



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet **03**



**BENIN ART
THROUGH
A BRONZE
HEAD**

Benin Altar Head, (side view), Bronze

© Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

BENIN ART THROUGH A BRONZE HEAD

The art of the royal kingdom of Benin is an unravelling of untold stories. Today, Benin exists as a state in Southern Nigeria and the role of the Oba is more ceremonial than political. Through the Benin punitive expedition of 1897, the first bronze works from Africa were recorded. The Benin bronze casters started creating these bronze figures before the 13th century. These bronze works are known collectively as Benin Art. Bronze is an alloy of copper and zinc. They were first discovered when the spoils of the Benin punitive expedition caught the attention of the European public after the expedition. Although artistic production at Ife predates the one of Benin, Ife art was brought to the attention of the European public in 1910 when Leo Frobenius, a German ethnographer, discovered some bronze and terracotta heads at Ife.

Who are the Benin people and why did they make art? What does the head in the museum at Pan-Atlantic University represent and to whom did it belong? A curious look at the Benin bronze head in Figure 1.1 brings all these and more questions to mind.

A CURSORY VIEW OF THE BENIN KINGDOM

The Benin kingdom, home of the Edo speaking people, is located in the tropical rain forest region of what is now Nigeria. It was formerly Edo, a name given to it by Oba Eweka I and it had a great monarchical system. The King called the Oba is the ceremonial as well as stately head of the Kingdom. Guilds of bronze casters and ivory carvers were formed to facilitate the making of art for the royal court. The people greatly paid respect to their Oba who had "the realm's supreme religious and political authority" (Plankeinsteiner, 2010).

From myths and archeological discoveries, it is gathered that from the earliest times, the Benin kingdom was ruled by the Ogisos "the kings from

the Sky" who were "warrior kings" as well. "Depending on the tradition, this dynasty consisted of thirty-one kings, or twelve, or just one" (Plankeinsteiner, 2010). The dynasty of these warrior kings came to an end with the banishment of the only son of the last warrior king. Consequently, the Uzama (the village Elder) turned to the Oni of Ife in the 13th century for a new King. He sent his son Oranmiyan who begot a son with the daughter of a village chief and this marked the beginning of the second dynasty. This son is Oba Eweka I, the first King of the second dynasty. In another account that favours the Benin authority, the banished prince went to Ife and in time became King. At the bidding of the Benin people, he sent his son Oranmiyan who established a new dynasty.

As with the head in figure 1.1, commemorative heads were done to honor a deceased. The occupational and political status of the deceased determined the material that was used in making it. The medium used varies from wood, terracotta to bronze which was introduced in the second dynasty. There is no generally accepted origin of bronze casting in Benin. The version most widely known was published by an Edo historian, J.U. Egharevba.

"Oba Oguola (the fifth king) wished to introduce brass casting into Benin to produce works of art similar to those sent from Ife. He, therefore, sent [for a brass smith from the Oni of Ife] and Iguegha (e) was sent to him" (Egharevba, 1936, as cited in Plankensteiner, 2010)."

In some accounts, it is recorded that it originates from Ife. As the art historian Peter Garlake states, "The myths and traditions of the city of Benin point to Ife as the origin of kingship and brass casting" (Catwright, 2019). The naturalism of early Benin bronzes attests to this possible relation but definite proof has not been found in Benin art research.

THE BENIN BRONZE HEAD



Fig 1.2 Benin Altar Head (front view), Bronze,
©Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

The work in Figure 1.2 represents the head of a dead King or Oba. In the ideal Benin Altar setting, an ivory tusk would be inserted in a hole on this bronze head of an Oba.

"The first duty of a newly crowned Oba or King was to erect an ancestral altar to his deceased father and commission a commemorative head for it. These altars were housed in a special area of the palace; they served as a site for the worship of royal ancestors, and at the same time legitimized the living ruler" (Plankeinsteiner, 2010)."

The Oba as seen from the bronze head is decked in beads. A beaded cap is worn on his head, with additional beads strung on in the form of flowers resting on both sides of this cap. A single bead rests close to the forehead of the Oba. On both sides of this cap, two sets of eight rows of linearly stringed beads rest close to the ear of the Oba. From the base of the neck to the lower lip, the Oba's profile is wrapped in layers of stringed beads. Above the eyelids of the Oba sits three tribal marks and one standing alone on the forehead. The head represented a vessel through which power was transferred from the late king to the new king. "During the 15th and 16th centuries CE, Benin traded

with the Portuguese, who established a 30-year presence at Ughoton from 1487 CE" (Catwright, 2019). This could be the source of the bronze and copper the Benin people used to make their famous sculptures. This contact with the Portuguese is also likely depicted in their art. This trade boosted the production of these bronze sculptures. The lost wax method was used from this period to produce these sculptures.

THE LOST WAX METHOD

The wax from bees or latex is used in starting the process because it has 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 mold 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 then left to cool and harden. Afterwards, the clay exterior is broken revealing the casted metal underneath.

The precise dates of most Benin artworks are uncertain. Stylistic classification and "scientific analysis of materials or an age determination following the method of thermoluminescence" (Junger, 2007) has been used in the last decades to determine the age of the Benin bronzes. The common assumption shared by authors is that the more naturalistic a Benin head is, the older it is while the highly stylized ones were produced much later. The possible dating of the head above is grouped within the years 1700-1750 based on the methods listed above.

CONCLUSION

"Art in Benin served multiple functions from commemoration, ancestral deification, and trade to historical documentation and literary purposes" (Plankeinsteiner, 2010). In Igbo-Ukwu, like Benin,

bronze and brass are used. Igbo-Ukwu artworks, though smaller in size, have more precise details than Benin art. Heads similar to the heads in figures 1.1 and 1.2 can be found in other collections around the world. One was given to Queen Elizabeth II by the Head of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, General Yakubu Gowon during his State visit to the United Kingdom, 12th -15th June 1973. It is currently in the Royal Collection. Another can be found in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

REFERENCES

- Apley, A. (2001, October). *African Lost-Wax Casting*. Retrieved from metmuseum.org: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wax/hd_wax.htm
- Catwright, M. (2019, April 2). *Kingdom of Benin*. Retrieved from Ancient History Encyclopedia: www.ancient.eu/Kingdom_of_Benin/
- Collection*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Royal Collection Trust: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/72544>
- Egharevba, J. U. The Short History of Benin. In B. Plankensteiner, *Visions of Africa, BENIN*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions.
- Ezra, K. (1992). *Royal Art of Benin; The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Junger, P. (2007). Age Determination of Commemorative Heads: The Example of the Berlin Collection. In B. Plankensteiner, *Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*. Gent: Snoeck Publishers.
- Lunden, S. (2016). *Displaying Loot; The Benin Objects and the British Museum*. Gothenburg: Gothenburg University Press.
- Nzewi, U. (2007). The Head in Focus; Benin Art and Visual History. *Give and Take*, pp. 31-41.
- Plankeinsteiner, B. (2010). *Visions of Africa, BENIN*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions.