

**Handicraft Galleries in Bamenda (North-West Region of Cameroon):  
An Overview of Two Case Studies**

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**Abstract**

Handicraft galleries serve as venues for numerous cultural exchanges and creative pursuits, as well as spaces for intercultural dialogue. They are places where various forms of art and craft are stored. Handicraft galleries can be displayed openly or privately, allowing or restricting direct access depending on the owner's preferences. They are also connected to the economic sector. This study aims to expand knowledge of handicraft galleries by focusing on several cases in Bamenda, the capital of Cameroon's North-West region. The research employed a qualitative methodology, relying extensively on existing literature and field observation. The findings demonstrate that handicraft galleries adopt various approaches to serve the public through their roles. They function as educational institutions, cultural representatives, and economic units, aiming to engage both current and future generations.

**Key Words:** Handicraft, gallery, overview, values, institutions.

**Introduction**

Handicraft galleries are important showplaces that showcase a variety of arts and crafts items and serve as venues for visitors and tourists. Galleries hold and exhibit the icons of countries and cultures, play a key role in communities, and are not just notations in a guidebook or stops on a tourist trail. Arts, crafts, and galleries are essential sectors in the socio-economic and cultural development of countries. Handicraft galleries in Bamenda are vibrant and dynamic, exhibiting the work of local, national, and international contemporary artists and craftsmen. The main question posed by this paper is: how are the handicraft galleries in Bamenda organised? This main question raises subsidiary ones, such

as how the galleries address social issues. How are they involved in the economy? To answer these questions, we will first define galleries and trace their origins. Then we will study two handicraft galleries in Bamenda before examining their social, cultural, and economic values.

### **Brief history of galleries**

People had collected objects for many reasons. Collections in history reveal the spirit of that time with all of its reality.<sup>1</sup> Each collection in history reflected the dominant value, closely aligned with the era's general spirit. That general spirit could be political or philosophical facts.<sup>2</sup> In the 16th century, Bramante created the first formal display setting in the Vatican. European collectors, particularly in Italy, marked the Renaissance era. Some early examples include the Ashmolean, which was the first to collect and display collections publicly available at the University of Oxford in 1683.<sup>3</sup> The Vatican Museums laid the ground for a public gallery like the Uffizi Gallery.

The transition from private collections to public art galleries emerged. Galleries served as reminders of a glorious past.<sup>4</sup> A new art-historical narrative increased enthusiasm for artworks and, consequently, the nation's significant presence. It also completed the idea of national identity. The Louvre Museum and the British National Gallery organised and classified artworks and archaeological objects,<sup>5</sup> before being followed by France.<sup>6</sup> The National Gallery became a symbol of the acceptance of ranking magnates and the social uses of art displays.<sup>7</sup>

In Africa, the collection and preservation of primitive art and visual images date back to the Palaeolithic period. Some of their oldest forms

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<sup>1</sup> E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 164.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 2 (Danbury: Grolier Inc., 1992), 382.

<sup>4</sup> D. Preziosi, *Introduction to The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 14.

<sup>5</sup> B. Guanay, "Museum Concept from Past to Present and Importance of Museum as Centers of Art Education," *Procedia-social and behavioral sciences*, 55(2012), 1250- 15558.

<sup>6</sup> C. Duncan, "From Princely Gallery to Public Art Museum", *Representing the Nation: A Reader Histories, Heritage and Museums*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 309.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

included paintings of animals on cave and tomb walls made between 15,000 and 10,000 BC. Stone carvings of gods and goddesses, fertility symbols, and masks for spiritual dances followed it.<sup>8</sup> The Egyptian Museum in Cairo was established in 1859, and the South African Museum in 1877. In East and central Africa, museums were also established. In Cameroon, the collection of rituals, religious, and, recently, prestige and aesthetic objects dates back to antiquity. The Grassfield's founding fathers laid it down.<sup>9</sup> Enhanced by colonists during the period of African colonisation, collections provided the basis for the creation of a palatial repository, for example, in the Western Grassfield, to safeguard the Western Grassfield's cultural heritage. In the post-independence era, the idea of harmonising the arts and crafts of local artists from diverse ethnic groups was conceived by craftsmen, and some foreign volunteers endorsed by the Cameroon government. Hence, the establishment of handicraft galleries in Bamenda town.

