

# ROYAL ART OF BENIN

The Perls Collection



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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The Perls Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

*Kate Ezra*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

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Holding Mudfish (detail)

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16th–19th century

# CONTENTS

Foreword <i>by Philippe de Montebello</i>	vii
Preface <i>by Klaus G. Perls</i>	viii
Acknowledgments	x
Maps	xii
Introduction	1

## BENIN ALTARS

Heads of Kings	29
Queen Mother Heads	41
Terracotta Heads	47
Royal Altar Tusks	51
Figures	67
Altar Tableaus	79
Roosters	85
Rattle-Staffs	91
Bells	97
Altar Rings	103
Altars to the Hand	107

## PALACE PLAQUES

Palace Plaques	117
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## COURT AND CEREMONIAL OBJECTS

Pectorals, Hip Ornaments, and Waist Pendants	153
Bracelets	175
Staffs of Office	191
Hand-held Clappers	197
Ivory Trumpets	209
Healing and Divining Instruments	215
Brass Vessels and Implements	225
Ivory Containers and Implements	245
Wood Boxes and Coconut-shell Containers	253
Stools and Chairs	263

## ART OF YORUBA KINGDOMS

Owo	277
Ijebu	299
Appendix	307
Chronology of Benin Kings	312
Glossary	313
Bibliography	317
Index	325

# FOREWORD

The art of the kingdom of Benin took the world by surprise in 1897, when thousands of its sculptures were seen by outsiders for the first time. The naturalism and royal imagery of these works were compared to masterpieces of Renaissance Europe, and their technical sophistication and precious materials were much admired, earning Benin art a central place in European and American museums. In the nearly one hundred years since then, as knowledge of African art has deepened and broadened, the importance of Benin art has become even more apparent. Its cast brass and carved ivory sculptures constitute a continuous record, spanning more than five hundred years, of the artistic heritage of one of Africa's greatest kingdoms. With advances in archaeology, anthropology, and history, the story of how Benin's art forms began and flourished provides a unique chapter in the history of African art.

The art of Benin is not new to the Metropolitan Museum. In 1950 the Museum's very first African acquisition was a Benin brass rooster. In 1978 and 1979, it was joined by almost two dozen Benin sculptures from the collection of Nelson A. Rockefeller, including the ivory pendant mask that is one of the Museum's prized possessions. With the recent gift of 163 objects from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, these fine but small holdings have been transformed into one of the leading collections of Benin art worldwide.

It is therefore with great pleasure that I introduce the exhibition *Royal Art of Benin from the Perls Collection*. Remarkable in both breadth and quality, the collection reflects the taste, sensitivity, and knowledge acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Perls during their long careers as dealers in modern art. Beginning in the 1930s, during years when most collectors of African art were drawn to more abstract types of sculpture with obvious affinities to modern art, the Perls quietly amassed one of the world's largest and finest collections of Benin art in private hands. What was once their private passion is now a public treasure, thanks to their generous donation to the Metropolitan Museum.

To celebrate this important acquisition, the Museum is presenting the entire collection in the exhibition *Royal Art of Benin from the Perls Collection*. Later, a major portion of it will be placed on view permanently in The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing. I am deeply grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Perls for entrusting their magnificent collection to the Metropolitan Museum and thereby enabling us to present this important aspect of Africa's artistic legacy to a broad public.

Philippe de Montebello  
*Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*



## PREFACE



Fig. 1. The dining room of the Perls home, with Benin art displayed beneath *Nu Couché* by Amedeo Modigliani, 1918

When my parents married in 1910, in Berlin, they asked their friend Mies van der Rohe to build them a house in the Zehlendorf suburb. Then they went on their honeymoon, to Paris, to buy things for that house. There they met Kahnweiler and Vollard and Picasso, and in Picasso's studio they saw African sculpture. When they filled the new house with the many art objects from Paris, there was among them at least one Baule carving that appears in a photograph of the period. Picasso and his friends had elevated African ethnographic objects to the realm of art, and I grew up looking at them in this context.

In 1897, British government officials had insisted on going to Benin City at the time of the yearly festival honoring royal ancestors, in spite of having been warned off: they were promptly killed. The British then mounted what came to be called the Punitive Expedition, and Benin City was destroyed. The huge royal palace complex, whose

splendor European travelers since the sixteenth century had compared favorably to their own great cities, was built of wood that readily burned. But the wooden posts and pillars had been covered with bronze artifacts commemorating Benin personalities and their activities. When the ashes settled, these bronzes, together with ivories and other objects from the kings' altars, were loaded onto warships and taken back to London. Quite a few were then sold, especially to the British Museum and the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde.

When I started studying art history in 1929, and during all the years before my doctorate, the only art produced in Africa that was ever mentioned was that of Egypt. However, as a result of Picasso's interest in African art, perceptions slowly changed. Still, when Benin objects appeared on the market, buyers were few indeed and prices accordingly low. I started buying African art simply because I liked to see it together with the works of the Picasso generation of artists in which I specialized as a dealer, with no clear intention of either collecting or reselling.

Soon, however, my predilection for Benin art asserted itself, and it became the only kind of African art I continued to buy, until, quite unnoticed, it developed into a collection. It began to fill a large room of the Perls Galleries townhouse at 1016 Madison Avenue until finally it was overflowing. It became necessary to think of another place, better qualified to show this art in the way it deserves to be shown. It is my hope that the collection will help establish African art as one of the supreme products of the general human tendency to immortalize our accomplishments, and I am grateful to The Metropolitan Museum of Art for its willingness to undertake this heavy responsibility.

Klaus G. Perls  
New York City  
January 2, 1991

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has given me great pleasure to work with the extraordinary collection of Benin art assembled by Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls. Many people have participated in the creation of this exhibition and its catalogue, but my primary debt is to Mr. and Mrs. Perls themselves. Always gracious, generous, and understanding, they facilitated the many tasks involved in transforming their private collection into a public one. I am deeply grateful to them, and to their daughter, Katherine Perls, for their every assistance, and for their willingness to lend several of the objects remaining in their collections for this occasion.

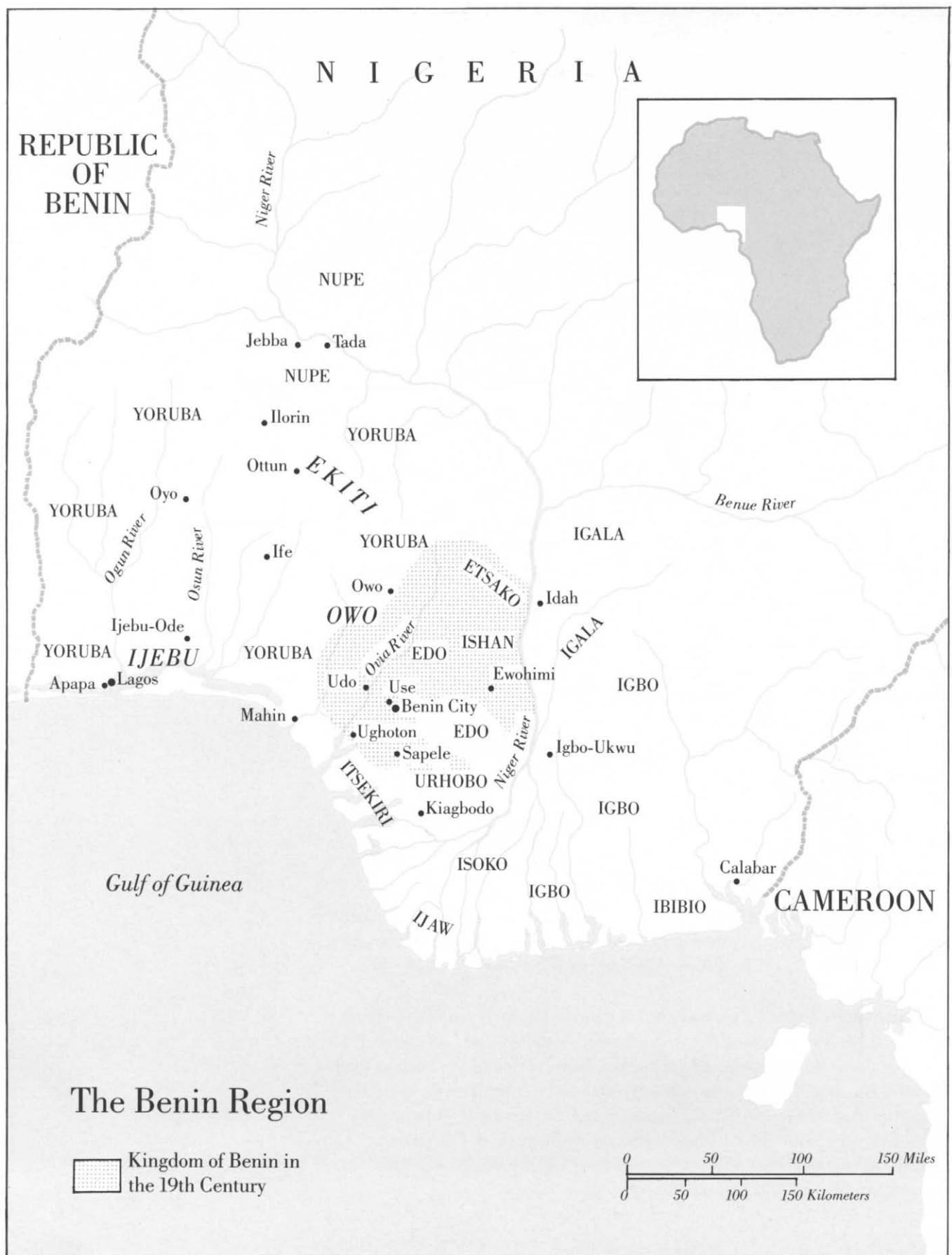
As a relative newcomer to the intricacies of Benin studies, I have benefited from the knowledge and experience of the field's most eminent scholars. Paula Girshick Ben-Amos examined and discussed all of the objects with me, bringing to them her vast knowledge of Benin art, culture, and history. She read and commented on many of the catalogue texts, although any remaining errors of fact or interpretation are entirely my own. Barbara Blackmun and Joseph Nevadomsky also generously shared their knowledge with me, as did many others, including Rowland Abiodun, Kathy Curnow-Nasara, Philip Dark, Henry Drewal, Lance Entwistle, William Fagg, Phyllis Galembo, J. Kenneth Moore, John Picton, Norma Rosen, Roy Sieber, Robert Soppelsa, Irwin Tunis, Hermione Waterfield, and Frank Willett. I greatly appreciate courtesies extended to me at the Museum of Mankind, London, by Nigel Barley and Julie Hudson, at the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, by Hans-Joachim Koloss and Andreas Wilczek, and at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, by Chris Gross. The staff of the Perls Galleries, including Barnett Owen, Alison Read, and Douglas Mayhew, cooperated in many ways throughout the preparations for the exhibition, and I would like to express my thanks to them.

Many departments and individual staff members at The Metropolitan Museum of Art contributed to this exhibition. The objects were brought safely into the Museum by the Registrar's Office, and once here, their condition was carefully monitored by the Department of Objects Conservation. Ellen Howe supervised the examination and treatment of the collection, assisted by Diana Harvey, Pat Griffin, and Lucia Militello. Richard E. Stone, John Canonico, Deborah Schorsch, and Mark Wypyski also helped in analyzing and treating several of the objects. Nancy Reynolds and Alexandra Walcott, both expert mount-makers and installers, ensured that the objects would be displayed safely and to their best advantage. Daniel Kershaw designed the exhibition itself, capably assisted by many others in the Design Department.

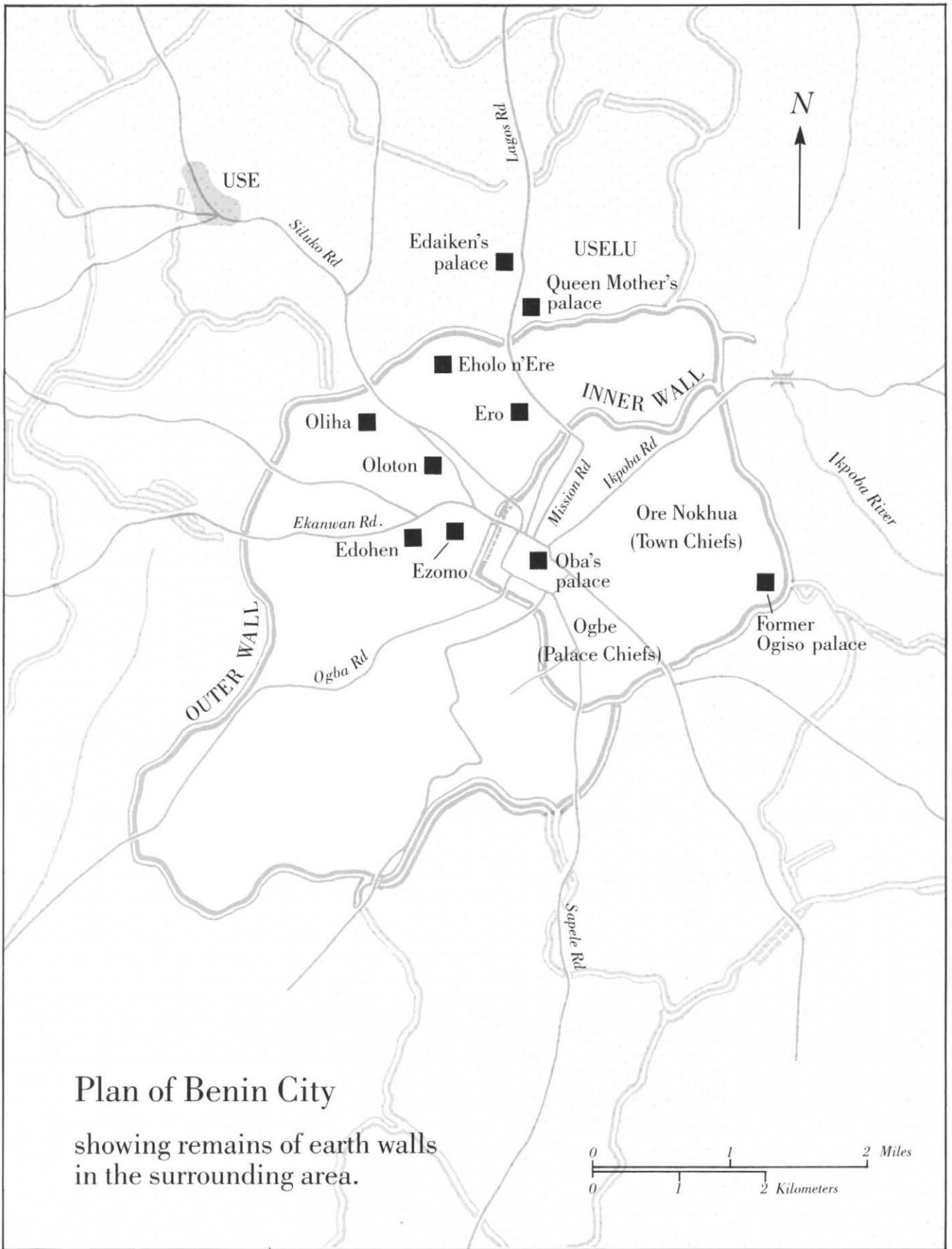
I am grateful to the many people whose special skills and talents are evident in this publication. Foremost among these are Martina D'Alton, who edited it, and Michael Shroyer, who designed it. Their experience, efficiency, and cheerfulness simplified many difficult tasks. Barbara Burn, executive editor of the Editorial Department, facilitated its timely completion in many ways, and Matthew Pimm was responsible for its production. Much credit is due to the staff of the Museum's Photograph Studio and its manager, Barbara Bridgers. I am especially indebted to Karen Willis and Joseph Coscia, Jr., for their exquisite photographs, and to Caitlin McCaffrey for her painstaking prints.

Special mention must be made of the staff in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Douglas Newton, formerly the Evelyn A. J. Hall and John Friede Chairman of the Department, ushered the collection into the Museum before his retirement, and Julie Jones provided support and advice after his departure. Alisa LaGamma helped in countless ways and, along with Kokunre Agbontaen and Christa Clarke, performed valuable research on many objects. Ross Day and Peter Blank of the Robert Goldwater Library and Virginia-Lee Webb of the Photograph Study Collection provided much-needed assistance. Others in the department, past and present, whose work is greatly appreciated, include James Downtin, Shannen Hill, Marilyn Martucci, Joan Anne Maxham, Donald Roberts, and Cynthia Turner.

Two others deserve a special word of thanks. Daniel Headrick patiently listened to nightly reports of the progress of this catalogue and exhibition, and was always enthusiastic and supportive. Ernst Anspach has been a close friend to Mr. and Mrs. Perls for over fifty years and a faithful supporter of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas for more than thirty-five years, ever since its beginnings as the Museum of Primitive Art. I have also benefited from his wisdom and friendship over the past decade, and I would like him to know how much I have appreciated it.



Map 1.



Plan of Benin City  
 showing remains of earth walls  
 in the surrounding area.

Map 2.



# INTRODUCTION

The art of Benin is unique in African art. Primarily made of cast brass and carved ivory, it provides an unbroken record of the artistic heritage of one of West Africa's greatest kingdoms. It is a royal art, made to glorify the divine king, or Oba, and to honor the great kings of the past. In addition to the powers and prerogatives of kingship, the art of Benin expresses the roles and ranks of the myriad chiefs, titleholders, priests, court officials, and attendants who constitute the kingdom's complex administrative and ritual hierarchy. The kingdom of Benin and its art have flourished 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. The themes of history, politics, and, most importantly, divine kingship are inextricably woven into the fabric of Benin art. This catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies mark the donation of one of the finest and most extensive collections of Benin art in private hands, that of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, to The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The art of Benin first became known to Western viewers in 1897 as a result of a British military expedition. Thousands of art works, once housed in the royal palace and used in the service of divine kingship, were confiscated and eventually dispersed to museums and private collections throughout the world. Despite the devastating destruction and loss caused by these events, the art of Benin is not extinct. The kingdom exists today, incorporated into the modern state of Nigeria. A divine king, Oba Erediauwa, sits on the throne of Benin and presides over a bustling court, vivid and solemn palace rituals, and active guilds of artists.

## **The Kingdom of Benin**

The kingdom of Benin is located in the tropical rain forest of southern Nigeria, on a sandy coastal plain west of the Niger River and north of the swamps and creeks of the Niger Delta (see map 1).<sup>1</sup> The majority of



the kingdom's people are known as Edo, the name also given to their language, and at times to the entire kingdom and its capital. Igbo, Ijaw, Yoruba, and Itsekiri people also live within Benin's borders. The heart of the kingdom is its capital, today called Benin City. Outside of Benin City people live in several hundred villages, with an average population of four or five hundred. The villagers have traditionally earned their livelihood by farming, especially growing yams which are their staple crop, although much of their land is now devoted to timber reserves and rubber plantations.

The kingdom has been defined as that area in which the Oba has power over the life and death of his subjects, and over the centuries its geographic boundaries have expanded and contracted with the king's fortunes. At its apogee, in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the kingdom extended west beyond Lagos, northwest through the Ekiti region of the Yoruba to Ottun, northeast to incorporate much of the Ishan area, and east to the Niger River. The Etsako people immediately to the north, and the Urhobo and Isoko immediately to the south, remained largely resistant to Benin control, although certain pockets within them recognized the Oba's rule. The non-Edo territories included within the kingdom were obligated to pay tribute to the Oba, to provide military assistance, and to facilitate trade with merchants from Benin, but otherwise they governed themselves. Their relationship with Benin was also reflected in the regalia of their rulers, which were often provided by the Oba as a sign of both his approval and his domination. The kingdom shrank in the seventeenth century but began to expand again in the eighteenth with the renewed wealth and power of the king, and even in the nineteenth, when the kingdom was again waning, successful campaigns were waged to reacquire rebellious territories.

Benin City, home to over 160,000 people (Ben-Amos 1980:5), has always been the administrative and religious center of the kingdom, yet it is fundamentally different from the rest of the kingdom. In the capital a person's success and power are determined by his achievements, particularly his ability to manipulate the kingdom's complex political system so as to be granted important titles within the government. In the villages a man's influence is primarily dependent upon his age. The elders, *edion*, govern the village, headed by the Odionwere, its oldest man. Some villages also have a hereditary ruler, Onigie; the original holder of such a title would usually have been a younger brother or trusted ally of an Oba, sent there to represent the Oba's interests. Together the Odionwere and the Onigie balanced the needs of their villagers with the demands of the Oba and the kingdom's central bureaucracy. They sent cowrie shells, livestock, and agricultural products to the capital as tribute, and provided soldiers in time of war.

In order to control the relationship between the villages and the capital, the whole kingdom was divided up into tribute units or "fiefs"

that were administered by an official within the capital. These fief-holders, generally appointed by the Oba from among the Uzama, Palace and Town Chiefs, and other high-ranking retainers, were able to enrich themselves by receiving a percentage of the tribute they brought to the Oba. However, the system prevented them from accruing wealth and power to a degree that might threaten the Oba. Although a single official might control many fiefs, they were dispersed throughout the kingdom, so that his influence in a particular territory was limited, and the titles that brought with them control of the fiefs were not hereditary, so that power was not concentrated along family lines.

The Oba is the central 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 because his original forefather was not Edo. The origin of the royal dynasty is recounted in Edo oral tradition. After the failure of the early kings of Benin, known as the Ogiso or "Rulers of the Sky," a group of chiefs requested a new king from the Oni of Ife, the ancient center of the neighboring Yoruba people, which they associate with the origin of the world and the spread of divine kingship. The Oni sent his son Oranmiyan to Benin. Oranmiyan chose not to remain in Benin, but before leaving he fathered a son by the daughter of a Benin chief. When that boy grew up he was enthroned as Eweka I, the first king of the dynasty that still rules Benin today. Eweka is believed to have taken the throne around 1300; Erediauwa, the current Oba, is the thirty-eighth in his line (fig. 2).

The Oba is considered to be divine. It is believed that, unlike mortal men, he does not need to eat or sleep. More significantly, he personally controls the forces that affect the well-being of the entire kingdom. He is the channel through which the powers of his ancestors continue to vitalize and protect the Edo people and ensure their survival into the future. Numerous state rituals are performed in order to maintain the close connection between the Oba and his ancestors and to reinforce the Oba's personal capacity to serve as intermediary between them and the Benin people.

The Oba exercises power in this world as well as in the spirit world. He must be a consummate politician, balancing the ambitions and obligations of numerous interest groups that compete with each other, and sometimes with him, for prestige, wealth, and power. By judiciously granting titles and fiefs he can foster his own interests and foil his enemies. In the past, the Oba controlled the trade of various commodities such as ivory, slaves, cloth, and pepper, and thus also ensured his economic supremacy. The Oba was also the highest judge in his realm and prior to 1897 had power over the life and death of his subjects.

The combination of the Oba's great spiritual powers and his vast temporal ones caused him to be regarded by his subjects with a

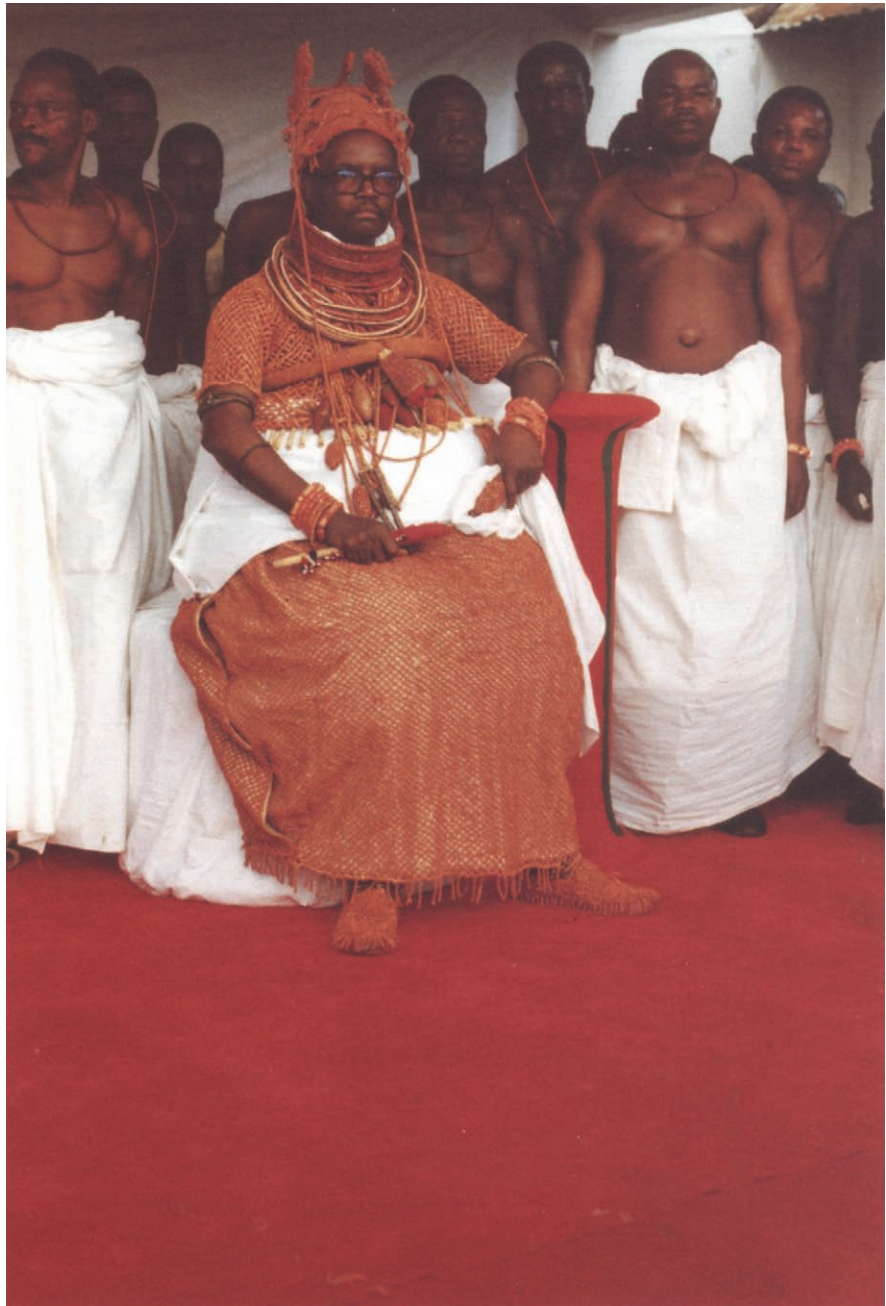


Fig. 2. The king of Benin, Oba Erediauwa (r. 1979 to the present), dressed in lavish coral-bead attire for the celebration of Igue, the palace ceremony that strengthens his spiritual powers. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky

mixture of awe, reverence, and fear. John Adams, an English sea captain who visited Benin in the late eighteenth century, described the attitude toward the monarch as follows: “The King of Benin is fetiche, and the principal object of adoration in his Dominions. He occupies a higher post here than the pope does in catholic Europe; for he is not only God’s vice regent upon earth, but a god himself, whose subjects both obey and adore him as such, although I believe their adoration to arise from fear rather than love” (Hodgkin 1975:229). Known to the Edo as “Child of the Sky whom we pray not to fall and cover us, Child of the Earth whom we implore not to swallow us up” (Bradbury 1973:75), the Oba is uniquely powerful in Benin.

In addition to the Oba, the administration of the kingdom was overseen by three groups of chiefs, the Uzama, the Palace Chiefs, and the Town Chiefs. According to tradition, the Uzama are the descendants of the elders who sent to Ife for a Yoruba prince to rule Benin. Unlike the vast majority of chiefs in Benin, their titles are hereditary, passing to the oldest son after the death of the titleholder. As a body, they have the greatest prestige of all Benin chiefs. They perform crucial ritual roles, particularly at the inauguration of new kings and the ceremonies dedicated to the king's ancestors, making the king and the well-being of the nation dependent upon them to a great extent.

The Uzama include Chiefs Oliha, Edohen, Ezomo, Ero, Eholo n'Ere, and Oloton; the Edaiken, or crown prince, is also counted among the seven Uzama. The highest ranked is the Oliha, who is the guardian of the shrine that ensures the well-being of the entire Benin nation. The Ezomo is also particularly important, since in the past he acted as one of the Oba's two supreme military commanders. This role, and the fact that he administered many territories or fiefs for the Oba, allowed the Ezomo to acquire vast wealth rivaling that of the Oba himself. All of the Uzama ruled supreme within their respective villages, indicating that they had a degree of independence from the Oba greater than that of other Benin chiefs. The special position of the Uzama, whose titles had existed before that of the Oba himself, often resulted in conflicts with the king, especially during the early years of the dynasty when the Obas were struggling to establish their primacy. These conflicts are reenacted in palace rituals that dramatically proclaim the power relationships between the king and the chiefs (see fig. 13).

The Palace Chiefs, the Eghaevbo Nogbe, are concerned directly with the administration of the palace and the Oba's personal life. They are divided into three broad associations, Iwebo, Iweguae, and Ibiwe. The chiefs belonging to Iwebo are responsible for the king's regalia, including his ceremonial garments and coral beads; they oversee the craft guilds that produce these and all the other objects used in the rituals of divine kingship, and, in the past, they supervised trade with Europeans. Iweguae consists of the Oba's personal staff, including his servants, cooks, and pages (*emada*). Members of Ibiwe are responsible for supervising and caring for the Oba's hundreds of wives and children. Membership in the palace associations was open to all who could pay the initiation fees; the acquisition of titles within the associations, and their concomitant privileges, depended upon still more fees as well as loyalty and service to the king. Because of the wealth and experience required for advancement in the palace associations, the Palace Chiefs have been likened to a "hereditary aristocracy of retainers" (Bradbury 1973:64).

In contrast, the Town Chiefs, Eghaevbo Nore, have been described as "*nouveaux riches* who rose to power by their own efforts, not through inherited wealth and connections" (fig. 3; Ben-Amos 1980:9).



Fig. 3. Senior chiefs at Igue, resting on their ceremonial *eben* swords and dressed in costumes of scalloped red *ododo* cloth that imitates the protective scales of the pangolin. At their left sides they wear ornaments called “hands of wealth,” brass faces, and belts with stiff leather ends shaped like leaves. Photograph by Norma Rosen

The Town Chiefs were primarily responsible for administering the territories of the kingdom, collecting tribute, recruiting military support, and serving as intermediaries between the Oba and the villages. The four highest ranked of the Town Chiefs are known as the “Four Pillars,” indicating their crucial positions within the government. First among them is the *Iyase* who, with the *Ezomo*, was one of the Oba’s two supreme military commanders. But unlike the *Ezomo*, who is usually described in Edo oral tradition as a faithful supporter of the Oba, the *Iyase* was frequently the king’s opponent. The *Iyase* is often depicted in Benin art, identified by his distinctive headgear (fig. 4). Both the Palace and Town Chiefs were constantly vying for more

prestigious, lucrative, and influential titles, for which the favor of the Oba was essential. Thus the political system of Benin was intensely competitive. The balance of opposing factions was constantly shifting, and the ability to adapt to new demands was crucial to the stability of the kingdom and the power of the king.

The complex administrative bureaucracy that unified the kingdom and allowed it to prosper and survive for more than six hundred years is reflected in the layout of the capital city (see map 2). The heart of the city is surrounded by an earthen wall and ditch six miles in circumference, said to have been built by Oba Ewuare in the mid-fifteenth century. The area within the wall is divided into two unequal parts by a broad street running northwest to southeast. The smaller precinct to the southwest, known as Ogbe, comprises the Oba's palace, the various palace associations, and the homes of the Palace



Fig. 4. Plaque depicting the Iyase dressed in ceremonial attire, raising an *eben* sword, and accompanied by an attendant who carries a box in the form of a cow or antelope head. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th–17th century. Brass; h. 15¾ in. (40.0 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972. 1978.412.320

Chiefs. The larger area northeast of the dividing street is called Ore Nokhua. It is home to the Town Chiefs, as well as to the dozens of occupational specialists who work for the Oba, including the various artists' guilds. Beyond the first wall is a second one, and between the two walls on the western and southern side of the town are areas inhabited by many of the Oba's ritual specialists. Here too are the villages ruled by six of the seven Uzama, the most prestigious chiefs in Benin. Just outside the second wall to the north is the former village of Urelu, the location of the palaces of the queen mother and the crown prince, Edaiken. The layout of the capital makes clear the centrality of the Oba, as well as the opposition between Palace Chiefs and Town Chiefs, and the separate status of the Uzama.

Dutch visitors to Benin in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were favorably impressed with the city (D.R. and Olfert Dapper, quoted in Hodgkin 1975:156–57, 160–61). They describe its long, broad, straight avenues, comparing them to the streets of Amsterdam. The architecture, orderly arrangement, and cleanliness of the houses also met with their approval. From the accounts of these visitors we also get an idea of the size and complexity of the palace with its many square galleries, formal gates, audience halls, and courtyards. The Dutch trader David van Nyendael, who visited Benin around 1700, noted the tall turrets that surmounted some of the palace gates and were ornamented with enormous cast brass birds and snakes (Bosman 1967:464). The accuracy of his description is confirmed by the engraving published earlier by Olfert Dapper (fig. 5) and also by some Benin sculptures that portray the palace and its turrets (von Luschan 1919: pls. 40, 90). Together, Dapper and van Nyendael also provide important descriptions of other Benin art forms, including the brass plaques, royal ancestor heads and tusks, and carved pillars.

But as valuable as they are, the Dutch accounts give only the slightest hint of the quantity of art works that filled the palace, serving the king, chiefs, and other participants in court life. Like the capital city itself, these objects can be seen as reflections of the political structure of the kingdom. And also like that structure, they cannot be understood without considering the events that occurred throughout Benin's history.

### **Benin History**

The early phases of Benin history are shrouded in mystery.<sup>2</sup> Benin began as one of about 130 “mini-states” in the Edo-speaking area (Obayemi 1976:241–42, cited in Shaw 1978:171) and grew into a vast military and commercial power by the time the first Europeans arrived in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Although the reasons for the concentration of people and power in and around Benin City are unknown, archaeological remains indicate that this process was well



Fig. 5. Seventeenth-century engraving illustrating a court ceremony. In the foreground is the king of Benin on horseback, surrounded by musicians, dwarfs, and attendants with tame leopards, and leading a procession of chiefs and warriors, also on horseback. The middle ground shows the royal palace, which has high turrets surmounted by large cast-brass birds with outstretched wings. In the background, separated by a wall, is the town of Benin. From Olfert Dapper, *Beschreibung von Afrika* (1967: pl. opp. 486), first published in Amsterdam in 1670

under way by the thirteenth century (Connah 1975:248–49). By that time, clusters of settlements, each surrounded by an earthen wall, had fused together on the site of the present capital, and a system of hereditary territorial leaders, the ancestors of the present-day Uzama, was probably already in place.

According to Edo oral tradition, during this period the kingdom was ruled by the Ogiso, “Rulers of the Sky,” who may have numbered as many as thirty-one kings. Some of the emblems of kingship and status that are used in Benin to this day are believed to have had their origin in this period of Benin history. The rectangular *agba* stool, the scimitar-shaped state sword called *ada*, and commemorative ancestral heads of wood and terracotta are all attributed to the Ogiso period (fig. 6; Ben-Amos 1980:14–15). Casting technology had not yet reached Benin and the brasswork of this period was limited to smithed and chased bracelets (Connah 1975:250).





Fig. 6. Wood heads on an ancestor altar.  
Photograph by William Fagg, 1958  
(58/52/7). The Metropolitan Museum of  
Art, Department of the Arts of Africa,  
Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph  
Study Collection, The William B. Fagg  
Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthro-  
pological Institute, London

After the downfall of the Ogoiso kings, the dynasty engendered by the Yoruba prince Oranmiyan began with the accession of Eweka I to the Benin throne. While various dates have been proposed for the founding of the dynasty, based on oral traditions and the lengths of the kings' reigns, it is most likely to have occurred around 1300 (Bradbury 1973:17-43). With the enthronement of Eweka I, the Edo were ruled by a king of foreign ancestry,<sup>3</sup> a fact that has both enhanced the mystique of subsequent Obas and brought them into conflict with the autochthonous chiefs. The first few Obas were apparently constrained by these forces until, in the middle to late fourteenth century, the fourth Oba, Ewedo, asserted his preeminence over the Uzama and reorganized the administration of the kingdom so as to maximize the power of the king. Ewedo constructed a new palace and organized the Palace Chiefs to serve him. He decreed that certain insignia of power, such as the *ada* ceremonial sword, should be limited to the Oba; that all chiefs, including the powerful Uzama, be obligated to stand in the presence of the Oba; and that only the Oba has the right to confer

titles, thus reserving for himself the most powerful tool for manipulating the political system of the kingdom. The administrative and symbolic features introduced by Ewedo laid the groundwork for the subsequent centralization of power and expansion of the kingdom.

It was during the reign of Ewedo's successor, Oguola (r. late fourteenth century), that brasscasting is said to have been introduced into Benin. According to an often-cited oral tradition, "Oba Oguola wished to introduce brass casting into Benin so as to produce works of art similar to those sent him from Ife. He therefore sent to the Oni of Ife for a brass-smith and Iguegha[e] was sent to him. . . . The practice of making brass-castings for the preservation of the records of events was originated during the reign of Oguola" (Egharevba 1960:12). Thus, like the ruling dynasty itself, some believe brasscasting came to Benin from Ife, the Yoruba city where naturalistic brass heads were made at least as early as the fourteenth century (Willett and Fleming 1976:142–43). This tradition has been used as the basis for the most widely accepted chronology of Benin art (see cat. nos. 1–6). However, it has been pointed out that other oral traditions indicate that casting may have been practiced earlier in Benin, and that the Oguola/Igueghae tradition may only refer to the casting of certain types of objects or to the origin of a particular lineage of brasscasters (Ben-Amos 1980:17–18).

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were the period of Benin's glory, when the kingdom was ruled by a succession of powerful warrior kings who expanded its boundaries and added to the magnificence of the court, and the kingdom as a whole. Perhaps the greatest king of all was Ewuare, who took the throne in the mid-fifteenth century after a bitter succession dispute with his brother, during which the capital was destroyed by fire. In rebuilding it, Ewuare erected a new palace, created the division between the palace and town precincts, and surrounded them with a defensive wall, all of which can be seen today. Like Ewedo, Ewuare introduced sweeping changes in the administration of the kingdom, including the formal incorporation of the Town Chiefs as part of the government. A fierce warrior, he extended the kingdom to include distant Yoruba and Igbo areas.

The role of art and ritual in reinforcing the power and mystique of the divine kings of Benin was greatly enhanced during Ewuare's reign. He is credited with establishing much of the annual cycle of royal ancestral rituals in which the spiritual powers of the king are strengthened, and with introducing the use of red stone and coral beads and red *ododo* cloth for the costumes worn by the king and chiefs at these ceremonies (see figs. 2, 3). Ewuare significantly shaped the arts of divine kingship in Benin.

Ewuare's son Ozolua (r. late fifteenth century) is renowned for his impressive military accomplishments. Known as Ozolua the Conqueror, "he fought many desperate battles and waged war upon war with this or that town or village every six months. In fact his chief desire was to get

plenty of fighting” (Egharevba 1960:23). The kingdom expanded in all directions during Ozolua’s reign, and he, like other kings at this period, sent his sons to many of these outlying areas to consolidate his military victories, supervise his vassals, and promote the doctrine of divine kingship centered upon the Oba.

Ozolua is also remembered as the Oba during whose reign the Portuguese first arrived in Benin, although his son, Esigie, is much more closely associated with these new participants in Benin history. Portuguese navigators first began to explore the coast of what is now Nigeria between 1469 and 1475, but it was not until 1486 that João Afonso d’Aveiro was sent by King John II of Portugal to sail up the waterways into the area then known as the “slave rivers” and make contact with the king of Benin. The early Portuguese visitors have left disappointingly few accounts of this period of Benin history, but those records that have survived confirm the warlike nature of the kingdom at that time. Duarte Pacheco Pereira, who visited Benin in the 1490s, wrote in his *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, “The Kingdom of Beny is about eighty leagues long and forty wide; it is usually at war with its neighbours and takes many captives, whom we buy at twelve or fifteen brass bracelets each, or for copper bracelets which they prize more” (quoted in Hodgkin 1975:121).

Trade and the propagation of the Christian faith were the primary interests of the Portuguese in Benin. The slaves they acquired in Benin, as well as stone beads and locally woven cotton cloths, were exchanged for gold at Elmina on the Gold Coast, now Ghana.<sup>4</sup> Pepper was the most highly valued commodity sent from Benin to Europe at that time, but ivory later became an important item of trade. In exchange, the king of Benin received brass and copper rings known as manillas, cowrie shells that were used as currency in Benin, European and Indian cloth, hats, coral and glass beads, and other luxury items. In the seventeenth century, when the Dutch replaced the Portuguese as the most important Europeans trading in Benin, a much wider range of European goods reached Benin. The trade took place at Ughoton (Gwato), Benin’s port on the Ovia River. As much as possible, the Oba required that European trade be handled only through his own representatives, led by the Unwague, the head of the Palace Chiefs, and assisted by other members of the various palace associations.

The Portuguese also sought to convert the Edo to Christianity. They were convinced that Benin lay close to the realm of Prester John, the mythical Christian ruler of the East who was popularized in medieval legends as an ally of the Crusaders against the Muslims. Their belief was strengthened by the account of João Afonso d’Aveiro, published in the sixteenth century by João de Barros, that each new king of Benin had to be confirmed in his office by a powerful ruler to the east, known as the Ogane, who provided the king and his messenger with brass crosses as tokens of his approval (quoted in Hodgkin 1975:124–25). The Portuguese thought the Ogane must be

the elusive Prester John. This account has been used as evidence for the Ife origin of the Benin dynasty, since the Oni of Ife is known as the Oghenne in Benin, and as the basis for one of the interpretations of cross-wearing figures in Benin art (see cat. nos. 15, 16). The Portuguese believed that they could successfully convert the Edo to Christianity once they had converted the Oba, and they sent missionaries to Benin to educate the Oba's son. According to tradition, this prince was crowned as Oba Esigie in the early sixteenth century. Although he is often associated in Benin legends and art with the Portuguese (Blackmun 1990:67–68), there is no evidence that he or many of his subjects were strongly influenced by Christian beliefs.

In addition to their work as traders and missionaries, the Portuguese also served as mercenaries in the Benin army and are frequently depicted in Benin art with the firearms that they introduced to Benin (fig. 7). Esigie is known for his victories in two fierce struggles, one



Fig. 7. Portuguese Soldier with Flintlock. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 18th century. Brass, h. 18½ in. (47.0 cm). London, Museum of Mankind. 1944. Af4. 7. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

with his brother Aruaran over the succession to the throne, and the other with the Ata of Idah, the ruler of Igala, who came very close to seizing the capital of Benin. In addition to the Portuguese soldiers, he was aided in both battles by the political expertise and occult knowledge of his mother, Idia. To thank her, he established the title of queen mother, *Iyoba*, giving her powers equivalent to senior Town Chiefs, who are all men.

The impact of the Portuguese on Benin is readily visible in its art. Images of the Portuguese, immediately recognizable because of their long hair, beards and moustaches, sharp aquiline noses, and sixteenth-century dress, appear on Benin art works long after the Portuguese had been supplanted by other Europeans and ceased to play a major role in Benin. The brass and copper they bartered for African goods provided the material basis for the explosion of brasscasting that occurred in the sixteenth century, especially evident in the vast series of brass plaques made to decorate the palace (see cat. nos. 35–52). Most importantly, because the seafaring Portuguese added immeasurably to the kingdom's wealth and dealt exclusively with the king or his agents, they fit perfectly with Benin concepts linking the king, the sea, and the prosperity of the kingdom. Because they came "from across the sea, bringing with them wealth and luxury items, the Portuguese travellers were readily incorporated into (or perhaps generated) the complex of ideas associated with the god *Olokun*, ruler of the seas and provider of earthly wealth" (Ben-Amos 1980:28). The ideas and images developed during the reign of *Esigie* provided a rich source of motifs to be reused and recombined in Benin art for centuries to come.

The age of Benin's great warrior kings lasted until the end of the sixteenth century. *Obas Orhogbua* (r. mid-sixteenth century) and *Ehengbuda* (r. late sixteenth century) further expanded the boundaries of the kingdom, but when *Ehengbuda*'s son *Oba Ohuan* died childless, Benin entered a period of crisis lasting until the end of the seventeenth century. The power of the king decreased as that of the chiefs increased, and a series of bitter disputes raged over succession to the throne, leading to the abandonment of the practice of primogeniture. Of the seven kings who reigned in the seventeenth century, none was notable, except insofar as they squandered the resources of the kingdom and alienated the Palace and Town Chiefs.

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, *Ewuakpe* became *Oba* and eventually restored the power of the king and the fortune of the kingdom. His reign was fraught with difficulties; he totally lost the support of the chiefs and was reduced to great poverty, but he ultimately triumphed, reinstating the rule of succession by primogeniture and ensuring that the kingdom's replenished treasury would not be depleted in the future. *Ewuakpe* is immortalized in a brass altar tableau that alludes to both his setbacks and his triumphs (Ben-Amos 1983). Examples such as this, in which particular persons and events are commemorated, are frequent in the art of Benin.

Ewuakpe was succeeded by his son Akenzua I (r. ca. 1715–35), whose reign, no less difficult than that of his father, also ended in success. Despite the return to the rule of primogeniture, Akenzua was challenged by a younger brother, who was supported by the Town Chiefs and their leader, the *Iyase n’Ode*. The bitter civil war that ensued was won eventually by Akenzua with the help of his other primary military commander, the *Ezomo*, one of the seven *Uzama*. Akenzua’s victory over the *Iyase* is represented in a brass rattle-staff that portrays the *Oba* standing triumphantly on top of an elephant, used here as an allusion to the *Iyase n’Ode*, whose home village was the center of Benin’s guild of elephant hunters (fig. 8; Ben-Amos 1984; Vogel 1978). Akenzua became one of the wealthiest *Obas*, in part because of the increase in European trade, especially in ivory, that occurred in the eighteenth century, and in part because of his success in acquiring for the crown more of the income previously diverted by the chiefs. This age of prosperity and power continued under Akenzua’s son *Eresonyen* (r. ca. 1735–50).

Throughout the eighteenth century, despite the renewed authority of the *Obas*, the kings of Benin retreated into the security and mystery of the palace. Because they could no longer safely leave the capital for extended periods to wage war as had their fifteenth- and sixteenth-century predecessors, they developed the ceremonial and ritual aspects of kingship to enhance their power and reputation and to emphasize their unique position as the living representatives of the kingdom’s royal ancestors. The renewed emphasis on court ceremonies and the increased resources at the king’s command permitted the arts of brasscasting and ivory carving to flourish in the eighteenth century. New types of objects for royal ancestral altars, such as carved altar tusks and brass altar tableaus, were created or elaborated to extol the greatness of each *Oba* and to underscore his relationship to the kings of the past.

The kings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries inherited a stable and prosperous kingdom, thanks to the political success, administrative acumen, and economic gains of *Ewuakpe*, *Akenzua I*, and *Eresonyen*. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the position of the *Oba* and the kingdom as a whole was by no means secure. The shift in the emphasis of European trade from slaves and ivory to palm oil directed economic attention away from Benin and focused it on the peoples of the Niger Delta. The growing British colonial presence along the coast of southern Nigeria and in the Yoruba territories effectively eliminated Benin’s dominance over many of its former vassals. Islamized Nupe raiders made inroads in Benin’s power over its northern regions, particularly *Ishan*. The kingdom was diminishing. European visitors to Benin, who had once praised the sophistication of the court and the size and bureaucratic complexity of the kingdom, now found much to criticize. Particularly distasteful to the Europeans in the second half of the nineteenth century was the



Fig. 8. Detail of the top of a rattle-staff depicting *Oba Akenzua I* standing on an elephant. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, mid-18th century. Brass, copper, iron; h. 63½ in. (161.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ann and George Blumenthal Fund, 1974. 1974.5

practice of human sacrifice in Benin state rituals. Equally abhorrent to European interests were the Oba's restrictions on trade, which prevented Europeans from obtaining some commodities entirely, and required them to trade only with the Oba for other goods.

In 1892 Oba Ovonramwen (r. 1888–97) signed an agreement that promised to ease the restrictions on trade and grant Great Britain greater power within Benin territory. Britain's perception that Benin was not honoring this agreement led to the event that decisively changed the course of Benin history. In January 1897, James Phillips, the newly arrived Acting Consul-General of the Southern Protectorate of Nigeria, without the permission of his superiors, embarked on an expedition to discuss the trade agreement with the king. He was accompanied by eight unarmed Englishmen and about two hundred African bearers. Oba Ovonramwen, who was at that time engaged in performing a major state ceremony honoring his ancestors, sent word to Phillips to postpone his visit. Phillips proceeded despite this warning, and he and his party were ambushed on the road to Benin. It seems that the attack was not sanctioned by the Oba but was conceived and carried out by a group of chiefs. Most of the Africans, and all but two of the Englishmen, were killed. When word reached the British post in Sapele, telegraph dispatches were sent to London, and within weeks a retaliatory force of fifteen hundred men was assembled.

The Benin Punitive Expedition captured Benin City in February 1897, destroying much of the palace and town in the process. The thousands of art works found in the palace were seized (figs. 9, 10). It was believed that confiscating them would discourage state rituals, particularly the human sacrifices, and weaken the kingdom's power in the eyes of the Edo people. The objects were brought to England and auctioned in order to defray the costs of the expedition and provide pensions for the participants or their survivors.

