

## The Art of the Benin People

**Daniel Irabor, Ph.D**

University of Arkansas – Pine Bluff

[DOI:10.15520/jassh58446](https://doi.org/10.15520/jassh58446)

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**The original ivory mask representing the face of Queen Idia, court of Benin, sixteenth century**

William Fleming in the book, *Art and Ideas*, reflecting the present and the future as well as the claims that the wise author of the Old Testament past, reflecting human achievement as well as book Ecclesiastes (1:9) seems to be thinking of the potential when he wrote “The thing that hath way history holds up the mirror to humanity, been, it is that which shall be; and that which is

done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.’’. The search for roots and beginning is really the quest for continuation (Fleming 1). He further queried, “for how can people know where they are going unless they know where they have been? How can they understand the present until they know the past? The past in fact, is never really discarded, only expanded, encompassed, and eventually transcended’’ (Fleming 1).

Human life may well have begun in Africa, for the oldest human skeletal remains that have ever been found came from Southern Rhodesia. ...centuries before Europeans invaded the African continent, art was a vital part of every phase of living. Useful objects were enriched with decoration, and scripture was an important aspect of rituals and ceremonies. African societies similar to those of historical past still can be found today. (Russell 1975) The people of Benin are one of such societies; and sculpture forms the most important aspect of their rituals and ceremonies. Bronze, silver, ivory sculptures can easily be found in shrines, riverbanks, alters, worn on faces and other parts of the body.

It has often been said that the ‘objet d’ art’ in European sense – that is, an object created for the sake of its beautiful than its utility – does not exist in Africa. Yet perhaps nowhere is the art of the object and the love of aesthetic form so present in

daily life as it is in Africa. (Meyer 1995 p.8) Geary (1983) remarked that among the major African Art traditions, the art of Edo Kingdom has perhaps the widest and most popular appeal for European and American public. Since the destruction of Benin by a British punitive expedition in 1887 and the subsequent removal of large numbers of art works, Benin bronze and ivories have become prize pieces in museum collections. (362) The Kingdom of Benin is known to the world today essentially because of its Art and nothing else.

Nevadomsky (2005) noted that Benin's art reflects one of the great kingdoms of West Africa, a forest empire that spanned a millennium. Trade with Europe found a visual analog in cast brass objects--testimony to centuries of contact and Benin's expansionist impulses. ... Pre-twentieth century Benin art became iconic. Like Egyptian pyramids and Great Zimbabwe, Benin art represents Black Africa, the continent's highest but defunct cultural achievements.

He explains that:

The technical virtuosity and aesthetic excellence of Benin art astonished, then puzzled European curators because its framing occurred within the "cultural degeneracy" theory of the time. Arguments over sources--European technical diffusion or indigenous African production--eventually gave way to the documentation of

objects and development of a time line. Benin's art came to be recognized as an African accomplishment comparable to the best casting traditions of Europe, a metallurgical tour de force that rivaled Renaissance cast art and, in its employment of horror vacui, utilized embellishments worthy of the Baroque if not that tradition's exuberance.

The art of Benin is a significant part of the Benin culture as sculpture forms the important aspect of rituals and ceremonies. Despite frequent views that creativity of Benin artists died with the British punitive expedition of the Benin Kingdom, Thorold Masefield, the British High Commissioner to Nigeria in an opening address at the Oba of Benin Palace during the Great Benin Centenary in Benin City declared that in the late twentieth century, there have been a number of art exhibitions featuring the wonderful creativity of Benin artists. The most recent, and in some ways the most striking, was the exhibition at the Royal Academy assembled in London as part of Africa 95. ... The art of Benin is now an important part of the British National Curriculum for schools.

The paper presents a descriptive analysis of the Art of the Benin people in pre-colonial era. Specifically, it describes and examines the origin, structure and activities of the Art of Benin purely from a historical perspective. It is hereby noted that the art of Benin cannot be discussed in

isolation. To the Binis, the art was Benin and Benin was the art. There was nothing as significantly symbolic and important than their art. It was their major resource for everything from their economic, social, political pride, value and integrity, to creating meanings for their beliefs and their entire ways of life.

Chanda wrote that the continuation of social norms was not only reflected in the structures of the community, but also through religious rituals, ceremonies, and non-religious ceremonies. In these domains, art played and continues to play a significant role. ... Regardless of the medium, art forms represented the social, political, and religious values and customs of the African people. (6) While the primary focus in this paper has been on art of Benin, attempts have been made to discuss the history, the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the people of Benin Empire, sometimes described as one of the most highly centralized and socially stratified West African societies.

Although the ancient Benin Empire is widely recognized for its rich cultural heritage, the paper identifies that not much work has been done in the area of literature and empirical studies to unravel the mystery surrounding the genesis of its Art (Irabor 2009). Garrard declared that it is uncertain when and where this technology was introduced to Benin. (17) According to Babatunde Lawal, scholarly interest in the ancient arts of Nigeria

dates from the last years of the nineteenth century: when the British Punitive Expedition sacked Benin in 1897, thousands of bronze objects and other art treasures were captured and taken to England, where they were sold to museums and private collectors. Later, these acquisitions were catalogued and published. (193) Such is the technical perfection of these bronzes that scholars at first attributed their origin to the Portuguese, (Read and Dalton 1899; Lawal 1977 ) with whom Benin had established contact as early as the fifteenth century A.D. Lawal (1977) wrote that, however, this assumption was later discarded partly because possible prototypes for Benin art could not be found in the whole history of Portuguese or even European art. (Forman, Forman and Dark 1990; Lawal 1977) More-over, the over nine hundred brass plaques that previously decorated the pillars of the oba's palace found in the storehouse along with the rich artistic culture of Benin predate any Portuguese contact (Jones 2003).