Similar in their missions and operations, Handicraft galleries in Bamenda are vibrant and dynamic, showcasing the work of local, national, and international contemporary artists and craftsmen. These galleries are on a mission to bring art and craft to the community and the community to art through compelling exhibitions, interactive workshops, and thought-provoking events. They also help raise the living standards of artists and craftsmen. Among those located in Bamenda town, we have decided to focus the study on two cases: the Bamenda Handicraft Cooperative Society and the Presbyterian Handicraft Centre.

### **The Bamenda Handicraft Cooperative Society (BHCS)**

The Bamenda Handicraft Cooperative Society Limited, abbreviated BHCS, is one of Bamenda's contemporary galleries. It was established in 1964 by a group of Grassfield's craftsmen with the assistance of some

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<sup>8</sup> M. A. Gene & R. Ragans *Understanding Art* (New York: Glencoe McGraw Hill, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> V. Bayena Ngir, "Bamenda Grassfields Royal Collections and Museums from Ancient Times to the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Symbolism and Conservation of Palace Arts" (PhD Thesis: University of Yaoundé 1, 2014), 79.

American Peace Corps volunteers. The organisation was registered as a cooperative on the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1964.<sup>10</sup> It is located at Station Hill, Bamenda. This gallery displays utilitarian and functional utensils such as bowls, baskets, trays, knives, spoons, pots, mortars, jugs, and other aesthetic objects.

**Plate 1: Partial Exterior View of the BHCS**



**Source:** courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**Plate 2: Display of wood Craft Articles at the Bamenda Handicraft Cooperative Society**



Woodcraft in bowls, glasses, a giraffe, a wine stand, and numerous other accessories are crafted by a talented artist in the Bamenda Grassfields. These cosmic craft articles are not just for consumption purposes but also for decorative reasons.

**Source:** courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with S. Swa on the missions and formation of the BHCS, 65 . Manager at BHCS . 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024

**Plate 3: multi-colored flower jars displayed in the BHCS gallery**



Craft in the North-West region of Clay, Cameroon. This luxurious embellishment is a contemporary craftwork by complex craftsmen. The origin of clay craft could be traced back to the period of antiquity

**Source:** courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**Plate 4: Two Beaded decorative kettles displayed in the gallery**



These beaded ornaments are made from dry, shaped calabashes, mainly for aesthetic purposes.

**Source:** courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**plate 5: Ceremonial drums carved and beaded**



These ceremonial drums are used in churches and in traditional ceremonies like the conventional festivals and death celebrations in many Grassfield villages of the North West Region of Cameroon.

**Source:** courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**Plate 6: Sculptured Royal Stools**



One of the most special status symbols of the Grassfield people was the royal stool. The stools are historically significant as they commemorate the reigns of several kings in the North-West Region of Cameroon.

**Source:** courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**Plate 7: Multi-colored maps of Cameroon and Africa**



Custom-carved cartographic maps are made from solid wood to ensure durability and a stunning appearance.

**Source:** courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**Plate 8 Fluids and Clay Pots**



The beautiful Fluids are made from Indian bamboo for ceremonial use. The clay pots are baked by artisans using the best-quality clays. These pots are used as water vessels.

**Source:** courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**Plate 9: Chopping Board and Wooden Bowl**



Chopping boards are made from solid wood. The Grassfield region has solid, durable woods for woodworking. These chopping boards are used in local and international cuisines to ensure uniformity.

**Source:** Courtesy of Nahgwah, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

Most of the craft items found in the BHCS are handmade, ranging from woodcraft (plates 2, 6, 7, and 9), claycraft (plates 3 & 8), bamboo craft, and embroidery craft (plate 4). This gallery has obtained its collections from artists and craftsmen from diverse backgrounds of the North-West regions.

**The Presbyterian Handicraft Centre Bamenda (PRESCRAFT)**

The project of the Presbyterian Handicraft Centre was initiated in the early 1960s by a Swiss missionary, Rev. Hans Knopfli, as a non-governmental project.<sup>11</sup> Knopfli was a visionary committed to empowering talented craftsmen he met during his missionary work in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> PRESCRAFT Bamenda was created in 1974. Structured as a showroom and a marketing outlet for arts and crafts. It is located on Commercial Avenue, Bamenda. Since its foundation, the organisation has built up a thriving export market.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with E. Ntambo 46, Accountant and Assistant General Manager at PRESCRAFT Commercial Avenue, Bamenda, July 11<sup>th</sup> 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Njei Timah, "Craftmanship in North West Province of Cameroon," <https://www.njeitimah-outlook.com>. Accessed February 24, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Gilbert kings, 36, Manager at PRESCRAFT Bamenda 18<sup>th</sup> July 2025.