Ovonramwen was sent into exile in Calabar, where he died in 1914. His death coincided with the fusion of Britain's territories into the Northern and Southern Provinces of Nigeria, and with the ascendancy of their policy of "indirect rule," whereby they administered areas of the colony indirectly through British-appointed traditional rulers. In keeping with this policy, Ovonramwen's son was brought back to Benin and crowned as Oba Eweka II. To him fell the responsibility for rebuilding the palace and reconstituting the ranks of the Palace and Town Chiefs. The administration of the kingdom was reestablished according to its traditional structure but with the addition of the colonial forces among the many interest groups that traditionally had vied for power (Bradbury 1973:76–128).

The royal coral beads that had been seized by the British were returned to Eweka II, thus restoring to him a spiritually charged source of the power and dignity inherited from his predecessors. Eweka II also revitalized the craft guilds, by commissioning brass and ivory objects to replace those that had been confiscated by the British, so that the royal

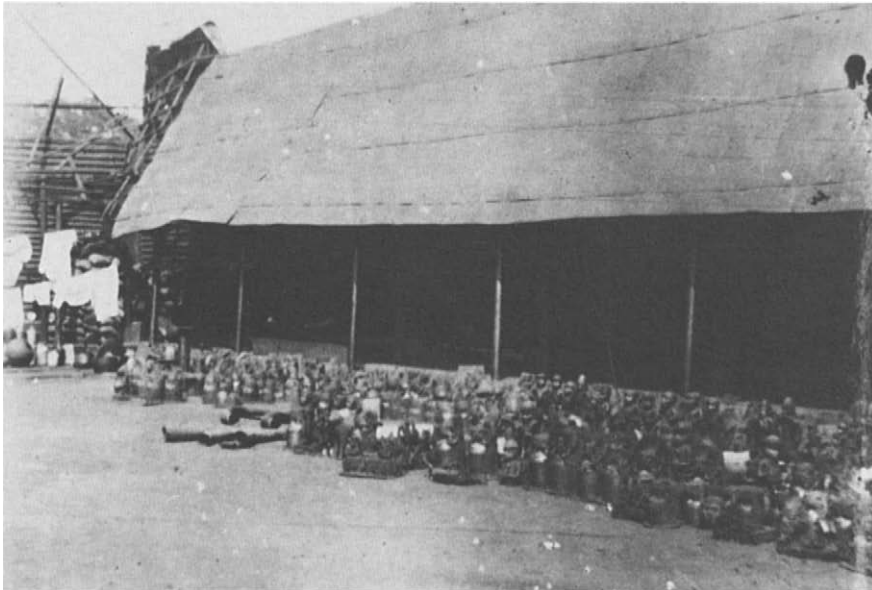


Fig. 9. Brass heads and figures seized by the British Punitive Expedition, 1897. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

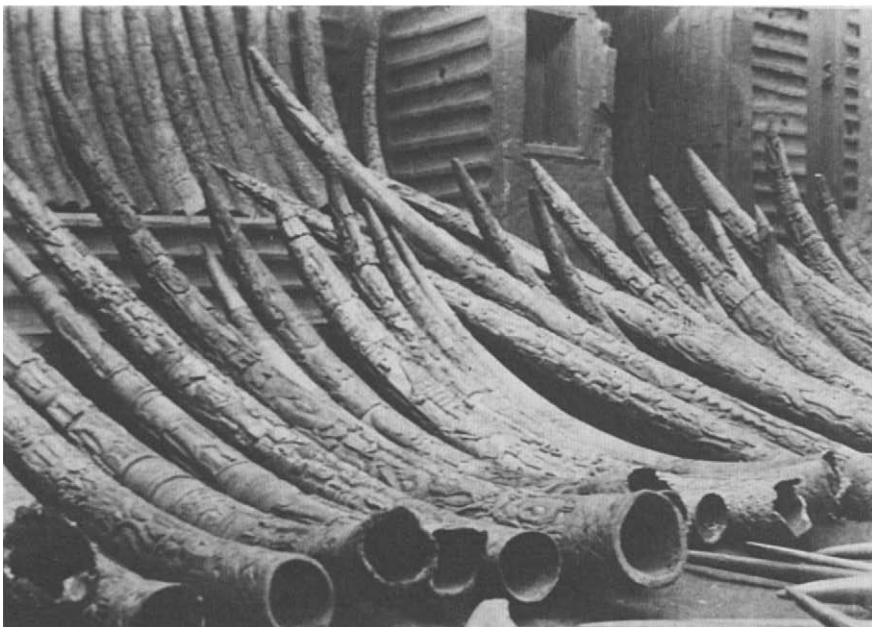


Fig. 10. Carved ivory tusks removed from royal ancestral altars by the British Punitive Expedition, 1897. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

ancestral altars could be reestablished and the state rituals performed once again. In addition, Eweka instituted the Benin Arts and Crafts School, which encouraged students drawn initially from the Omada and later from the brasscasting and ivory-carving guilds to create objects for a wider patronage (Ben-Amos 1976a:321–22; Dark 1973:45). Owing to the efforts of Eweka II, many of the traditional artists' guilds of Benin are still functioning, and they now serve a wider clientele by creating works for tourists and Nigerian patrons, rather than solely for the Oba.





Fig. 11. Oba Erediauwa during Ugie Erha Oba, wearing coral-bead regalia and an elaborately woven wrapper. He is supported at the wrists and elbows by two attendants, as frequently seen in Benin art. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky

### Benin Palace Festivals

Benin history, religion, and political structure are brought to life every year in a series of palace rituals intended to purify the kingdom and renew the spiritual powers of the king.<sup>5</sup> Many of these vivid pageants and solemn rites were introduced or adapted over the centuries by individual Obas in order to commemorate events in their reigns and to promote important principles in the ideology of divine kingship. The palace festivals are occasions at which the powers of the king, the roles of the various chiefs and titleholders, and the relationships between them are displayed for all to see. The arts play an important role in manifesting the central beliefs of Benin kingship, and many of the objects included in this catalogue were worn or used during palace rituals.

In the past the palace rituals took place throughout the year, following the agricultural cycle of planting and harvest. Especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the kings emphasized their spiritual powers over their previous military role, their ritual obligations lasted months at a time. Although abruptly ended by the Punitive Expedition of 1897, this sequence of festivals resumed again, albeit in abbreviated form, when Eweka II took the throne in 1914. In the 1950s, the ritual cycle was confined to the ten-day period celebrated during the Christmas holidays. Today, under Oba Erediauwa, more and more of the palace festivals are being revived, providing an ever richer and more complex view of Benin art and kingship.

The two most important rituals of divine kingship are Ugie Erha Oba, which honors the king's royal paternal ancestors, and Igue, which augments the king's own mystical powers. These two rituals, which were introduced by Oba Ewuare in the fifteenth century, are equally concerned with the concept of divine kingship, although in Ugie Erha Oba the king is the officiant of the rite and in Igue he is the object (Ben-Amos 1980:82). Ugie Erha Oba is preceded by a ritual in which all the families of Benin commemorate their own paternal ancestors. This is followed by Ugie Igun, in which rites honoring each former king are performed individually. The rites honoring the father of the present Oba, Ugie Erha Oba itself, begin with a greeting ceremony, Otue, in which the living king receives the homage of all his chiefs and titleholders, in order of their rank. They greet him and receive gifts of kola nuts and palm wine in return, thus dramatically showing their acceptance of his superiority and of their own rank in the Benin sociopolitical hierarchy. In the central rite of Ugie Erha Oba, the Oba appears in public, dressed lavishly (fig. 11), preceded by the Ifiento, retainers who clear a path for him with magically charged bracelets (see fig. 49). Sacrifices are performed to appease evil spirits, honor the earth, and to commemorate the Oba's father, the focus of the day's events. The chiefs, dressed elaborately, again demonstrate their support and reverence for the king by dancing past him with upraised ceremonial *eben* swords (fig. 12). The king, dressed in his most elaborate beaded costume, then performs in similar fashion with an *eben* before the altar dedicated to his father. Ugie Erha Oba concludes with a ritual called Iron, in which the seven Uzama engage in a mock battle with supporters of the king, who eventually triumph (fig. 13). This part of the festival refers to the past conflicts between the Oba and the Uzama, who represent the original people of Benin as opposed to the alien rulers from Ife. The inclusion of Iron in the ceremony honoring the ancestors of the king emphasizes the supremacy of the Obas and the struggles that were necessary for them to achieve it; it also indicates the Oba's ability to vanquish any enemies who may oppose him during the coming year; finally, it illustrates the historical consciousness that has motivated so much of Benin art and ritual.



Fig. 12. A senior Town Chief, wearing a gown and hat of *ododo* cloth, raising his sword in honor of the Oba at a palace ceremony. The women near him play *ukuse* calabash rattles. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky

Igue, the other major ceremony in the calendar of Benin palace festivals, also includes a greeting ceremony, in which the chiefs and titleholders reaffirm their relationship to the king. Its main rite, however, is aimed at strengthening the king's mystical powers. In it a variety of medicinal substances are applied to the Oba's body, and made into preparations to be used throughout the coming year (fig. 14). Animals, including domestic cows, sheep, and goats, but also wild ones such as leopards, symbolic of the Oba's powers, are sacrificed to the Oba's head, the essence of his wisdom and capabilities. It ends with a rite in which children rush out of the capital with torches to drive away evil spirits, returning to town with *ewere*, "leaves of joy." The chiefs also present *ewere* leaves to the king, signifying their hope that happiness will characterize Benin during the coming year, and one of them presents him with a leather box, said to be filled with gifts from the Oni of Ife (see fig. 48). Igue is followed by another ceremony, Emobo, in which the now spiritually fortified Oba, playing an ivory gong, drives any remaining evil forces out of Benin (see fig. 47).

Ugie Erha Oba and Igue are the most crucial of the many rites of divine kingship of Benin. Ugie Erha Oba emphasizes the importance of the king's divine ancestry, particularly his debt to his late father in

providing him with the authority to rule. Igue concentrates on the living Oba, ensuring that he has the physical and spiritual strength to guarantee the well-being of the entire nation. Woven into these rites, as in all Benin palace festivals, are frequent allusions to important events in Benin's past, situations that crystallized the nature of kingship and the contributions of individual kings.

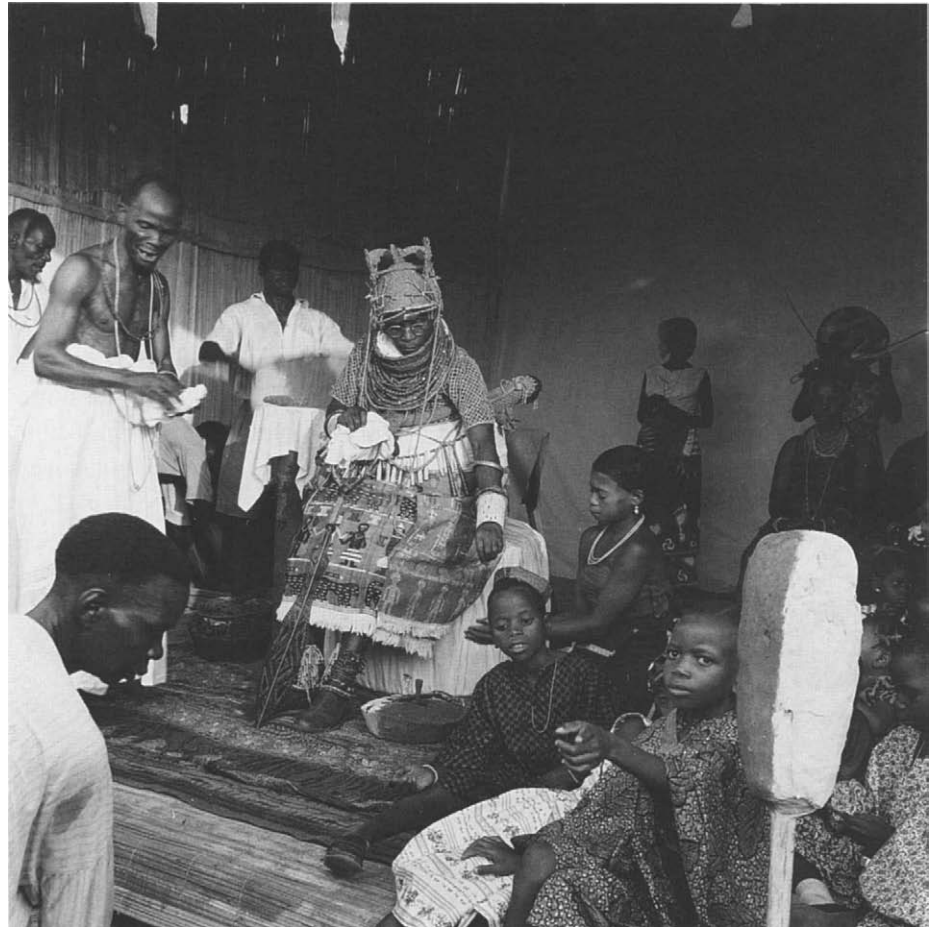
### Art and Artists of Benin

During the palace festivals, Benin City is a vibrant pageant of the arts, a virtual living museum. The participants in these ceremonies, none more so than the king himself, are bedecked with ornaments of shining brass and creamy ivory, as well as vivid coral beads and lavishly woven textiles. All of these objects elucidate their status and role within the court structure and proclaim the glory of Benin's divine kings, past and present. At certain times in Benin's history, the palace itself has been the setting for still more art works: cast brass plaques; carved lintels, pillars, and beams; monumental sculptures of birds and

Fig. 13. The Uzama, wearing basketry projections on their heads, engage in a mock battle with representatives of the Oba at Iron, a part of Ugie Erha Oba. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky



Fig. 14. The late Oba Akenzua II during Igue, handing ingredients to a young woman who will grind them to make herbal medicine. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/62/8). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London



snakes; and refined, elegant objects of use. The palace houses the royal ancestral altars, replete with sculptures and ritual objects that assist in the worship of the spirits of past kings, so that they may continue to animate both the monarchy and the kingdom as a whole.

The Oba is the most important patron of the arts in Benin, and before 1897 he had a virtual monopoly on the work of many of the artists' guilds. These guilds are incorporated into the court organization as part of Iwebo, the palace association responsible for the king's regalia and wardrobe. The guilds have workshops in the Iwebo area of the palace and perform their work there, although most of their living quarters are located in the Ore Nokhua, or town section of the capital. The artists' guilds, which include blacksmiths, brasscasters, ivory and wood carvers, bead and costume makers, and leather workers, are just a few of the sixty-eight guilds affiliated with the palace societies, with specialties as diverse as livestock keeping, leopard hunting, applying medicine, or performing royal funeral ceremonies (Igbafe 1979:392–94). Over the centuries guilds were created from preexisting groups of specialists whenever an Oba saw the economic benefits of organizing them to work primarily for the monarchy. Membership in the guilds is hereditary, and the skills are passed on from generation to generation.

Of particular importance for this catalogue are the guilds of brasscasters and ivory and wood carvers. Brasscasting is performed almost exclusively for the king, although bracelets, hip ornaments, bells, and other small items could be acquired by wealthy chiefs. The metal's shiny surface and reddish color were considered both beautiful and threatening, and thus appropriate for objects made for the divine king (Ben-Amos 1980:15,64). The origin of the brasscasters' guild, Igun Eronmwon, is a matter of controversy. Although some brass-working technology was known during the period of the Ogiso kings, the technique of lost-wax casting was introduced later, during the reign of Oba Oguola (r. late fourteenth century), according to the most popular account. It was probably not until the reign of Obas Ewuare or Esigie in the fifteenth or sixteenth century that the brasscasters were organized into a guild under the supervision of the palace associations (Dark 1973:47).

Most Benin castings were made of brass, which is an alloy of copper and zinc with varying amounts of other elements. A few castings, especially in the early period, were made of bronze, the alloy of copper and tin (Craddock and Picton 1986:8–10). As it has not been possible to analyze the metal content of each individual object in this collection, the term *brass* has been used arbitrarily throughout. Benin castings were all made by the lost-wax technique. In this process an exact model of the object to be produced is made in wax, over a clay core. All of the details desired in the finished work are incised or modeled in the wax. Wax projections are added, which eventually serve as sprues or channels for the metal to flow into the mold and for gases to come out. The entire wax model is then covered with a layer of fine clay, and further layers of increasingly coarse clay are added. The mold is then heated, firing the outer clay investment and melting the wax within it. When the wax is poured out, it leaves an empty space which is filled by pouring in molten brass. After the metal cools and hardens, the clay mold is broken, revealing a brass object identical to the original wax model. The sprues are removed, the surface polished, and as much as possible of the interior clay core removed. Sculptures made by the lost-wax process are unique, because the mold is broken and cannot be used again.

