

Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 18: Good as Gold

[INTRO MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Gold brings a lot of things to mind—Money. Jewelry. A fire-breathing dragon snoozing on a pile of glittering treasure. But for Gus Casely-Hayford, Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, gold is a time machine. [MUSIC] He has a doctorate in African history, so his appreciation for gold is academic...but it's also personal.

Gus Casely-Hayford: Gold is very important in particularly in West African history. But for my family, it had a very critical part to play in bringing us together. My grandfather, he was, um, a trader. One of the areas in which he was most successful was in the trading of gold.

Haleema Shah: When Gus's grandfather would return home from these long trips, his mother remembers him coming through the door and then...

Gus Casely-Hayford: Bringing from his pocket a little satchel full of gold nuggets and gold dust in tiny bags. And, he would give my mother a small nugget that she could take away and she could have made into a piece of jewelry just as a remembrance of that particular journey. So, over a period of time, my mother built this small collection of jewelry, each piece that was connected to a different trip that my grandfather had made.

Haleema Shah: Gus's family has moved a lot over the generations. He was raised in the UK, where his parents moved from West Africa. And his grandfather migrated to West Africa from the Caribbean. Gus's grandfather was Creole -- of European and African ancestry -- and descended from people enslaved in Barbados. But, he crossed the Atlantic to put down roots in Sierra Leone.

Gus Casely-Hayford: He built a house in the very center of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. And, as he built it, within the foundation stone, it was said that he buried a pot of gold.

Even if it's a family myth, what I think that represents is the idea that this was a family that was founded around this idea of the power, the strength of this material..it had given them a foothold in this country, in that community. I mean, that is a privilege. Because the idea of enslavement is that you cannot own anything, not even yourself....The idea that you could actually invest in giving through these beautiful objects, a sense of continuity, of history, of heritage, of love to others is a deeply profound thing.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: This time on Sidedoor, Gus Casely-Hayford will guide us through the story of gold in West Africa...where it is both a driver of history and an anchor to heritage.

[MUSIC]

To know the story of gold in West Africa, you have to know... Mansa Musa. He is said to have been the richest man ever. Think Jeff Bezos times Oprah, to the Power of Queen Victoria. Mansa Musa ruled the Mali Empire in the early 14th Century. His empire was one of the biggest at the time...spanning present-day Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, the Ivory Coast...and parts of Ghana, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Most of what we think of as "West Africa".

Gus Casely-Hayford: And he comes into that role in a really interesting way. His uncle, who is his predecessor, he looks at the scale of his empire which is absolutely vast, and he recognizes that there's almost no more lands to conquer. The only thing that he sees as a boundary that he hasn't actually managed to breach is the sea. So, he builds a huge armada of boats and he decides to take on the Atlantic and he sails out one day leaving his nephew Mansa Musa in charge. And he never returns.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: So, a while after Musa's uncle doesn't come back from his voyage... right around 1307, Mansa Musa's gig as interim emperor becomes permanent.

Gus Casely-Hayford: Mansa Musa inherits the throne and he makes a decision that his reign is going to be different from others. He's not going to be obsessed with conquering others. He wants to do something else -- he wants to invest in knowledge.

Haleema Shah: Mansa Musa transformed the city of Timbuktu into what Gus calls “the jewel of the medieval world.” It sat on the edge of the Sahara desert, which was both a gateway to the North, and to Mali’s vast natural resources. While Europe was still in its Dark Ages, Timbuktu was a flourishing intellectual hub... with libraries housing 800,000 manuscripts, and as many as 400,000 students combing their stacks.

Gus Casely-Hayford: He brings intellectuals from across the Middle East, from southern Europe to Timbuktu, and he creates a new center of learning, which is unlike anything that’s ever been seen before.

Haleema Shah: The city was also situated along trade routes where people swapped gold, salt, copper, horses, weapons...and was also where people were sold into slavery. There was a tremendous amount of wealth.

Gus Casely-Hayford: Here was a huge amount of alluvial gold. You could pick gold up from the surface of the earth. But, he had a rule that gold nuggets, they belonged to the emperor, they belonged to the state. But everyone else, they could mine the gold dust, and, so it wasn't just him who was wealthy.

Haleema Shah: Like the Silk Road, trans-Saharan trade routes were extremely lucrative for Mali. The Empire controlled crucial roads that connected North Africa, West Africa and Europe.

