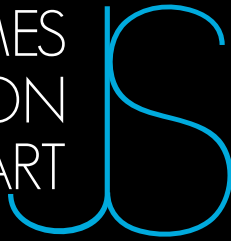


JAMES
STEPHENSON
AFRICAN ART



Zulu Prestige Staff

Zulu Prestige Staff

South Africa

19th century

wood

24 1/2" H

Ex. Private Estate

From 1816 to 1828, King Shaka Senzangakhona united what were, previously, numerous and disorganized clans into a single powerful tribe. He introduced a new system of military organization and revolutionized his army's weaponry and military tactics. Contact with the British is first documented in 1893, with the port of Natal being forced to receive the British forces. In between the numerous wars and conflicts that plagued Zulu-British relations (dubbed the Anglo-Zulu Wars), several missionaries were documenting the Zulu traditions, notably W Colenso, SB Stone, H Callaway and Lewis Grant. Through them we learned much of what we know of early Zulu, Nguni culture.



Fig. 1 Zulu Leopard Costume (Photo courtesy ROSS Archive)

Noted early on was the Zulu's love of dancing and singing. They relied on these established oral traditions to convey and celebrate ancestor myths, folklore, morality, proverbs, etc (note: the first written Zulu publication, by J.L. Dube wouldn't be written until 1903). These activities promoted unity at all the transitional ceremonies such as births, weddings, and funerals. All the dances are accompanied by drums and the men dress as warriors (Fig.1).

These costumes worn by the Zulu men usually consisted of painted cloth and animal hides, meant to suggest whatever animal or spirit dancer was portraying. Several accouterments were added to this regalia, including a knobkerrie, a polished wooden staff usually with a rounded head. According to the Pitt Rivers Museum "Lightweight, wooden, ball-headed clubs like this one from South Africa are commonly termed 'knobkerries'. 'Knopkieri' is a word used in Afrikaans, a Dutch-based language, but which is itself a mixture of the !Kung (Kalahari bushmen) term 'kieri'

meaning 'club' and the English 'knop' or 'knob', alluding to the rounded head." The purposes of these clubs vary from a prestige or dance item, to an actual weapon used in battle. Most examples, like Fig. 2, are very simple and elegant in appearance, lacking any adornment or decoration.

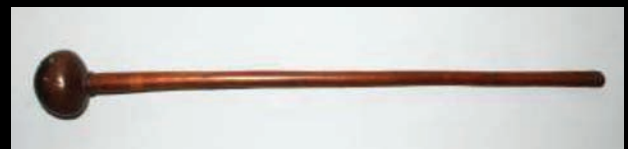


Fig. 2 Knobkerrie, British Museum (Photo used with permission)



Fig. 3 (Photo courtesy Yale van Rijn Archive)

The amount of decoration and adornment each club has gives us clues as to its function i.e. the more beautiful the less likely it ever saw battle. The examples used for dancing or show demonstrate a vast diversity in terms of style, flourish and species of wood used. What differentiates the example in question are the wooden knots carved around the head and shaft of the stick. Since the knots are carved from one piece of wood, not carved separately and added, one assumes this must've been quite a massive specimen of wood. Several examples exist with raised 'knots', but they're most always done with brass or iron tacks.



Fig. 4 (Photo Credit James Stephenson)

The most closely related example I know of (Fig. 3), sold by the dealer Kevin Conru, is a beautiful example of the aforementioned. The brass tacks have been placed into the head of the knobkerrie in vertical rows. In addition, copper wire has been wrapped along the shaft for decoration. The use of copper in Fig. 3 is likely reference to its owner's wealth, as copper was quite expensive in the late XIV century. The piece is likely quite old; the varied, deep patina juxtaposed with the precious metal makes for a very aesthetic piece of sculpture.

Stephenson sold one other top market example of a knobkerrie with tack inlay (Fig. 4). Note the exceptional refinement, as well as the lobed ball. This piece is likely a similar, if not the same, species of wood as the example in question.

Fig. 5 was in the collection of Elisabeth Zaloumis and Thomas van Gylswyk and sold at a small auction in Cape Town. Note the linear approach to the studs, as well as the beautifully rendered spiral (this time carved wood vs. metal coil).

Quite simply, the Stephenson staff is masterful in its uniqueness. I know of no other examples with the circular knots carved directly onto the piece. The amount of skill demonstrated by this carver is immense. Not to mention the piece is quite antique, with a beautiful, varied and honest patina--couple that with the impressive size and presence of the piece, it is simply captivating. Objects of this caliber always have timelessness about them, seemingly trapped in the fabric of human consciousness.

Of the relatively few masterpieces in the cannon of Zulu art, this is one.

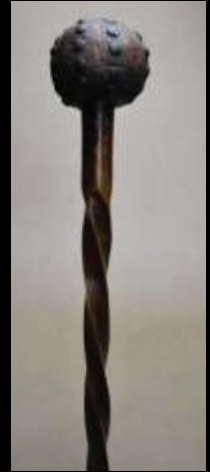


Fig. 5 (Cape Town Auction)