

Surviving Works: context in Verre arts

***Part Two, Chapter Four: Brass skeuomorphs: thinking about
originals and copies***

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PART TWO ARTS

Chapter 4 Brass skeuomorphs: thinking about originals and copies

Having surveyed the historical and ethnographic contexts of their production and collection, the objects made by Verre provide the point of entry to the second part of our account, a partial *catalogue raisonnée* that focuses on metalworks and the more important ritual accoutrements, notably anthropomorphic figures. We have not sought to disguise the thinness of the sources available to establish context; Verre artworks cannot simply be put 'into context' but must themselves be used as a resource to fill out what we know about context in outline and add some shade to it; the works tell us as much about their context as their context tells us about them. For instance, the relative quantities of different brasswares produced, their qualitative differences and cost, who might use them, when and for what ... are the kinds of questions to which even partial and cautious answers will augment our grasp of context or more simply help us grasp what was going on in the Emirate and colonial periods. With this in mind, Appendices 1-3 assemble all the fugitive scraps of information from Chappel's notes in the expectation that some details may turn out to be more meaningful for those who know the terrain intimately than they are for us.

Remaining with brass, the objects themselves are instructive in several regards. Verre works in brass are predominantly skeuomorphs: that is to say, versions in copper alloy of things that can be, and probably were, made in other materials first. In very few cases, do Verre brasses look like copies of things made by other people in brass. A majority of their skeuomorphs are of iron originals, but we also find brass versions of prototypes in wood, pottery, gourd, cowries, vegetable fibre, horn and leather. Verre skeuomorphism in brass is a continuum rather than a binary. A very few objects, of which single bells ornamented with crotals that have internal clappers are the clearest example, have no Verre original other than in brass; but an object that might appear closely related to such bells, such as double clapperless bells, are close skeuomorphs of Verre iron prototypes of which they retain welding seams that are non-functional given that each bell has been cast as a single piece. Verre brass-handled daggers provide an intermediary case: their blades are basically shared with wholly iron or wooden-handled iron daggers, but their ornamental hilts are distinctively brass creations, impossible in wood; and the brass scabbards have variably close resemblances to their leather 'originals'. Looking at brasswares, we are precipitated not only, as it were, forward into the world of their uses, but back to their inspirations and the relations that they continued to have with these prototypes. But the 'originals', in this loose sense, provided only a point of departure for their 'copies'. Many brassware templates are quite remotely connected to the forms of their 'originals', as we shall find in the case of the large pendant beads which derive from balls of cowries with which they share a name. Given that the plastic qualities of brass differ from those of the materials in which these 'forebears' were

made, brasswares were able to take on a life of their own. This becomes clearly apparent when we look at the decorative devices that ornament them.

The range of ornamentation possible in iron was limited compared to what could be cast in copper alloy, or more exactly what could be modelled in beeswax before being cast in metal. An ornamental device such as a coil or double coil can be, and was, forged in iron, but brass encourages not only ornamentation but decoration of part or the entirety of a surface, which may be covered, for instance, with raised coils, something which could not be achieved entirely in iron (though we do have one example of an iron pot ring with brass decorations). What is more, the same decorative device could be transferred across a range of otherwise diverse brass objects, such as bells, daggers, and crooks, so that in addition to conversing with their non-brass templates, objects in brass spoke to one another. Spiral decoration, to return to that example, became almost a Verre brasscasting signature across many different objects, and evidence suggests that this decorative device was increasingly prominent in later brassworks displacing other motifs. The pattern is relatively simple to produce using threads of wax, and it was adopted enthusiastically by the Koma who learned their brasscasting skills from Verre. Brassworks which can be identified as Koma are often covered almost entirely in spirals which is in marked contrast to their restrained deployment in balance with other decorations in older-looking Verre objects.

Verre metalwares were made for a variety of users and uses. The prosperous position of Verre smiths at the beginning of the twentieth century, we suggested, argues for them having been able to maintain a rewarding place in a system of local trade wider than their immediate communities that included Bachama, Bata, Chamba and Fulani demand for their wares. For instance, Frobenius recorded a Chamba Daka chief smoking a brass pipe bought from the Verre, since they did not cast brass themselves (1913b: 244), and that Koma smiths forged iron but did not cast in brass, only the Bata and Verre knowing how to do so in 'earlier times' (1913b: 203). Direct evidence in the shape of Verre works collected from the dominant Fulani is rare, in part this might be explained by the eclipse of the cavalry and broader military purposes for which Verre metalwares would have been designed, but it is additionally the case that collection efforts have concentrated on the peoples considered 'local', or on the pastoral Fulani, but not on the descendants of immigrant settled Fulani. We do, nonetheless, have some collection evidence that Verre bells were in demand by Fulani both for use in domestic settings and as parts of horse tack, and that Verre weapons were made for Fulani troops, albeit these troops may have consisted largely of non-Fulanis.

