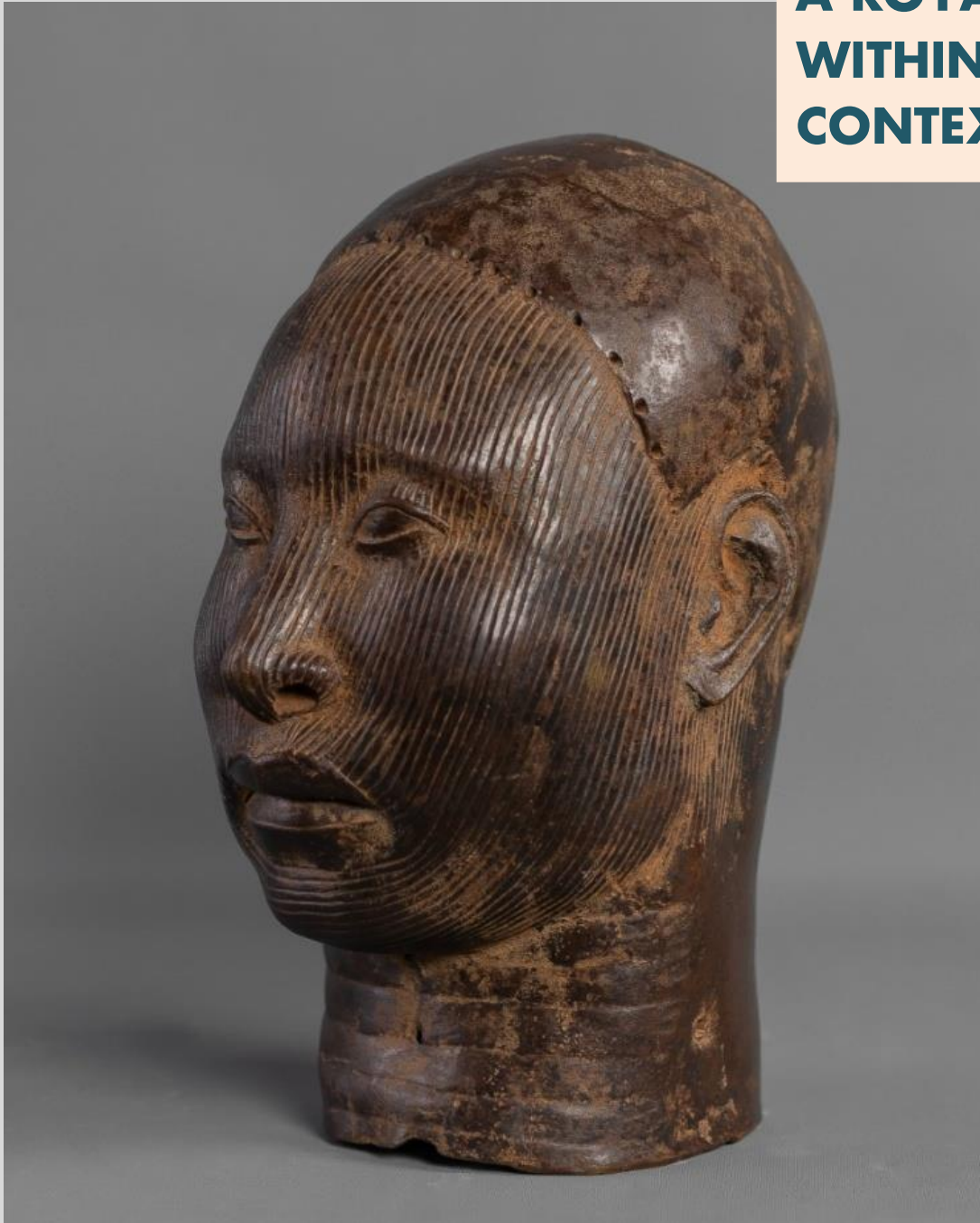


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# Artwork Information Sheet

# 01

## A ROYAL HEAD WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF IFE



*Ife Royal Head (side view)*, Bronze, 30 x 14 x 16cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

## INTRODUCTION

Leo Frobenius, a German ethnologist, who came to Nigeria in 1910 for ethnological finds was the first person to undertake serious archaeological work in Ife. His “most famous find, was the brass head known as Olokun which appears to have been dug up in the Olokun Grove during the second half of the nineteenth century” (Willet 1960). Although this discovery of Frobenius changed people’s perception of African Art, he had a misconception about its origin. With great disbelief that the Olokun head was made by an African, Frobenius maintained a theory that it was from the lost city of Atlantis, an ancient mythical Greek colony. However, the discovery of a figure of the Oni of Ife in 1957 challenged the credibility of his theory.

In Yoruba Philosophy, the head is seen as the shell that houses the essence of an individual. It is, therefore, usually depicted bigger than the rest of the body in sculptural representations. “It is the representation of Orí (head) in the metaphysical sense. The proportion depicted reflects the unquantifiable and immeasurable attributes of Orí, while its physical largeness symbolises its largeness in content” (Ademuleya 2007). Oni’s figure depicts this philosophy. Therefore, it is certain that the art of Ife was done by persons who understand this philosophy. Ife art then must have been made by the Yorúbás for the Yorúbás.

