I notice...
Ivory Chief's Trumpet

West Africa

Age: 
Around 100 years old

Size: 
2½ feet long

Function: 
To announce the arrival of high-ranking chiefs

For hundreds of years ivory trumpets such as this were used in West Africa to announce the arrival of high-ranking chiefs. The music made by an ivory horn of this size is similar to the trumpeting sound of an elephant. This horn retains the shape of the elephant’s tusk. Within Africa, the elephant has long been respected for its power and wisdom. The ivory from its tusks is also admired for its hardness, color, rarity, and shine.

Ivory has played an important role in Africa’s history. It has been made into luxury items for traditional African use such as this trumpet. It has been traded to Arab merchants who crossed the Sahara Desert. Over the last 200 years, huge amounts of African ivory were exported by colonial powers. As a result, the African elephant is now an endangered species, and the international trade of ivory has been banned.

Why does it look like this?
The Mende carver who made this trumpet playfully carved the hole (used to blow into the trumpet) in the figure’s chest, exactly where the lungs would be. The figure wears a western style hat, influenced by European hat styles.

During the late 1800s, Great Britain began to trade with the Mende people; at the same time European-style clothing began to appear on traditional Mende art objects such as this.
I notice...
In West and Central Africa there were many great kingdoms built, in part, on the wealth that resulted from long-distance trade. Many beautiful pieces of art were made for these royal courts. This plaque was made over 400 years ago to decorate the royal Benin palace in present-day Nigeria. The plaque is made from bronze, a costly and rare metal often used in royal art. The artists of Benin were experts in bronze casting. In fact, this part of Africa had perfected metalworking long before Europeans arrived on the coast in the 1470s and 1480s.

This young female figure was probably a royal servant in the Benin court. On her shoulder is a water jug in the form of a leopard. Actual leopard jugs like this were used in Benin court ceremonies. The leopard is a symbol of the Benin king. For many years the Benin kings actually kept leopards at the royal palace, and they were also given as sacrifices to royal ancestors.

**Why does it look like this?**
The detailed marks on the royal servant’s body might have been patterns of body paint. The plaque is pierced at the four corners so that it could be attached to a pillar of the royal palace.
I notice...
Age: Around 100 years old
Size: Around 1 foot long
Function: To assist in sales transactions

Until around 1900, the Akan people of Ghana used gold (dust and nuggets) as their currency. The price of an object was measured using balance beam scales such as this. The buyer and the seller each had their own scale and set of fifteen or more brass weights. On one side of the scale was placed a brass weight, representing the agreed-upon price. On the other side, the gold was placed. The buyer adjusted the gold dust with a spoon until the scale balanced. Both the buyer and the seller weighed the gold dust on their own scales to be sure the transaction was fair. If there was a dispute, they went to another person whose weights they both trusted. This system of weighing gold came to this area through Muslim traders from the great trading kingdoms of Ancient Ghana and Ancient Mali. West African gold comes from many locations in the forest and the savanna, especially from parts of what is now modern Ghana. Gold occurs naturally in some dirt, sand, and river gravel, as well as deep within the ground. Small amounts could be obtained by the simple panning of river sand and gravel. To find the rich deposits, however, workers had to dig shafts up to one hundred feet deep to reach the gold-bearing rock called “ore.” It was dangerous work, because the mine shafts could collapse.

Akan chiefs commonly charged taxes on miners and claimed ownership of all nuggets over a certain weight. Akan gold production reached its peak in the 1600s. Before that time, much gold was transported across the Sahara Desert, ending up in Europe. Many mines have been closed over the centuries, but some in Ghana are still open and producing gold today. Gold continues to be an important and symbolic material in the regalia of Akan chiefs and kings.