Museum der
Kulturen Basel

GOLD
Its Bright and Dark Sides

Gold signifies the best, the finest, and the most valuable. A promise that not least advertising banks on: Gold packaging adds a touch of luxury even to everyday products. Yet not all that glitters is gold.

Gold brings glitter to festive occasions, decorates precious items and symbolizes holiness. But where there's light, there's also shadow: the extraction of this precious metal has left deep marks across the globe – in ecological, social as well as political terms. Let yourself be drawn in by the allure of gold, but also discover what lies concealed behind it.

GLAMOUR & STATUS

Gold has a lustrous sheen and is rare. This is why people use it to adorn themselves and objects: its golden glow emphasises status, wealth, or sacredness. Yet it can also appear in times of hardship and danger.

CLOTHING – Sumptuous clothes are embellished with gold using different techniques: Fabrics are gold printed, woven with golden threads or embroidered with gold elements, making them special garments that are worn on festive occasions such as weddings, rituals or ballroom dances.

In Tunis and the Tunisian Sahel, magnificent wedding gowns for wealthy women were crafted well into the 20th century, embroidered with gold and silk threads and adorned with gold lamellae and sequins. They were made specially for the *jelwa* ceremony on the third day of the wedding. This is when the bride made her first appearance as a married woman. The colour red indicated her new status. It was not only the precious material that made the garment so valuable but also the exquisite work of the professional embroiders assigned to the task. Apart from doing the actual work, they often also taught the bride how to embroider, instructed her in the Quran, and informed her about her new role as a married woman.
Valuable fabrics belonged to the personal possessions of a woman. Usually, mothers passed them on to their daughters. In this sense, a wedding gown had the power to unite families across generations.

1 Wedding gown *hram* | makers unknown to us | Tunesia | before 1968 | cotton, silk, gold thread, gold lamella, sequins | Germaine Winterberg, purchased in 1968 | III 17535

Fred Spillmann (1915–1986) from Basel is known as one of Switzerland's leading couturiers. Up to his death, he used to stage two fashion shows per year in his boutique on Basel's Rheinsprung; for members of the local bourgeoisie these were social highlights.
He described himself as a bird of paradise and as a box of surprises. Openly gay, he cultivated an air of extravagance and deliberately crossed the line of traditional masculinity by way of his appearance.

For this evening dress, Spillmann designed a striking silhouette. He chose a fabric woven with artificial silk in the weft and the metallic-shimmering fibre Lurex in the warp, using genuine silk for the lining only. Like Spillmann's own appearance, the dress also plays with social notions of value and status: It owes its luxurious golden sheen not to precious materials, but primarily to synthetic fibres.

2 Evening dress | Fred Spillmann | Basel, Switzerland | second half of 20th c. | artificial silk, Lurex, silk | previous owner Samuel Kopp | Schule für Gestaltung Basel, gifted in 2016 | GM 1987.06

Among the most flamboyant pieces of Ottoman dress worn by wealthy women in the Balkans is the *anterija*, a long outer gown with a narrow waist, flared skirt and long, slit sleeves. Especially precious pieces such as this one here was made of ruby-coloured velvet and richly embellished: In the so-called couching technique, gold threads and gold braid are secured to the velvet with fine stitches. The elaborate ornamentation made such garments visible markers of affluence and social standing.

3 Gown *anterija* | makers unknown to us | Metohija, Kosovo | before 1956 | velvet, gold braid, gold thread | Else Byan, purchased in 1956 | VI 21956

This *gharchola* sari from Gujarat combines intricate dye and weaving techniques. Silver-coloured threads run lengthwise and are crossed by gold-coloured threads, thus dividing the ruby-coloured cotton fabric into regular fields. The threads are wrapped with fine strips of metal; in technical terms this is referred to as 'gimping'. Additionally, gold-coloured threads woven into the fabric mark the centre of the individual fields.
The white, yellow, and green patterns were created using the *bandhani* technique, meaning small portions of the fabric were tied off before being dyed, preventing any pigment from penetrating those areas. This results in geometric shapes formed by a myriad of individual dots as well as figures such as elephants or dancing women.
gharchola cloths are, on occasion, still worn at weddings in Gujarat today. Often, they are given to the bride by her mother-in-law as a gift. When rounding the ceremonial fire, one corner of the *gharchola* is tied to the groom's shoulder cloth. Red stands for energy and fertility, gold for happiness and prosperity.

4 Sari *gharchola* | makers unknown to us | Patan, Gujarat, India | early 20th c. | cotton, gold and silver threads | Georges Gogel, gifted in 1963 | IIa 2552

In Bali, fabrics embellished with gold foil are referred to as *perada*. They are used to adorn people, deities and temple complexes during important ceremonies and temple festivals. Often, Batik textiles from Java serve as source material. These were additionally embellished with gold foil or gold dust on one side. Before the gold leaf or dust was applied, the destined areas had to be outlined with glue made from fishbone or water buffalo hide, often mixed with a sprinkling of ochre. In doing so, the underlying batik pattern could be traced, or an entirely different pattern could be applied in gold. *perada* textiles tend to be stiff and brittle where the gold adornment has been applied. They cannot be washed and the gold rubs off easily which meant that they were worn only for important ceremonies such as tooth filing or the purification of the soul. In addition, they were worn by dancers as part of their costume. Statues of deities were often dressed in *perada*.
True gold is hardly used today. Most *perada* patterns are now painted directly onto the fabric using bronze pigments.

5 Shoulder wrap for dancers *selendang perada* | makers unknown to us | Bali, Indonesia | early 20th c. | cotton, handmade batik, gold foil | Collection Ernst Schlager, gift from estate 1968 | IIc 16117

SACREDNESS – In many religious traditions, the sheen of gold is associated with the sacred. Sometimes it highlights rank and singles out individuals; in other instances, it stands for perfection that transcends possession.

In Catholic liturgy, gold-embellished garments distinguish ecclesiastical dignitaries from the congregation and signify their special role: In certain liturgical acts, Catholic priests represent Jesus Christ.
The chasuble – a sleeveless outer vestment worn by a priest during mass – shows a lamb on a book with seven seals. The motif is from the Revelation of Saint John, where God's plan is represented by a sealed book which only the sacrificed and resurrected Lamb of God is able to open.
The cope – a cloak worn by priests during mass and processions – shows on the back a pelican. According to legend, the pelican rips open its chest to feed its young with its blood. In Christian iconography, the pelican symbolizes Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself for humanity. Both garments feature embroidery that symbolizes Jesus Christ and takes the form of a lavish golden aureola.

6 Liturgical garments chasuble and cope | makers unknown to us | Undervelier, Jura, Switzerland | around 1950 | brocade, golden braid | parish of Undervelier, purchased in 1972 | VI 41554a, VI 41563

Seated at the centre of this Tibetan *thangka* is Buddha Shâkyamuni. The image shows the moment of spiritual awakening, marked by his right hand touching the ground and asking it to witness his enlightenment.
The Buddha's skin is golden in colour. However, this does not stand for material wealth – his elongated earlobes serve as a reminder that he once wore heavy jewellery but had since removed it. Rather, his golden skin and the multi-coloured aureole encased in gold are a reference to spiritual completeness and to the radiance of truth and wisdom.
The union of sacredness, light, and gold in Buddhist iconography has probably been influenced by the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism where light is of key religious significance.
In Buddhism, gold may also signify a special form of offering: Embellishing images of the Buddha or stupas with gold is regarded as a rewarding religious act.

