America's Instrument: B·A·N·J·O·S from the Jim Bollman Collection

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The banjo has played an important role in many musical forms over the past two centuries, including minstrelsy, vaudeville, jazz, bluegrass, folk, and pop. The instrument itself has ranged from relatively simple and folky examples during its early history to highly decorated instruments of the late Victorian period. This exhibition displays some of the rarest and most significant banjos from the nineteenth century, a period when the instrument underwent dramatic developments in its construction, visual design, and sociological roles.

Banjo, Hexum P. Kent (1837–1918), Providence, Rhode Island, 1880s. 34″ x 10.5″ x 3.25″. Collection of Jim Bollman. Photo: R. J. Phil.

What is a Banjo?

The primary feature where the banjo differs from its musical cousins of nineteenth-century America (the guitar and mandolin) is that instead of a wood soundboard to amplify the vibrations of its strings, it has a thin membrane of calfskin or sheepskin, like the head of a drum. The circular body of the banjo echoes this relationship with the drum, and it is the acoustic nature of this skin membrane that gives the banjo its distinctive tone.

Banjos vary greatly in design and appearance, but those in this exhibition mostly have five strings, one of which is short and serves as a musical drone. The bodies of most nineteenth-century banjos are open at the back but starting in the 1860s some makers opted for a closed back, feeling this would enhance the tone. Keeping the banjo’s skin head taught is generally accomplished by metal hooks and brackets around the rim of the body that can be tightened to provide more tension.

Early banjos lacked raised frets on the neck to serve as a guide to particular notes. Later ones, however, almost invariably have metal frets set into the fingerboard for this purpose. Tuning mechanisms likewise changed in design over time, the earliest being a wooden peg simply fitted into a hole in the peghead and held by friction. Later models, however, employed geared metal “tuning machines.”

Photograph, The Carmen Sisters, Leading Banjoists, c. 1902. Collection of Jim Bollman.

African Origins

Across the African continent, people have played plucked lutes for centuries and continue to do so today. It has long been understood that enslaved people who were brought to the Americas adapted instruments like these to create the banjo, the earliest of which was documented in 1687. Only a handful of early gourd-bodied banjos from this African American tradition survive today. These instruments, along with descriptions of them, appear along the northeast coast of South America, throughout the Caribbean, and into North America as far north as New York state. In those descriptions, the banjo carries a wide array of names, including *bangie*, *banza*, *banjer*, and *banjar*.

The exact story of how and where the first banjos were created by enslaved African peoples living in North America—and how the idea was transmitted from their homelands—will probably never be fully revealed. But it has become increasingly clear from eyewitness accounts that these peoples put the banjo to use not just for entertainment, but also to provide rhythm and melody that accompanied dancing as a part of sacred rituals.

Banjo with inlaid tool designs, unknown maker, New England region, 1870s. 37" x 12" x 3.5". Collection of Jim Bollman. Photo: R. J. Phil.

Minstrelsy

The so-called minstrel show was a form of racist entertainment in which performers depicted people of African descent in a caricatured and demeaning manner through music, dancing, and skits. Minstrelsy cannot be condoned today but it is an important, though repugnant, part of the story of the banjo's historical development in America. Although a few performers in the genre were actually African Americans, the majority were White presenters who appeared in "blackface," darkening their skin with burnt cork and wearing motley costumes. Although minstrelsy predates 1840, it was around that time that the banjo was introduced by performers. Because of the banjo's association with enslaved Africans, it was an obvious choice for these shows and soon became the heart of a standard minstrelsy ensemble that included fiddle, tambourine, and bones (a type of clapper).

The minstrel show was the predominant form of American popular entertainment during the 19th century and continued well into the 20th century. But today it is difficult to comprehend the way that it so falsely depicted African Americans as buffoonish, happy-go-lucky, and superstitious, while also promoting an idealization that they were happy being enslaved on plantations, which was of course, far from the case. Despite the negative stereotypes, some Blacks performed in minstrelsy for commercial reasons. Others continued to play their own repertoire for both White and Black dances and social events.

Mandoline-banjo, August Pollman Company, New York City, 1890–1900. 34″ x 11″ x 3.5″. Collection of Jim Bollman. Photo: R. J. Phil.

Post-War Popularity

After the Civil War, many musicians envisioned the banjo having greater musical potential than realized on the minstrel stage. A new method of playing the strings was advocated, called "finger picking," which was in the manner of the guitar rather than the so-called stroke style that had previously been used. This led to more complex repertoire as musicians introduced tunes composed specifically for the banjo. A sociological change came about as well, as the banjo was promoted as a musically sophisticated instrument, respectable for the parlor and one that even women could play.

