

Backgrounder

Benin Artifacts, Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art

History

The Kingdom of Benin, home of the Edo peoples, is located in the southwest tropical forest and mangroves region of present-day Nigeria. Oral histories trace the founding of the kingdom to Ogiso rulers, the first royal dynasty of Benin that ruled until c. 1200 A.D. A rebellion against the Ogiso was settled when an outsider, Oranmiyan, the son of the divine king of the Yoruba city of Ile Ife, was invited to rule Benin. Traditions recount that Oranmiyan did not rule, but married an Edo woman. Their son Eweka became *oba* (ruler) around 1300 A.D., beginning the present dynasty.

Supported by his court and advisors, the *oba* governs from his palace in Benin City, the kingdom's capital (sometimes called Edo) and the present capital of Nigeria's Edo State. He is also supported by town chiefs, who historically administered many of the kingdom's territories and villages, collected tribute and raised armies. The *oba*'s mother, the *iyoba* or queen mother, occupies a unique position in the court hierarchy. Equal in rank to a senior chief, the *iyoba* maintains her own palace in a nearby quarter, which is staffed by attendants and members of her own court and includes her own altars and royal regalia.

Archaeological excavations, oral histories kept by court and guild officials, narrative accounts and trade records from European travelers, and thousands of works of art document the kingdom's long and rich history. Portuguese exploration along the coast of west Africa, which began around 1460, reached inland to Benin in 1485–86, where the Portuguese found a flourishing kingdom and a desirable trading partner. The English first reached Benin in 1553, and Dutch travel accounts to the kingdom date to 1699.

During this early period of contact with Europeans, the Edo did not embrace Christianity, but they welcomed European trade goods and integrated them into their art and material culture. Early trade focused on the exchange of pepper, a highly sought-after spice, cloths, ivory and enslaved Africans for damask, silk, cowries and the manillas of copper that would ultimately become the primary material used in the fabrication of the Benin bronzes. It is estimated that the Portuguese alone traded some 25 to 49 tons of copper to Benin. The extent of the Kingdom of Benin's involvement in the trafficking in enslaved Africans is debated, but the Portuguese did buy the enslaved, along with cloth and beads, and then traded them for gold along what is now the coast of Ghana for an enormous profit. Some historians argue that the expansionist policies of 15th- and 16th-century kings were motivated by the desire for more slaves, more than land. The kingdom did grow significantly throughout this period.

The 1897 Raid on Benin

After centuries of power, a single event marks a stark turning point in the history of the Benin Kingdom. James Phillips, an official in Britain's Niger Coast Protectorate, led an unarmed trading expedition to Benin City in January 1897. To prevent the British party from interfering with sacred royal rituals, some chiefs, acting against *Oba* Ovonramwen's wishes, ordered the expedition attacked. Six British officials and almost 200 African porters were killed.

Britain responded immediately, mounting a so-called punitive expedition to capture Benin. In addition to disrupting the *oba*'s economic and religious power, the kingdom's practice of human sacrifice was exaggerated in the popular press of the day and served as further pretext for the British raid. The palace was burned and looted in February 1897, and the *oba* was exiled. To break the power of the monarchy, the British confiscated all royal treasures, giving some to individual officers but taking most to auction in London to pay for the cost of the expedition. The looted objects—estimated to be about 3,000 in number—eventually made their way into museums and private collections around the world.

It was not until 1914 that a new *oba*, Eweka II, was allowed to return to Benin. He rebuilt the palace shrines, recalled the dispersed artists and reactivated their guilds. Although he no longer controlled trade or wielded judicial or military powers, *Oba* Eweka II's moral authority remained. In addition to making artworks in the service of the *oba* and his court, artists were now permitted to create objects for sale to anyone, including foreigners who visited the royal casting guild and visitors to art galleries and souvenir shops in Nigeria's towns.

Description of Benin Kingdom Court Art (Benin Bronzes)

The Kingdom of Benin is renowned for the exceptional quality and diversity of its royal arts fashioned in copper alloy, ivory, terracotta, wood, iron and coral beads. Benin sculpture often centers on the human figure, but animals are also depicted, and the art includes a wealth of symbolic imagery that references the kingdom's culture and history.

Historically, the kingdom's specialized artists and craftsmen belonged to guilds in which membership was hereditary. The *oba* was the leading art patron, who not only owned more objects than anyone else, but also decided what others might possess. He also controlled the use of ivory and copper alloy—essential materials for the creation of court arts.

Royal wealth was prominently displayed on palace altars, particularly those dedicated to past *obas* and *iyobas*. Cast copper alloy heads, individual figures and multi-figure tableaux, intricately carved ivory tusks, wooden heads and staffs, and cast copper alloy lidded vessels and bells of varying sizes were placed on these ancestral altars. Typically, the cast heads honored past *obas*, although certain heads with distinctive markings and limited regalia suggest non-Edo Africans and may represent so-called trophy heads of defeated and subjugated enemies. Since the late 18th century, some of the cast heads supported ivory tusks ornamented with intricately carved motifs reflecting the political, economic and spiritual power of the *oba*.

Carved ivory tusks were also placed on ancestral altars and stored in the palace to reflect the wealth of the *oba* and his kingdom.

Royal plaques are particularly prominent in the corpus of Benin Kingdom court art. According to court historians and the accounts of early 17th-century Dutch travelers, the *oba* of Benin once covered the posts of his palace courtyard with hundreds of cast copper alloy plaques. Later travelers' accounts did not mention the plaques, and in 1897, a British military expedition found them in a palace storehouse.

Plaques were individually molded and cast with molten copper-based metal. While some plaques have narrative scenes, such as battles and hunts, most have one, two or more male figures in royal attire carrying court regalia, such as swords, bows and gongs. Foreigners were also depicted. Plaques with more than one figure often employed hierarchical perspective, with the size and placement of a figure indicating its relative importance. Close inspection of the plaques reveals a high level of technical expertise and a wealth of historical detail that provide a glimpse into Benin court life centuries ago. Today, nearly 1,000 plaques exist in public and private collections.

Benin Bronzes in the National Museum of African Art Collection

The collection of the National Museum of African Art includes 39 artworks from Nigeria attributed as Benin Kingdom court style. When the museum became part of the Smithsonian in 1979, and in anticipation of the 1987 opening of its new facility on the National Mall, the decision was made to expand the collection of historical African art with objects of exceptional quality, including Benin Kingdom court arts.

The Benin Kingdom court-style artworks are listed below (all are cast copper alloy, unless otherwise noted):

- 5 commemorative heads (one ceramic)
- 9 plaques
- 4 human figures (one ivory)
- 2 animal figures (fish, rooster)
- 2 gongs
- 3 ceremonial swords (copper alloy and iron)
- 3 pendants
- 3 bracelets (one copper alloy, two sheet brass)
- 2 ivory tusks
- 2 bells
- 1 lidded vessel
- 1 altar stand
- 1 iron staff
- 1 crest mask

The majority of these artworks are dated, based on style, from the late 15th or early 16th century through the late 19th century. The Benin bronzes entered the museum's collection through

purchase, transfer, donation and bequest. Twenty pieces were transferred from the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Joseph H. Hirshhorn had acquired the works through dealers and auctions.

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