Ivory carvers belong to a guild called Igbesanmwan, which is said to have been established by Ere, one of the Ogiso kings.<sup>6</sup> Despite the greater antiquity of the ivory-carvers' guild, it ranks beneath that of the brasscasters in prestige. The ivory carvers work communally, with many carvers helping out on large commissions, such as royal altar tusks. The work, as well as the compensation, is meted out by the guild's titleholders, according to the varying talent and experience of the carvers. Whereas in the past the members of Igbesanmwan worked almost exclusively for the Oba, today only two carvers are sufficiently skilled to work on royal commissions (Blackmun 1984a:39). Igbesanmwan carvers draw inspiration from the works of the past. They have sets of



Fig. 15. Crown and flywhisk made of coral and red stone beads. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin. London, Museum of Mankind, 98.6-30.5 and 3. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

motifs and patterns that are passed on from generation to generation; it is of primary importance for carvers to master these time-sanctioned patterns. Change and innovation are slow under such a system, although over the centuries new motifs were introduced and old ones altered or given new meaning (Blackmun 1988). Conversely, motifs preserved over generations gain in depth and power of meaning, and Igbesanmwan members are aware of the spiritual efficacy of their designs. Their chief has said, “The Oba comes to Igbesanmwan with problems and they solve them with carvings. Igbesanmwan has never failed him” (Ben-Amos 1975:181).

Igbesanmwan members also decorate some wood objects, such as rectangular *agba* stools, for use in the palace. Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, the Oba’s palace pages, members of the Omada organization, have also carved wood in their spare time. They do not work exclusively for the Oba, but rather carve objects for Benin chiefs or even foreigners who request their services. Their works are strictly secular and are not used in palace ceremonies as are those of Igbesanmwan and Igun Eronmwon. The Omada carvers do not constitute a guild and are not a hereditary group. As a result their works tend to be more individual and show a greater freedom than those of the brasscasters’ and ivory-carvers’ guilds.

The guilds of beadmakers, leather workers, and weavers also make important contributions to the royal arts of Benin. Junior titleholders in Iwebo, known as Enisen, are responsible for making the resplendent coral or red stone beads worn by the Oba, chiefs, and members of the palace associations (fig. 15).<sup>7</sup> Although Oranmiyan is said to have brought beads with him from Ife to Benin, Oba Ewuare is credited with the introduction of both red stone beads, which he obtained while in exile before taking the throne, and coral beads, which he acquired from the opulent undersea palace of the sea god Olokun. From the late fifteenth century on, coral beads constituted one of the principal commodities of European trade with Benin.

All coral and stone beads are owned by the Oba. They are distributed by him to chiefs, titleholders, and members of palace associations but must be returned to him upon the death of the holder of the beads. The king alone wears a complete costume of beads, including crown, collar, robe, ornaments, and even shoes (see fig. 2). The status of other notables is evident in the relative lavishness of their beaded attire. The beads are not merely decorative but are imbued with divine authority.

Benin leather workers make leather fans for cooling the king and chiefs and cylindrical boxes, called *ekpoki*, for presenting gifts of kola nuts. They also make hats, the ceremonial costumes made of scalloped red *ododo* cloth that are worn by senior chiefs, and *ovibiovu*, the belt with leaf-shaped ends tied at the left hip. Members of Owinna n’Ido, the weavers’ guild, make the richly ornamented woven textiles with weft float designs worn as wrapped skirts by the Oba and certain

high-ranking chiefs (Ben-Amos 1978). Only a few of these cloths are made today (see figs. 11, 14). None of these beaded, leather, or woven items are included in this catalogue, but the brass plaques and figurative sculptures of past centuries show the richness of their designs and skill of their craftsmanship.

Since the artists' guilds worked exclusively for the king and the chiefs and priests at his command, the art of Benin was indeed a royal art. By their very nature, costly and exclusive materials such as brass, ivory, and coral beads conveyed the centrality and power of the king. In their form and subject matter, these objects explore his divine nature, his relationships with his people and courtiers, and the splendid deeds of his ancestors.

### **The Perls Collection**

The art of Benin first became known in Europe and America in 1897, following the Punitive Expedition. Because of their relatively naturalistic style and use of luxury materials, such as brass and ivory, they created a sensation among art historians, anthropologists, and collectors. Felix von Luschan, the anthropologist who acquired a vast collection of Benin art for the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde, wrote in appreciation, "These works from Benin are equal to the very finest examples of European casting technique. Benvenuto Cellini could not have cast them better, nor could anyone else before or after him, even up to the present day. Technically, these bronzes represent the very highest possible achievement" (von Luschan 1901:10, cited in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990:21).

When the Benin objects were sold by the British Foreign Office, the British Museum acquired the core of its great collection of Benin art, now housed in the Museum of Mankind (Read and Dalton 1899; London, British Museum, 1985). Other European museums followed suit, acquiring Benin art for their ethnographic collections, most notably the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde (von Luschan 1919), but also including the ethnographic museums in Liverpool, Hamburg, Cologne, Stuttgart, Vienna, Philadelphia, and Chicago.<sup>8</sup> Many objects were acquired by dealers in ethnographic art such as W. D. Webster of Bicester, England, and then sold to museums and private collectors (Webster 1895–1901). The collection formed between 1897 and 1900 by Lieutenant-General Augustus Pitt-Rivers was outstanding (Pitt-Rivers 1900). By the beginning of the twentieth century the thousands of objects once housed within the Oba's palace had been dispersed.

One of the most extensive collections of Benin art in private hands is that assembled by Mr. and Mrs. Perls. It was begun in the 1930s, its selection based on aesthetic standards developed by them over the years as dealers in modern European paintings and on their appreciation for beauty wherever it manifests itself. It is a collection



of the highest quality. Their generous presentation of such a range of material to The Metropolitan Museum of Art makes the splendors of Benin art available to a broad public.

This catalogue accompanies the first public exhibition of the Perls collection in its entirety. It is divided into four sections. The first section includes objects that would have been placed on the royal ancestral altars, most notably the commemorative brass heads, figures, and altar tableaus, as well as objects that would have appeared on other types of altars. The second section focuses on the brass plaques that decorated the pillars of the palace during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These plaques provide a detailed portrayal of life at the royal court at that time. The third section features a variety of court and ceremonial objects, many of which are pictured in the palace plaques. The great diversity of objects included in this section testifies to the magnificence of Benin court life. The fourth section is only indirectly concerned with Benin art. It comprises objects made in the Yoruba kingdoms of Owo and Ijebu, which at various times in their history were part of the Benin kingdom and were influenced by its art. Finally, an appendix includes those few African objects in the Perls collection that were not made in Benin or under its influence.

1. Information on the geography and political organization of the kingdom of Benin is based upon Bradbury 1957; idem 1973:44–75; Ben-Amos 1980.

2. Information on Benin history is based on Bradbury 1973:17–128; Ryder 1965, 1969; Egharevba 1960; Ben-Amos 1980.

3. While the Yoruba origin of the dynasty is commonly accepted today in Benin, several scholars who have studied the documentary evidence for the Ife-Benin relationship suggest that the Igala kingdom northeast of Benin, rather than Ife, was more likely the source of Benin's current dynasty (Ryder 1965; Thornton 1988).

4. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, the sale of slaves to Europeans was greatly restricted by the Oba who preferred to keep a large labor force for projects within the kingdom.

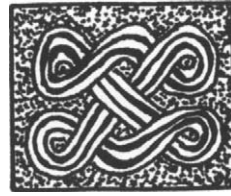
5. This text on Benin palace festivals is based on Bradbury 1957:58–59; idem 1959; Ben-Amos 1980:70–93.

6. Discussion of Igbesanmwan is based primarily on Ben-Amos 1975 and Blackmun 1984a:38–39.

7. Benin beads and bead makers are discussed in de Negri 1964; Agbontaen 1983:24–26.

8. For the history of European and American collections of Benin art, see Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962.

# BENIN ALTARS





# HEADS OF KINGS

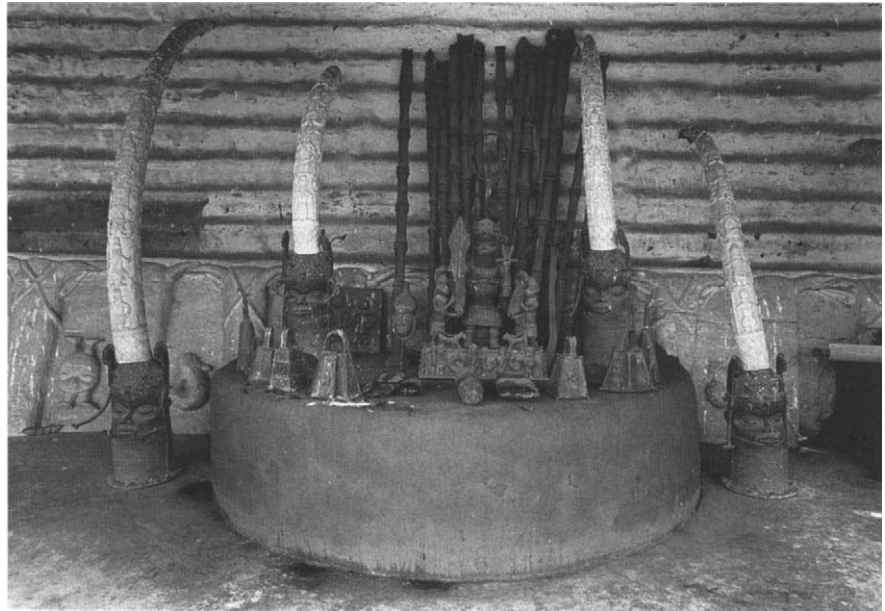


Representations of the head are a major feature of Benin art, just as the head itself is a central focus of Benin ritual. According to oral traditions, even in the age of the Ogiso kings, before the founding of the present dynasty, wooden heads were made to commemorate ancestors, both royal and nonroyal. Benin traditions state that cast brass heads were introduced for royal ancestors during the reign of Oba Oguola, the fifth Oba, or king, in the current dynasty, who probably reigned in the late fourteenth century (Dark 1975:55). At least to the Edo today, the red color and shiny surface of brass make it both beautiful and frightening, properties fitting for images of a divine monarch (Ben-Amos 1980:15, 64).

Before 1897 cast brass heads were placed on altars dedicated to each of the past Obas of Benin, while heads in terracotta and wood were placed on the ancestral shrines of brasscasters and chiefs respectively (see cat. nos. 9–11; fig. 6). One of a new Oba's first ritual responsibilities was to establish an altar commemorating his father and to commission brasscasters and ivory carvers to create objects to decorate it. Such an altar is a tribute to the achievements of the deceased father, and a point of contact with his spirit. An early-nineteenth-century visitor to Benin estimated there were twenty-five to thirty such royal altars in the palace, and in 1897 seventeen of them were noted by a member of the British Punitive Expedition (Allman 1897:44; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 38; see also Blackmun 1991:90, n. 11). Since there had been thirty-five Obas up to that time, the altars for some kings had apparently either fallen into disuse or were not seen by foreign visitors. The objects on these altars were removed by the Punitive Expedition, but when Oba Eweka II was enthroned in 1914 he began the process of reestablishing the royal ancestral altars (fig. 16). Today in Benin there exist individual altars dedicated to Obas Adolo, Ovonramwen, and Eweka II, and a communal altar dedicated to all the previous kings. The current Oba, Erediauwa, who was crowned in 1979, has commissioned objects intended for an altar for his late father, Oba Akenzua II.

**1. Head of an Oba (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th century

Fig. 16. Royal ancestor altar, dedicated to Oba Ovonramwen (r. 1888–97). Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1970. National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Archives, Smithsonian Institution



The royal altars are semicircular mud platforms, their surfaces packed hard and rubbed smooth, located in an open courtyard of the palace. On each altar are placed a number of brass heads, each supporting a carved ivory tusk. David van Nyendael, a Dutch merchant who visited Benin in 1699 and 1702, saw an altar with “eleven men’s heads cast in copper . . . and upon every one of them is an elephant’s tooth” (Roth 1968:162). Eight ancestor heads supporting tusks are pictured in Giovanni Belzoni’s 1823 drawing of an altar (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 38). Judging from photographs taken in the 1890s (Roth 1968:79), and from contemporary practice, the heads, always in pairs, are arranged symmetrically on the altars, with a cast brass altar tableau (*aseberia*) depicting the Oba and attendants in the center, along with other freestanding brass figures. Leaning against the wall at the back of the altar are rattle-staffs (*ukhurhe*), which are shaken to call the spirits; placed at the front are pyramidal brass bells, also rung in order to alert the ancestor’s spirits. Neolithic stone celts, believed to be “thunder stones,” are also found on the altars. The celts are “instruments of supernatural intervention” (Nevadomsky 1989:67), and a reminder of the sudden destructive power of Ogiuwu, the god of death (Ben-Amos 1980:64). In addition, ceremonial swords, *ada* and *eben*, are placed on the altar or on the wall behind it.

The royal ancestral altars are the settings for one of the two most important rites of divine kingship in Benin, Ugie Erha Oba, when the Oba honors the spirit of his late father and performs sacrifices to the royal ancestors and to the earth in which they are buried. Acknowledging his role as his father’s successor, the chiefs pay homage to the king and greet him in order of seniority. The rite expresses the continuity of divine kingship, and the altar before which it takes place provides the means by which the connection between the living king and his predecessors is made.

In honoring the deceased kings, the cast brass heads refer to the special role of the head in directing not only the body but also a person's success in life. According to British anthropologist R. E. Bradbury, "the Head (*Uhumwu*) symbolizes life and behaviour in this world, the capacity to organize one's actions in such a way as to survive and prosper. It is one's Head that 'leads one through life.' . . . On a man's Head depends not only his own wellbeing but that of his wives and children. . . . At the state level, the welfare of the people as a whole depends on the Oba's Head which is the object of worship at the main event of the state ritual year" (Bradbury 1961:134). Igue, the annual state ceremony to which Bradbury refers, includes sacrifices to the Oba's head, in order to strengthen his power and that of the kingdom. It is in the same section of the palace where the Oba celebrates Igue that his commemorative altar will be erected by his successor (Blackmun 1984a:235). The placement of brass heads on this altar is a vivid reminder of the role of the Oba's head in successfully guiding the kingdom throughout the Oba's reign.

The brass heads upon the royal ancestral altars are not portraits of particular kings but rather generalized portrayals emphasizing the trappings of kingship, especially the king's coral-bead regalia. Their facial features are not individualized, and it has not been possible to reconstruct which heads in museum collections commemorated which kings. However, the heads can be divided into several types, based upon the form of the coral-bead crown and collar, the relative naturalism or stylization of the facial features, and the overall size, thickness, and weight of the head. William Fagg, former keeper of the African collection at the British Museum, used these distinctions as the basis for dividing Benin art into early, middle, and late periods, progressing from the simplest regalia and most naturalistic features to more elaborate regalia and the most stylized features (Fagg 1963). Philip Dark, a British anthropologist concerned with the material culture of Benin, refined this typology while retaining the developmental sequence (Dark 1975).

According to Dark's typology of the brass heads, heads of types 1 and 2 are both relatively naturalistic, small, and thin-walled. Type 1 is distinguished by a tight-fitting bead collar that hugs the neck but does not cover the chin, and by the lack of a beaded crown (see fig. 17). Type 2 heads have a rolled collar that is worn low on the neck and a latticework bead crown with hanging bead strands (see fig. 18). Type 3 heads, such as cat. no. 1, are larger and heavier castings. They are distinguished by the bead collar that extends up to the mouth, giving the head a wide cylindrical shape, by the addition of bead clusters to the crown, and by the more stylized features of the face, particularly the swelling of the cheeks and enlarging of the eyes. In type 4 a flange is added around the base of the head. This flange is retained in type 5 heads, such as cat. nos. 2–4, which are further identified by the still greater exaggeration of the facial features and by the addition of

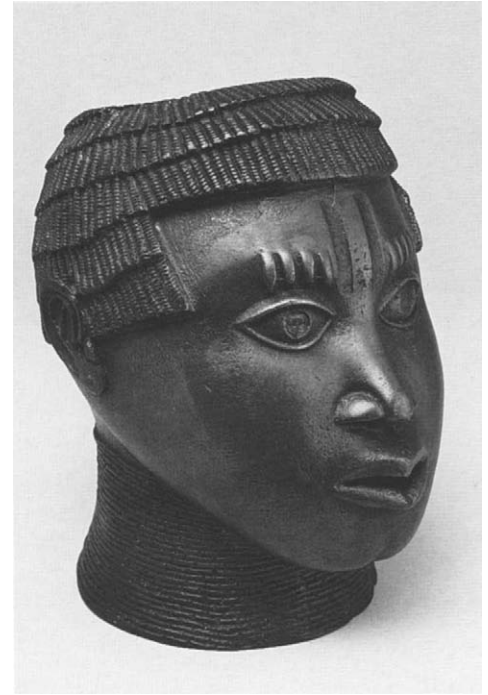


Fig. 17. Head of a man (type 1). Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, late 14th–15th century. Brass, iron; h. 8¾ in. (22.2 cm). National Museum of African Art, purchased with funds provided by the Smithsonian Institution Collection Acquisition Program, 1982. 82-5-2. Photograph by Bruce Fleischer, National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Archives, Smithsonian Institution

winglike beaded projections on the sides of the crown and arcs of beads extending in front of the eyes.