Jonathan Jones (2003) wrote that

The Benin plaques and sculptures in the British Museum are at once imaginative and classical, with a compelling mixture of smoothness and sharpness, natural observation and unforced fantasy. Brass was the preferred medium of the royal art of Benin because its redness was beautiful and menacing, with an authority and a

fiery presence that makes this art live. It has lived longer, anyway, than the British Empire. The European "discovery" of African art began with the British punitive expedition against Benin in 1897. It was the looting of Benin that made African art visible to Europeans. When the seized artifacts were sold, entering the collections of museums, there was a sense of surprise and mystification. Although travelers had written descriptions of Benin City, this was the first time anyone outside Africa comprehended the scale of Benin's artistic achievement. (Jones 2003)

The whole issue concerning the origin of the Art of Benin appears to be very contentious. To think of it, there have been several schools of thought on the issue. Some schools strongly believe that the art of bronze-casting was imported from Ife, whose bronze art is widely believed to antedate the arrival of Europeans in West Africa (Lawal 1977). Willett and Fleming (1976) stated that it is uncertain when and where the brass casting technology was introduced to Benin. Few of Benin castings have been scientifically dated; the earliest yet known, a ram-head mask, was made in the first half of the sixteenth century. They further stated that the man Iguegha for which certain Arts of Benin have been attributed to, for example, was claimed to have brought with him from Ife to Benin, a set of terracotta heads and a small bronze figure in ceremonial regalia (Willett et al, 1967).

As Lawal noted, “but oddly enough, these terracotta heads are in the characteristic Bini style, so that it is unlikely that he brought them from Ife, which produced the naturalistic heads. On the other hand, the small bronze figure in ceremonial regalia is in the Ife style; but then its antiquity is uncertain, and it could well have been imported later” (Lawal 1977).

Lawal argued that while the evidence so far at our disposal does not provide any clue as to the real identity of Iguegha and when he may have come to Benin, neither does it justify the present tendency to treat Benin Bronze art (especially the heads) as an extension, in a degenerate form, of Ife naturalism. He added that the assumption that Benin must have imported the technique of bronze-casting along with Ife naturalism has not taken full cognizance of the fact that this technique is no more than a vehicle of expression. The vehicle and what it expresses are two different things: technique per se is not necessarily expression. (198)

Let us try to look at it this way, oral history has it that brass casting was introduced to Benin by Oba Oguola when he had desired to create art works similar to the ones sent to him from Ife. As a result, he sent to Benin to the Ooni of Ife requesting for Iguegha to be sent to Benin for that purpose. It was unusual for the Binis to request things from Ife. For example, at a time when it

was impossible for the Binis to rule themselves, it was from the Ooni of Ife from whom they requested for an Oba. The ancestors of present Oba of Benin himself are said to have come from Ife. Some sources have indicated that Iguegha who supposedly introduced the art of casting into the land of Benin, possibly learned it from the Arabs in the late 13th century.

Others sources claimed that the people of Benin and Ife brought their arts along with them to their respective empires from Egypt where they originally migrated from over 600 years ago. Read (1910) for example wrote,

Some enthusiasts have even gone as far as to attribute it to the influence of the art of ancient Egypt. A recent writer in *Globus* has been at great pains to reproduce a number of Indian panels of superficially the same kind as those characteristic of Benin, and is convinced that he has shown the style and make of these latter to be derived from Indian models. It is hardly worth while to repeat the evidence in favor of the Portuguese influence that is given at length in the British Museum volume just referred to. But it is just as conclusive now as when it was written eleven years ago, and a cast bronze panel with reliefs from Italy or France necessarily presents the same features as one from India or Benin, and would be of equal weight as showing French or Italian influence. In the case of the panels from Benin the style of the

art is unquestionably native, while the metal of which they are made has been shown by Professor Gowland's analysis to be certainly Portuguese. To argue for an Indian origin in face of these two facts is only to waste time and serves no useful purpose. (51)



**Benin Palace Ancestral Altar, dedicated to Oba Ovonramwen, Benin City, Nigeria photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1970. Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives**

In this paper, apart from the fact that attempts have been made to examine the body of knowledge as it exist in this area of study, efforts would be made to examine the iconographic value and the aesthetic sensibility of the art of Benin.

The French philosopher Henri Bergson once said that “time is the continuous progress of the past, which gnaws into the future, and which swells as it advances” (Fleming 1). There is this common agreement among art history scholars that the art of Benin served to narrate events and achievements, actual or mythical, which occurred in the past. Sometimes, one wonders how a single event

could cause the rise and fall of one of the greatest kingdom in the face of the Western Sahara of Africa.

Until the British punitive expedition to Benin in 1897, little or nothing was known to the international community about the art of Benin, yet it was the same 1897 British invasion that left the palace ransacked, its art confiscated, several chiefs hanged, and the king exiled (Nevadomsky, 2005) . Nevadomsky (2005) noted that the loot from the palace arrived in London, dispersed into museums and private collections to offset expedition costs, with the largest caches going to the British Museum and German

collections. Chronologies convey the impression that, because the king was central to the scheme of things, everything of value had been carted off, Benin's technology eviscerated, its artistic inspiration anesthetized. The exercise undoubtedly destroyed the dreams and aspirations of a people later admired for their artistic creativity, originality and ingenuity.

