

Discover...

# COURT ART OF BENIN

This fact sheet looks at court art from the city of Benin in southern Nigeria. In 1897, a British military force embarked on a mission to capture the city of Benin. The reason given by the British for the expedition was the murder of members of a British trade delegation. The British brought back thousands of objects, some of which are on loan to the Pitt Rivers Museum.



Benin's art is royal art. It was made to glorify the divine king, or Oba, and to honour great kings of the past. It is primarily made of cast brass and ivory.

## Animals



▲ **Pendant mask representing a leopard's head, Benin; 1965.9.1 B**

In Benin animals are symbols of deities or cults. Some represent the power of the Oba (King). The objects from Benin in the Museum feature images of fish, snakes, leopards, and crocodiles. They are not just on plaques but on bracelets and other objects too.

In Benin cosmology the leopard is a symbol of royal power. At one time leopards were sacrificed to ensure the well-being of the kingdom. In the seventeenth century the Oba kept tame leopards that he led about in chains when he paraded through the city. This showed his power and domination over the 'King of the Bush'.

Crocodiles are called the 'policemen of the waters'. They are associated with Olokun, the god of waters. The crocodile is feared for its ferocity. It represents the Oba because it has the power to take human life. In earlier times the Oba had the power to sentence his subjects to death.

Snakes symbolize the power of Osun, the god of nature. The python is also a symbol of Olokun, the god of water. It is said that pythons are sent by Olokun to punish wrongdoing.



▲ Ivory armlet inlaid with brass and carved with mudfish and heads of Europeans, Benin; 1991.13.26

There are many types of fish in Benin art. The mudfish is a symbol of peace, prosperity, and fertility. Because the mudfish lives close to the riverbank it symbolizes the Oba's position between mortal men (on the land) and the spirit world of Olokun, god of the water.



▲ Carved elephant tusk, Benin; 1991.13.2

## Materials and Kingship

Ivory is associated with the Oba. Only he had the most elaborately carved ivory. Because the material is so hard and durable, ivory represents the longevity of the Oba's reign. Because the elephant is strong, it represents the Oba's physical power. Because it is an expensive and luxurious material, it represents the Oba's wealth. Because ivory is white it is also a symbol of purity. Tusks would have been bleached with citrus juice and rubbed with chalk to keep them white.

Most 'Benin bronzes' are actually made of brass. At one time brass was rare and expensive. It was a material favoured by the Oba and he adorned his palace with it. Because it never corrodes or rusts brass represents the permanence and continuity of kingship.

The brass from Benin on display in the Museum has dulled over time. When it was new it would have been a very shiny reddish colour. These qualities are considered both threatening and beautiful and are symbolic of the Oba.



▲ Ada, ceremonial sword, sheathed in coral beadwork. Aside from a sword like this one, the Oba would also have owned ceremonial garments – a headdress, fly whisk, and jewellery, all of coral beadwork. Benin; 1991.13.17

Coral is another important royal material. It was made into beads like those covering this sword. Possession of the royal coral beads determines who sits on the throne. They are the emblems of kingship. The royal coral beads also possess a mystical power. It is said that any proclamations or curses the Oba makes when holding them will come to pass.

## Palace Plaques and the Oba



◀ **Cast brass plaque of three men. The figure in the middle is carrying a leather or bark box called an ekpokin used for ceremonial presentations. The warriors on either side of him are wearing collars of leopards' teeth around their necks. Leopards' teeth were believed to give the warriors spiritual protection in battle. Benin; 1991.13.8**

Brass plaques once adorned the Oba's palace. The Oba is considered to be the descendant of a god, and therefore divine. It is said that unlike mortal men he does not eat or sleep. He has great mystical power, and is an object of reverence, awe, and fear.

The Oba is often depicted wearing a crown, necklaces, and garments made of coral beads. Similar coral regalia is still worn by the Oba today. The royal coral beads are spiritually powerful and are the emblems of kingship.

Until the end of the nineteenth century the Oba was the primary patron of the arts. He commissioned work for the palace, for altars, rituals, and ceremonies. The brass-casters guild made the plaques. The ivory-carvers guild made ivory objects. There were other guilds including those for iron-workers, weavers, and wood-carvers. They were rewarded with gifts of food, slaves, and wives. They also enjoyed high social status. Today, the craft guilds of Benin still make objects for the Oba, and for use in rituals and ceremonies. They also make objects for sale.

## Ancestral Heads and Altars



In Benin, families maintain altars dedicated to their male ancestors. The only woman to have an altar erected after her death is the Oba's mother. This square brass altarpiece was dedicated to the Oba's mother and would have been placed in the middle of her altar. She is the largest figure at the back surrounded by attendants. The hole in the middle is for offerings of kola nuts.

◀ **Altarpiece dedicated to the Queen Mother. The figure of the queen mother – she is dressed in coral regalia befitting only the most high-ranking chiefs. Benin; 1991.13.25**

The Museum also holds several ancestral, commemorative heads, which were placed on altars as a way of honouring the deceased and contacting their spirit. The head and representations of the head are an important part of ritual and belief in Benin. The head is the seat of thought, judgement, and character.

Ancestral heads are made of different materials depending on the political and occupational status of the owner. Brass heads would only be placed on a royal altar, wooden heads on a chief's altar, and terracotta heads on a brass-caster's altar.



A wooden commemorative head is pictured on the left. Such heads are one of the main features of a chief's altar. They differ from royal examples by being made of wood, rather than brass, and by the feather carved on one side of the headdress. Feathers were worn by chiefs as a mark of status. The heads have a hole in the top that was intended to hold a large carved ivory tusk. When positioned in this way, the tusk represents *ede*, a protrusion from the head that links the human and spiritual worlds.

◀ **Wooden commemorative head, Benin;**  
**1970.16.1**

## References and Further Reading

BEN-AMOS, PAULA, *The Art of Benin*, London: British Museum Press (1995).

DUCHÂTEAU, ARNAUD, *Benin: Royal Art of Africa*, New York/London: Prestel (1994).

EZRA, KATE, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art (1992).

The objects found in this Information sheet can be found at the following locations:

Lower Gallery (first floor)

Case 26A - Court Art of Benin

**Compiled by:**

Jennifer Peck, Project Assistant  
DCF Redisplay Project 2002

**Revised by:**

Bryony Reid, Senior Project Assistant (Interpretation)  
DCF What's Upstairs? October 2005