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Gold Weights

Arnold Lehman: The items in this display case come in an immense variety of forms, from geometric shapes to animals and objects from daily life. No two pieces are exactly alike. These are weights that were used to measure gold dust, the primary currency in Ghana from about the fifteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was replaced by coins and paper money. Every household would have had a set of these weights. In transactions, both buyer and seller would measure the gold dust with their own weights to make sure the values matched.

These weights come from a part of Africa known as the Gold Coast because of the large quantities of gold found there. Traditionally, people who found gold were allowed to keep the dust, but had to surrender any large nuggets to the royal court. Much of the gold from this area was exported to Europe and became, among other things, the basis of British currency.

Within Africa, gold was often made into jewelry, which was also used as a form of exchange. To your right you'll see beautiful examples, as well as a photograph of a woman wearing an exquisite set of gold jewelry, with gold dust sprinkled on her face.

William Siegmann: The weights are made first by forming them out of beeswax. The form is then enclosed in clay. And it's allowed to dry. And after the clay is dried, the entire thing is put into a fire and the wax is melted out, poured out, and then molten brass would be poured into the existing mold. Therefore, the brass takes the form of the original wax model. Each of these pieces, therefore, is unique. It's original and can't be duplicated.

Among the pieces here are a pair of beetles that are linked side by side. They're actually made by taking two beetles and encasing them in clay. And then they are burned out of this, and the void where they were is filled with brass. So this is not the lost-wax method, but the "lost beetle" method of casting.

For more information about these objects, be sure to visit www.brooklynmuseum.org