7 *Thangka* Buddha Shâkyamuni | makers unknown to us | Tibet | late 19th c. | silk taffeta, silk cords | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | IId 13737

For his ongoing series *Welsh Emergency Blankets*, Daniel Trivedy combines two very different kinds of blankets. The designs originate in traditional Welsh woven woollen blankets which he associates with emotional security and cultural belonging. They are printed on gold-coloured, foil emergency blankets – a cheap, mass-produced material that is able to retain heat. For many of us, this triggers vivid visions of refugees wrapped in these blankets after dangerous sea crossings or in emergency shelters. In this sense, emergency blankets evoke a powerful form of political symbolism.
Trivedy created the series in 2018 against the backdrop of declaring Wales as the first 'Nation of Sanctuary' – that is, as a land that is prepared to grant refugees protection and acceptance. By using the emergency blankets, the artist is symbolically declaring the refugees as a part of modern Wales, thus signalling an inclusive understanding of belonging. These are not the shiny cloaks of the rich but of those in need of protection.
In other contexts, too, the gold-coloured emergency blanket has become a political symbol. The association "Die Vielen", a network of over 4,500 institutions and activists engaged in art and culture, uses it as a visible marker against rising right-wing extremism, and in support of solidarity, diversity, and an open society, whilst also highlighting the "illusion

of a glittering life for all". Here gold does not stand for wealth and opulence, but for participation and inclusion.

Daniel Trivedy (b. 1975) lives near Swansea in Wales. His multi-disciplinary work combines research and experimenting with diverse materials with issues such as migration, colonialism, identity, and belonging. Initially, Trivedy studied Geology and Palaeontology at the Imperial College London before taking up Art at the Swansea College of Art. For *Welsh Emergency Blankets*, he was awarded the gold medal for Fine Art at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 2019. In the same year, the National Museum Wales acquired works from the series for its collection.

8 *Welsh Emergency Blankets* | Daniel Trivedy | Wales, United Kingdom | 2019 | printed metallised polyester film | on loan from the artist 2026

JEWELLERY – In Bali, gold jewellery remains part of ceremonial attire to this day; it is worn and put on display particularly on the occasion of rites of passage such as weddings. The jewellery is an indicator of the social status and wealth of the person wearing it.
The Dutch colonial officer E. Joakim served as a court clerk for many years in Batavia, today's Jakarta, before he moved to Switzerland and settled down in Villeneuve. He had purchased this gold armlet from the Bank of Java in Batavia. According to E. Joakim, '[the bank] used to collect gold objects from pawnshops and melt them down, or else (good pieces) sell them to the museum in Batavia or private collectors.'

9 Armlet | makers unknown to us | Bali, Indonesia | no date | gold alloy | Freiwilliger Museumsverein Basel, permanent loan in 1953 | IIc 14482

The Bronze Age (2,000 to 1,000 BC) is named after the way metal was worked. At this time, people began making weapons and tools from copper, later from bronze. Gold, on the other hand, was used only rarely, and if so, only for jewellery and similar decorative items.
These two pieces were found in Switzerland – but whether they were made here or imported is not known.

10 Earring | makers unknown to us | Cortaillod, Neuchâtel, Switzerland | Bronze Age | gold alloy | Museum Schwab, purchased in 1908 | I 5952

11 Ornamental sheet | makers unknown to us | Lake Biel, Switzerland | Bronze Age | gold alloy | Museum Schwab, purchased in 1908 | I 5953

Until the early 20th century, Guna men and women in Panama marked their identity, status, and affluence by wearing golden ear and nose rings as well as golden necklaces. Today, it is mainly women who still wear gold jewellery. Earrings are part of a woman's life from birth onwards: Typically, a girl's birth is celebrated in the first month of her life as a sign of her integration into the community and to protect her from evil. For this purpose, her earlobes and nasal septum are pierced to accommodate the jewellery.
Consigned by the MKB, Richard Herrmann assembled a collection among the Guna people. The bishop of Colon had introduced him to the island of Ustupu; there he collaborated with the interlocutor Guillermo Hayáns, who had already worked with other anthropologists before. In a letter he wrote: 'With regard to gold jewellery, I was very lucky. In addition to a golden nose ring, I was able to the purchase a golden ear disc owned by the oldest man on Ustupu, who died two years previously, aged 98. […] The second golden ear disc belonged to an old woman.'

12 Woman's nose ring | makers unknown to us | Guna; Ustupu, Panama | first half 20th c. | gold alloy | Adolf Richard Herrman, purchased in 1963 | IVb 3761

13 Girl's earrings | makers unknown to us | Guna; San Blas, Panama | first half 20th c. | gold alloy | Arthur Hurni, purchased in 1935 | IVc 4853a+b

14 Woman's earring | makers unknown to us | Guna; Ustupu, Panama | first half 20th c. | gold alloy | Adolf Richard Herrman, purchased in 1963 | IVb 3760b

15 Man's earring | makers unknown to us | Guna; Ustupu, Panama | first half 20th c. | gold alloy | Adolf Richard Herrman, purchased in 1963 | IVb 3760a

16 Necklace with eagle | makers unknown to us | Guna; Ustupu, Panama | first half 20th c. | gold alloy, glass beads | Adolf Richard Herrman, purchased in 1963 | IVb 3759

During the First World War, the German civilian public was asked to turn in all kinds of precious metals for the purpose of funding the war. In exchange for a gold ring, people received an iron ring bearing the inscription 'I gave gold for iron'. In place of a wedding ring, a symbolic pledge of eternal love, people wore a symbolic declaration of allegiance to their nation at war.
From 1916 on, people were also asked to turn in all kinds of household goods such as copper pans. People who refused faced being fined or sent to jail for up to a year.

17 Iron rings | makers unknown to us | Germany | 1914 | iron | Else Steinbömer-Feix, gifted in 1982 | VI 56259.01-04, VI 56260+61

TRADITIONAL COSTUME BONNETS – Headpieces conceal the hair to some extent and instead embellish the head with other forms of finery – not least with gleaming gold embroidery. Especially in the 19th century, gold-embroidered traditional headdresses from Eastern Switzerland, the Black Forest, and Alsace were a visible symbol of prosperity and social status.
Usually, embroiders used silk threads wrapped with ultra-thin strips of gold, silver or gilded silver, complemented by thin metal strips in the shape of tiny spirals (*bouillon*) and small perforated metal discs (sequins).

In Alsace, too, richly adorned bonnets belonged to women's festive dress in the 18th and 19th centuries. Especially valuable pieces were adorned with gold-coloured metallic threads, sequins, small metal plaques, and gold lace. Originally, such bonnets were worn by wealthy bourgeois women and the wives of wealthy artisans; in the 19th century, the shapes and adornments also found their way into rural festive attire. The material, form, and decoration said something about the origin, wealth, and social status of the woman wearing it.