**Plate 10: Partial view of PRESCRAFT Bamenda**



**Source:** Courtesy of Nahgwah, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

**Plate 11: Metal Craft**



This metal craft of a human head is the work of an inspired artist. In Cameroon, the iron industry dates back to the 19th century. The contemporary galleries have been exhibiting metal crafts today, thanks to the technological know-how of the ancient people.

**Source:** Courtesy of Nahgwah, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

**Plate 12: Buffalo drinking Horns**



The buffalo horn drinking cups are handcrafted with curled handles and designed for title holders in communities. The cups are designed for Fon, sub-chiefs, etc.

**Source:** Courtesy of Nahgwah, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024

**Plate 13: Basketry**



These tightly woven baskets are designed for various purposes. Some are used in churches as offering boxes. Due to their fine materials, rats can hardly infiltrate the baskets.

**Source: Courtesy of Nahgwah, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024.**

**Plate 14: Mortars and Pistols**



The mortars are carved from solid wood. Many homes are filled with these mortars for food smashing.

**Source: Courtesy of Nahgwah, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024.**

**Plate 15: Clay bowls Cups and Mugs**



The artist produces these mugs and bowls from lumps of dug clay from the North West Villages. These food and water bowls are used worldwide.

**Source: Courtesy of Nahgwah, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024.**

**Plate 16: Raffia Bags**



Raffia bags are crafted by talented artisans in Cameroon's North West Region. The materials are carefully selected from natural fibres. Beautifully woven, dialled-in colours, and decorated with fringes.

**Source: Courtesy of Nahgwah, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2024.**

Display of an array of arts and craft items in the gallery. This gallery features metal crafts (plate 11), clay crafts (plate 15), wood crafts (plate 14), and Woven crafts (plates 13 & 16). All the items displayed in the above galleries play very important roles in society.

### **Values of the Galleries**

#### **Cultural values**

Handicraft galleries are essential institutions for preserving works of art and craft created by people from diverse cultural backgrounds. According to Throsby, the sources of cultural values connected with the museum/gallery are in the works of art and the institution itself. It is possible to assign the following cultural values to works of art: aesthetic value (such as beauty, harmony, and form); and spiritual value. i.e., a collection of cultural meanings essential for a certain group of people; social value, which builds the sense of identity; a historical value, which strengthens the feeling of continuity with the past; a symbolic value, which is the sense hidden in works of art; and the value of authenticity in the originality of objects.<sup>14</sup>

Holden views cultural value as a combination of three modes of value, each originating from the perspective of different stakeholders, groups, government, cultural institutions, and the public. Governments are aligned with instrumental values and their focus on cultural contributions to social and policy objectives that align with a broader agenda of social change. Public agencies such as museums and galleries are associated with institutional value. Through programs, services, and the ethos of public service, these institutions can enhance the public realm and build trust in the institution.<sup>15</sup> To users, Holden attributes

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<sup>14</sup> D. Throsby et al, *Re-imagining the Museum. Beyond the Mausoleums* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 42

<sup>15</sup> J. Holden "Cultural value and the crisis of legitimacy: why culture needs a Democratic mandate", *Demos*, London, 2006, 17.

intrinsic values, which means a set of values that relate to the subjective experience of culture intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

Position and perspective impact on value. Instrumental and institutional values were created through planning and intent. Intrinsic value is experienced. While Holden's view was that cultural value is found in the combination of three modes,<sup>16</sup> Evidence shows that instrumental policy and institutional practice have achieved the intended outcomes, thereby dominating the value.

Handicraft galleries functioned as vital preservation spaces for artistic heritage. They provided a platform for artists to engage with and respond to the cultural context in which they are working. The galleries serve as repositories of cultural heritage, housing artefacts and artworks that reflect a society's history and traditions.<sup>17</sup> Visitors sought to enrich their understanding of different cultures, traditions, and historical periods by immersing themselves in the exhibits. These galleries are creators, guardians, instigators, and nurturers of ever-evolving concepts of cultural heritage. The Bamenda galleries are places of cultural tourism, and, aside from that, they also serve as spaces for ephemeral artistic events such as festivals and performances, art exhibitions, and individual or collective workspaces for artists or their living spaces.<sup>18</sup>

### **Economic values**

Pearce observed that cities and towns were becoming increasingly popular destinations, especially for cultural tourists, a sector for urban revitalization in post-industrial cities.<sup>19</sup> Kotler notes that one of the growing recognitions of the economic potential of tourism and culture is that planners are more aware of the value of these sectors. They can add to the economy and are centered around cultural institutions and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Solomon Swa, Manager at BHCS gallery.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Gilbert Kings, Manager at PRESCRAFT Bamenda gallery.

