

# Artwork Information Sheet 09

## THE NOK HEAD IN CONTEXT



*Nok Head*, Terracota, 130x20x22cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

## INTRODUCTION

**N**ok art occupies a prominent place in Nigeria's art because of its history which dates back to the 2nd-5th centuries of the iron age. The product of a culture that appeared in northern Nigeria around 1500 BC and vanished under unknown circumstances around 500 AD, the Nok terracotta Sculptures were first discovered in Taruga, Kaduna by Colonel Dent Young, a tin miner in 1928. Bernard Fagg, an archaeologist, later discovered more sculptures in 1940 and named them "Nok" because of the location where the sculptures were discovered.

Since then, hundreds of Nok Culture sites have been illegally dug in search of these terracotta sculptures. Valuable information about the Nok Culture was lost when these objects were taken from out of the ground and removed from their archaeological contexts (Breunig, 2017). Further archaeological discoveries have given depth to the Nok culture though a proper knowledge of their contexts remains uncertain. Present in the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art is one of such finds and we would consider its context in this write up basing our ideas on knowledge gotten from credible research materials.

## ABOUT NOK

Nok is a small village located 500km from Abuja. As mentioned earlier, the term "Nok" was given to the art works because they were first discovered there. However, this does not imply that the people who made the works were actually from the Nok terrain. Nok Art "depicts people and occasionally animals, featuring clear stylistic similarities" (Breunig, 2017).

The figures are almost life sized and are very stylized with perforated eyes and lips, the hair is usually detailed. The figures have some exaggerated features "such as enormous ears and genitals, leading some scholars to argue that they are representations of diseases like elephantiasis" (Hirst, 2020). In central Nigeria, more than 160 archaeological sites "associated with the Nok figures, including villages, towns, smelting furnaces, and ritual sites" (Hirst,

2020) have been found. These figures were made by farmers and iron smelters who from 1500BCE-300BCE lived in central Nigeria.

From discoveries, it appears that they were made from coarse clay and burnt hence the term "terracotta". In making terracotta, coarse and porous clay is used. First it is sculpted, then fired until hard. In prehistoric times, it was left to harden in the hot sun then baked in primitive ovens at about 100°C. It assumes a brownish orange colour after firing and is not water resistant unless glazed.

Fagg's daughter, Angela Fagg, followed in her father's line of research and in 1970 she excavated Samun-Dukiya, a settlement near Nok (Breunig, 2017). This discovery greatly assisted knowledge of the Nok culture in-context because previous discoveries had not been in their original contexts making it difficult to gather information on the work. Interest in Nok sculptures grew with its popularity among art collectors and illegal digs were organized and executed to unearth the Nok sculptures. This has greatly affected the documentation of these pre historic art forms from Africa. In 2005, the German Goethe University, Frankfurt/Main in conjunction with the Nigerian Commission for Museums and Monuments conducted an intensive research on the Nok sculptures. This research was conducted in three phases, from the discovery of the sculptures in their original contexts in the ground to deciphering their possible functions. This development which lasted till 2017 has contributed extensively to the knowledge of Nok art.

A chronology of Nok art has been developed based on the stylistic trend and radiocarbon dating of the works and figures discovered in the archaeological sites (Franke, 2016). It is divided into three namely: early, middle and late Nok. The pottery of the early period, 1500 BCE- 900BCE was characterized by incised lines. These lines cover much of the pots surface. There has been no evidence of iron smelting in this period.

The middle period, 900BCE-400BCE was the high point of the Nok culture. Most of the discovered sites



date back to this period. The decorations on the pottery were reduced to thin bands, up to 5 CM in width, with the first traces of terracotta sculptures appearing recently. There is evidence of iron smelting here.

The discoveries in the late period, 400BCE-300BCE show minimal similarities with those of the earlier periods. The finds from this period are scarce and scholars believe that the Nok people had to abandon the hills and move into the valleys most likely because of climate change. It is interesting to note that Bernard Fagg believed that the Nok Culture began to flourish in 500 BCE. However, recent discoveries prove otherwise. “The time which Bernard Fagg considered the beginning of the Nok Culture was in fact already the beginning of its end (Late Nok)” (Breunig, 2017). This conclusion was reached as a result of the reduction in settlement density. The Nok sites known from the last four centuries BCE are very few.

## NOK HEAD

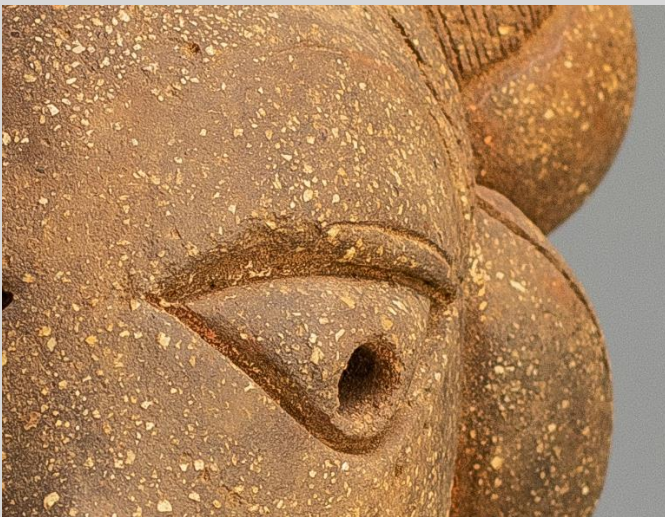


Figure 1. **Nok Head** (Detail), Terracotta, 30x20x22cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

Typical of Nok sculptures, Figure 1 has triangular eyes with holes in its eyes and mouth and hair parted into mounds. Closely looking at the work, it is interesting to note the use of geometry- triangles, circles or ovals, and semicircles in almost every facial feature which is typical of African styled art. The eye brows sit about 2 metres above the eyes and are

highly arched. They also have perforated nostrils. The NOK head also has an “O” shaped mouth, with the hole highlighting its features. The form at the base of the neck is made up of linear lines which together give the effect of a necklace and the hair style depicts the female gender.

*“Nok head fragments were once part of entire bodies and are the most renowned objects within the corpus known to date. These objects are so highly varied that it is likely they were modelled individually rather than cast from moulds. Although terracotta is usually formed using additive techniques, many Nok pieces were sculpted subtractively, in a manner similar to carving” (Nok Terracottas (500 B.C.- 200 A.D.), 2000).*

Based on the chronology of Nok finds discussed earlier, the piece discussed in this write up is highly probable to come from the middle period since it was the period in which most of the Nok sculptures flourished. The context of Nok sculptures such as the ones above has been subject to a lot of speculations. It was later discovered through the excavations conducted by the Frankfurt Nok Project that the Nok sculptures are linked to graves. This means that where a grave is, Nok sculptures would be found and where Nok sculptures are found, a grave was. The terracotta sculptures were part of complex burial rituals. It is likely that these figures could have been discovered in a past grave.

## CONCLUSION

The Nok sculptures are important references to early civilizations in Africa. The added knowledge from the research of the German University has aided the contextualising of these Nok figures. Though the context in which the works were produced is still very vague, their importance as pre historic figures in Africa cannot be obscured.

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