18 Bonnets | makers unknown to us | Strasbourg, France | late 18th c. | silk, damask, velvet, gold embroidered | Historisches Museum Basel, gifted in 1963 | VI 29706+07, VI 29720, VI 29729

The so-called *Goldkäppi* (golden cap) made up part of the festive attire of married women in Appenzell Innerrhoden. It is worn on a white winged bonnet made of lace, which in turn is flanked by a black winged bonnet made of tulle. Today, this type of headgear is still occasionally worn for major Catholic holidays or at secular events such as traditional costume festivals or livestock shows.

19 *Goldkäppi* | makers unknown to us | Appenzell Innerrhoden, Switzerland | around 1850 | silk, gold embroidery | Historisches Museum Basel, permanent loan in 1953, gifted in 2026 | HM 1903.0041a

The parted bonnet from Schwyz gets its name *Coiflihube* from the French term *la coiffe* meaning headgear or hairdo. The gold-embroidered silk cap is set between white (for married women) or black (for unmarried women) lace wings and is adorned with gold thread, flowers, and glass beads. The bonnet was fastened to the hair with long hairpins. They were usually made in convents.

20 *Coiflihube* | makers unknown to us | Schwyz, Switzerland | around 1860 | plain weave, lace, linen | Historisches Museum Basel, permanent loan in 1953, gifted in 2026 | HM 1953.0038b

So-called Regina bonnets were worn by married wealthy women on festive occasions in the Allgäu and on the Swabian Alps. In the event of a funeral, they were 'blued', that is, the metal gold or silver tips were coated with a dark blue liquid.

21 Regina bonnet | makers unknown to us | Swabia, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany | around 1950 | silk, foil, cotton, beads, gold purl | Lisbeth Bissier, gifted in 1955 | VI 21527

The so-called Lake Constance bonnet from Kreuzlingen made up part of a festive costume. The base of the bonnet is embroidered using gold and silver thread. The 'wheel' consists of a wire frame onto which lace made from flattened metal threads (lamé lace) was mounted. The edge probably had a white lace trim. The wide, patterned silk ribbon served as a decorative bow at the nape and was tied under the chin at the front.

22 Lake Constance bonnet | makers unknown to us | Kreuzlingen, Thurgau, Switzerland | 1805 | cotton, linen, gold lace, beads, sequins | Rudolph Iselin, gifted in 1956 | VI 22821

VALUE & TRADE

Gold has been traded for thousands of years. Its weight can be measured, its value calculated. Yet what makes it precious depends on more than just the properties of the material. Ideas of what is precious are also shaped by society. Sometimes, the golden glow alone is enough.

ASANTE GOLD JEWELLERY – Among the Asante people, gold served several purposes: it was a symbol of political power, a medium of exchange, and was crafted into jewellery. Reaching back to the 7th century, trade routes through the Sahara Desert linked North and West Africa. Gold, enslaved people, and cola nuts were shipped to the north; salt, copper, brass, fabrics, corals, cowrie shells and glass beads were traded southwards.
From the 14th century onwards, Akan-speaking groups in West Africa extended their long-distance trading and gold mining. They panned for gold in rivers, dug in open trenches, or built mines with shafts up to 30 meters deep. Beginning in the 15th century, they traded with European seafarers along the coast, exchanging gold and, later, also enslaved people for European goods including firearms and luxury items.
In the Asante empire (17th to 19th century in what today is Ghana) gold played a significant role. Gold dust served as a means of payment in trade. The 'Golden Stool' symbolized the empire and the rule of the *asantehene*, the king in Kumasi. The royal family, dignitaries, and wealthy nobles used gold jewellery to indicate their high status. Many motifs found in jewellery allude to proverbs and general words of wisdom. Some pieces also served as *suman*, that is, as talisman for protection, well-being, good fortune or special powers.
In the course of the 19th century, the rapport between the Asante and the European powers changed, and previously equal trade relations gave way to colonial power struggles. In 1874 and again in 1896, British troops attacked the Asante empire, ransacked the royal palace, and exiled the ruler Prempeh I.
The gold jewellery presented here found its way to Basel through the Basel Trading Company. The small items probably represent gifts or souvenirs. The Basel Trading Company grew out of the Basel Mission. Its subsidiary, the Union Trading Company (UTC), operated primarily in Ghana and Nigeria from the 1920s through to the 1970s, dealing in cacao, vehicles,

machines, and textiles next to running farms and department stores. A part of the profit went into supporting the Christian mission.
Up to this day, Ghana ranks among the leading producers and exporters of gold, with Switzerland as one of its main trading partners.

This armlet features various symbols of power: the key, egg, and crown stand for rule, prudent governance, office, and authority. The two-gun barrels are a reference to the firearms which the Asante acquired through trade with the Europeans; they signify strength and courage. The knots serve as a reminder that it is better to exert power through wisdom than through force.
A further motif alludes to a proverb: 'The tsetse fly sits in vain on the tortoise's back.' The tortoise is a symbol of patience, endurance, and resistance.

23 Armlet | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy wrapped in lace wire | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27218

Since the colonial days, golden replicas of European watches rank among the jewellery and status symbols of Asante kings and noble dignitaries.

24 Representation of a watch | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27221

With growing European influence in the late 19th century, the lion became a popular symbol of royal power among the Akan – although lions are rare in Ghana. The creature stands for strength, courage, and authority and still features on numerous emblems today.
At the royal court in Ghana, the lion is usually shown with its head turned to one side and its tail high over its back. The lion of the former British colonial power, on the other hand, is shown from the side with its tail lowered.

25 British lions | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27230a+b

There have been, and still are, necklaces whose pendants refer to Akan proverbs or are worn as talismans. This piece, however, features Christian symbols: the cross for faith, the anchor for hope, the fish as a mark for Jesus. The gold nugget could be understood as a sign of prosperity.

26 Necklace with pendants | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy, cotton thread | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27238
27 Cast nuggets as jewellery | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27223, III 27225-27227

The motif on the ring refers to the proverb 'The tsetse fly sits in vain on the tortoise's back.'

28 Ring | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27219
29 Ring | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27239

This ring was probably modelled on a European sealing ring. Two birds flank a plaque bearing the initials F.A.D.A. We do not know what this stands for.

30 Ring | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27240
31 Hairpin | makers unknown to us | Ghana | mid-20th c. | gold alloy | Basler Handels-Gesellschaft AG, gifted in 2000 | III 27220

WEIGHTS – Long before coins were used, gold was exchanged and traded. Its value was measured by weight. Because gold hardly corrodes at all and can be divided into small quantities, its weight can be determined very accurately. The units of measurement used and the weights employed as counterweights varied from region to region.

