



TOUR HIGHLIGHTS The Ancient West African City of Benin

Explore works of art from the city of Benin, the capital of the Benin kingdom as it existed before British colonial rule. (The city of Benin is in present-day Nigeria.) A study of cast-metal heads, figures and architectural plaques reveals a dynastic culture that, although modified, continues to exist today.



Spoon

Edo peoples

Nigeria

16th-17th century

Ivory

H x W x D: 16.5 x 4.8 x 3.2 cm (6 1/2 x 1 7/8 x 1 1/4 in.)

Bequest of Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss

69-20-4

Even with its broken beak, this luminous ivory spoon seems to exemplify age and tradition, but it actually was created during a time of great change and innovation in Benin art and culture. Ivory spoons, saltcellars, and hunting horns with European subjects were made for export. Edo artists brought local techniques and fine craftsmanship to the creation of foreign objects and motifs. This bird, however, with its outspread wings resembles those in traditional Benin art--the large birds that crowned the tower roofs of the oba's palace and the bird found on idiophones. The latter has a specific historical context. It commemorates the victory of oba Esigie over the nearby Igala Kingdom. In defiance of prophecy and his advisors, he ignored the cry of the bird of disaster and triumphed not only over a mortal army but fate itself. After the battle he required the doubting chiefs to include gongs in the form of birds in their regalia.



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Manilla

England

Liberia

Late 19th-early 20th century

Copper alloy

H x W x D: 5.8 x 5.9 x 1.7 cm (2 5/16 x 2 5/16 x 11/16 in.)

Gift of Robert and Nancy Nooter

71-16-16

Manillas were open bracelets in various sizes and weights cast from copper or brass; later they were composed of a mixture of other metals. From the late 15th to the early 20th century, they circulated widely, especially along the West African equatorial coast. Manillas like this one were cast in Birmingham, England, and traded as currency in West Africa. Three types of manillas exist. Pieces of the smaller standard size were often amassed and taken to a blacksmith, who melted them down and reformed into the larger size. The other two types are the so-called queen manillas and the larger specimens, or king manillas, which were considered stored wealth. Some manillas were decorated with incised designs or a second coil of metal twisted around the shank. The quality of the ringing sound and the amount of "flash," or excess metal, extruded at the joints of the mold helped to determine their value. Metalsmiths from the kingdom of Benin, part of present-day Nigeria, melted down imported manillas and recast the metal into works of art.

By 1911 manillas ceased to be legal tender. The "Manilla Currency Ordinance" of 1919 prohibited foreign traders from using them for trade with the local people. Despite these measures, manillas continued to be used side by side with the new money introduced by the West African Currency Board. During the 1940s and 1950s, an extensive campaign was activated to redeem all manillas still in circulation. Nevertheless, some are still found in private households to this day.



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Plaque

Edo peoples

Nigeria

Mid 16th-17th century

Copper alloy

H x W x D: 45.6 x 35 x 8.9 cm (17 15/16 x 13 3/4 x 3 1/2 in.)

Purchased with funds provided by the Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program

82-5-3

Plaques are individually modeled and cast. This plaque is virtually identical in subject and composition with the other multifigure plaque in this collection (85-19-18); details of decoration and figural proportions vary, however.

Musicians and a page holding a ceremonial sword (eben) flank a high-ranking warrior, possibly a war chief or the oba himself. The half figures depict Portuguese. Trade between Benin and Portugal increased the wealth and power of the oba and his court and provided the ingots that were recast into art such as this plaque. In the early 1600s, a Dutch report described the royal palace of the Benin court as having "beautiful and long square galleries . . . one larger than another resting on wooden pillars . . . covered with cast copper . . . pictures of their war exploits and battles." Later travelers' accounts did not mention the plaques; however, the British military punitive expedition found them in a palace storehouse in 1897.



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Plaque

Edo peoples

Nigeria

Mid 16th-17th century

Copper alloy

H x W x D: 34.3 x 29.2 x 7 cm (13 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 2 3/4 in.)

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1966

85-19-6

According to local court histories and the accounts of early-17th century Dutch travelers, the oba or king of Benin covered the piers of his palace courtyard with hundreds of plaques such as this. As a sheer display of wealth and power, this act would rival covering the White House with gold from Fort Knox. But more than excess, it reveals aspects of artistic technique, local history and a society in which art was essential. Today, some 900 plaques survive in public and private collections, but there is no documentation to indicate how they once were arranged. After 1700, travelers' accounts do not mention the plaques, and an 1897 British military force found them in a palace storehouse. A few plaques show narrative scenes, such as battles and hunts; some depict symbolic animals; most, like this example, have one, two or more male figures in court regalia.