Fagg and Dark based their chronology of Benin art on several premises, including an oral tradition according to which brasscasting technology in general and the practice of making brass commemorative heads in particular were introduced to Benin during the reign of Oba Oguola (r. ca. late fourteenth century). Both of these innovations came from Ife, the ancient Yoruba city where highly naturalistic brass sculptures were made at least by the fourteenth century (Willett and Fleming 1976:142–43). The most naturalistic Benin heads were thus considered to be the earliest (roughly early fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century). These heads, being thin castings, also require the least metal, reflecting the scarcity of copper and its alloys before trade with Europeans was in full swing. Another oral tradition states that the winged crown seen in type 5 heads was introduced by Oba Osemwende (r. 1815–50), and thus Fagg and Dark propose that heads with this feature can be no older than his reign. The high bead collars seen on heads of type 3 are also depicted on Benin brass plaques, which are believed to have been made from the sixteenth to the late seventeenth century (see cat. nos. 35–37). The production of type 3 heads is thus thought to have begun during this period and continued into the eighteenth, when those of type 4 were also made. Heads of types 4 and 5, and some of type 3, are extremely large and heavy, reflecting the increase in the supply of brass that occurred when the stability of the kingdom was reestablished in the eighteenth century and trade with Europe flourished.

There are several criticisms of this proposed chronology for Benin art. Scholars have questioned the assumptions underlying the beginning and end of the sequence, namely Benin's artistic dependence upon Ife and the introduction of the winged crown by Osemwende, since both are based on oral traditions for which other, conflicting versions exist. These questions also throw into doubt the assumption that Benin art represents a progressive degeneration from idealized naturalism to exaggerated stylization (Ryder 1965; Rubin 1970; Lawal 1977). Paula Ben-Amos, the American anthropologist and Benin art scholar, has suggested that the type 1 heads may not be royal ancestral images at all, but rather trophy heads depicting conquered enemies. If this is the case, they need not occupy a particular point in the chronological development of royal heads, but instead could have been made at any time throughout Benin's history (Ben-Amos 1973:71; *idem* 1980: fig. 16). Frank Willett, the British archaeologist, illustrates two examples in the Benin Museum collection that support this view (Willett 1973: 16). According to American anthropologist Joseph Nevadomsky, brass heads representing the most prominent slain enemies of Benin were hung on the hooks of a large iron Osun staff, an emblem of the god of medicine, and placed at the shrine of war as part of traditional preparations for war (Nevadomsky 1986:42–43). A late-

nineteenth-century photograph illustrates such an iron staff with type 1 heads hanging from it (von Luschan 1919:348; Freyer 1987:19). These criticisms point out the need to reconsider and revise the chronologies proposed by Fagg and Dark. However, no one has yet developed a replacement, and their proposals must still be considered the best working hypothesis available.

Heads in the Perls collection representing Dark's types 3 and 5 (cat. nos. 1–4) share certain stylistic features that define these types. In all of them the lower part of the face, as it emerges from the collar, swells to resemble a section of a sphere. At the level of the eyes it abruptly joins the upper part of the face, itself curved like part of a smaller sphere. The eyes are large pointed ovals outlined by heavy rims, which in the case of cat. nos. 2, 3, and 4 are decorated with short hatch marks. These last three heads, all type 5, also have lightly incised eyebrows, a feature not found on earlier Benin heads. Two of the heads (cat. nos. 2, 4) also have a chevron of small circles below each eye. Above each eye are three raised oval scarification marks. These are called *ikharo*, “tribal mark of eye” (Nevadomsky 1986:42). They are believed to indicate gender, with three marks above each eye denoting Edo males and four denoting Edo females and foreigners, although this is not always the case (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 16). All of these heads, except for cat. no. 3, have inlaid iron irises in their eyes. According to Nevadomsky this creates the menacing glare appropriate for a man of power, particularly a divine king (1986: 42).

One of the heads (cat. no. 1) wears a simple caplike beaded crown decorated with clusters of beads and hanging beaded and braided strands. The beads of the crown are not set down individually at right angles to form a lattice pattern, as they are in cat. nos. 2, 3, and 4. Rather, the artist used long crisscrossing strands of wax with a raised dot marking the intersections. This feature is unique to type 3 heads, being found on more than three-quarters of them (Dark 1975: table 3). The crown depicted on cat. no. 2, with winglike projections at the sides, was introduced by Oba Osemwende, according to one oral tradition, and by Ewuare (r. mid-fifteenth century) or by Obanosa (r. early nineteenth century), according to others (Ben-Amos, cited in Tunis 1981:86). This type of crown has been worn by Obas in the twentieth century (see figs. 2, 11, 14, 47). The projections are said to suggest the barbels, or “whiskers,” of the mudfish, one of the primary symbols of Benin kingship (Blackmun 1984a:294), or to represent the ceremonial sword, *ada*, which is restricted to the king and highest-ranking chiefs.<sup>1</sup> This type of crown also features curving arcs of beads strung on a wire in front of the eyes. According to Akitola Akpata, a Benin chief, these are known as “spectacles” (Akpata 1937:9). On the back of the crown on cat. no. 2 is a tubular bead with a small square panel with incised designs below it. Cat. nos. 3 and 4 also depict the winged crown; in cat. no. 3 the wings and arcs are cast separately and riveted to the head, and on cat. no. 4 they are cast much closer to the



Fig. 18. Head of an Oba (type 2). Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th century. Brass, iron; h. 9¼ in. (23.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979. 1979.206.86



head than on other examples, perhaps owing to a weakness in the wax model. All three type 5 heads (cat. nos. 2–4) have a flange projecting around the base of the head, decorated with a guilloche pattern on top of which many motifs that denote the king's physical and mystical powers are depicted in relief. At the front is a stone celt, and at the back is the head of a cow, an animal often sacrificed to the royal ancestors. Arranged symmetrically around the flange are elephant trunks ending in hands holding leaves (emblems of the king's power, wealth, and occult abilities), leopards (symbols of the king's speed and ferocity), and more cow heads. These relief motifs appear often on objects attributed to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The fifth head in the Perls collection (cat. no. 5) is unusual in many respects. It resembles heads of Dark's type 1 in that it has a tight-fitting bead collar under the chin and no beaded crown, yet its face lacks the strong, firm contours, sensitive modeling, and smooth surface of most type 1 heads. Its patina is not original but has been created with various pigments, waxes, and clay materials. The thin walls and alloy of the head (97.3 percent copper, 2.3 percent zinc, 0.3 percent tin) are compatible with other type 1 heads (Craddock and Picton 1986:8–10, 23), yet other features are startlingly different from them. Although the coiffure of layered rows of ringlets is typical of type 1 heads, here each ringlet was impressed into the wax model with a length of cord, rather than created by adding a textured piece of wax. In addition, the ears are inverted from their usual shape. These two features are found on only one other Benin head, in the collection of the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, the Netherlands. William Fagg considers them both works of the early period and offers several possible reasons for their atypical features (London, South Kensington, Christie's, 1990a: lot 53). However, with no information concerning the provenance of this head or the one in Berg en Dal, such explanations are merely speculative and we must await further evidence for their dating and attribution.

1. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.

### 1. Head of an Oba (view 2)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th century

Brass, iron; h. 13 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (33.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.2

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster

*References:* Webster 1895–1901: cat. 18,  
no. 57; London, Sotheby and Co., 1974:  
lot 83; Dark 1982: Z2/65.

*Exhibitions:* Greenvale, N.Y., C. W. Post Art  
Gallery, 1980: no. 77





## 2. Head of an Oba

Nigeria, Edo: Court of Benin

19th century

Brass, iron; h. 18 in. (45.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

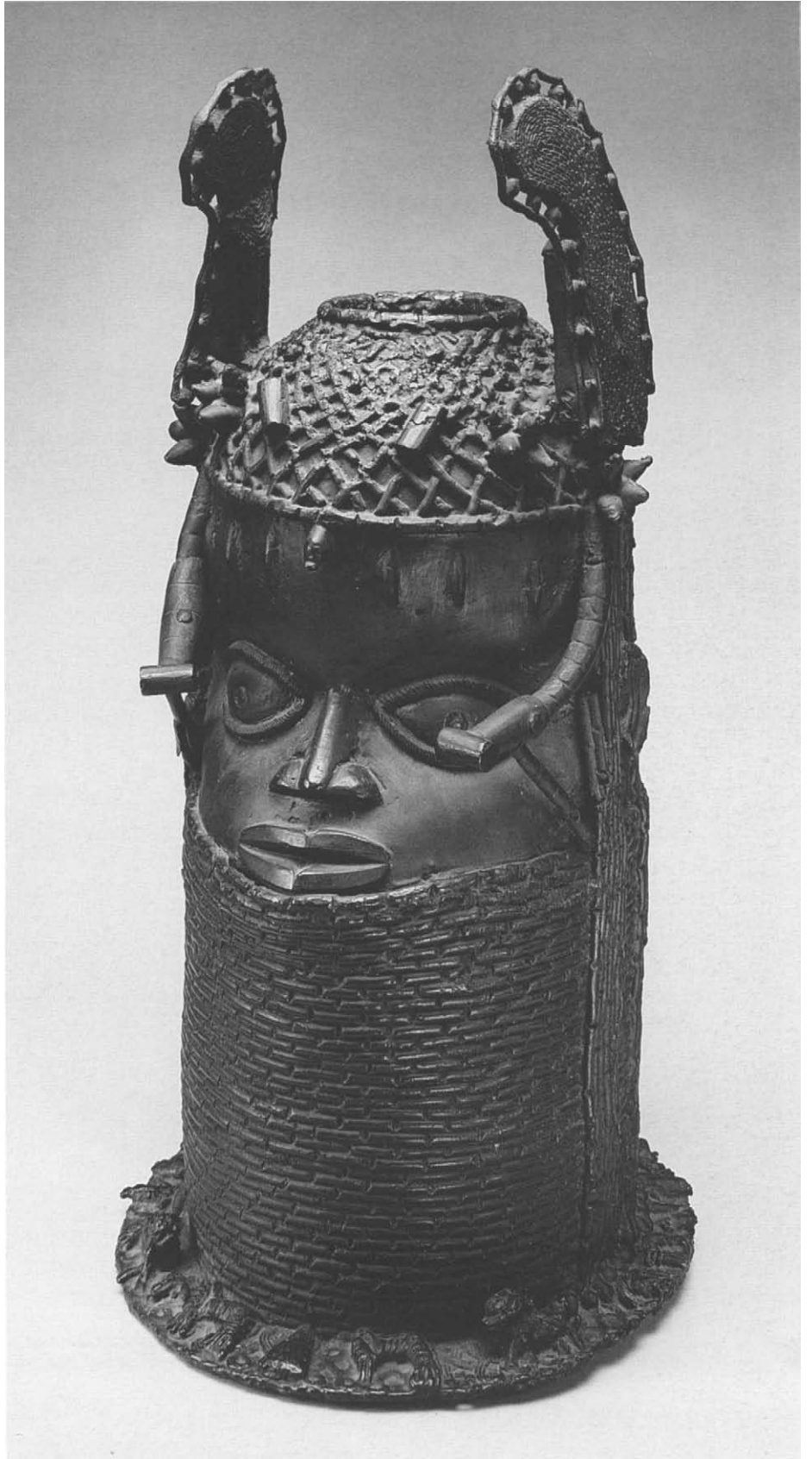
1991.17.3

*Ex Collection:* Dr. Ernst Augustin

*References:* London, Sotheby and Co., 1971:

lot 240; London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet and

Co., 1979b: lot 172; Dark 1982: Z1/55



## 3. Head of an Oba

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Brass; h. 23 in. (58.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.1

*Exhibition:* Greenvale, N. Y.,

C. W. Post Art Gallery, 1980: no. 79



#### 4. Head of an Oba

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Brass, iron; h. 13¾ in. (34.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.6

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus

Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 16,

figs. 96–97; London, Sotheby and Co.,

1975: lot 183; Dark 1982: O/47.

*Exhibition:* Bloomington, Indiana

University Art Museum, 1980

#### 5. Head of a Man

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

15th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 9½ in. (24.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.9

*References:* London, South Kensington,

Christie's, 1990a: lot 53





# QUEEN MOTHER HEADS



Altars dedicated to past Iyobas, or queen mothers, like those of past Obas, are furnished with cast brass commemorative heads. These altars are found in the Iyoba's palace at Urelu and in the Oba's own palace. Like the altars to the king, the queen mother's altars also contain bells, rattle-staffs, and other types of sculpture, such as altar tableaus and cast brass roosters (see cat. nos. 23–25). The title of queen mother was introduced by the early-sixteenth-century Oba Esigie to honor his mother, Idia, for her help in averting two serious threats to his rule and the integrity of the kingdom (Ben-Amos 1980:24; Nevadomsky 1986:44). Like Idia, the queen mothers are known for their ability to bring their own supernatural powers to the aid of their sons.

Queen mother heads are distinguished by a special type of coral-bead crown with a high, forward-pointing peak, an elongated version of an elaborate coiffure known as “chicken's beak,” worn by high-ranking Edo women (fig. 19; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 25). The projection on the queen mother's crown is called *ede Iyoba*, likening it to the spiritually potent *ede* projection on top of the Oba's crown (Blackmun 1991:60). The right to wear a coral-bead crown is limited to the Oba, the queen mother, and the Ezomo, the Oba's principal war chief, and thus conveys the queen mother's importance in the Benin political hierarchy. An Oba has many wives, and the first one who gives birth to a son, who will succeed his father, will eventually become the Iyoba. She is granted the title several years after her son is crowned. Oba Erediauwa has recently named his mother, Aghahowa N'Ovbi Erua, as queen mother; she is the first to hold the title since 1897. The Iyoba advises the Oba and is the only woman considered one of the senior Town Chiefs. Like them she is responsible for administering a portion of the kingdom for the Oba. In her case, this is the former village of Urelu, which is now part of Benin City.

The queen mother heads can be divided stylistically into two types (Dark 1975). One group resembles the early types of commemorative heads for kings: they have a tight-fitting bead collar under the

## 7. Head of a Queen Mother (view 2)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century



Fig. 19. Wives of the Oba wearing “chicken’s beak” hairstyle with coral-bead ornaments. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky



chin; the facial features are sensitive and relatively naturalistic; and they are extremely thin-walled, delicate castings (fig. 20; von Luschan 1919: pl. 52). A second group of queen mother heads is closer in style to later Oba heads, Dark’s types 4 and 5. As seen in cat. nos. 6, 7, and 8, these heads are large, thick-walled, heavy castings. They have a high cylindrical bead collar that comes up to the mouth. They also have a semicircular opening at the top to enable them to support an ivory tusk, probably on a wooden peg placed inside the head. In addition to the collar and the pointed bead crown with bead clusters on each side, the queen mother is shown wearing a beaded headband, which wraps around her forehead and is tied with a bow in the back, a type worn usually by male chiefs in Benin (see fig. 48). As on the heads of Obas, the lower part of the face balloons outward, and the eyes, inlaid with iron irises, are enlarged in an exaggerated, heavily outlined stare. In cat. nos. 6 and 7 the rims around the eyes are carefully incised with regular, narrowly spaced striations. Above each eye are four raised *ikharo*, or gender marks. The flanges around the bases of these heads are less ornate than those on the kings’ heads. They are decorated with the looped strap motif, and cat. nos. 7 and 8 also have a single elephant-trunk/hand-with-leaves motif at the front. Like the heads of kings, the queen mother heads are dominated by the sheer quantity and extent of their coral-bead regalia, which frames the face at top, bottom, and sides, alters its natural contours, and gives its human elements an extraordinary aspect.

On the basis of their similarity to Dark’s type 4 and 5 kings’ heads, these queen mother heads are dated to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This seems to have been a period when altars to the queen mothers became more elaborate, as indicated by the quantity of these heads (Dark 1975:88–89) and by the creation of other forms of sculpture, such as altar tableaus and roosters, to be placed on the altars. Surprisingly, no objects dedicated to the queen mothers have been attributed to the middle period of Benin art, from the mid-sixteenth through the seventeenth century, although several women held the title during that time.