From the 15th to the end of the 19th century, Akan-speaking groups used gold weights, *mbrammuo*, to weigh gold dust, which served as a means of payment until 1896. The system of weights was based on units adopted through trade with Islamic countries. Kings, chiefs, traders, and families owned their own sets of weights; they were kept in a pouch together with the scales and a small spoon, and usually passed on from one generation to the next. The weights were cast from brass using the cire perdue method. Brass reached the Akan through trade with Europeans.
Under British colonial rule, gold dust lost its purpose as a means of payment – and, consequently, so did the weights. At the same time they became sought-after collectors' items in Europe and North America.
Many of the figurative gold weights reference proverbs and words of wisdom.

'A tortoise too has its worries'

32 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of a tortoise | makers unknown to us | Ghana | no date | metal | Ernst and Annemarie Vischer-Wadler, bequest in 1995 | III 26643

'The Sankofa bird reminds us: "Pick up what drops behind you."'

33 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of a Sankofa bird | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1914 | brass | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22531

'Rain wets the skin of the leopard – but it can't wash away the dots.'

34 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of a leopard | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1914 | brass | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22610

'The black cobra is feared even when it has no bad intentions'

35 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of a snake | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1914 | brass | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22617

'A family has many mouths but only one stomach.'

36 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of crocodiles | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1914 | brass | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22619

'The elephant's tail may be short, but it's enough to keep the flies at bay.'

37 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of an elephant-tail fly whisk | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1914 | brass | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22492

'When the threads become entangled in weaving, it takes both hands to unravel them.'

38 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of a wisdom knot | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1918 | brass | J. Aeppli, gifted in 1918 | III 4972

'Difficult problems, too, need resolving by deliberation and not by force.'

39 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of an axe | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1914 | Messing | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22697

'If the drum has a head, you don't beat it on its side.'

40 Gold weight *abrammuo* in the shape of a drum | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1914 | brass | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22685

41 Gold scales | makers unknown to us | Ghana | before 1890 | tinplate, brass, string | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22831

42 Spoons for gold dust | makers unknown to us | Ghana | not dated | brass | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981, gifted in 2015 | III 22804, III 22806- 22808, III 22811

Ever since the 7th century BC, gold has been used as coins – but here, too, the value was initially defined by how much precious metal they contained. This is why scales remained important for moneychangers, traders, and travellers; a coin might be valid in nominal terms, but actually be worth less if it was worn or had been clipped or tampered with.
François-Antoine Jecker produced extremely precise measuring instruments in Paris, including, among other things, these foldable scales. In the lid it features a 'table of gold coins'. It describes the prescribed weight of roughly twenty gold coins from different European countries – from the Dutch ducat to the Roman zecchino and the Spanish pistole, right through to a Prussian gold coin. This enabled a person to assess whether a coin matched the prescribed weight, thus allowing to assign the coin its value.
The scales were made in a time of turmoil and change: after the French revolution, the franc replaced the *livre tournois* as the official French currency. Accordingly, the scales display information on both currency systems.

43 Scales for gold coins | makers unknown to us | Emmental, Bern, Switzerland | 18th c. | brass | Jakob Lanz-Ruchti, purchased in 1941 | VI 16156

The gold scales used on the island of Rote consists of two small bowls and an arm made of tortoiseshell. Seeds, stones, and the lids of sea snail shells served as weights. The seeds of the paternoster pea (*Abrus precatorius*) and the condori tree (*Adenanthera pavonina*) were widely used; both were known as *saga*. The unit of weight *saga* was derived from these seed weights. 24 *saga* were equivalent to one *mas*. Today, gold is weighed according to the metric system; in conversion, one *saga* corresponds to roughly 0.1 grams, a *mas* to approx. 2.5 grams.

44 Gold scales with weights | makers unknown to us | Tudameda, Rote, Indonesia | early 20th c. | wood, tortoiseshell, stone, seeds, snail shells | Alfred Bühler, purchased in 1935 | IIc 4030a-f

REPLACING GOLD – Time and again, gold has been imitated or replaced by other materials – whether out of necessity, through ingenuity or by deliberate choice.
The Fulbe – a pastoral community in West Africa – are well known for their skill as gold-smiths and for the filigree jewellery pieces they make. But gold is not the only shiny material. This piece is made of straw with a core made of beeswax. With its diamond-shaped links and the intricately decorated pendant in the shape of a double cone at the centre, it accurately replicates the style of gold necklaces known to the region.

45 Necklace | makers unknown to us | Djenné, Mali | 1980s | straw, beeswax | Ruth Kunz, gifted in 2017 | III 27820

In Timbuktu, a main hub in the trans-Saharan trade and a religious centre in northern Mali, Songhai women create jewellery out of beeswax and straw which closely resembles gold jewellery in appearance. Upon closer inspection, one discovers a number of highly creative reinterpretations in terms of material, make, and use. The shape of this necklace resembles a bracelet clasp common in the Middle East between the 11th and 13th centuries.

Subsequently it resurfaced in the Fulbe jewellery repertoire in the form of gold bands that fit closely around the neck.

46 Necklace *guinda maé* | makers unknown to us | Timbuktu, Mali | before 1951 | straw, beeswax, cotton thread | Gustav von Selve, gifted in 1951 | III 11344

In the 19th century, the canton of Aargau was world-famous for its straw industry; craftwork made of straw was exported to major cities around the world, such as Paris, London, and even New York. Straw goods were produced mainly at home. In addition to their work in the house and on the farm, women earned an extra income by creating hats and finery made of straw. In its heyday, the Aargau straw industry had up to 25,000 women working from home.

47 Straw finery | makers unknown to us | Wohlen, Aargau, Switzerland | around 1900 | straw, artificial gems | Silvia Wissmann-Erzinger, gifted in 1960 | VI 26614+15, VI 26620+21, VI 26623

Together with women from the Sahrawi refugee camp in Algeria, the designer Florie Salnot created the collection 'Plastic Gold' in 2009. The delicate pieces of jewellery were hand-crafted from recycled camp waste: The women cut gold-coloured plastic bottles into thin strips, wrapped around pegs on a board to create the desired shapes, and hardened the pieces in hot sand around the pegs. The project combines sustainable design with efforts to create income opportunities for women in a precarious situation.

48 Necklace 'Soltiss' | Florie Salnot | Algeria and Hamburg, Germany | 2014 | recycled bottles, acrylic paint, cotton thread | Stephanie Lovász & Franziska Jenni, purchased in 2014 | IIII 27767

GIFTS

Gold is precious – and that makes it a very special gift. It is given to people, offered to deities, and placed in graves for the deceased. Such gifts show appreciation, forge bonds and connect people with the divine or the world beyond. Yet what is placed in a grave as a precious gift can also spark desire – not least in museums and among collectors.