<sup>19</sup> G. D. Pearce "An Integrative Framework for Urban Tourism Research" *Annals of Tourism Research*, 284 (2001): 927.

activities of local and regional governments and the city.<sup>20</sup> The galleries add monetary value to the economy through visitors. The gallery sector provides job opportunities. They had staff for services, with a minimum employment wage rate of 50,000 FCFA.<sup>21</sup>

Florida notes the trend for large cities to shift their development efforts away from “smokestack chasing” toward attracting tertiary-sector firms by attracting people. Museum and the expansion of the Art Gallery of Ontario are elements that helped cultural development plans: fiscal policies, urban revitalisation, and economic redevelopment schemes. As the most visible cultural institutions, galleries are becoming cornerstones of development plans. Arts and heritage policies are intended, in part, to enhance the city's image as a tourist destination. Many urban policies have recently incorporated the city's attractiveness to potential tourists, as part of plans to regenerate local economies.<sup>22</sup>

### **Social values**

The social values of these galleries are appreciated in the light of education and well-being. Here, it is tacitly assumed that any subjective value derived from such pastimes informs the population about available sociocultural experiences. It is designed for a broad audience that is not necessarily divided into stable groups. As for education, Abduraheem Mohammad Ansari focuses on informal education. According to him, such education occurs outside a structured curriculum, and galleries can play that role. Informal education encompasses student interests within a curriculum in a regular classroom, but is not limited to that setting. It works through conversation, exploration, and enlargement of experience.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> N. Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture: the Role of Museums and Marketing Implications”, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 19.4(2001): 417-425.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Solomon Swa, Manager at BHCS gallery.

<sup>22</sup> M. V. Levine, “Tourism-based redevelopment and the fiscal crisis of the city: The case of Montreal”, *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 12.1(2003) 1188-3774.

<sup>23</sup> K. Abduraheem et al. “Role of Museums in Education” *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology (IJARSCT)* Volume 3, Issue 2, (2021).

He also added that education comprises a set of organised actions aimed at disseminating and explaining scientific knowledge, as well as other socially significant information. The transmission of the values of the historical and cultural past, along with an explanation of their information. Society becomes obvious. Here, such events correspond to the educational events in the popularisation of cultural and leisure activities in a significant and meaningful way to the general population.<sup>24</sup>

George E. H. defines education as the transmission of culture as a whole. In that sense, education begins at birth and continues until death. On the other hand, formal education is a programme applied according to a curriculum to create a permanent transformation in a person's mental organisation and attitude. Differences in educational programmes stem from separate, distinct definitions.<sup>25</sup> Thus, these galleries served as an enabling environment for the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Therefore, handicraft galleries' functions in Bamenda are not limited to economic and cultural activities; they also serve as learning institutions engaged in knowledge production. Mary E. observed that social well-being could be enhanced in galleries. They provide feelings of happiness<sup>26</sup> and well-being.<sup>27</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Studies have proven that modernity has eroded the pride of African culture. However, handicraft galleries in Bamenda town have been serving as multifaceted institutions that cater to a broad spectrum of interests and motivations. Whether it was for educational purposes, cultural exploration, or commercial purposes, these galleries are enriching spaces that contributed significantly to the fabric of our collective knowledge, as an economic unit, a place to improve mental well-

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> G. E. Hein, *Learning in the Gallery*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 16.

<sup>26</sup> S. Lyubomirsky & H. Lepper, "A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary Reliability and construct validation", *Social Indicators Research*, 46 (1999), 137-155.

<sup>27</sup> M.E.Munley, "Art Museums and Well-Being", *A Review of Literature MEM &Associate*, November 2015, 12.

being, and appreciation for the Bamenda people. The galleries served as a platform for creative expression and community well-being by collecting and presenting work by artists and craftsmen from diverse Grassfield backgrounds, perspectives, and communities. Opportunities were/are given to a wide range of artist voices by sharing the work and collaborating with artists and Craftsmen from all backgrounds. These galleries have adopted various approaches to satisfy visitors and have helped revive a dying history. These institutions are not just repositories of objects; they are dynamic spaces where the past and present converge.

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