

## Bound Together: Leather from Northern Nigeria

19<sup>th</sup> August 2025 - 8<sup>th</sup> February 2026

The hidden skills and expertise of the Nigerian people behind the creation of a century of northern Nigerian leathers in the University of Cambridge collections is revealed for the first time in a new display, **Bound Together**, opening August 19<sup>th</sup>. Most of the Nigerian objects on show have been in museum storage for 100 years and never been on display.

**Bound Together** traces the origins of leathers from the tanners and leatherworkers in Northern Nigeria, to the exported goatskins that were a prized commodity among bookbinders in the UK and the United States from the late 1800s, used to create intricate and beautiful book covers and continue to be used today.

Yet despite this widespread preference for the durability and aesthetics of Northern Nigerian goatskins, the technologies and expertise of the Nigerian people behind this centuries-old leather industry was rarely acknowledged outside of Africa. While we know a lot about the designer bookbinders and book conservators featured in this display, and how their work made its way into the collections at Cambridge, the Nigerian makers are not named among the historic collections.

Nigerian tanners and leatherworkers were described as ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilised’ throughout this period in publications describing Nigerian leathers, and the leather objects they designed and produced themselves have remained in museum storage for up to 100 years.

This display will centre the Nigerian makers and in doing so it will reflect one of the key outcomes of [African Collections Futures](#), a research project of the University’s [Collections-Connections-Communities Strategic Research Initiative](#) that is developing new approaches to the African and Africa-related objects across the University of Cambridge.

It found that African labour, technologies, and expertise are present in the most unexpected places in the University collections. **Bound Together** will display together for the first time:

- **Nigerian leathers** – featuring objects from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and an exploration of how they were produced
- **Designer bookbindings made in Britain with Nigerian goatskins** – featuring bindings from the Fitzwilliam Museum and those on long-term loan from the Keatley Trust and have not yet been on display at this museum. The designers featured are Edgar Mansfield (1907-1996), Jeff Clements (1934-2021), Trevor Jones (1931-2012), and from the Fitzwilliam’s own collection, Sybil Pye (1879 – 1958).
- **Contemporary Nigerian goatskins** – featuring bindings from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University Press, and a designer leather handbag from Nigeria to bring this story up to the present.

Dr Eva Namusoke, Senior Curator, African Collections Futures said, ***“We find countless stories like this amongst the African objects at the University. Like the African Collections Futures report, this display is just the start of uncovering these narratives. It’s clear that African resources, knowledge and craft have been a part of this University for a very long time. There are rare books in libraries across the University that were rebound in Nigerian leather as part of conservation practice, protecting these texts for future generations. The display makes visible some of the many connections between people in West Africa and others who may never have met them but nonetheless benefited from their labour, including us here in Cambridge.”***

Most of the material in this display is attributed to Hausa people, the largest ethnic group in Nigeria today, with Hausa communities across West Africa. In stark contrast to the designer bindings, museum records retained only limited information about the makers of the Nigerian objects, and how the objects were acquired.

The works from Northern Nigeria are reflective of the Islamic culture of the region, with the geometric shapes and abstracted forms found throughout the Islamic world. Imagery from illustrated Qur'ans and Quranic calligraphy is translated onto everyday objects throughout the display.

#### **Highlights include:**

**A over 100-year-old saddlebag:** the makers of this bag worked the thin and smooth leathers to create a range of textures and shapes. A close look at the hanging panels reveals tiny geometric cut-outs revealing lighter coloured layers underneath. These were either stamped or cut - both methods required a precise hand. The bag has likely never been on display.

**A Manuscript cover:** like others around the Islamic world, Northern Nigerians used geometric shapes and abstracted forms like those on this manuscript case to create beautiful decoration. The geometric shapes and checkered patterns here were common decorations in Hausa Qur'an as well as on leather goods, textiles, and architecture. This manuscript cover was donated to the museum empty, so if there was any original text inside, it is lost.

**A Cushion case:** from the use of bright coloured leathers to the detailed embroidery, this cushion case shows several of the techniques that made Hausa leatherwork renowned across West and North Africa. Before imported synthetic dyes became more common through the mid-1900s, Hausa leatherworkers used dyes they made from local vegetation and minerals to produce the vivid colours of these leathers.

**Riding Boots:** Hausa leatherworkers used hides and skins from different animals for the objects they made, often choosing cowhide for harder-wearing objects and goatskins for smaller, finer products or decorative works. Stored flat over 100 years in Cambridge, these boots and several of the other leather objects in this display were placed in a specially made chamber with the humidity slowly increased, to bring them back to life.

All of the objects in the display come from the University's collections including: the Fitzwilliam Museum, the MAA, the University Library, the Botanic Garden and Cambridge University Press

#### **Notes to Editors**

**For press information 07788 727 601 | [press@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](mailto:press@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)**

Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1RB +44 (0)1223 332 900

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