There are several reasons to begin our object survey with bells and related percussion instruments. In universalizing terms, bells are idiophones defined by their rimmed edge producing a resonant ringing. Whether a bell is struck internally by a clapper, or externally, is immaterial to this classification. A gong by contrast is a flat disc of metal, struck to produce a reverberant boom. When gongs have pronounced lips at their edges, and/or bosses at their centres, the distinction between bells and gongs can become fuzzy, but this is not germane here. In terms of this typology, Verre made bells and not gongs, although they made bells both with and without internal clappers. A universal typology is helpful for some purposes, particularly if the overriding concern is technical and comparative rather than ethnographic;

however, the fact that Verre have different nouns for their types of bell cautions against lumping all of them together if our aim is to understand the users' intentions. That bells with and without internal clappers have different names in Verre gains additional interest from the further fact that some Verre bells were skeuomorphs and others were not, and this difference corresponds to the terminological distinctions Verre make.

Externally decorated brass bells with suspended internal iron clappers were used in various ways, most prominently they were worn by women on their left hip while dancing on public occasions, or at other times when a display of prestige items was appropriate. The left hip is also where a woman usually carried a baby, leaving her right arm was free for other purposes, but aside from practicality the convention is also involved in a motivated, right-left distinction between men, who wore prestige ornaments (like brass medicine containers and brass-handled daggers) on the right hip, and women, who wore bells, and also oversized pendant beads distantly modelled after clusters of cowries, on the left hip. Youths who danced in public during the ceremonies preceding circumcision and initiation into adulthood would also wear brass bells. Brass bells with clappers varied widely both in size and in the type and extent of their decoration and, by virtue of these characteristics, in cost; because brass clapper bells had no iron prototype, they cannot be classed as skeuomorphs; together with Verre brass clapper bells being more numerous and more diverse than most other brass objects, this suggests bells may be a longstanding, or if the technology was introduced, even original, form of Verre brasscasting. In the absence of non-brass prototypes, brass clapper bells must have been copied from similar examples elsewhere at the outset.

The ubiquitous crotal bell, or simply crotal (also known as a hawk's bell or sleigh bell), is a second non-skeuomorphic brass object in use by Verre. In strict terms, crotals are not bells at all but rattles. The most closely related of Verre metalwares in terms of mechanism would be the pellets enclosed within iron anklets which rattle in time as the dancer's steps agitate them, also clanking them together when anklets are worn stacked in multiples. Sets of threaded crotals may also be worn as anklets; these were explained to Chappel as encouragements for children to walk when he collected examples from Verre. Crotal anklets might not produce the sheer volume of percussive sound a skilled woman dancer can raise with a stack of iron anklets, but they were a literal first step towards doing so. Aside from a shared rattle mechanism, the formal resemblance between iron anklets and a set of threaded crotals seems too slight to suggest that either is the prototype of their other.

Tiny brass crotal beads are also found as ornaments on larger Verre pieces, particularly those that show evidence of age. These have been added by secondary welding to the original casting. As with larger crotals, we cannot be certain whether these small ornaments were invariably made by Verre brass smiths or became available to them through regional markets. Crotal ornamentation is characteristics of the apparently older specimens of three objects in particular: around the shoulder of brass clapper bells; around the raised central ridge of arm cuffs; and flanking the often figurative, central boss on the pommel of brass-handled daggers. Supposing that brasscasting was an innovation, clapper bells, arm cuffs, and dagger handles and scabbards may have been among the earliest objects to be cast in brass by Verre, a list to

which we might want to add full-sized crotal bells, as well as their miniatures used for ornamentation, supposing Verre cast these themselves rather than purchasing them.

Clapperless iron bells are closely related to hoes. Among the neighbouring Mapeo Chamba, who bought their metalwares from Verre, bells and hoes are included under a single term (*baan*). The relation is a technical one. Typically, an African iron bell is made by hammering together the edges of two pieces of metal, each in the form of a flanged hoe blade. Sometimes the flange may be shared between the two blades, so the metal is forged in a single piece and then folded (Joyce 2019). In either case, the form may be accented in various ways. For instance, simply by size: some single clapperless bells are particularly tall, much larger than any hoe in use, and often found in pairs. Such large status pieces are found among the neighbouring Chamba, and it is probable that Verre smiths would have been capable of meeting a demand for them, even if we do not have an example definitively attributed to them. Clapperless bells are also found as joined pairs differing in size and hence pitch. It is convenient on occasions to refer to these as double handgongs, both because, as noted already, Verre do not use the same term for them that they apply to bells, but also because they must be held by the handle that joins them for the note to ring true when they are hit with either a wooden or metal striker. Double handgongs have close brass skeuomorphs. The fact that brass double handgongs were modelled on a clapperless iron original and not on a pair of brass clapper bells is evident from the prominent side seams which are formed when two iron hoe-shaped blades are welded together to make a bell; these are not just functionally redundant in a brass version which has been cast but require additional modelling. Handgongs in brass are also found singly, and in all but one case known to us, the single handgong clearly resembles, or simply is, the larger chamber of a double handgong with which it shares a redundant welding seam and more often than not also the small loop in brass to which a leather thong may be attached. All this suggests that bells and gongs (using these terms as translations here) were distinct categories for Verre. They are certainly distinct in use. Gongs are not worn as ornaments by women but played as percussive idiophones by men in rituals. The most striking case of ritual percussion instruments are the iron rattles used in cult rituals not just by Verre but throughout the region. These have no brass counterparts but consist of iron rings from which hang iron clappers. Depending on the cult to which they belong, the clappers on these iron rings differ in size and on occasions in shape, and they may or may not include a central clapperless bell or gong. On all these grounds, we can conclude that brass bells with internal clappers, and brass or iron clapperless bells were quite distinct categories for Verre: differently named and used in distinct social spaces on distinct occasions.

All brasswares were prestigious, and all but minor personal ornaments were displayed on special occasions rather than worn routinely. To varying degrees, as have seen, they were also skeuomorphs, versions in brass of items made less expensively in other materials. Having surveyed bells, gongs and rattles, our presentation in Part Two proceeds, very roughly, from the less to the more esoteric forms of Verre metalware.

A review of Verre personal ornamentation conveniently begins with items that can be worn, of which beads, bracelets and arm cuffs, as well as ear plugs, are examples. These were

predominantly worn by women, as were the oversized pendant hip beads which, as noted earlier, are skeuomorphs inspired in part by ball-shaped clusters of cowries and retain the same name that includes the Fulfulde term for cowry, *ceede*. Intriguingly, these outsized beads do not appear in collections until the early mid-twentieth century, suggesting they may be a recent innovation. The name additionally points us to the relation between wealth in the forms of cowry clusters and bulky brass ornaments. However, a resemblance with clapper bells seems also to be in play: the oversized bead is worn on the left hip, like a bell, and although we have no documentation for this, presumably this is also where clusters of cowries were worn. The globular edge decoration of these large beads replicates that of the shoulder decoration of some bells, which in turn evokes women's waist beads, a form of decoration which apparently replaced crotals. In its overall form, a large bead resembles – it is tempting to say, more simply, is – two bell domes fused to one another by a decorative rim, which for its part refers us back to the cowry. Over time it looks as if oversized beads became larger and heavier, as well as cruder in their decoration, as though the form acquired a dynamic of its own that was given rein by the increasing availability of raw material. These later examples are often strung together with particularly ornate brass beads, whereas field photographs from the 1960s show that the beads were suspended singly in the same way that bells had been worn previously (see, Chapter 3 Chappel field photographs). At least indirectly, it seems we can suggest a development of a Verre ornament over several decades in this instance.

Other more specialized worn ornaments seem to show variable degrees of influence by the Fulani: brass charms apparently modelled on Muslim popular amulets, as well as snuff bottles, both of which have loops for attachment. On the other hand, phallic medicine containers, again with loops to allow men to wear them on the right hip, as well as brass tobacco pipes with small phallic protrusions, smoked by older women, are unlikely to have been modelled on Fulani originals. All four of these items are represented by very few examples in Chappel's substantial collection, which is not the case for the prestige items we turn to next.

Two distinctively Verre prestige brasswares are particularly numerous in museum and private collections: brass skeuomorphs of agricultural hoes, and brass-handled daggers or short swords, together with their brass scabbards.

Some brass hoes were cast in two pieces to copy the wooden handle and hafted metal blade of a mundane farming hoe; other single-piece castings feature a raised relief outline representing the haft where a handle would have fitted into the blade socket. Most of these brass hoes are ornamented with spirals, and a few have additional features including horns at the elbow, or a small creature on the shaft. Production of brass hoes continued into, and possibly increased during, the colonial period and maybe beyond, but later examples are often cast in single pieces with scant or no remembrance of the hafting of a farming hoe, and ornamentation with spirals became pervasive to the exclusion of other devices or ornaments. Hoes are strongly associated with women both because of their work as farmers and because brideprice was recalled as having been calculated in hoes. Brass hoes were apparently displayed as wealth objects on ceremonial occasions, although Chappel witnessed no performances particularly associated with them.

