

Jamaican Items on Display at British Museum

An early version of the Jamaican Bongo Drum is the featured item at the entrance of the exhibition, 'A history of the World in 100 Objects', at the British Museum in London.

The drum is titled 'Akan', as it was originally from the Akan people of Central Ghana. It is exhibited as a foundation of western hemisphere music with photographs of Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff and others. This exhibition is being staged in association with the BBC Radio 4, which broadcasts 100 15-minute programmes about each of the items on display and explores their contribution to the development of the world over time. The Akan Drum was donated to the museum by the famous physician and botanist, Sir Hans Sloane. It is this week's featured object and is depicted within the context of its contribution to the development of western popular music. Among the images adorning the display are those of Jamaica's most popular singers, Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff, alongside American greats, such as Billie Holliday, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and Missy Elliot. The display charts the role of the drums in Afro-centric music, looking at its traditional use as an instrument of rites in the Akan region of Western Africa to its arrival in America and dominant use in music forms such as jazz, reggae and hip hop. This drum on display was found in Virginia in the United States and was originally thought to be an Amerindian instrument. Researchers found that it came from Africa. Sir Hans Sloane lived and worked in Spanish Town, Jamaica for 15 months from 1687 to 1688. He was physician to the Governor, the Duke of Albermarle. During his 15- month stay he took an interest in slave culture and transcribed music from slave performances, which included drumming. As a botanist, he noted more than 800 new species of plants, many of which he brought back to Britain and used for medicinal purposes and also to establish the Chelsea Physic Garden. Many of his original collections, including weeds and roots brought from Jamaica, form part of the current display at the British Museum. Jamaican High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, His Excellency Anthony Johnson was given a tour of the exhibition last Thursday, August 19. He was shown the wide and varied items collected by Sloane during his time in Jamaica, including replicas of the yellow snake, mongoose and rat from the early sugar plantations. Artefacts from the Tainos (Arawaks) were also on display as well as items related to the development of drinking chocolate, about which Sloane learnt when he was in Jamaica. High Commissioner Johnson said the display highlighted the extent to which Jamaican items have played a crucial role in the development of medicine, botany and other fields. "The relationship between Sir Hans Sloane and Jamaica is very interesting. The British Museum and the Chelsea Physic Garden are celebrating the 350th anniversary of his birth. Jamaica figures prominently in all the activities because of the impact that his time in Jamaica had on his life and career. In addition to the display at the museum, the botanical garden has developed a special Jamaica plot on the bank of the River Thames where they grow bananas, yam, mangoes, cocoa, among other Jamaican crops. While these will perhaps only last the summer, it is important to understand the tremendous value that has been placed on Jamaican produce over the years," he said. A 'History of the World', told through 100 objects, charts the history of the world from two million years ago to the present. The radio programmes are broadcast on BBC Radio 4 with an omnibus edition on the BBC World Service and are also available online.