Gus Casely-Hayford: The gold that you see in West Africa, it would be the gold in those Venetian paintings that would adorn the crowns of kings. It would be the gold that would be in the very early crown jewels of European dynasties. And, that is the gold that you see in parts of South Asia. This was a huge network that spread across the ancient world that radiated out from this single state...Mali.

Haleema Shah: As West Africa’s gold was carried around the world, travelers and writers claimed there was no place on earth with finer or more abundant gold. There were even stories that claimed gold in Africa grew from the ground like a plant.

[MUSIC]

In 1324, Mansa Musa, a devout Muslim, set off for pilgrimage to Mecca. He traveled with an entourage the size of an invading army... but, this invasion was more about goodwill: hearts and minds. An Arab writer reported that he traveled with 20,000 people and more than 2,000 pounds

of gold. So, when his caravan made a pit stop in Egypt... Mansa Musa and his crew made quite the impression.

Gus Casely-Hayford: Whilst he's in Egypt a huge number of other intellectuals who've heard about Mansa Musa. They all converge on the city because they want to meet him and he gives away so much gold. It is said that he collapsed the price of gold for the next 10 years but he wanted to demonstrate his power and his generosity. And it completely transforms the perception of Mali.

Haleema Shah: According to one account, Mansa Musa's stop in Cairo quote "left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold." It was like Oprah's favorite things giveaway...

[OPRAH CLIP PLAYS FAINTLY ...everybody gets a car]

Haleema Shah:...only Musa was giving away precious metal. But, throughout his pilgrimage to Mecca, Mansa Musa got to know other rulers... and, it literally put his empire and his gold on the map.

Gus Casely-Hayford: This is potentially a new intellectual center of the Medieval world. And so when Abraham Cresques, 50 years later, when he designs one of the very first maps of the ancient world, it's a map that shows Europe. It has on it Britain on its periphery. On the other edge... It has the Middle East. But, to the south...holding a gold nugget is Mansa Musa, and he's seen at the center of a nexus of roads, which all radiate toward this new intellectual center. Timbuktu.

Haleema Shah: Timbuktu. The city Mansa Musa poured massive amounts of wealth into, became one of his greatest achievements. Even after his death around 1337, it thrived for centuries. And, Gus says through gold, the world can look back at West Africa's history and see an era of intellectual and cultural expansion, when Europe's Enlightenment was still 300 years away.

Gus Casely-Hayford: I think for peoples of African descent, our history has been assaulted in so many ways, by enslavement, by colonialism, by racism, by so many different things that have really served to undermine our sense of self and our sense of history. And, the beautiful thing about gold is it does tell the story of kings, of emperors, of the powerful; it does tell that story that colonialism sought to deny all of that indigenous story of really structured wonderful cultured civilizations.

Haleema Shah: But, it also preserves the experience of people like Gus's grandfather, who used gold to convey his love for his wife and daughter.

Gus Casely-Hayford: It tells the other story that colonialism denied you. The story of you and I. Of the love that seemed to somehow...despite everything... survive these appalling assaults. And, I think that is equally important.

Haleema Shah: So coming up after a quick break, we'll see how gold isn't just a time capsule into West Africa's history. It's also a way to celebrate the region today -- through family lore and fashion.

[MUSIC]

Gold is a universally precious metal, but West Africa has a special relationship with it. That's an idea that Gus Casely-Hayford stresses in his role as director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. Throughout history, gold generated incredible amount of wealth for both royalty and everyday traders and craftspeople. And, it also made West Africa a center for trade and learning....And at our center of learning in America, Gus is using gold to get Smithsonian visitors to engage more closely with West Africa and its history. Kind of like Mansa Musa did... you know, minus the massive empire....You have a really big job—bringing Africa to Washington, DC; and... effectively the world [laughs]. How do you do that through art?

Gus Casely-Hayford: I think it's one of the best ways of talking and getting an introduction into the complexities of Africa. That some of the oldest archeological science on the African continent, they give us a really thrilling sense of how the visual has always been important to Africans.

Haleema Shah: Archaeologists in Africa have unearthed ancient and elaborate textiles, jewelry, sculpture... even masks that tell us about courtly and everyday life.

Gus Casely-Hayford: We, as an institution, very proudly are the custodians of one of the most important collections. Telling the story of over 2000 years of this incredible set of cultures that we, sadly, know less about than almost anywhere else on earth.