THREE WISE MEN – In the Gospel of Matthew, it is told that wise men from the East, versed in the stars, travelled to Bethlehem to pay their respect to Baby Jesus. As gifts they had with them gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Later, the unspecified number of astrologers became the Three Kings, or Wise Men, named Melchior, Balthasar, and Caspar, and the gifts became symbolically charged: gold refers to Jesus as king, frankincense to his divine nature, and myrrh – also used in mortuary rites – to his human mortality.
The representation of the three men changed in the course of the centuries. They were understood to represent the three ages in life, later also the then known continents, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Ever since the 15th century, one of the three kings has been depicted as a black man, thus reflecting the European understanding of the Other and the Exotic – for example, through particularly striking clothing or stereotypical facial features.
While in early imagery, the emphasis was on the humble demeanour of the kings, courtly splendour took on greater significance from the late Middle Ages onwards. Precious robes and crowns stand in stark contrast to the humble setting of the stable. The gold was usually presented by the oldest king as the first gift, usually stored in a precious box or vessel. Later nativity scenes replicate this iconography: shining robes, rich jewellery

and ermine-trimmed cloaks dominate the scene and mark the Three Wise Men as rich and powerful rulers.

Nativity figures, each featuring the Three Wise Men

49 Makers unknown to us | Metepec, Mexico | 1976 | ceramics | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 8501-8503

50 Makers unknown to us | Ecuador | before 1992 | ceramics | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 14822-14824

51 Jan Malik | Cracow, Poland | 1981 | textile, wood | Borys Malkin, purchased in 1983 | VI 57322-57324

52 Makers unknown to us | Ayacucho, Peru | 1980 | unfired clay | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 11944-11946

53 Makers unknown to us | Barcelos, Braga, Portugal | 20th c. | Ceramics | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 || RH 11355.02-04

54 Makers unknown to us | Mexico-City, Mexico | 1972 | ceramics | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 4353-4355

55 José Marcelino Moreira | Estremoz, Portugal | mid-20th c. | ceramics | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 1323-1325

56 on horses | makers unknown to us | Barcelona, Spain | mid-20th c. | ceramics, wire | Joan Amades, purchased in 1957 | VI 22920-22922

57 Marcel Chanet | Marseille, France | mid-20th c. | ceramics | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 6579-6581

58 Makers unknown to us | provenance unknown to us | 20th c. | gypsum, metal | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH UFO_Krippe 007-009

59 with mounts | makers unknown to us | Diessen am Ammersee, Bavaria, Germany | mid-20th c. | pewter | B. Schweizer, purchased in 1958 | VI 24817.04-09

60 Pupils from the school of Klara Prillowa | Bydgoszcz, Poland | mid-20th c. | unfired clay | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 64-66

61 Makers unknown to us | Val Gardena, South Tyrol, Italy | 18th c. | wood | Werner Konrad Jaggi, purchased 1979 | VI 50730-50732

62 Makers unknown to us | Andes, Venezuela | around 1965 | medulla of the Montanoa quadrangularis (Asteraceae), metal, hair (horse), textile, wadding | Angelina Pollak-Eltz, purchased in 1966 | IVc 10180h+i+k

63 Makers unknown to us | provenance unknown to us | 20th c. | ceramics, textile, plastic | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH UFO_Krippe 004-006

64 Morel | Les Baux-de-Provence, France | before 1960 | ceramics | Domus, Kornfeld & Co, purchased in 1960 | VI 26098+99, VI 26106

65 Adrian Ojeda Gomez | San Martín Tilcajete, Oaxaca, Mexico | not dated | balsa wood (Bursera glabrifolia) | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH UFO_Krippe 010-012

66 on camels | makers unknown to us |provenance unknown to us | 20th c. | ceramics, metal | Collected by Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH UFO_Krippe 001-003

67 Erich Müller | Dresden, Germany | mid-20th c. | wood | W. Döderlein, purchased in 1959 | VI 25463d+f+h

The series *Rematriation* by Estefanía García Pineda evokes the symbolic restitution of sacred and ritual artefacts (*huacas*) made of gold and tumbaga (gold-copper alloy) found across many European museums today. Each work is created as an offering, idea, and reminder of the concept of the origins of the Kimbaya people and their culture.
In Pineda's works, the *huacas* step forth from their museum showcases and materialize as living beings. They embody the guardians of the balance of nature. They inhabit and protect snow-covered peaks, sacred sites, and offering places in the Colombian territories of Tama, Tabuchía, and Kumanday. There, the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures embody the complementarity of the human and non-human realms. Guažalak is the spirit

of the large colibri that accompanies the spirit of the deceased to yonder world. Maktaguak is the spirit of the deer; it is not only a sacred animal but also represents a cycle of the lunar calendar. Tukao embodies the connection between time and space.

Estefanía García Pineda (b. 1991 in Colombia) is an artist, researcher, and cultural manager whose artistic practice critically examines the interfaces between territorial memory, the dynamics of exploitive mining, and contemporary colonialism. She is a bearer of traditional knowledge of the lost wax casting technique, also known as *cire perdue*, for producing gold and tumbaga objects. In her research and artistic practice, the materiality of gold and the restitution of sacred objects to their places of origin are central concerns.

68 Guažalak | Estefanía García Pineda | Colombia | 2025 | mambe, lime, gold leaf on paper made from coca leaves | on loan from the artist 2026

69 Maktaguak | Estefanía García Pineda | Colombia | 2025 | mambe, curcuma, gold leaf on paper made from coca leaves | on loan from the artist 2026

70 Tukao | Estefanía García Pineda | Colombia | 2025 | *mambe*, gold leaf on paper made from coca leaves | on loan from the artist 2026

BURIAL MONEY – In China, replicas of money and other valuable items made of paper have traditionally been produced for the deceased. The bereaved burn them during funerals and commemorative rituals. In this way the gifts, shall make their way to the afterworld and be at the deceased's disposal there. Apart from money, such offerings also include jewellery, clothing and other valuable items, all made of paper.
Gold plays an important part in this context as well. The paper objects mimic various items: The ship-shaped *Jin Yuanbao* remind us of historical ingots, whilst the paper covered in gold foil is reminiscent of bank notes. The 'Hundred Treasures' offering set includes ingots bearing the inscription 'pure gold, 999.9' along with coins modelled on historical designs. The *Shunzhi Tongbao* characters refer to the currency common to the reign of the Shunzi emperor in the 17th century.
Here it is not the material value of gold that is of significance. Paper, foil or metal overlays suffice to represent gold and its inherent value – and symbolically pass it on to the deceased.

71 Burial money | makers unknown to us | China | 20th c. | paper, gold foil | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981 | IId 10270.01, IId 9835a

72 Burial money | makers unknown to us | Qingdao, Shandong, China | 20th c. | paper | Samuel Preiswerk-Sarasin, gifted in 1909; collected by Richard Wilhelm | IId 837

73 Offering set 'Hundred Treasures' | makers unknown to us | New York, USA | 2010 | cardboard | Stephanie Lovász and Franziska Jenni, purchased in 2010 | IId 15011

74 Mortuary offering armlet, rings, and hair ornaments | makers unknown to us | China | around 1900 | paper, wood | Basel Mission collection, permanent loan in 1981 | IId 13232

75 Mortuary offering *Jin Yuanbao* | makers unknown to us | New York, USA | 2010 | paper, gold foil | Stephanie Lovász and Franziska Jenni, purchased in 2010 | IId 15039.01+.02+.05+.07

SACRIFICIAL OFFERINGS IN PRE-HISPANIC AMERICA – In pre-Hispanic America, gold was important in terms of sacrificial offerings, grave goods, and gift giving. Items made of gold or gold alloys were an expression of the power and status of secular and religious elites. People used gold to represent and embody deities and to craft ritual gifts and objects used in ceremonies. Objects were often specifically made or used for a particular ritual. Gold objects accompanied the deceased – frequently buried in mummified form – to the beyond, whether in the form of ornaments for the ears, chest, nose or clothing, or in the form of headdresses, crowns or death masks.

76 Earplugs | makers unknown to us | central Andes, Peru | 1st millennium AD | gold alloy | Gerhard Baer, purchased in 1969 | IVc 12730a+b

77 Earplugs and nose ornament | makers unknown to us | central Andes, Peru |100-1500 | gold alloy, turquoise | Carmen Dolores Oechsle, purchased in 1988 | IVc 23701-23704

78 Mask | makers unknown to us | north coast, Peru | 600-1370 | gold alloy | Carmen Dolores Oechsle, purchased in 1988 | IVc 23700

79 Ornamental feather *penacho* | Chimú | Batan Grande, Peru | 1200-1470 | gold alloy | Leopoldo Gómez Alonso, purchased 1970 | IVc 12736

GIFTS FROM MOTHER EARTH – In the Andes, gold was associated with the sun, silver with the moon. All ores came from Mother Earth. The elaborate manufacturing procedures made metal objects the ideal offering destined to be returned to Mother Earth. Hence, on different occasions metals served as suitable sacrificial offerings, for instance, when asking Mother Earth for permission to erect a new building or when mining metals, not least because these offerings necessitated work, knowledge, and creativity. Representations of animals, particularly of big cats, birds, amphibians and reptiles such as frogs or snakes were placed in graves and thus returned to the Earth. Birds roam between different worlds, the here and the beyond, amphibians and snakes symbolize fertility, among other things.

80 Representations of animals | Kimbaya and Sinú | Columbia | 500-1550 | gold alloy | Anna Ritter-Buser and Ernst Ritter, bequest in 1968 | IVc 11609, IVc 11612-11614, IVc 11632-11635

81 Eagle and two frogs | makers unknown to us | Panama | 700-1550 | gold alloy | Gotthelf Kuhn, bequest in 1975 | IVb 4638-4639

82 Male figure | makers unknown to us | Columbia | 1000-1500 | gold alloy | Gotthelf Kuhn, bequest in 1975 | IVc 17477

TOMB RAIDERS AND MUSEUM COLLECTIONS – Whilst in pre-Hispanic America, the spiritual and symbolic significance of gold was paramount, Europeans were primarily interested in its material and monetary value. The search for 'Eldorado' was a driving force behind the European colonization of the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries. In those early days, the vast majority of gold objects was melted down.
Museum collections today mostly hold gold artefacts that arrived in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries; this includes the MKB. Museums usually know the names of the collectors or dealers from whom they directly received or purchased an object. The items' earlier provenance is usually unknown, although it is likely that the vast majority of these artefacts were excavated illegally, looted and exported from the country of origin in violation of their national legislation. This is why information concerning find contexts is rarely available. Today, many government bodies and Indigenous communities in South America are demanding that the artefacts be repatriated to the nation state they came from or to 'rematriate' them to the respective Indigenous communities.

83 Ear ornaments | Kimbaya and Sinú | Columbia | 500-1550 | gold alloy | Anna Ritter-Buser und Ernst Ritter, bequest in 1968 | IVc 11604-11607, IVc 11615

84 Nose ornaments | Kimbaya | Columbia | 500-1550 | gold alloy | Anna Ritter-Buser und Ernst Ritter, bequest in 1968 | IVc 11611

85 Nose ornaments| makers unknown to us | Ecuador | 1000-1500 | gold alloy | Walo F. Eppenberger, purchased in 1973 | IVc 15807

BASEL-BASED PETROLEUM GEOLOGISTS AND COLLECTIONS – In the first half of the 20th century, petroleum geologists from Basel frequently collected for the MKB. Among them was Ernst A. Ritter, who collected items between 1921 and 1923 while doing survey work in Columbia. During his fieldwork and prospecting, he excavated artefacts without following archaeological standards and correct documentation. He also purchased objects

from local people. In his correspondence with the museum, he merely indicates the approximate origin of his gold finds: the Kimbaya objects were from the Rio Sinu and Rio San Jorge areas in the Department of Bolívar, the Muisca artefacts from the Department of Cundinamarca. Some of the small fragments were obtained from panning.

86 Votive offering, Tunjo| Muisca | Columbia | 500-1540 | gold alloy | Anna Ritter-Buser and Ernst Ritter, bequest in 1968 | IVc 11598

87 Ornaments from objects or clothing | makers unknown to us | Columbia | 500-1550 | gold alloy | Anna Ritter-Buser and Ernst Ritter, bequest in 1968 | IVc 11599-11603, IVc 11608, IVc 11610

METALWORKING TECHNIQUES IN PRE-HISPANIC AMERICA – Important techniques for working gold alloys such as *tumbaga* (gold-copper alloy) in pre-Hispanic northern Peru included hammering, repoussé, and engraving along with various methods of gilding other metals or materials.
Craftspeople and artists among the Muisca, Kimbaya, Sinú, and Tairona communities in Columbia relied mainly on the method of lost-wax casting, or cire perdue, for producing gold artefacts. The *tumbaga* alloy had the advantage of melting at lower temperatures than pure gold, making it easier to cast and work. It was particularly well suited to hammering and repoussé. By heating the alloy and treating it with vegetable acids to etch away the copper on the surface, craftspeople were able to create a gold-like lustre.

88 Beard tweezer | makers unknown to us | central Andes, Peru | 500-1500 | gold alloy | Carmen Dolores Oechsle, purchased in 1988 | IVc 23699

89 Ornaments from objects or clothing | makers unknown to us | north coast Peru | 100-800 | gold alloy | Doris Buderer, gifted in 2013 | IVc 26434.01+02

90 Gold disc with two-headed amphibia | makers unknown to us | central Andes, Peru | 200-600 | gold alloy | Cron community of heirs, purchased in 1989 | IVc 23891

91 Grave goods snake | makers unknown to us | Cundinamarca, Columbia | 500-1500 | gold alloy | Hermann Schlenker, purchased in 1978 | IVc 19156

92 Ornamental plate deity F | makers unknown to us | north coast Peru | 100-800 | gold alloy | Ernst and Annemarie Vischer-Wadler, bequest in 1995 | IVc 25151

In her video work *Fuel to Fire* (2023), the artist Carolina Caycedo reverses a trusted process: Gold is no longer extracted from the ground or a river, but returned to the waters instead. Caycedo thus fulfils a *pagamento* – a return to nature.
Key to her work is the concept of reciprocity: if you receive something from the earth, you have to return something in place. This is based on the notion that humans, animals, plants, water, mountains, and other beings do not exist independently but are inter-connected by a host of relationships. If anything is permanently removed from this intricate web, the whole system becomes unbalanced.
This act of restitution is dedicated to the Páramo de Santurbán, a high-mountain ecosystem in northeastern Colombia. Its marshes and wetlands provide over two million people with water. At the same time, the mountains hold large deposits of gold. *Fuel to Fire* was created after the mining company Aris announced the start of the *Soto Norte* gold mining project in the Páramo area. Caycedo is thus responding to the prospect that an ecosystem vital to the area's water supply could become a site of large-scale industrial gold mining. Aris continues to pursue its plans.
Caycedo also describes her *pagamento* as a ritual act aimed at protecting the Páramo, thus countermanding the logic of extraction, exploitation, and accumulation with the notion of care and restoration.