Joseph Nevadomsky wrote that the events surrounding the British punitive expedition to Benin in 1897 are often seen as a paradigm of the European-African encounter, boiled down to this stark sequence: European imperialists invade and destroy an African kingdom, oust its ruler, establish political control, and carry off its cultural treasures, causing the indigenous culture to slip into an irrevocable artistic decline. The Time reported that

Benin sculpture is more naturalistic than most African totems, as evidenced in 30 of the original bronze plaques lent by the British Museum and currently on view at the University of Pennsylvania's museum. Most remarkable was the high level of skill displayed in employing the complex craft of casting with the lost-wax process. But today,

the tradition and skills that created the masterpieces are lost. What remains in Africa is enshrined in Nigeria's museums, a testament to past perfection and proud accomplishment illuminating what for centuries was considered the very heart of darkness

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,834141,00.html#ixzz0opaVErli>

Thorold Masefield, the British High Commissioner to Nigeria in an opening address at the Oba of Benin Palace during the Great Benin Centenary in Benin City, acknowledged that,

The British did not deliberately burn down Benin City. In fact, the fire which destroyed the roofs of many of the houses in Benin started accidentally, very near to the hospital, which had to be evacuated in great haste--hardly evidence for a planned destruction. Contemporary sources also show that the British did not remove all the treasures of Benin. They took those in the palace, some of them half buried, but not those belonging to the other chiefs. For many years after 1897, original works of art came on to the international market as a result of sales

originating in Benin itself. Nor did the British seek to destroy the kingship, for in due course Oba Ovonramwen's son succeeded his father.

#### Origin of the Benin People

The power and beauty of African artworks can touch even casual viewers, but true appreciation can come only through understanding the cultural and environmental factors that have influenced its creation. The African art takes many forms, and is made from many different materials. Any work of African art, old or modern, is shaped by the African culture from which it comes. (Chanda 1993) Chanda (1993) noted that early Africans passed information about the origins of the peoples, historical events, migrations, and relationship among communities from one generation to the next through myths, ceremonies, and symbols. Despite this rich oral tradition, Westerners have often identified African history as beginning in the fifteenth century, with the arrival of the first European explorers on African shore (8). This cannot be true as societies were said to have existed in Africa long before then.

The Art of Benin as the name implies can be traced to the people of the ancient Benin Empire, a pre-colonial West African state

located in modern day Nigeria. The early history of Benin is something of a mystery. Some scholars have noted that the history of the Benin people is pre historic. Others have been so authoritative as to have assigned a time period to it, claiming that the people of ancient Benin Empire were said to have migrated along side with the Yorubas from Egypt around 600 A.D. Cable et al, in the book *Treasures of the World: The African Kings*, wrote that "According to their oral history, the Edo (people) had come originally, at some remote date, from Egypt to Western Africa. There they settled down and lived for many centuries under a line of kings, they called Ogiso. Its founder was probably Ere, and although, little was known of him – he may have been mythical- the Edo honored him down the centuries as an inventor of order, an institutor of tradition (Cable et al 114).

Dominique Malaquais claims that experts believe that the first inhabitants of the southern Nigeria were nomads who lived by hunting and gathering wild foods (Malaquais 8). He further claims that by 500 A.D., these early settlers had learned how to work iron, which they used to make farm tools and weapons for hunting. This meant that they could now settle in one



place since they were no longer compelled to wander about in search of food

(Malaquais 8).



**Left: Plaque with multiple figures mid 16th-17th century, Edo peoples, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria. Copper alloy 48.6 cm (19 1/8 in.). 85-19-18, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1979. Right: Figure of a King (*Oba*), 19th century, Edo peoples, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria. Copper alloy 41 cm (16 1/8 in.) 85-19-12, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn to the Smithsonian Institution in 1966 Photograph by Kathy Corday**

Ross (2002) wrote that the current leaders of the kingdom of Benin trace their origins to a ruling dynasty that began in the fourteenth century. Brass commemorative heads are commissioned by each oba (king) in the first years of his reign to honor his immediate predecessor. Although these heads represent specific obas, they are not portraits in the sense that they capture the individual

features of the kings. Rather, they are idealized depictions that emphasize the trappings of kingship (Ross, 2002).

#### The Oba of Benin Kingdom

The ancient Benin Empire was like a solid structure with the Oba of Benin at the apex. Kate Ezra in *The Royal Art of Benin* wrote “The Oba is the center figure in the kingdom, combining vast spiritual powers

that result from his divine ancestry with enormous political clout and expertise. He is set apart from his subjects not only because he is descended from the son of a god, but also because his original forefather was not an Edo (Ezra 3). The power of the Oba in the ancient Benin Kingdom cannot in anyway be underestimated. He ruled with absolute power, believing that through the powers of his ancestors, he could control all the forces that affect the very well being of his people and was only accountable to the gods of the land and the ancestors. Jonathan (1993) wrote that "the arts of Benin have been created over the centuries to aggrandize the high status of its oba as a secular and religious leader. Incredibly naturalistic cast-brass heads commemorate ancestors and were produced for royal ancestral alters (6) as everything else was made or done to glory of the Oba. To the people of Benin, the Oba was god. He decided matters over life and death of his people. He was usually so bloody that Benin City which served (and still) as the capital city of the Benin Kingdom was named the city of blood.

As Cable et al claims that " The Kingdom of Benin, which lay (and still lies) in the humid tropical forest in the southwest of

what is today (Edo, delta States and even further on all sides of modern day) Nigeria, was small, at least if measured in square miles. Yet no ruler on earth at that time wielded power more absolute than the Oba. Like the legendary Buddha who once said that "I am the god above gods, superior to all the gods; no god is like me and how could there be a higher god"', the Oba of the Benin kingdom was uniquely powerful and arrogant. He was an absolute ruler that ruled his people absolutely.