Haleema Shah: The museum's exhibition called "Good as Gold," portrays gold as something that shaped West Africa's economy and culture... but also something that showcases people's appreciation for style and visual art.....The exhibition features elements of a global fashion

show. There's gold jewelry encased in glass, portraits of fashionably dressed women, and glimpses into the work of modern goldsmiths. Amid all of that, is the exhibition's centerpiece—a mannequin that's perched on a platform. But, this isn't your average Macy's display. This mannequin has presence and an attitude. I actually went to look at it, like, four times while reporting this story.

Haleema Shah: So, this is a dress that was designed by Oumou Sy, she's Senegal's Queen of Couture. It's a beautiful, flowy, maroon dress... and, it has gold details all along it. Those are the two color schemes—maroon and gold. She wears a maroon and gold conical head wrap...and, then, the dress has a lot of gold embroidery on it. And, she wears gold bangles, gold bracelets....and... just has an extremely regal presence.....The exhibition zooms in on Senegal...which was also part of Mansa Musa's empire centuries ago. I asked Gus why he chose to focus on Senegal's capital of Dakar in particular.

Gus Casely-Hayford: Dakar is like Paris. This is a place in which the most beautiful people seem to find ways of expressing themselves through fashion, which are utterly exquisite and they have done it across time. What this exhibition attempts to do is to bring a little bit of that to DC. The gold traditions in Dakar are very particular, there is a particular kind of filigree gold making tradition that requires incredible virtuosity of using long, fine, strips of gold.... almost woven like silk. These pieces.... They are exquisite and stylish. This is gold that is meant to be used. And... the women, when you see them, this beautiful gorgeous skin, and, then, to see a wonderful piece of gold; there's almost nothing like it. It's utterly exquisite.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: When you walk through the National Museum of African Art, you might be surprised that the main exhibition is about... style. But, as you walk amongst the beautiful artwork, stunning fashion, and the glittering jewelry, it becomes clear that in Dakar -- and West Africa more broadly -- style is history.

Gus Casely-Hayford: When I think of Africa and I travel in West Africa and you see the incredible style. And, I think it's because of a kind of vibrancy, a love of life, of beauty that these things celebrate, It sits in such stark contrast to so much of the difficulty that has been apart of the recent and distant history of the continent. This is an art form which defiantly stands against the ideas that we might have of Africa. Of this kind of simplistic story that we have of it being corrupt, failed, all of these terrible things that we might read about.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Is there a particular individual that you thought about when you were working on the exhibition?

Gus Casely-Hayford: I do think about what gold had meant to my own family. To my grandmother.

Haleema Shah: Gus actually keeps a photo of his grandmother in his office. He grabbed a small cardboard box from one of his bookshelves which was filled with black and white photographs.

Gus Casely-Hayford: I keep this not as something that I look at ongoingly...but, just as a kind of a powerful talisman. And, the wonderful thing about them, you know, I just taken out two photographs from top of this box; and, one is a photograph of my grandmother. And, she was educated in Oxford. But, in this photograph she's chosen to wear traditional Kente, traditional West African cloth; but, also, she's wearing her gold jewelry. In the colonial period, a lot of the things that were important to them, were being compromised. But, nevertheless, within all of that, they wanted to keep their sense of identity and gold and textiles.

Haleema Shah: It sounds like what you're saying is that the value of the metal is not necessarily in its material value, but, almost the sentimental value.

Gus Casely-Hayford: Well, gold of course is valuable because it can be melted down and it can be used as currency as in West Africa; as it could be in many parts of the world. But, of course, added to that material value was its value as a receptacle of narrative.

Haleema Shah: Narratives of thriving empires... Family histories. And, people's journeys across deserts and oceans. So, that each time, gold is worn in West Africa... it's a celebration of heritage, history, and live itself.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Haleema Shah: If you like shiny things, and want to see stunning gold and the dress I couldn't take my eyes off in the "Good as Gold" exhibition...you can find pictures in our Sidedoor newsletter. Subscribe to the newsletter, at si.edu/sidedoor. Every other week, I will show up in your inbox with bonus content, news, and updates.

Haleema Shah: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian National Board. And thanks to listeners like you— your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Lizzie Peabody, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from John Barth and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music for this episode comes from Smithsonian Folkways and Greg Baumont.

Haleema Shah: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship at prx.org. I'm your host Haleema Shah. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC OUT]

SUGGESTED READING FOR NEWSLETTER:

"Timbuktu" by Gus Casely Hayford

"Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time"

"African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Medieval West Africa" by Michael A. Gomez

"Beyond Timbuktu: An intellectual history of Muslim West Africa"

"The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu: And their race to save the world's most precious manuscripts"

MUSIC:

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