Ornate brass-handled short swords or daggers, together with their scabbards, are particularly varied. Their pommel ornaments, as noted already, may include the crotals which appear to be characteristic of older Verre brasswork. Verre daggers were traded locally and have been collected or recorded from Bachama and Bata to the north as well as Chamba to the south. On these grounds, daggers and hoes, like clapper bells and arm cuffs, but unlike oversized pendant beads or figures, may be among the longer-standing items of Verre brass casting. In terms of their circulation, we might contrast them with display wares that look likely to have been taken up during the period of the Emirate, such as brass fans and fly whisks, and large brass spear blades modelled on a cavalry rather than hunting weapon, or the single example of an apparently impractical pair of brass sandal soles. All these items are well made but have been collected in tiny numbers from Verre suggesting both that Verre smiths were familiar with making them and that their primary market was not local.

By contrast with these skeuomorphs, numerous examples have been collected from Verre of two items of restricted purpose particularly associated with male initiation. Brass skeuomorphs of fibre, leather and cowry helmets were made with various degrees of elaboration reflecting the status of the wearers. While the circumcision crooks, which initiates hooked behind their necks, are widely distributed in the region in iron and wooden versions, among the Verre they were additionally produced in brass with varying degrees of ornamentation. The crook, whether in wood, iron, or brass, is an intriguing signifier, associated with initiation but also, among neighbouring Chamba, with ritual chiefship. Although the metal versions have a handle that might be modelled on a sickle, the crook is blunt, and its blade faces the handle like a hoe rather than aligning with it like a sickle. Initiates undergoing circumcision clasp it around their neck when being circumcised, as if this cutting foreshadows the later separation of ancestral skull from corpse after death when skulls are collected to be venerated. We do not have a local interpretation, but the crook would certainly lend itself to being seen as a mediator between the hoe and the sickle, and thereby between women's and men's domains.

Of more restricted use than these public initiation pieces were the brass versions of paraphernalia used in ritual settings that were entered by progression through age grades and further initiations to *Do'os* or cults. Decorated gourds are an interesting instance. Most Adamawa peoples recall in pre-Emirate times predominantly using clay rather than gourd vessels for eating and drinking. Gourds were not only adopted but decorated during Emirate times, and Frobenius's expedition collected examples claimed to be from the Verre and Chamba, some of which survive either in whole or part in German museum collections or else through illustrations of their designs. Yet, by the time Chappel collected from Verre in the mid-1960s, and Fardon researched among Chamba in the mid-1970s, 'calabash decoration', to use the phrase more familiar locally, was apparently no longer practised and, aside from the occasional example purchased from Fulani or in the market, these inherently fragile objects had disappeared. Chappel did, however, collect a few brass skeuomorphs of decorated gourds from Verre which we assume date from a time when their 'originals' were still in use. These had become ritual accompaniments, but it seems reasonable to assume they once would also have been attractive to Fulani as users of decorated gourds. Drinking vessels were only one element of the accoutrements needed for beer consumption that might

be copied in brass; although expensive in their own time and subsequently, and hence collected in small numbers, these included beer jars, pot rings to support them, and tall tri-forked pot stands. Beer jars are skeuomorphs of their clay counterparts and selectively incorporate some of their decorative devices; the ornate brass rings on which round-bottomed pots were balanced are copies, at least in terms of function, of the grass-fibre rings used as pads to headload them, as well as being larger versions of arm rings.

Pot stands are composite items which require longer explanation. In the simplest terms, their mechanism is the same as that used domestically when a three-pronged, forked branch is planted upright and used to support a pot to remove it from the likely nuisances of insects, animals and infants to which it would be vulnerable on the ground. This simple device can also be made in iron by combining a metal shaft, such as might otherwise be used in a ceremonial spear, with three or more support elements at its top. The Verre term for spear shaft is shared with that for pot stand. Typically, the pot cradle is formed from three hoe blades, and the brass skeuomorph that Chappel collected copies this form. However, iron examples have also surfaced in museums or on the market with pot cradles composed of ankle rattles, or of double spirals. The fact that an iron staff can be topped with a rattle device resembling an iron anklet to make a ceremonial spear forges another link with the pot stand. Other examples of metal, tripod pot stands combine hoes, leg rattles and double spirals to form complex cradles. As well as being an ornamental motif added to other metalware, on its own the double spiral in iron has regional uses, mundanely as an iron on which to strike flints, but also as a cult object. The most ornate pot stands, those with cradles that include rattles and spirals, appeared on the market later than those solely with hoe blades, the only kind collected *in situ*. So, we cannot discount the possibility of the ornate form being a market-oriented innovation for collectors.