Pread and Dalton declared that the king of Benin lived in the usual atmosphere of a West African court. His title was Obba, and he was an object of adoration to his subjects; on this fact his power may have largely depended.' Under him were the captains of war, who seems to have resided in the suburb, and possibly two or three other great chiefs, who were his principal advisers. Below these were the great body of chiefs or" homographs," from whose number the principal public officers and local governors were taken. (367-8)

They explained that

The royal palace of Benin was one of the great cultural complexes of Africa, a continent that, according to Victorians, wasn't supposed to have anything like it. It was a court as big as a European town. "It is divided into many palaces, houses, and apartments of the courtiers," reads Olfert Dapper's enthusiastic 1668 account, "and comprises beautiful and long square galleries... resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered with cast copper, on which are engraved the pictures of their war exploits and battles... Every roof is decorated with a small turret ending in a point, on which birds are standing, birds cast in copper with outspread wings."

As expressed by T. Hodgkin (1975) in the book, *Nigerian Perspective : A historical Anthology*, John Adams, one of the early sea captains that visited the ancient Benin kingdom in the late eighteenth century had these words to say: the king of Benin is fetiche (fetish), ... he occupies a higher post here than the Pope does in Catholic Europe. He is not only God's representative on earth, but God himself whose subjects both adore and obey (229). He arrogated to himself, the owner and ruler of the whole universe and that all men must bow to him.

The Oba of Benin maintained absolute control over all political, social, economical and religious

affairs of the kingdom, most especially, his interest in the sales of ivory, cloth, slaves, pepper cannot be over emphasized. He also exercised absolute control over the judiciary and prior to the invasion of the British forces, matters over life and death of his subjects rested on his word.

In the words of Kate Ezra (3) The Oba is considered to be divine. It is believed that, unlike mortal men, as perceived by his subjects, he is one who does not need to eat or sleep. Of course, you and I know that as a human being, the Oba eats and sleeps like everyone else, but he is shielded from public views to bolster the belief that he is divine and supernatural. More significantly, he personally controls the forces that affect the well-being of the entire kingdom. ... The Oba is seen to exercise power in this world as well as in the spirit world. The Oba was also the highest judge in his realm and prior to 1897 had power over the life and death of his subjects (4). Bradbury (1973) stressed that the Oba was known to the Edos as the "child of the sky whom we pray not to fall and cover us, the child of the earth whom we implore not to swallow us up (75). One can safely state that the mysteries surrounding the spiritual association of the Oba of Benin with the gods is not unusual as most great leaders of the early ages have one mystery or the other surrounding their births or existence. Hercules, the Great - the Greek hero noted for his strength and courage and for his

many legendary exploits for example, was said to be the son of the god Zeus and Alcmene. He was said not to have a biological father but his mother Alcmene was the wife of the Theban general Amphitryon. The same could be said of Alexander the great, Jesus Christ and a host of others. There must be one thing or the other about them.

Oba Ewuare, the great was known as the most famous Oba (king) that has ever ruled in the Benin Kingdom- past or present. The political, spiritual and economic strength of the Benin kingdom was firmly established under his reign. He was on the throne from 1440 to 1480. He was originally known as Ogun, the son of Oba Orobiru. He was said to be powerful, courageous, sagacious, and highly successful at warring and in acquiring things (Cable et al 117).

Moreover, he was a great bureaucrat, great warrior, a great magician and a lover of music. He established a hereditary succession to the throne and vastly expanded the territory of the Benin kingdom, which by the mid-16th century extended from the Niger- delta in the east to what is now

Lagos in the west. (Lagos was in fact founded by a Benin army and continued to pay tribute to the Oba of Benin until the end of the 19th century.)

#### The Royal Art of Benin

Culture, they say is the collective way of life of a people. The art is a significant part of the Benin culture. According to Ben- Amos (1999),

For the Benin kingdom, royal art is a means of enshrining the past in the metaphorical and literal senses of the term. The Benin people are profoundly concerned with their history, which is above all, the saga of the kings. ... Oral traditional about Benin rulers record their artistic innovations as well as their political maneuverings and war exploits. This view of the royal art appears to be of long standing in Benin culture. (5)

As Bradbury explains that the past kings, as depicted in legend and anecdote, were lively individual personalities, each of whom left his imprint on the political culture. Every change in the fortunes of the state and the configurations of its institutions was attributed to their creative genius (1969:20; Ben- Amos, 1983).



**(Left) Head of an Oba (King), 19th century, Nigeria; Edo peoples, court of Benin Brass, iron H. 18 in. (45.7 cm) Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991 (1991.17.3) (Right ) Head of an Oba), 18th century, Nigeria; Edo peoples, court of Benin, Brass, H. 13 in. (33 cm) Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991 (1991.17.2)**

Nevadomsky observed that for the past one hundred years, scholarly research on Benin art and material culture has been skewed toward the study of the pre-colonial ivory carvings and brass-castings, those sophisticated and baroque products of state-craft and empire that bear comparison with the best of the West--the African equivalent of the Renaissance. He explains that just as Benin's massive earthworks, sophisticated technology, and traditional architecture conveyed the power of centralized authority, so the ivory and metal sculptures have provided eloquent representations of the institution of divine kingship and the social and political hierarchies that supported it. The result has been a Whiggish fascination with traditional dynastic histories. Essentially, the Benin art which was largely made

by highly specialized, skilled artists and artisans was produced mainly for the court of the Oba - a divine ruler for whom the craftsmen produced a range of ceremonially significant sculptures, and other artifacts. Jell- Bahlsen (1997) wrote that "from the detailed and careful presentation of the images of Benin art objects together with their individual histories and backgrounds, it becomes evident that what is today widely known and appreciated as the "art of Benin" was originally meant as a national, royal, or state art of the Benin monarchy. The art was predominantly produced for its king, the oba. (Jell- Bahlsen, 1997) According to her, the royal art of Benin largely reflects the dynasty's history and its significance as a focal point of Benin society, as well as the historical and political achievements of the

individual Obas, their entourage, royal court, chiefs, and other members of the ruling class, and their splendor. (Ben- Amos 1999, Jell- Bahlsen, 1997)