Fig. 20. Head of a queen mother. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th century. Brass; h. 20 in. (50.8 cm). Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. III C 12507

**6. Head of a Queen Mother**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century  
Brass, iron; h. 20½ in. (52.0 cm)  
Lent by Katherine Perls





**7. Head of a Queen Mother  
(view 1)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 21 in. (53.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.146

*Ex Collection:* Lee Ault



**8. Head of a Queen Mother**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 21 in. (53.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.4

*Ex Collection:* Dr. Eisenbeiss

*Reference:* London, Sotheby and Co.,  
1972b: lot 168



# TERRACOTTA HEADS



The brasscasters of Benin traditionally make heads of terracotta as well as brass. Today in Benin these are placed on the ancestral altars of members of the brasscasters' guild (Willett 1973:17; Ben-Amos 1980:15). They distinguish the brasscasters' altars from those of kings, where heads of cast brass are used to honor royal ancestors, and from those of chiefs, whose commemorative heads are made of wood, sometimes decorated with brass sheets. The use of terracotta seems particularly appropriate for the brasscasters' commemorative heads, because the process of modeling clay for the terracotta heads is virtually the same as that of modeling wax for cast brass heads.

The senior titleholder of the brasscasters' guild, Ineh n'Igun Eronmwon, is the direct descendant of Igueghae, the brasscaster who according to tradition came from Ife during the reign of Oba Oguola (ca. late fourteenth century) to teach his skills to Benin craftsmen. Terracotta heads now in the collection of the Benin Museum are said to have been brought to Benin by Igueghae himself to use as models in teaching (Willett 1973:17; Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960:15). The actual Ife origin of these heads is dubious, as Babatunde Lawal has pointed out, because their style is clearly related to the art of Benin and not to that of Ife (Lawal 1977:198).

Terracotta heads were once used more widely than they are today. According to oral traditions they were placed on the paternal ancestral altars of the first kings of Benin, the Ogiso dynasty, who probably ruled before 1300 (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 12). In the past terracotta heads were also placed on altars in the quarter of Benin known as Idunmwun Ivbioto, "the sons of the soil," which was built during the Ogiso period, and in Idunmwun Ogiefo, the ward guild responsible for purifying the earth after taboos had been violated (Ben-Amos 1980:15). Their meaning in Benin ritual today may also be more varied than previously supposed. Joseph Nevadomsky observed that at the climax of the coronation of Oba Erediauwa in 1979, the coral-bead crown placed on his head had been kept on a terracotta head from which a brass head would later be cast (Nevadomsky 1984:52).

## 9. Head

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Terracotta, sacrificial materials;

h. 6½ in. (16.5 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.7

*Ex Collection:* Morton Lipkin

*Reference:* New York, Sotheby's,  
1988: lot 112

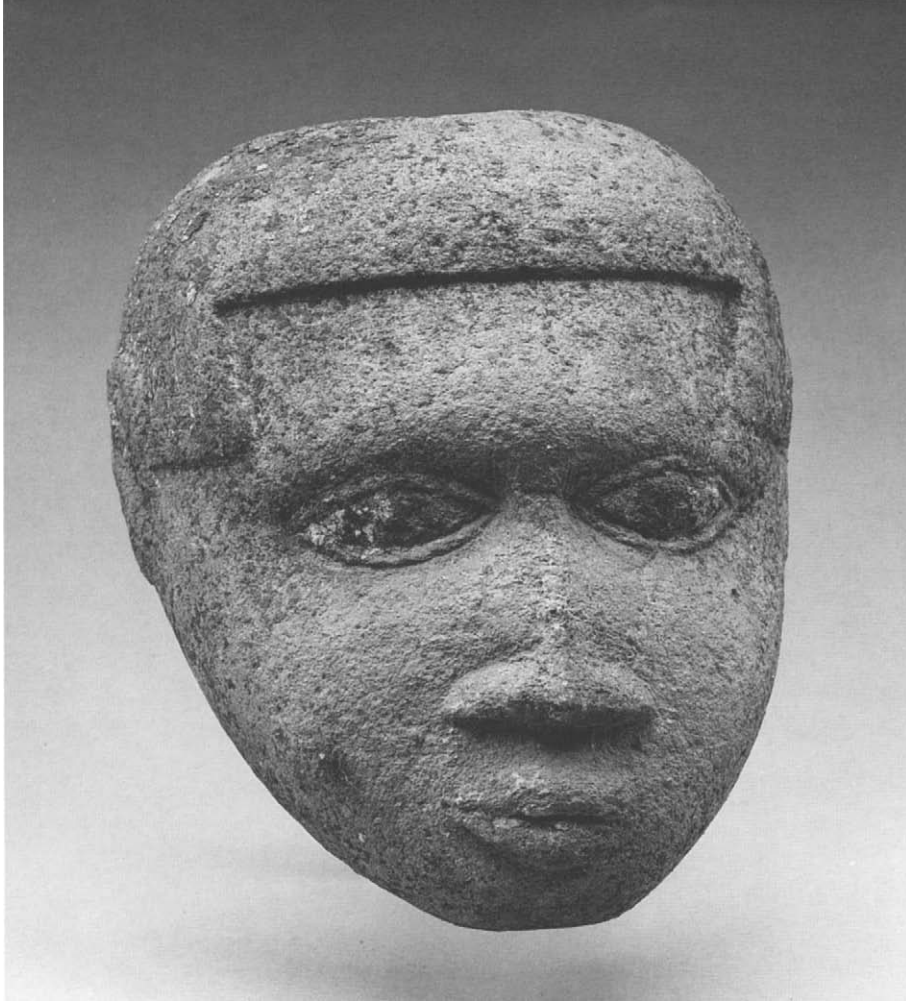
*Exhibition:* New York, Grey Art Gallery,  
1981: no. 9

Most of the terracotta heads display the low, tight-fitting bead collar and coiffure of overlapping rows of ringlets that characterize brass heads of Dark's type 1 (see fig. 17). Many of the terracotta heads also resemble the type 1 brass heads in the sensitive modeling of their facial features, as can be seen in cat. no. 9. The cheeks are rounded but not swollen, and the fullness is most evident at the sides rather than the front of the face. The eyes are pointed ovals whose outlines, though usually thicker than those on the type 1 brass heads, often retain the deeper top lid that is seen on them. The hair is usually somewhat less delicately and meticulously executed on the terracotta heads than on the brass ones. In such heads as cat. no. 9, the separate layers and individual ringlets are distinguished by short, deep incisions. In others, shallower incisions create an overall grid pattern of perpendicular lines. Although mostly eroded in the case of cat. no. 10, this feature, as well as the small eyes, delicate mouth, and relatively flat, wide face, links cat. no. 10 to a similar example in the Benin Museum (Willett 1973: fig. 10).

Cat. no. 9 resembles the faces of figures on Benin plaques (see cat. nos. 35–46) and on figures believed to be of the same period as the plaques, the sixteenth to seventeenth century (see cat. no. 15). Cat. no. 10 has been tested by thermoluminescence and found to have been made sometime between the sixteenth and eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The terracotta heads seem to have been made over a longer period of time than Dark postulated for the brass heads that share the same features (early fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century), and therefore support the view that the brass type 1 heads may not be the earliest brass royal commemorative heads, but rather heads made for other purposes at other periods of Benin's art history.

There are some terracotta heads that feature extremely puffed cheeks and/or a high beaded collar like Dark's type 3 and type 5 brass heads of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Willett 1973: fig. 11; Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: pl. iv). While it has neither of those distinctive features, cat. no. 11 has another characteristic of late-period Benin art, the lightly hatched eyebrows. This head is distinct from other Benin terracotta heads in its exceptionally wide, almost spherical shape and the roughness and irregularity of the features, especially the thick-lidded yet narrow and elongated eyes, the rather straight and unarticulated mouth, the C-shaped ears, and hastily incised hair. These features relate more closely to the unfired mud sculptures found in Olokun shrines in chiefs' houses in Benin City and certain Edo villages (Ben-Amos 1973; Beier 1963). The mud shrine sculptures are made not by members of the brasscasters' guild but by skilled amateur artists, men and women known as Omebo. Like the Olokun mud sculptures, cat. no. 11 has a spontaneity and individuality that are rare in Benin court art.

1. Daybreak Nuclear and Medical Systems, Guilford, CT; reference no. 201A60.

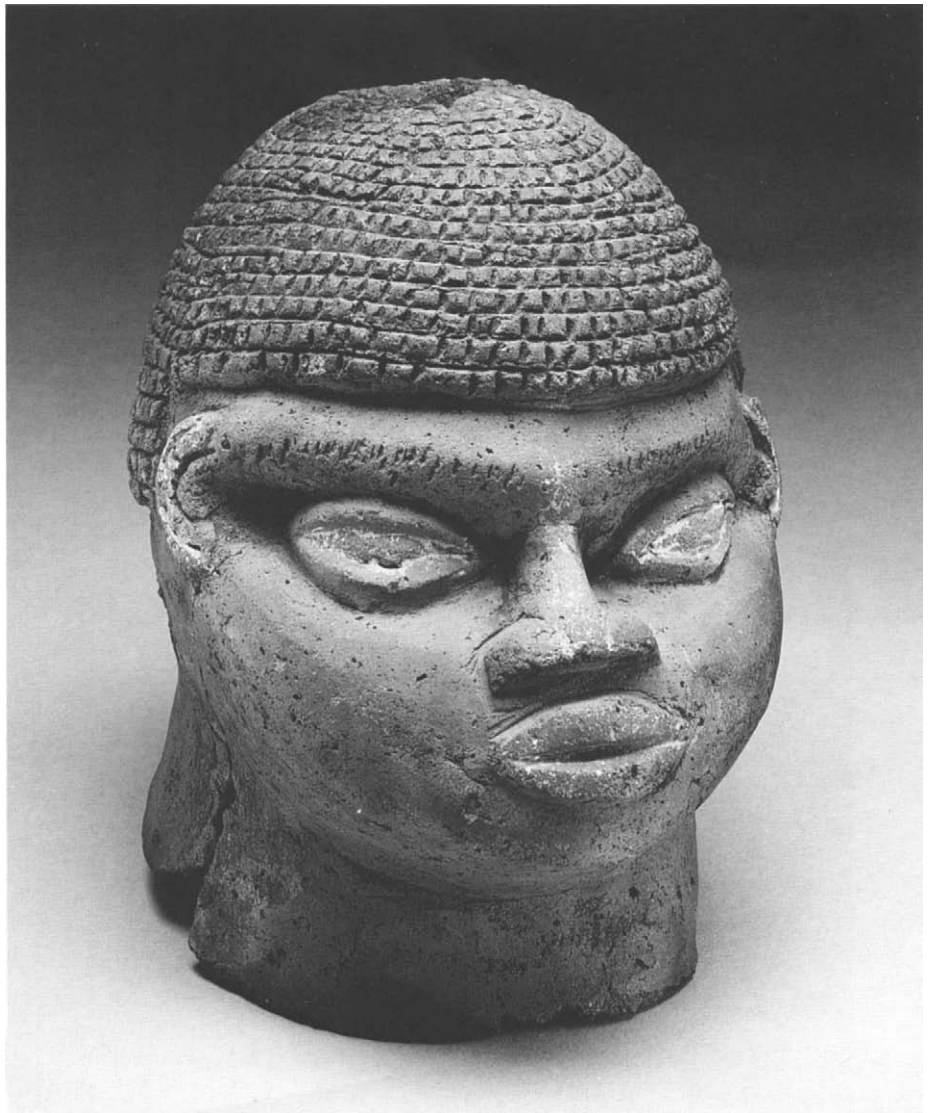


**10. Head**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–18th century

Terracotta, pigment; h. 7 in. (17.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.8



**11. Head**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
20th century

Terracotta, pigment; h. 9 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
(23.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.5





# ROYAL ALTAR TUSKS



The brass heads of kings and queen mothers on royal ancestral altars serve as supports for ivory tusks (see fig. 16). The altars of some chiefs also feature tusks. Many of these tusks are carved in relief over their entire surface with figures of kings, queen mothers, warriors, priests, palace officials, foreigners, and other motifs that “serve as historical reminders, reassert the legitimate authority and divinity of the king, and reveal the numinous sources from which his powers derive” (Blackmun 1984a:235). They refer to the achievements of past rulers and the concepts underlying kingship in Benin. Each king commissions a set of carved tusks for the altar he establishes to his father, choosing motifs that reflect the political, economic, and spiritual conditions of his reign.

Like the *ede*, the projection that extends upward from the top of the Oba’s coral-beaded crown (see figs. 2, 14, 47), the tusks rise from the top of the cast brass heads. The tusks thereby complete the image of the Oba’s crowned head, which is the key to the well-being of the kingdom (Blackmun 1984a:31). In addition to their *ede*-like shape, there are many other reasons for choosing elephant tusks as the medium for expressing ideas related to kingship. The tusks symbolize attributes of the elephant, such as physical power, leadership, wisdom, and longevity, all of which are appropriate for the Oba. Because of their hardness, the tusks are considered to be a suitably permanent material on which to carve motifs meant to enlighten future generations. Ivory’s color is also important, its whiteness being reminiscent of the color of chalk (*orhue*), a symbol of ritual purity that is associated with Olokun, the Edo god of the sea. The altar tusks were washed and bleached with citrus juice to remove the remains of sacrifices and to keep them as white as possible. The monetary value of ivory reinforces its association with Olokun, who is the source of extraordinary wealth. Ivory itself was a form of wealth, helping to attract European traders to Benin, thus bringing still more wealth to the kingdom. Trade in ivory was virtually a monopoly of the king, who was entitled to one tusk from every elephant slain in the kingdom. Ivory thus perfectly expresses the king’s leadership qualities, his spiritual properties, particularly his association with Olokun, and his wealth (Blackmun 1984a:31–32).