## IFE

In Nigeria, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, the ancient African city “Ife” (Ile-Ife) flourished. It is located along the Guinea Coast of Southern West Africa and had trade connections with other West African Kingdoms.

According to historical stories, Ife is the centre of the world. In Ife, “the children of the most high god came through climbing down a chain from Heaven with a five-toed chicken and a bowl of sand, which the chicken scattered across the primordial ocean to make the land” (Willet 1960). Oduduwa or Odua was the eldest of these descendants from heaven and was

the first ruler of Ife with the title “Oni of Ife” which means King of Ife. Later on, he sent out his sixteen sons with beaded crowns to rule kingdoms of their own.

Since the time of Oduduwa, Ife was and is still known as the centre of Yoruba traditional beliefs. One of the most important historical events in ancient Ife was the civil war between the supporters of Obatala and those of Oduduwa which erupted in the reign of Ife’s 46<sup>th</sup> king. The effects of this civil war left Ife vulnerable and consequently, Ife was evacuated several times in its history by its twin town called “Modakeke”. These interruptions probably affected the continuity of some of their practices and traditions as many of the older ones who practiced these traditions died in exile. This, in turn, has made it difficult to correctly align Ife’s history. Information from one of Frobenius’ allies revealed that,

***“Many make mutual accusations of having stolen their Orishas (gods) and are therefore not descendants of the gods upon whom they allege dependence. Many were not entitled in any way to make a claim to such descent, for in the earlier warlike times everything got mixed (Willet 1960)”.***

Nevertheless, in 1938, thirteen bronze heads of approximately life-size were found in the compound of Wunmonije (a previous Oni of Ife) which was close to the back door of the palace. By this time, the then Oni of Ife, Sir Adesoji Aderemi was keen on keeping these emblems of their culture and heritage. He started collecting items dug up by people from building foundations and road constructions. This has helped greatly in the discovery of ancient Ife art.

Apart from being a historical site, Ife is known to have great artists. Although copper is a difficult metal to work with, the Ife artists through their ingenuity, used it in producing their artworks. They also used terracotta, stone, quartz, copper and brass for sculpting. Importantly, Ife art is believed to have

influenced Benin art because early Benin art shows an inkling to realism like Ife art.

## THE IFE HEAD SCULPTURE



Fig 1.1 *Ife Royal Head* (side view), Bronze, 30 × 14 × 16cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

Viewing the Ife royal head, a smooth scalp alternates at the forehead which has a straight cut with perforated holes. Numerous lines ensue from the sharp hairline and slopes inwards and outwards as it enwraps the features of the face; eyes nose and lips. As the lines curve to enwrap the jaw, it comes to an abrupt end as it meets the neckline. The neck has linear representations that are typical of the fold lines on the human jaw. It's a typical human head depicted in a naturalistic manner. It is made of bronze which is a metal alloy of copper and tin.

Ife heads, though naturalistic, have some stylizations; the eyes are arched at the sides and have no brows, the lips are depicted slightly apart and the overall look of the face exudes peace and serenity. Most of the Ife heads “are identified as depictions of

individuals who lived in the era in which Ife king Obalufon II was on the throne and or participated in the civil war associated with his reign” (Blier 2012). In the suggestions of some scholars, this supports the claim that the king was a chief patron of the arts which is reinforced with his modern-day identity as patron of bronze casting, textiles, regalia, peace and wellbeing. The holes lining the scalp have been interpreted to be a possible hold for beaded crowns which in the ideal setting would have been worn on the Ife heads. “Vertical line facial marks such as these appear to reference Ife royals (as well as elites) and ideas of autochthony more generally” (Blier 2012). Most of the Ife heads were made using the lost-wax process from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century CE (the dating was derived through chemical analysis). A piece similar to the one in the picture above is in the care of the National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria.

## THE LOST WAX METHOD

The use of this method requires great knowledge of the different mediums in use which include clay, bronze or brass and the various temperatures conducive for each medium at different points in casting.

The wax from bees or latex is used in starting the process as it is a material with a low melting point. It is also a material soft for carving and strong enough to retain its shape. The wax after being carved is coated with clay, first with a fine layer to capture the fine details that have been carved. Then more layers of clay that could be coarse are added to the initial coat for more stability. The coated mould is left to dry. Next, “the entire assemblage is fired, causing the original wax carving to melt away, leaving only a baked clay shell” (Apley 2001). Into this void space left by the melted wax, molten metal is poured through a narrow hole. It is left to cool and harden. Afterwards, the clay exterior is broken revealing the casted metal underneath.

## CONCLUSION

Today, Ife art is not practiced as it was in the past but some of its shrines and groves still exist. Rituals to these gods are still performed by existing traditionalists. It remains an important site of religious and spiritual activities of the Yoruba people. Ife heads have come to stand as items of national heritage and reveal the skill and commitment Ife artists had in attaining difficult feats in their works. Ife's History is difficult to trace because conflicting accounts of it exist but its impact on changing misconceptions attributed to African art cannot be denied.

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