Basic Detail Report

Bracelet Currency (Manilla)

Date
19th Century

Medium
Copper

Description
Manillas are a West African currency known for being used from the end of the 15th century to the mid- 20th century, most notably for the Spanish and Portuguese slave trade. This currency was derived from metal bracelets or anklets but later forms were made of copper, bronze, or brass penannular rings and were often horse-shoe shaped with enlarged finial terminations. Portuguese traders commissioned large sums of Manillas beginning in the 15th century, dominating the Golden Coast to the lower Niger. This currency were made in Europe and would be traded in African countries, such as Nigeria, for trade goods like ivory, spices, palm oil and slaves. By the early 16th century the Portuguese were actively engaged in the slave trade with Manillas being most common payment option. Soon, other western nations joined the trade including the English, French, and Dutch who all possessed labor plantations in the Caribbean and Americas. This particular manilla was made in the 19th Century when the production of Manillas had mostly shifted to Birmingham, England and Manillas had a highly regularized shape and metal content (70% brass and 30% lead on average). This form of currency played an integral part of the triangle trade that dominated the time. After Portugal lost its monopoly, England became the main export of Manillas, sending them to West Africa. From there, slaves were sent to the Americas. In exchange, cotton was shipped to Europe from the Americas. Though Manillas were the main currency sustaining the slave trade, their value was always variable, fluctuating according to time, place, type, and inflation. This type of currency could take on multiple forms, quality, and sizes. Smaller Manillas were manufactured in England or France while large queen and king Manillas were forged in Africa. The larger Manillas were of higher value inland and on the coast and were even used for funerals and dowries. By 1948 all manilla-type currencies had been redeemed and would no longer be in circulation. The significance of this currency remains obvious in the cultural heritage of African states.

Dimensions
2 1/2 × 2 1/4 × 5/8 in. (6.4 × 5.7 × 1.6 cm)