Carolina Caycedo (b. 1978 in London, resident in Los Angeles) is a Colombian artist and an internationally acclaimed voice in the artistic discourse on environmental justice and the exploitation of natural resources. For many years already she has been addressing the issues of land, water, and the impact of extractive economic practices by means of films, performances, installations, photographs, and sculpture, always with an eye on forms of coexistence that are not based on exploitation but on mutual interdependence, care, and responsibility. Her work has been shown at numerous international biennales and in leading museums including the Tate Modern, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

93 *Fuel to Fire* | Carolina Caycedo | 2023 | HD video. 7 minutes, 34 seconds | on loan from the artist 2026

MATERIAL & EXTRACTION

Gold is a rare, exceptionally durable, and easily shaped metal. It is found in rocks and in river sediments around the world. Extracting even small amounts of gold can require major interventions in the natural environment and have serious consequences for local communities.

There are many ways of extracting gold: It is washed out of sand and gravel in rivers. In the shallow, water-filled pans, the heavier gold particles settle at the bottom. In small-scale mining, sediments or rocks are processed by hand or with the help of simple machines. In this case, mercury is often used. In industrial mining, whether open-cast or subsurface, gold is often extracted from rock using cyanide. In 'urban mining' gold is recovered from used electrical appliances and other products.
In manufacturing, gold is often mixed with other metals, such as copper, silver or palladium. Such a mixture is referred to as an alloy. Depending on its composition, the colour of the gold changes, as do its hardness and workability. The amount of gold in an alloy is expressed as its fineness or in carats.

In Umiken in the canton of Aargau, gold was panned in the river Aare until 1875. It is here that the river meets hard rock, allowing small particles of gold to settle on the riverbed, especially after the snowmelt when the Aare's tributaries tend to form new watercourses. Between 1825 and 1835, there were roughly 40 such gold panning stations in operation between Olten and Klingnau. Gold-bearing silt and sand were first coarsely sieved and then poured over a sloping surface, where the gold particles became caught up in the fleece. The panners sold the gold they had extracted to goldsmiths in Baden and Aarau. On a good day, they could earn up to 20 francs.
Leopold Rütimeyer, then curator for the Africa department at the MKB, purchased this 'gold-washing chair' from a 73-year-old man called Horlacher, who, as a child, had helped his father pan gold. According to Rütimeyer, this was 'probably the last remaining gold-washing chair' and he used it as a starting point for his history of gold panning in Switzerland.

94 Gold-washing chair | makers unknown to us | Umiken, Aargau, Switzerland | around 1875 | wood | Leopold Rütimeyer, gifted in 1925 | VI 10050

These two wooden pans are from the gold mines operated by the mining company Mica near Brad in Transylvania (Romania). The mines are located in the Apuseni Mountains, one of Europe's most significant gold-producing regions. For centuries, gold has been extracted here from both rivers and rock.

In Romanian, these pans are referred to as *saitroc*, a combination of the German words 'scheiden' and 'Trog', meaning separate and trough. They were used to separate gold from crushed stone.

95 *Şaitroc* pans | makers unknown to us | Brad, Hunedoara, Romania | before 1934 | wood | Sieber, gifted in 1934 | VI 11642+43

The island of Sumatra in present-day Indonesia was for many years inextricably associated with gold. In Indian sources the island was referred to as *Suvarnadvīpa*, that is, island of gold. Early European travellers suspected it being the fabled kingdom of Ophir, from where King Solomon was thought to have obtained his gold treasure. In fact, the island does have significant gold deposits, particularly in the central highlands. The gold trade played an important part for the Minangkabau political power centres in West Sumatra during the 14th century.

Gold mines dating from pre-European times are known to have existed in West Sumatra, and in the Lebong region of south-western Sumatra the largest and most profitable gold-mining area of the Dutch colonial era grew in the early 20th century. Gold is still mined in Sumatra today – on an industrial scale as well as in small, often informal operations. In addition, gold is still panned from river sediments.

One of the bowls comes with a coconut shell containing equipment used for panning gold: alongside two small bags for storing the panned gold, it contains a sea snail shell – to prevent the gold from scattering – and a piece of turmeric root to keep it yellow. Three stones of different colours were meant to prevent the bowl from floating off.

96 Bowl for panning gold dulang and panning equipment | makers unknown to us | Sarolangun, Sumatra, Indonesia | around 1910 | wood, coconut shell, textile, snail shell, stones | August Tobler, gifted in 1913 | IIc 1321+22

97 Bowl for panning gold | makers unknown to us | upper reaches of the river Kahayan, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th c. | wood | Mattheus Vischer-Mylius, gifted in 1934 | IIc 3005

This T-shirt is printed with a promotional image for the gold and copper mine in Ok Tedi at an altitude of 2,000 metres in the Star Mountains of western Papua New Guinea. The motif evokes the image of the happy gold digger and promises findings, prosperity, and success, an image which has very little to do with reality. The Ok Tedi mine promised to bring work, education, and healthcare to the local area; however, the only thing it did was to destroy the people's livelihood. The mine claimed large tracts of land which were previously owned and used collectively. The traditional taro cultivation just about came to a stop. During construction in the 1980s, many men found short-term, unskilled employment, but as soon as the mine began operating, many of these jobs disappeared again.

At the same time, the mine became a prime example of the environmental destruction caused by large-scale industrial mining in Papua New Guinea: Large quantities of waste rock and residues from ore processing ended up in the Ok Tedi River and, from there, spread to watercourses further downstream. The contaminated sediments impaired the quality of water, caused riverbeds to rise, exacerbated erosion, and have led to the death of large forest areas along the riverbanks.

98 T-Shirt | makers unknown to us | Telefomin, Sandaun and Western provinces, Papua New Guinea | late 20th c. | cotton | Maria Wronska-Friend, purchased in 1991 | Vb 30487

In artisanal mining, raw materials such as gold are extracted without the involvement of large companies. The people work with very little technical equipment, often without formal contracts, and with no legal protection. Working without safety measures bears considerable risks. Yet, for many families mining is an important source of income.

During a period of drought in the Sahel region in the 1980s, many farmers and herd owners had to look for an alternative source of income due to the persistent dry spell. In 1987, in Thiou, Burkina Faso, hundreds of people, among them children, tried their luck in a different way: In search of gold, they dug shafts up to 20 metres deep and sifted through the soil in the hope of finding gold particles, often for days on end without success. It is told that gold had been found shortly before these pictures were taken. If successful, the gold was sold, for example, to government agencies thus finding its way into the worldwide trading system.