Benin art served as both a sign of status and a record of court life. The oba, nobles, officials and attendants were depicted on various objects, including plaques. Costumes and regalia indicated their relative position in the court hierarchy. The warriors on this plaque carry swords and short bows and wear headdresses made from imported horsetail. According to early accounts, horsetail headdresses symbolized military authority and were worn by war chiefs. Fanning out in low relief behind the heads, the horsetail is sculpted in a manner similar to Benin depictions of European hair or the fins and tails of the mudfish, a symbolically significant animal. Both Europeans and the mudfish are associated with Olokun, the god of the waters and bringer of wealth.

Benin art emphasizes patterns and texture; empty space is avoided. A background pattern of quatrefoil "river leaves" is typical of most Benin plaques. Symbolically the background design is another reference to Olokun, who is linked with the oba and wealth, and to the oba's monopoly on foreign trade. Artistically the loose, freehand quality of the linear foliate motif contrasts with the formal pose, frontality and high relief of the figures. The well-defined musculature of the legs on this plaque is unusual and may be the style of a particular artist.

This recurring emphasis on wealth and foreign trade leads back to the most basic and blatant of symbols, the metal itself. The most obvious effect of Benin's overseas trade with Europe was a dramatic increase in the availability of copper and brass. European ingots and imported metal trade goods provided the raw material that was transformed into royal Benin art by metal casters who worked solely for the oba.



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Figure of a mudfish

Edo peoples

Nigeria

Mid 16th century

Copper alloy, copper

H x W x D: 6 x 5.1 x 15.9 cm (2 3/8 x 2 x 6 1/4 in.)

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1966

85-19-8

Depictions of special fish appear in Benin art as symbols of an oba's divine powers. Aspects of several species of fish are combined because of their unusual traits, such as the ability to inflict an electrical shock or to survive on dry land. The cross-in-circle motif, an emblem of the sea god Olokun, further emphasizes the divine and royal connection.



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Pendant

Edo peoples

Nigeria

18th-19th century

Copper alloy

H x W x D: 20.3 x 15.2 x 6 cm (8 x 6 x 2 3/8 in.)

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1966

85-19-9

Despite the unusual shape and open-worked background, this pendant uses conventional images of wealth and power. Royal beads, Portuguese faces, and hands to grasp wealth border a European merchant and a valuable horse.



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Altar stand

Edo peoples

Nigeria

18th-19th century

Copper alloy

H x W: 24.4 x 23.5 cm (9 5/8 x 9 1/4 in.)

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1966

85-19-11

This object possibly supported an ivory tusk on an altar. The depiction of four female figures holding gongs suggests an association with an iyoba, or queen mother. Two figures strike bird gongs, which symbolize the infallibility of the oba.



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Figure of a king

Edo peoples

Nigeria

18th-19th century

Copper alloy

H x W x D: 41 x 17.1 x 15.2 cm (16 1/8 x 6 3/4 x 6 in.)

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1966

85-19-12

The staff in the oba's left hand gives added power to his pronouncements. It is shaped like a double gong and studded with blades that are similar to the head of a metalsmith's finishing hammer. The blade of a ceremonial sword in the right hand and a large loop atop the head have broken off. The missing loop had the same form as the handle of the ceremonial sword.



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Figure of a musketeer

Edo peoples

Nigeria

19th century

Copper alloy, iron

H x W x D: 51.4 x 14 x 16.2 cm (20 1/4 x 5 1/2 x 6 3/8 in.)

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1966

85-19-15

This figure, probably from a royal altar, combines local and European-influenced regalia. The musket implies membership in the Iwoki guild. Since the 16th century, the guild has cared for the royal guns and protected the oba. On the square base are depictions of musket balls and the severed head of an enemy, a rebellious chief. The extensions below the base are the remains of casting channels or sprues.



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Commemorative head of a king

Edo peoples

Nigeria

18th century

Copper alloy, iron

H x W x D: 33 x 23.5 x 23.2 cm (13 x 9 1/4 x 9 1/8 in.)

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1979

85-19-16

This head was once displayed on an altar honoring a particular oba, or king. It is not a specific portrait but an image of the status and regalia of kingship. Particular emphasis is given to the collar and crown made of imported coral beads.



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Pendant

Edo peoples

Nigeria

Mid 16th-mid 17th century

Copper alloy

H x W x D: 17.5 x 14.9 x 5.4 cm (6 7/8 x 5 7/8 x 2 1/8 in.)

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1979

85-19-17

Pendants, worn on the hips display a variety of human and animal images. In Benin art, as well as in contemporary court ceremonies, an oba is frequently seen flanked and supported by two attendants.