate the Museum's continuing commitment to representing and collecting art and design from Africa.

The V&A does not have a gallery dedicated to African art and design, but there are many objects on display throughout the Museum that were either made in Africa or have a connection with Africa.

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Notes to Editors

- V&A Africa – Exploring Hidden Histories will be shown in the V&A's Studio Gallery 15 November 2012 – 3 February 2013
- Admission: FREE

For further PRESS information please contact the V&A Press Office on 0207 942 2502 or email press.office@vam.ac.uk

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