

Origins of the Afro Comb: 6,000 years of culture, politics and identity

2 July to 3 November 2013

The Fitzwilliam Museum and the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology,
Cambridge

Curated by Sally-Ann Ashton, Senior Assistant Keeper, Antiquities, Fitzwilliam
Museum and artist and writer Michael McMillan

The 6,000-year history of the Afro Comb, its extraordinary impact on cultures worldwide, and community stories relating to hair today are being explored in a new exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum and the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology in Cambridge.

The traditional African comb has been used in the creation, maintenance, and decoration of hairstyles for both men and women for over 6 millennia. In many African societies, ancient and modern, the hair comb symbolises status, group affiliation and religious beliefs. Today the Afro Comb has an iconic status, and the famous 'Black Fist' comb has taken an important place in twentieth century political history as an emblem of the Black Power Movement.

Origins of the Afro Comb follows the evolution of the comb from pre-dynastic Egypt to modern-day, tracing the similarities in form and the remarkable diversity of designs found across Africa and the African Diaspora. The exhibition is a part of a legacy project to record how the comb is used today, with visitors being encouraged to contribute their personal stories and hairstyles both to the exhibition and to archives for future generations.

Each of the hundreds of beautiful combs on display is a work of art, from pieces exquisitely carved in wood with tiny geometric designs, to works sculpted from ivory or inlaid with multi-coloured glass beads. The displays will include images and sculpture showing a wide variety of hairstyles illustrating how the combs have been used since antiquity.

A digital interaction gallery will show projections of personal stories about combs and African type hair, as well as the contribution personal styling has had to play in maintaining and expressing cultural identity.

At the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, the story is brought into the present with three connected contemporary art installations *My Hair: Black Hair Culture, Style and Politics* by artist and writer Michael McMillan. The installations show the development of the global black hair industry, the politicising and popularisation of Afros and Dreadlocks, and bring to life the



Ashanti hair comb, Ghana early 20th century © Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology



Wood and bead figure, before 1949, South Nigeria, Yoruba culture © Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

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'Cottage Salon' in the Home, The Barber Shop and The Hairdressing Salon. Explaining black hair culture, styling and politics as we know it today, the installations are complemented by a film showing different hands styling hair, and a series of soundbites, which can be heard by sitting under one of the hairdryers.

Origins of the Afro Comb has been curated by Sally-Ann Ashton, Senior Assistant Keeper of Antiquities at the Fitzwilliam Museum: "This exhibition expresses the unity of archaeology and anthropology, where art meets personal human stories, observing patterns of change and continuity of this vital cultural tradition. Much of the work here has involved a very lively community of people today, working with a diverse committee contributing both advice and pieces for the displays, including artworks and personal combs. These personal items add depth to the story we are telling here, complementing the truly remarkable artworks we have on display from the Cambridge University Museums collections, from the British Museum, the Petrie Museum, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria and other individual contributors."

Four major strands of Ashton's own research are reflected in this exhibition: museum curatorship, Egyptology, anthropological fieldwork in Jamaica, and leadership of an innovative long-term prisons project across England, teaching black history - and at the same time studying the impact of imprisonment on hair.

Contributions from the widening public about their hair stories are being welcomed throughout the exhibition and beyond at the website <http://www.originsoftheafrocomb.co.uk/>.

Ashton commented: "Regardless of where you are and whether you visit the exhibition, we would love to hear from anybody who uses the combs today, who thinks about hair styles and what they might mean in general, or who might just be interested in cultural history at a global scale.

One of the most important displays in the exhibition is a case of combs with lost histories. They have no story because it was never recorded at the time; now we have no way of knowing. With enough contributions from the public we can create an important archive reflecting a unique part of our global culture today, and continue the story for future generations."

This project is partially supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

- Ends -

Notes to editors continues below



Plastic hair comb, 21st century, bought in Nigeria © Fitzwilliam Museum



Bronze head, before 1950, from Udo, Edo State, South Nigeria, by a Benin artist © Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology



Bamboo, midribs of palm leaf, glass beads and cotton thread hair comb, date unknown, from Malawi by a Yao artist © Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

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ADMISSION FREE

2 July to 3 November 2013 - The Fitzwilliam Museum

Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

2 July to 28 September 2013 - The Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology

Downing Street, Cambridge, CB2 3DZ

BOTH VENUES OPENING HOURS:

Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00

Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00

The Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge, with collections exploring world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts. Welcoming over 400,000 visitors a year, the Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

The Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology

The recently refurbished and re-opened museum is a treasure trove of objects, images and ideas that express human cultural diversity across the globe. It contains world-class collections of Oceanic, Asian, African and native American art - canoes, sculptures, masks, and textiles - and major archaeological discoveries, ranging from the earliest stone tools, discovered by Louis Leakey in Olduvai Gorge, to British finds from Roman and medieval periods. Recent exhibitions include *Assembling Bodies*, a cross-disciplinary exploration of ways of knowing and representing the human body, which ranged widely over time and space.

<http://maa.cam.ac.uk>

The Afro Comb

Hair and grooming have always played an important role in the culture of Africa and the African Diaspora. The traditional African comb has played a crucial role in the creation, maintenance, and decoration of hair-styles for both men and women. In many African societies, ancient and modern, the hair comb symbolises status, group affiliation, and religious beliefs, and is encoded with ritual properties. The handles of combs are decorated with objects of status, such as the headrest, human figures, and motifs that reference nature and the traditional spiritual world. In the twentieth century 'afro' combs have taken on a wider political and cultural message, perhaps most notably in the form of the 'black fist' comb that references the Black Power salute. By looking at archaeological records of burials, and through recording oral histories in modern societies, it is hoped the exhibition *Origins of the Afro Comb* will provide a much better understanding of the status of this iconic object and the spiritual and societal status it can hold.

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