Traditionally, African royalty and most typical of the Obas of the Benin Empire, surrounded themselves with ceremonious and luxurious objects to show their position in society. According to Chanda (1993), these objects were often either made or decorated with precious materials such as beads, ivory, special wood, gold, brass, bronze and silver. Sometimes the decorations did nothing more than add beauty and elegance to the item and sometimes the designs communicated messages relating to the office of the chief (Oba) and his military, financial and spiritual strength.

Fraser and Cole (1972) explained that the most significant feature of the royal art was their contribution to the rulers' social position, political activities, and symbolic power. Rulers were set apart from the ruled and this separation was expressed artistically in their ability to possess objects made of more costly, scarce, refractory materials, objects which were monumental in size and very elaborately done, all in contrast to what commoners processed. "Their tangibility and durability – rich materials and iconography- contributed to the forcsfulness of these objects as symbols, much more effectively than music and

dance which are ephemeral'' Fraser and Cole 1972, Ben-Amos 1989:5). In the words of Ben-Amos (1999), the Art of Benin was seen primarily as a mechanism of support, serving to confirm legitimacy and insure stability. (119)

Ezra stressed that as much as any culture on earth, Benin's (culture) was materialistic and obsessed with the raw materials from which beautiful things could be made. Bronze was the most precious thing of all and the substance in which the very notion of kingship resided. By the fifteenth century, bronze was required for the Oba to decently honor his predecessor and thus succeed to the throw. ... Because bronze was the source of his legitimacy, and because the metal was scarce, the Oba watched over the bronze smiths' guild with a special vigilance (115). She further stressed that ivory was almost as important to the Oba as bronze. As his hereditary right, he could claim one of each pair of elephant tusk. (117) Coral, too are of immerse important to the Oba. The coral beads form the high collars the Oba wears around his neck and also commonly used by the Oba's wives on their necks as necklaces and on the hair for their hair-do.

Sometimes, we think of art as something mysterious. Sometimes in reality, that is what it really is and sometimes, they make us see things that are not there. Works of art are great non-verbal symbols, which one can use to generate

special meanings. Even when they cannot talk, the beauty talks for them in our hearts. As symbols, they help us reconstruct and interpret current events against the backdrop of the past.

Although, the art of Benin is considered ‘‘The Royal Art’’, because it is said to have been used to glorify the divine king and to honor the past Obas of the kingdom, ‘‘The Art of Benin’’ is functional, historic and symbolic to the people of Benin. It touches all parts of the lives of all the people of the kingdom. It expresses the roles and ranks of the myriad chiefs, titleholders, priests, and court officials, attendants who constitute the kingdom’s complex administrative and ritual hierarchy (Ezra 1). It has been observed to create special meaning for the people and they are found in homes, offices, museums, shrines and everywhere. It reminds the Binis who they are as a people and their place in the world they find themselves. The art of Benin can be classified as unique and vastly different from others seen in the rest of the region. It primarily consists of cast bronze, ivory, brass heads, figurines, brass plaques, large rectangular metal pictures, and carved wood works.

To the Binis, the Art is its beauty that has attracted the world to it and has contributed in no small measures to its economic, political, conceptual and spiritual strength. In the Western world, Benin has been famous for its art for the last sixty-five years. The art however has a much longer history.

As Blackmun (1988) indicated that, the Benin people used their art to depict religious, social and cultural issues that were central to their beliefs, such as ceremonial weapons, religious objects and masks (Blackmun 1988)

Aside from producing work to promote theological and religious piety, Benin Art includes a range of animal heads, figurines, busts, plaques, and other artifacts. Typical Benin art materials include bronze, brass, clay, ivory, terracotta, and wood. During the reign of the Kingdom of Benin, the characteristics of the artwork shifted from thin castings and careful treatment to thick, less defined castings and generalized features. (Wikipedia – the online encyclopedia assessed on 12/10/09).

It was obvious that there were no photographic equipment at that time; consequently most of the royal sculptures were used as cameras to capture and preserve images for prosperity. According to Ben-Amos, when cotemporary chiefs and craftsmen claim that carvings and castings are ‘‘our olden days photographs’’, they are addressing ideas still very much at the heart of the Benin concept of Art. For them the equation of sculpture and photographs

implies both narration and commemoration. (Ben-Amos 1999),

Although the ancient Benin Empire is widely remembered for its artistic creativity, not much is known by way of formal documentation about the genesis of its Art. The Binis invented no written language. Even in modern times, the majority of the people cannot read and write, they could only communicate orally. Consequently, most of what we know about the Benin art before the British invasion of the kingdom was mere oral records that have been passed on from one generation to the other. Ben Amos explains it this way, "this is due in part to the lack of supplementary written documents. Because of the non-literate nature of the ancient inhabitants of Benin City, there is a dearth in literary backup as would be seen in other cultures" (Ben-Amos, 1980).