Other pieces of cult apparatus might also be reproduced in brass. Skeuomorphs of wind instruments made from animal horns were particularly costly and hence rare. More numerous were ritual staffs that are most likely to have been skeuomorphs of phallic wooden poles with rope whipping around their tops. They would be far from unique in this associations, since we have already remarked the clearly phallic shape of brass medicine containers, as well as the knob-shape protrusions of some circumcision crooks and smoking pipe bowls.

The final category of objects we examine are anthropomorphic figures in wood, clay and brass. By comparison with such neighbours as Mumuye and Chamba, anthropomorphic figures were of relatively slight significance among most Verre. Unlike these neighbours, although not without precedent in the wider region, Verre figures are described in public performance in the hands of women and youths. The early colonial collection contains several examples of wooden figures, most of them roughly finished and often encrusted with abras seed decoration which has been added to suggest hair and at other places on the body and limbs where brass ornaments such as beads and bands might be worn. Where gendering is evident, they are predominantly female. Two overall forms are apparent, one of them more similar to the 'doll' figures that art dealers attribute to the Dowayo (or 'Namji') to the south, while the other is elongated with resemblance to the less columnar Chamba style with rounded volumes. A late local development of this second style occurred in Tōza, near the

market town of Karlahi, in a single workshop, perhaps even by a single hand, in the mid-twentieth century. These figures, in new or near-new condition, were collected by Chappel in the mid-1960s, with examples appearing with international dealers shortly afterwards. Brass figures may also be late innovations since we do not find examples of them in the early colonial collection, and the first reference to them is from the 1940s. No more than a handful of them are known, some of which may be the products of the adoption of brass-casting by Koma.

The sketch we have proposed fleshes out an imperfectly known ethnographic and historical context by drawing upon the evidence of the objects themselves: what types of object were collected, by whom, in what quantities, when and where, or failing this, at least how objects first became visible, whether in museums, or in the hands of dealers, or in private collections. Brasswares lend themselves to reconstructive readings because of their variably skeuomorphic character. When, as in the Verre case, brasswares can be thought of as a skeuomorphic continuum, our attention is attracted at one pole to those items – brass bells with internal clappers and crotal ornaments – that seem essentially reliant on brass as a material. At the other pole, are the objects that are close skeuomorphs, for instance the fans and flywhisks probably copied from Fulani originals. In the middle, we find intriguing play between brass objects and their ‘originals’, as in the case of brass-handled daggers and scabbards, or between the brass objects themselves in the transfer of decorative patterns. And in other cases, the idea of an original itself recedes from investigation, as it does in the case of the iron crook copied as a brass crook. This proliferation of forms and designs offers historical pointers rather than historical certainties which we pursue in detailed consideration of types of object.

Thanks to digital publication, we can duplicate some illustrations rather than referring the reader elsewhere in the text for an image under discussion. The fullest accounts of individual objects are to be found in Chapter 2 for the early colonial assemblage, and in Appendix 1 for the largest part of the early post-colonial assemblage, almost entirely collected by Chappel, which is in Nigerian museums. We introduce objects that have surfaced later in museums, galleries, auction sales and private collections only if there is a demonstrable relation worth exploring between them and the provenanced examples. This has meant excluding some objects which have appeared with Verre attribution that may indeed be accurate but for which we lack provenance either for the object itself or for another that closely resembles it. We have considered the case for entirely excluding post-colonial examples in museums and private collections outside Nigeria but feel that these add value to our account by introducing variants or else by supporting our statements about the relative abundance of types of object. Above all, we have included what we hope might interest Verre themselves about the works made by their forebears. As we noted in introducing it, our intention in making this work freely available in digital form is both to signal its provisional nature and to invite correction and expansion.

A final chapter following this partial catalogue will find us in a position to contextualize Verre brasscasting alongside other such traditions in a wider regional context that have been documented. Where researchers have ventured an opinion, it is striking that they argued that

the brasscasting traditions extant for study in the twentieth century are of relatively recent origin. The tendency of brassworking centres to appear and disappear appears to be characteristic. In view of this evidence of temporal and spatial discontinuities, we shall at least pose the question of the longevity of this Verre specialism.

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