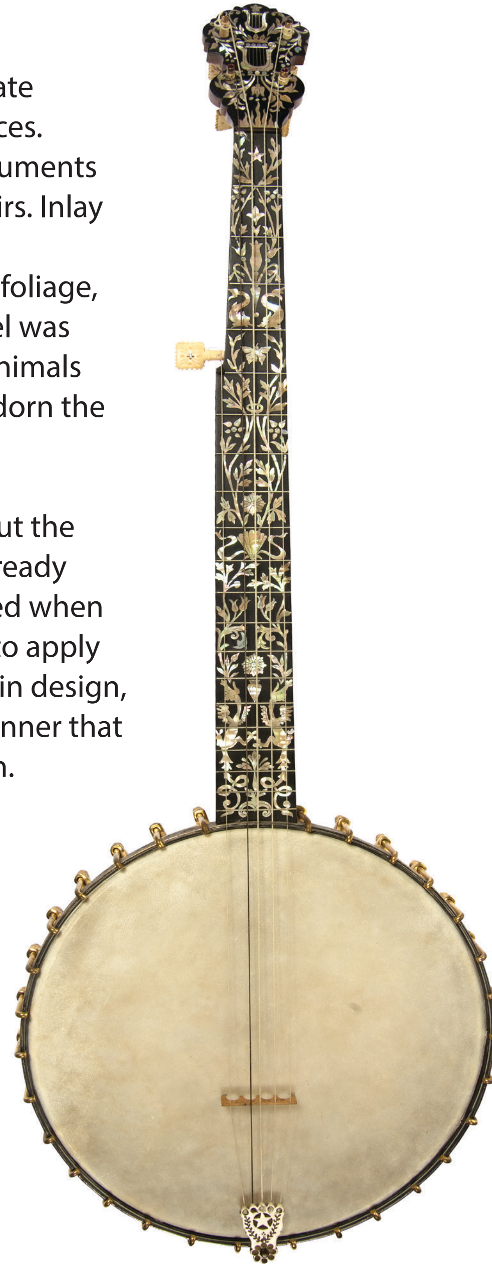
With changes in playing style and social attitudes came a wave of innovations to improve banjo construction and tone. The first patent for a banjo was in 1859, and many others followed through the end of the century. Not all the ideas were long lasting, but one that held sway for a number of years was covering the banjo's back with wood to create an enclosed sound cavity. Along with closed-back banjos came new head-tensioning devices that did not get caught on and tear clothing of male performers or dresses of female players.

Left & right: Mandoline-banjo detail

Presentation Banjos

Banjo companies of the late 1800s produced increasingly ornate instruments for customers who would pay commensurate prices. These makers also created "presentation" banjos, one-off instruments that were custom orders or intended for exhibition at trade fairs. Inlay work on the fingerboards and headstocks of fancy banjos was executed in mother-of-pearl and abalone shell, incorporating foliage, architectural elements, and fantastical creatures. The neck heel was also carved in various manners, including sculpted heads of animals and sometimes people. Elaborate engraving might likewise adorn the metal-covered rims of the body.

Various companies produced elaborately decorated banjos, but the best hailed from Boston. The work of that city's makers was already handsome starting in the 1880s, but a noticeable shift occurred when Italian-born jewelry maker Icilio Consalvi (1865–1951) began to apply his talents to this craft. Consalvi's inlay was not only inventive in design, but he also took pains to incise individual pearl pieces in a manner that gave them more life and depth than had previously been seen.



Banjo (Champion model), S. S. Stewart Company, Philadelphia, 1894–1895. 37″ x 12.5″ x 3.5″ Collection of Jim Bollman. Photo: R. J. Phil.

Top & bottom: Banjo (Champion model) detail

The Bollman Collection

Jim Bollman has been collecting nineteenth-century banjos and related material since the late 1960s, amassing what is arguably the world's finest and most significant collection of such instruments. His collection is well known for rare banjos dating prior to the 1860s as well as stellar examples made after the Civil War, especially presentation instruments from the late 1800s.

Banjo (Electric Presentation model), A. C. Fairbanks Company, Boston, 1895. 36.5" x 12.5" x 3.5". Collection of Jim Bollman. Photo: R. J. Phil.

Bollman has always sought the best and rarest banjos of these eras, favoring examples that exhibit particularly fine or noteworthy aesthetic elements. His collection thus represents the highest artistry of banjo-making during the first sixty years of the instrument's history. Enhancing the banjos is an astounding archive containing period photographs, advertising material, trade catalogs, periodicals, sheet music, and artwork.

Mountain Banjo, unknown maker, c. late 19th century. Collection of James Bollman. Photo: R. J. Phil.

America's Instrument was guest curated by Darcy J. Kuronen, formerly the Pappalardo Curator of Musical Instruments, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

To learn more about banjos visit:
• Fineoldbanjos.com
• The Banjo Project at banjo.emerson.edu

Front: Banjo (Electric Presentation model), A. C. Fairbanks Company, Boston, 1895.
36.5″ x 12.5″ x 3.5″. Collection of Jim Bollman. Photo: R. J. Phil.