Dominique Malaquais has suggested that two major sources of knowledge have provided us with the information we need to know about the origin and the days of glory of the Benin people. The first source he claimed is through the data gathered by archaeologists – scientists who studied the ways humans lived long time ago while the

other has been through Edo oral history (8). Ben-Amos on the other hand claims the sources available for the study of the Benin art history and how they have been used to reconstruct both general and specifically eighteen-century development include European documentary evidence, which consists of a number of first and second hand accounts dating back to the end of the fifteenth century. These include travelers' chronicles, trade records, and colonial official administrative reports. ... (Also) two significant secondary sources exist for the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: Alonso de Sandoval (1627) and Olfert Dapper (1668). The early Portuguese traveler, Duarte Pacheco Pereira, who visited Benin in the 1480s had this to say "The kingdom of Beny is about eighty leagues long and forty wide; it is usually at war with its neighbors and takes many captives, whom we buy at twelve or fifteen bracelets each, or for copper bracelets which they prize more" (Hodgkin 1975: 121; Ezra 12)

Duchateau (1994) suggested that the first attempt at constructing a chronology of the art of Benin were based on formal differences observed in a number of Benin heads. As much as some would suggest that



the Benin royal art was the degenerative and decadent product of ancient Ife influence. (17) Ross (2002) argued that the current accepted theory is that the smallest and most naturalistic heads are the earliest, with a gradual progression toward increased size and degree of stylization. The earliest heads have light thin walls and a tight-fitting collar that does not cover the chin. They have no beaded crown. She further argued that because the Benin kingdom had grown in both wealth and power, primarily through extensive trade with the Portuguese between 1500 and 1800, it was obvious that these changes may have also manifested in a dramatic increase in the size and ostentation of royal regalia (Ross, 2002). The heads became are larger, thicker and heavier, far more stylized and had wide and cylindrical shape; ; the crowns of Edo kings grew steadily more encrusted with coral beading collars reaching the mouth, with the addition of bead clusters to the crown.

According to William Fagg (1962), the Benin royal art can be divided into three periods: the first and the earliest was the thin walled castings of around the 1500s which revealed stylistic similarities with the brass objects of ancient Ife. As it appears, these casting did not last for a very long

time. In the middle period- probably of around seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries- the artistic designs departed completely from those that came from Ife and those that were earlier casted in Benin. Fagg (1962) further claims that this is the classic period of Benin art. The sculpture became increasingly schematic, with a high degree of expressiveness and independence. The third period which may have begun around the mid-eighteenth century, witnessed a decline in the political and cultural affairs of the Benin Kingdom which resulted in a corresponding deterioration of the arts (Duchateau, 1994).

The British scholars, Philip Dark expanded on Fagg's method for establishing the chronology of heads (Duchateau, 1994). According Dark, they are five types of heads. The first two types are noticeably smaller than the later. They are thin-walled, and have relatively naturalistic facial features (early fifteenth and sixteenth century). The full face can be seen in type one. The collar is made of coral bead strands closely hugging the neck and throat but does not go over the chin. The type three heads are larger and heavier, with high collars of coral beads ending just below the mouth. The swollen cheeks and large eyes are

particularly striking. A protruding flange surrounding the lower section of the head is a common characteristic of the type three, type four as well as type five. The type four and five heads are substantially larger and heavier. The type four heads (made around the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century) and type five heads (made around the nineteenth and early twentieth century) have more exaggerated facial features, upright wings and slightly bent rods of beads that reach in front of the eye sockets (Duchateau, 1994).

#### Casting the metal.

The basic method of lost-wax casting has been widely practiced on the African continent for centuries. There are indications that bronze casting may have been known in the thirteenth century Benin. Garrard explains that it is uncertain when and from where the technology of bronze casting was introduced to Benin, for few Benin castings have been scientifically dated; the earliest yet known, a ram-head mask, was made in the first half of the sixth century, while the castings of Igbo Ukwu, were made about

the ninth century. (17) Ben – Amos citing Egharevba (1968) on the other hand argued that casting was introduced to Benin from Ife. (18). Apley, (2001) explained that while it is difficult to establish how the method was developed or introduced to the region, it is clear that West African sculptors were casting brass with this method for several hundred years prior to the arrival of the first Portuguese explorers along the coast in 1484 (Apley, 2001).

Apley added that the technique requires a great deal of skill, involving extensive knowledge of both pottery and metalworking, and a careful attention to changing temperatures to prevent unwanted cracking or other damage to either the clay mold or to the metal sculpture during the casting process.

In the Benin Kingdom, brass, bronze, copper, iron and tin are base metals which have always been used for functional and decorative objects. Less exotic than gold and silver, they do not command anywhere near the same prices.



### **Head of a Queen Mother (Iyoba), 1750–1800**

**This is a Brass casted commemorative heads of the Iyoba of the Benin kingdom. The Iyoba is the mother of the Oba of the Benin kingdom. Oba Esigie first introduced the title to honor his mother Idia. As a result, the title was first conferred upon Idia, the mother of king Esigie. According to Ben- Amos, Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie, is the stimulus for the Eighteen century Art.**

The brass is an alloyed metal made of copper and zinc. According to Michael (1975), the proportions of each in the mixture determine the hardness of the brass, copper being the softer metal. Copper has a close kinship to brass. Being a soft metal, it is easily formed, has good colors, and can withstand the heat of cooking and other abuses. Bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) is a close cousin to brass. (Michael, 1975 189) Bronze is the most popular metal for cast metal sculpture; a cast bronze sculpture is often called simply a "bronze". The castings of Benin have customarily

been referred to as the bronzes, a term which is both loose and inaccurate. Timothy Garrard argued that "true castings have rarely been found in Africa and while a few examples are known in Benin, the great majority of Benin castings were undoubtedly made of Dutch and English brass imported from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. He explains that Brass is thus the preferred term to describe them as suggested by Posnansky. All the castings in the Museum of Cultural History Collection are likely to be brass (an alloy of copper and

zinc. According to Michael (1975), the proportions of each in the mixture determine the hardness of the brass, copper being the softer metal. Copper has a close kinship to brass. Being a soft metal, it is easily formed, has good colors, and can withstand the heat of cooking and other abuses. Bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) is a close cousin to brass. (Michael, 1975 189) Bronze is the most popular metal for cast metal sculpture; a cast bronze sculpture is often called simply a "bronze". The castings of Benin have customarily

zinc) rather than bronze - an alloy of copper and tin (Garrard's word edited by Ben – Amos 17). The significance of brass, at least in the modern Edo view, derives from its red color and shining surface, qualities which are considered both beautiful and threatening – a particularly appropriate symbol for the monarchy ( Ben –Amos 25).