99 Artisanal gold mining: gold seekers and shafts | photo: Bernhard Gardi | Thiou, Burkina Faso | 2.4.1987 | prints from colour negatives, 35mm | (F)III 15674, (F)III 15678-80, (F)III 15685, (F)III 15694, (F)III 15699

Goldsmithing is one of the oldest metalworking crafts in history. In view of the overall economic upturn after WWII, the demand for gold jewellery increased, not least in Mopti, Mali, thus lending the craft an additional boost. After Mali became independent in 1960, locally mined gold was exported increasingly. This meant goldsmiths had to rely evermore on already existing jewellery: they melted down older items and turned them into new pieces. Their customers were almost exclusively women. The gold jewellery remained in their care and was passed down from mother to daughter. It also served as an asset and as personal safety net.
In the 1980s, goldsmiths' workshops in Mopti focused on creating specific models based on two techniques: forming and embellishing the gold. In a workshop, different people were responsible for the individual work steps. Even though, today, modern equipment such as lasers and electric rollers is used, goldsmiths around the world still rely on tools that have hardly changed over the centuries: anvil, hammer, pliers, file, and burner.

100 Small turned golden rod, heating over a flame | workshop of goldsmith Baamoy Yattara | photo: Bernhard Gardi | Mopti, Mali | 20.10.1985 | repro from B/W negative, 35mm | (F)III 17567

101 Cleaning a finished gold pendant in an acid bath | Sory Tapo in the workshop of goldsmith Baamoy Yattara | photo: Bernhard Gardi | Mopti, Mali | 20.10.1985 | repro from B/W negative, 35mm | (F)III 17582

102 Small golden rod | photo: Bernhard Gardi | Mopti, Mali | 1985 | repro from colour negative, 35mm | on loan from Bernhard Gardi: Film 77, No. 28

103 Fine hammering of ear pendant using a hammer and anvil | photo: Bernhard Gardi | Goldsmith Baylo: Allay Kiida | Tongorongo, Mopti, Mali | 25.12.1978 | repro from colour negative, 35mm | on loan from Bernhard Gardi: Film 11, No. 34

104 Heating and welding fine wire and spherical elements | workshop of goldsmith Baamoy Yattara | photo: Bernhard Gardi | Mopti, Mali | 20.10.1985 | repro from colour negative, 35mm | on loan from Bernhard Gardi: Film 78, No. 35

105 Gold jewellery drying on hot embers | workshop of goldsmith Baamoy Yattara | photo: Bernhard Gardi | Mopti, Mali | 20.10.1985 | repro from colour negative, 35mm | on loan from Bernhard Gardi: Film 79, No. 9

106 Table with goldsmith's scales | photo: Bernhard Gardi | Mopti, Mali | 1979 | repro from colour negative, 35mm | on loan from Bernhard Gardi: Film 16, No. 21

PLAQUES

Mobile phones – Gold is used in many electronic devices. Old mobile phones, computers, and cables are sources of gold as a raw material. A single tonne of mobile phones contains up to 400 grams of gold; in contrast, a tonne of gold ore often yields only a few grams. 'Urban mining' helps to recover gold from e-waste. Even now, however, only a small fraction of the world's e-waste is collected and recycled properly.

Forests – Gold mining destroys vast areas of forest. Every year, some 435 km² of forest disappear across the globe due to gold mining – an area almost the size of the canton of Basel-Landschaft. Small-scale gold mining leads to forest clearance and topsoil removal; rivers are churned up or diverted; silt and contaminants are carried far downstream. Industrial-scale gold mines use up vast areas of land – for extraction operations, roads and buildings as well as for the storage of large volumes of rock, tailings and contaminated water. Forests are cleared and water systems diverted for these purposes too.

Poison – Cyanide is often used in industrial-scale gold mines to extract gold from pulverized rock. This process generates large volumes of contaminated residues that are held in retention basins. If solutions containing cyanide or otherwise contaminated tailings enter the environment, the soil and waterways are seriously harmed.
In 2000 at Baia Mare, Romania, a dam failed at a plant where chemical processes were used to extract gold from rock and mining waste. Around 100 million litres (100,000 m³) of cyanide-contaminated wastewater and sludge spilled into the surrounding rivers, poisoning the drinking water and the soil.

Fish – In small-scale gold mining, gold-bearing sand or pulverized rock is mixed with mercury; it in turn binds to the gold particles present. The resulting mixture is then heated: the mercury evaporates, and gold is left behind. During this process, mercury vapour is released into the air; further residues enter the soil and waterways through sludge and wastewater.
In rivers, mercury accumulates in fish and enters the human body through the food chain. Mercury damages the brain and nervous system. Foetuses and children are particularly at risk.

Ticino – Switzerland is a hub of the international trade in gold. Large volumes of gold are imported for refinement into Switzerland before being re-exported, used in the manufacture of watches and jewellery, or deposited in bank vaults here.
Four of the largest gold refineries in the world are in Switzerland – three of them in Ticino alone. Gold is assayed, analysed, refined, and re-cast in these refineries. Afterwards it is often impossible to identify the source of the gold.

Children – An estimated 20 to 30 million people around the world work in small-scale gold mines in which child labour is common. Children work in dangerous conditions, often without a contract, protective clothing or social security. They have to dig, carry heavy loads, crush stone or wash gold. Employing children in mines is one of the most deplorable forms of child labour. Criminal networks profit from illegal gold mining, a practice that is associated with human trafficking and forced labour, both of which affect children too.

Trust – Gold is considered a 'safe haven'. Especially in times of war, when inflation is high, or during a financial crisis, many people trust that gold will retain its value. Their confidence is based on gold's unique characteristics: it is scarce, durable and tradable around the world. Moreover, anyone who buys gold owns a tangible asset – and unlike money, the supply of gold cannot be increased arbitrarily. Such confidence does not protect against volatility, however: the price of gold can rise and fall sharply.

Rock – Gold is present in rocks around the world – although usually only in minute quantities. To extract it, massive amounts of material need to be mined, crushed, and processed. To make a gold ring weighing 10 g, about 1,000 kg of rock needs to be moved and processed – roughly the weight of a medium-sized car!

Profit – In the 20th century, there were two noteworthy instances of Switzerland profiting from gold supplied by oppressive regimes. During the Second World War, the Swiss National Bank purchased gold from Nazi Germany. Around 79 per cent of German gold shipments abroad at the time were shipped through Switzerland.
Decades later, Switzerland served as a key trading and financial hub for gold from apartheid-era South Africa. In the 1980s, up to 80 per cent of the gold exported from South Africa was remelted in Switzerland. Even today, profits are made in Switzerland from gold linked to human rights violations and environmental damage.

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Mark Pieth (2019): Goldwäsche – Die schmutzigen Geheimnisse des Goldhandels, Elster & Salis, Zurich, p. 52 and 59.

Danielle Müller (2025): Quecksilber – Das steckt dahinter, in: Greenpeace *Gold*, 4/25, Zürich. S. 16–28.

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