The Benin craftsmen adopt the lost – wax technique in casting bronzes and metal effigies. To create a bronze sculpture, as explained by Koslow in his book *Benin: Lords of the River*, the artist makes a clay model of the sculpture, and then he applies a thin layer of beeswax and carefully etches all the details of the sculpture into the wax. Then he covers the wax with several more layers of clay, forming a thick mold. When the entire form is heated over fire, the middle layer of wax would melt and drain off through the bottom of the form, and then the artist pours molten bronze into the top of the mold through a series of tubes. The bronze will fill the space where the lost wax has been conforming to all the details now baked into the surrounding clay. When the bronze cools and set, the outer layers of clay will break and the finished sculpture would emerge. The metal sculpture is produced through the same lengthy process as in the

casting of the bronze sculpture. The process cannot be dashed off in a moment. It takes careful planning, time and good engineering skills. It could be problematic if special care is not taken. One must also take strict cognizance of the fact the sculptor's skills give physical expression to his vision.

#### The Early Portuguese Influence

In a brief description of the Seated Portuguese Figure in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2000, the author wrote that

Merchants and explorers from Portugal first made contact with the kingdom of Benin in 1486, initiating an economic relationship that ultimately had a profound impact upon the art and politics of this West African state. Benin's oral histories relate how Oba Esigie, who ruled Benin in the early sixteenth century, skillfully utilized these new trading partners to augment and consolidate his personal power and expand his kingdom's military and economic strength within the Guinea Coast region of Africa. From this period onward, images of Portuguese traders were widely incorporated into royal Benin art forms (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000). One cannot underestimate the relevance of the Portuguese influence to the economic, political, social and religious advancement of the Benin people.

The Portuguese were the critical source of revenue extensively traded with the Benin people through for the Oba of Benin and his people. Before the direct trade by barter with the Oba of Benin British military invasion of the Benin Kingdom, Kingdom. As Dominique Malaquais the Portuguese were recognized to have



**Seated Portuguese Figure, 18th century Nigeria; Edo peoples, court of Benin, Brass. This is a brass casted Portuguese sculpture seated Portuguese man. As cautioned by the author, the creator of this seated figure may have exaggerated those generic aspects of the European face he found distinctive and representative, such as the large, beaklike nose, long hair, and luxurious moustache and beard**

During Oba Esigie's reign, Benin's relationship Records indicate the Portuguese were good with the Portugal blossomed. The Portuguese business partners with the Binis and they treated brought clothes, coral beads, and brass in the form each other with mutual respect. Their partnership of manilas, guns, horseshoe-shaped brass objects was on trade and military ties. As observed, the that were a common form of currency in the Portuguese provided the Binis the weapons and 1950s. firearms their soldiers were observed to have

These goods were all used to make court regalia – served in the armies that the Oba Esigie of Benin the clothing, furnishings, and ornaments of the used extensively to defend and expand the royalty. In exchange, the Portuguese received territorial boundary of the Benin kingdom. ivory, pepper, clothes made from Edo weavers, Undoubtedly, the presence of Portuguese soldiers strengthens the Oba's armies, so too their presence and slaves'' (27) was used to reinforce the people's belief in the

Oba's links with god the spirit world.

## CONCLUSION

As it was obvious, for over 500 years, before the British military punitive expedition of Benin in 1897, the royal arts of Benin – cast brass, carved ivory, terracotta and wood created to glorify a divine King had tremendous influence on early 20<sup>th</sup> Century artists. Ezra wrote that these splendidly naturalistic heads, plaques, carved tusks, bracelets, and other ceremonial and personal ornaments of Benin provide an unbroken record of one of West Africa's greatest kingdoms for more than 500 years (6)

According to a popular History channel slogan, "unless history lives in our present, it has no future". In the words of Jonathan Jones (2003), Modernism was born partly out of the encounter at the end of the 19th century between Europe and Africa. But we in Britain were too pious ever to capitalize on this. While Picasso leapt into the "darkness", Victorians preferred to keep the light on. There was no British Picasso, no British Matisse lingering in the British Museum, wondering at the massive aesthetic power and life of African art (Jones, 2003).

The Time describes the pre-colonial art of Benin as elegant, fiery - and mostly locked in the British Museum. Ezra declared that "the kingdom of Benin and its art did flourish over half a millennium, and perhaps more than any other art

in Africa, that of Benin consciously invokes its history. It portrays past people, and alludes to past events that have contributed to the kingdom's power, wealth, and conceptual or spiritual greatness (Ezra 1). The artists and the people were said to have been very creative and original in their works of art. But did the past continue through time right up to the present? Times and people may have changed, but, the question remains, is the art of Benin still the same today? The lack of written documentation in Benin makes it difficult to establish a sound chronology for the arts of the Benin people. Andrea and Overfield stressed that although only made popular after the British punitive expedition in the 19th century, Benin art has been in existence since at least 500 BCE (Andrea et al 2005). Some scholars have claimed that when the empire collapse after the British military expedition, the art of Benin collapsed with it. Read (1910) argued that it is not to be expected that the city of Benin itself will for the present continue to supply any great number of works of art. Such specimens as may come into the market will doubtlessly form part of collections made at the time of the punitive expedition. Most of these, however, are well known, and it is improbable that any great surprises are in store. (49)

Nevadomsky (2005) noted that:

Nothing is so stale as Benin art history. The Benin kingdom collapsed more than a hundred years ago, pummeled by a British Punitive Expedition. Like a terminal patient on life support, its cast art tradition was kept artificially alive by academic-to-academic resuscitation. Since nobody bothered about a prognosis for recovery, art historians soldiered on, happy with their comatose victim, that wonderful Latin phrase *terminus ad quem*--"final limiting point"--defining the moment of preemptive closure.

In the meantime the patient got up and walked away. The Benin Edo world hadn't stopped and neither had the artisans of Benin City.

Nevadomsky (2005) further noted that contemporary Benin art is farthest away in art historical documentation. There is no repository of twentieth century Benin art. Evidence is dispersed among individual tourists and collectors, as personal mementoes. For curators and their collector collaborators, condemnation of contemporary pieces is more rewarding than constructing a chronology. Ferreting out fakes rates as more compelling than exhibitions on contemporary Benin brasses. Scholarly interest in contemporary objects ranges from disinterest to disdain.

Simon Ottenburg (2002) argued that despite frequent Western views that African creativity died with the decline or passing of Africa's older

art forms as its societies changed under Western impact, internal conflicts, and difficult economic and political conditions, the African artistic creativity has not disappeared. It is proving to be rich, varied, and sensitive to rapidly changing conditions (3).

He further argued that as much as one realizes that some problems exist (e.g. standard of quality not set, contemporary African art relatively new, etc.), there is no reason to assume that Africans are less aesthetically creative than in the past.

It is the artistic media, forms of art, their functions, the distancing from indigenous ritual, the movement away from geographic localism, that have altered. Most times, the African art with all the multiplicity of cultures from which it derives, often unfamiliar to those who write about it, makes evaluation of the work difficult. No matter which way or how anyone sees it, it is obvious that one can hardly see in the art of Benin today, the creativity, originality and ingenuity that epitomized pre-colonial arts of Benin that brought fame, power and prosperity to the Bini people. Today, the Benin Artists are no longer interested in the profession for "Art for Art's sake or for the beauty or pleasure it brings to the heart. They are in it for money, money and nothing else. Most of the great works of Art of the Benin people are gone and if care is not taken, at the rate it is going, they may be gone forever. The world and times

have changed tremendously. One would expect that the artists of Benin would take advantage of the technological advancement that the world has experienced in recent times to advance their artistic creativity. Unfortunately that has not happened. Instead, the artists of Benin are stuck to the old ways of doing things, capitalizing on the material benefits derivable from mass producing copies of the works of the arts of their forefathers. The artists and people of Benin must face the true realities of a constantly changing diverse world. Copying existing works of art of other people is not art. Russell argued “A mere recording of nature, if that were possible would not be art. It is the interpretation and creative expression of the artist that makes art. And because no two people, artists or otherwise, can see the world in the same way, each work of art will be unique – a reflection of the artist’s perception, insight, and experience (5)

The FESTAC MASK – An Example of the Works of Arts in Benin Today

The Government of Federal Republic of Nigeria once had this to say about the FESTAC Mask in an official report titled, “ Nigeria's Gift to UNESCO, 25 May 2005: The Background to FESTAC Mask” (<http://www.unesco.org/africa/ua/Background-FestacMask.pdf>)

No singular artistic work represents the face of Nigerian rich vibrant culture in its majestic splendor more than what has now been known as the FESTAC Mask. The mask has its deep roots in the ancient city of Benin in Edo State of Nigeria, and can be traced to the expansive conquest of Queen Idia who during her reign extended the frontier of what is known as Ancient Benin Empire to unbelievable heights and wide geographical reach. The work in all subtlety represents the esoteric beauty of the Queen complete with all the royal pomp and pageantry. This, itself is a worthy tribute to a queen, who was an unquestable foremost Art-patron who encouraged the creative impulses of her people as much as their valiant pursuit of conquest. (<http://www.unesco.org/africa/ua/Background-FestacMask.pdf>)

This beautiful Masterpiece, cast in bronze, is a constant reminder of the richness of the past, the quest for excellence of the present and the vision of the future for Nigerian people. Just as the figurines at the back of this artistic showpiece depict the protective ambience of the communities that pay homage to Queen Idia in the past, it is also correct to say that the Mask symbolizes the spiritual bond for all peoples of African descent in the world today. (<http://www.unesco.org/africa/ua/Background-FestacMask.pdf>)





**The Festac Mask - A modern day ebony wood carving of the Face of Queen Idia - mother of Oba Esigie**

This was why the Mask was the symbol of the second Festival of Arts & Culture that was hosted by Nigeria in 1977, where all the people of African descent showcased their rich cultural heritage. Unfortunately, the original Mask, which is made of Ivory, is one of thousands of Masterpieces that was taken by Britain in 1897 in the so-called “Benin Massacre”. It still remains in Britain today. However, for Nigerians and all black peoples, the Mask remains a veritable symbol of the resilience of the human spirit. It is the template on which the creative talent of the people married to their physical courage and vision for the future is based. (<http://www.unesco.org/africa/ua/Background-FestacMask.pdf>)

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