12. Carved Altar Tusk (view 1)  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
1888–97

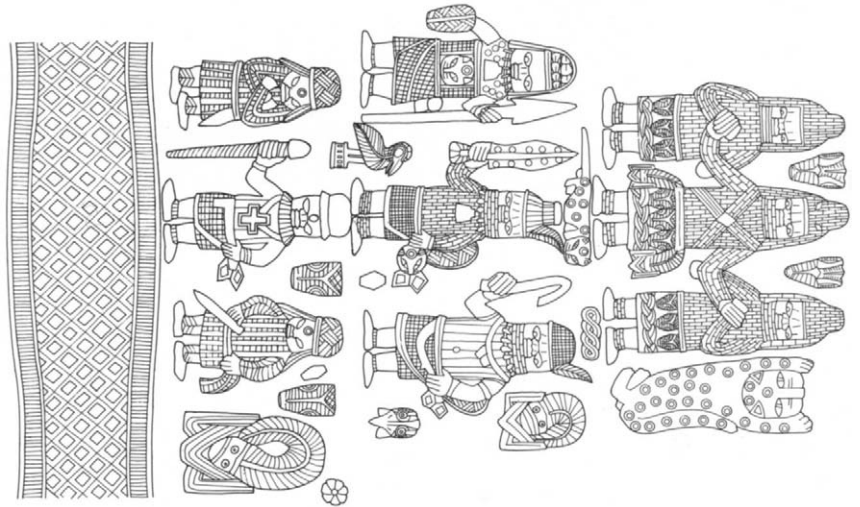


Fig. 21. Drawing of cat. no. 12.  
Drawing by Joanne Wood

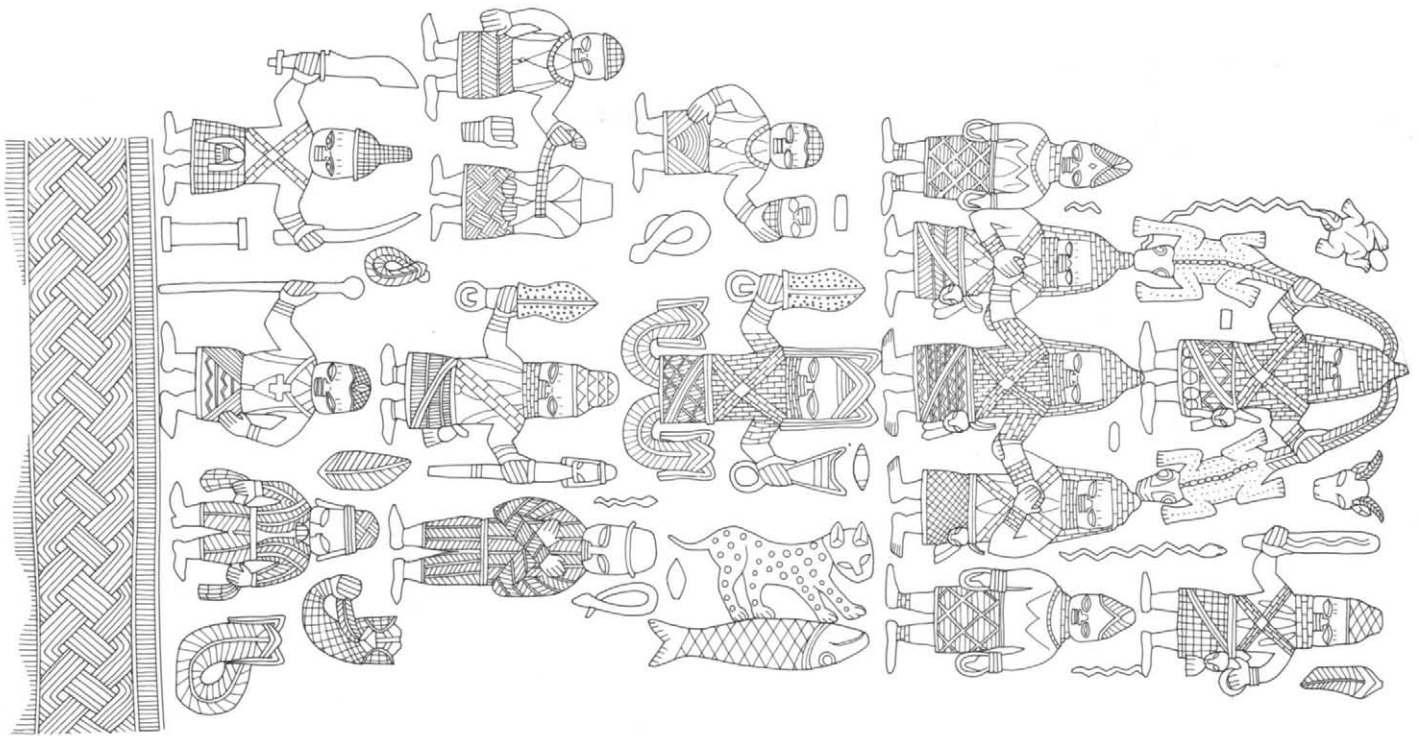


Fig. 22. Drawing of cat. no. 13.  
Drawing by Joanne Wood

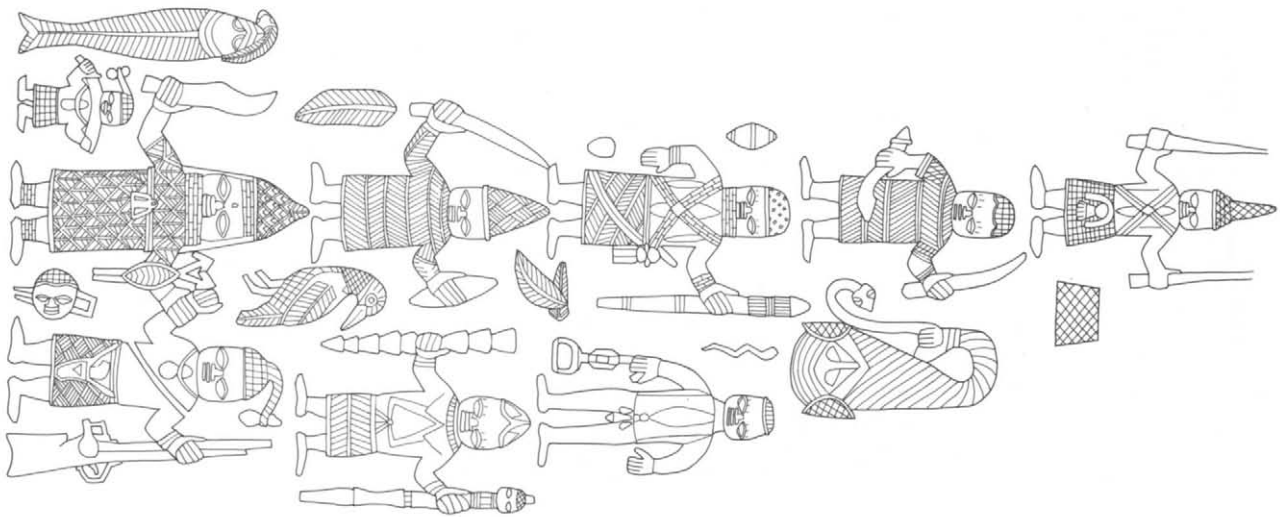
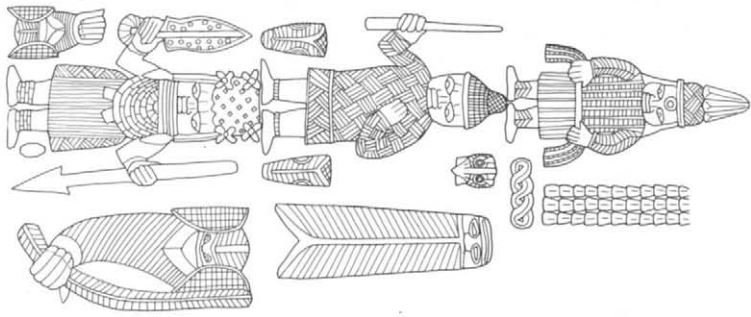




Fig. 23. Cross-wearing figure.  
Detail of cat. no. 12

According to its oral traditions, Igbesanmwan, the ivory-carving guild, had its origins in the earliest phases of Benin history, the era of the Ogiso dynasty of kings prior to the founding of the present dynasty around 1300. Oba Ewuare, who reigned in the mid-fifteenth century, is credited with encouraging ivory carving and developing much of the visual code that conveyed concepts of divine kingship in Benin art for the next five hundred years (Egharevba 1960:18; Ben-Amos 1975:171).

Despite the long history of ivory carving in Benin, it is unlikely that carved ivory altar tusks were made before the middle of the eighteenth century. Tusks were noted on the ancestral altars of ordinary, nonroyal people by a Spanish friar who visited Benin in 1651, and also by Dutch merchant David van Nyendael, who saw them on royal altars about 1700, but there is no indication that those tusks were carved (Blackmun 1984a:197–99). The earliest description of figurative carving on tusks is by a French captain, J. F. Landolphe, who visited Benin several times between 1778 and 1787, during the reign of Akengbuda (r. ca. 1750–1804). Landolphe and his companions saw sixty carved tusks on a royal altar and twenty on the ancestral altar of the Ezomo, a member of the Uzama and one of the two supreme war chiefs. Based on this evidence, and on the existing tusks themselves, it has been estimated that the carving of royal altar tusks began about 1750 (Blackmun 1984a:195–212; idem 1991:57–59).

More than 130 of these carved tusks were confiscated from royal altars by the British Punitive Expedition in 1897. At the time of their removal, no attempt was made to record their location or to indicate which tusks belonged together on a particular altar. American art historian Barbara Blackmun has sorted the tusks into groups based upon choice of motifs, carving style, wear, and other factors. She has arranged the groups in a chronological sequence and deciphered the multitude of motifs carved on them (Blackmun 1984a; 1987; 1988; 1991). According to her research, the tusks can be divided into ten groups or sets, seven of which were commissioned for royal altars and the remainder most likely made for altars of such high-ranking chiefs as the Ezomo.

Of the eighteenth-century tusks, two sets were commissioned by Akengbuda probably for royal ancestral altars honoring his father Eresonyen (r. ca. 1735–50) and grandfather Akenzua I (r. ca. 1713–35), and a third for the Ezomo Ekeneza to honor his father, Ezomo Odia. The fourth set is believed to have been commissioned by Oba Obanosa (r. ca. 1804–15) for the altar he erected to his mother, the Iyoba Ose. The fifth group, also attributed to the early nineteenth century, is very unusual and was possibly not made for an ancestral altar at all, but for a royal altar to the hand. The sixth and seventh sets were commissioned during the reign of Oba Osemwende (r. ca. 1815–50), one for the altar of the Oba's father, Obanosa, and the other for the altar of the Ezomo Osifo. The eighth set, commissioned during the reign of Oba Adolo (r. ca. 1850–88), was made to honor Adolo's father, Osemwende,

and to refurbish an existing altar to a previous Oba. The ninth group of royal tusks has been attributed to the reign of Ovonramwen (r. 1888–97). The tenth and final group consists of tusks made between 1921 and 1933 for altars established by Obas Eweka II (r. 1914–33) and Akenzua II (r. 1933–78) for their fathers. The tusks of the last two groups bear the closest resemblance to contemporary ivory carving, including tusks recently commissioned by Oba Erediauwa for the altar honoring his father, Akenzua II, thus fixing them at the late end of the chronological sequence.

The two figurative tusks in the Perls collection belong to the two most recent groups. Blackmun has charted and identified their motifs, and the descriptions that follow are based entirely upon her work (Blackmun 1984a:166–71, 185–92, 551, 563). In both tusks the motifs are frontal and static, and arranged in orderly rows, with the most important motif in the center of the convex side. The rows are to be read from the bottom up. The figures on both tusks are crisply carved with bold, incised lines and display the squat proportions typical of Igbesanmwan carving.

Cat. no. 12 belongs to the group of late-nineteenth-century tusks commissioned by Oba Ovonramwen for the altar of his father, Adolo. The tusk itself is unusually small and includes only six rows of figures between its lozenge-patterned base and thimblelike tip (fig. 21). The motifs depicted on the bottom row are especially characteristic of this set of tusks. In the center is a figure wearing a cross pendant and a shallow-brimmed hat and holding a round-headed staff and a hammer (see fig. 23). Similar figures occur elsewhere in Benin art and have been identified either as a type of palace official called *Ewua*, or as *Ohensa*, the priest of *Osanobua*, the Benin high god (see cat. nos. 15, 16). Both *Ewua* and *Ohensa* are associated with the origin of the present Benin dynasty, and with *Esigie*, the great sixteenth-century Oba. The cross-wearing official is flanked by two slant-eyed figures wearing sixteenth-century Portuguese dress (see fig. 24). Blackmun has demonstrated that rather than representing European merchants, as this motif did when used on eighteenth-century tusks, these late-nineteenth-century versions are interpreted today in Benin as priests wearing charm-covered garments that provide spiritual protection (Blackmun 1988). Their slanted eyes are seen as being closed in prayer, and the circles on their foreheads represent spots of blood or chalk that heighten their spiritual powers. The crossed arms of the figure on the left in this row, although derived from the relaxed posture of some early Benin images of Portuguese traders, is seen in the late-nineteenth-century tusks as a ritual gesture performed by priests of *Ovia*. *Ovia* is a masquerade honoring a village-based river spirit and is concerned with the villagers' paternal ancestors rather than royal ones (Ben-Amos 1980:38, 57; Blackmun 1990:66). *Ovia* worship was introduced into the palace by *Esigie* in the sixteenth century, then banned by Oba *Eresonyen* in the eighteenth century. It regained its



Fig. 24. Priest. Detail of cat. no. 12



Fig. 25. Warrior. Detail of cat. no. 12

popularity and royal sanction during Ovonramwen's reign, as part of the attempt to increase the spiritual resources available to the kingdom at a time when its political, military, and economic resources were waning. The three figures in the bottom row thus refer to various supernatural sources of the Oba's power, some of long standing and some recently acquired.

Row 2 of cat. no. 12 features the *Iyase* who, as head of the Town Chiefs and one of the two most important military chiefs, is a central figure in Benin court life. He is flanked on the right by an unidentified priest whose basketry hat with feather suggests his importance, and on the left by a warrior (fig. 25), dressed like the warriors on many plaques (see cat. no. 36). The warrior is shown with a bird, perhaps as an allusion to Oba Esigie's order to kill the "bird of prophecy" and his subsequent victory over the Ata of Idah (see cat. nos. 89–95). This row thus refers to the triumph of a past Oba and to the military and spiritual support available to all Obas.

Row 3 (fig. 26) depicts a motif found on every type of altar tusk, as well as on other types of objects, such as plaques (see cat. no. 53; fig. 45). It is what Blackmun refers to as the "linked supporting triad," a symmetrical, hieratic vision of the Oba in ceremonial dress with his arms and hands supported by two flanking figures in almost identical garb (Blackmun 1984a:271–76). In life, the Oba is actually supported in this way by the high priests Osa and Osuan at his coronation and at other major palace festivals (see fig. 11). The image incorporates several important aspects of Benin leadership. The number three is often a symbol of the Oba's power to punish enemies and of the occult forces at his disposal. Balancing this fearsome and dominating aspect of kingship is the Oba's need for the support of his people, shown graphically by the flanking subordinates who hold up his arms.

The most prominent position on this tusk, as on many others, is occupied by a figure representing Ozolua the Conqueror, one of Benin's great warrior kings (r. ca. late fifteenth century). He is identified by his long dress of chain mail with hanging panels under the arms, his bead crown and collar, and his charm-laden necklaces (fig. 27). In addition to the altar tusks, Ozolua's image is found frequently on wooden objects carved by the *Omada*, or palace pages (see cat. nos. 123–25). During Ozolua's reign Benin greatly expanded its territory and conquered many neighboring areas, including the Yoruba kingdoms of Owo and Ijebu-Ode (Egharevba 1960:24). Although at the time this tusk was made Benin was shrinking in size and power, the image of Ozolua continued to reaffirm the kingdom's view of itself and its king.

Near the tip of cat. no. 12 is the figure of an *Ooton* (fig. 28), a palace priest whose presence is required at sacrifices to the Oba's head and to his ancestors, both of which are essential to the well-being of the kingdom. Here he is shown surrounded by the heads of sacrificial animals, such as crocodile and fowl. The *Ooton*, seen also

Fig. 26. Oba and two supporters. Detail of cat. no. 12. Drawing by Joanne Wood

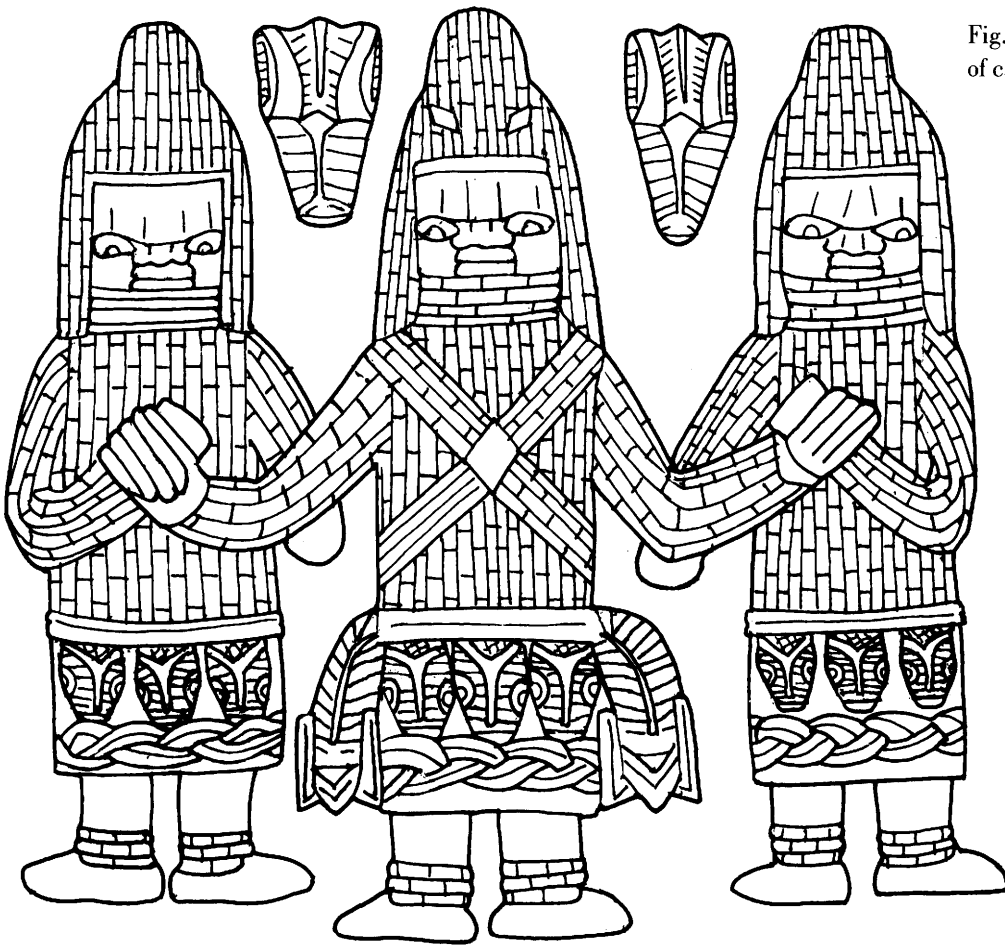


Fig. 27. Ozolua the Conqueror. Detail of cat. no. 12. Drawing by Joanne Wood

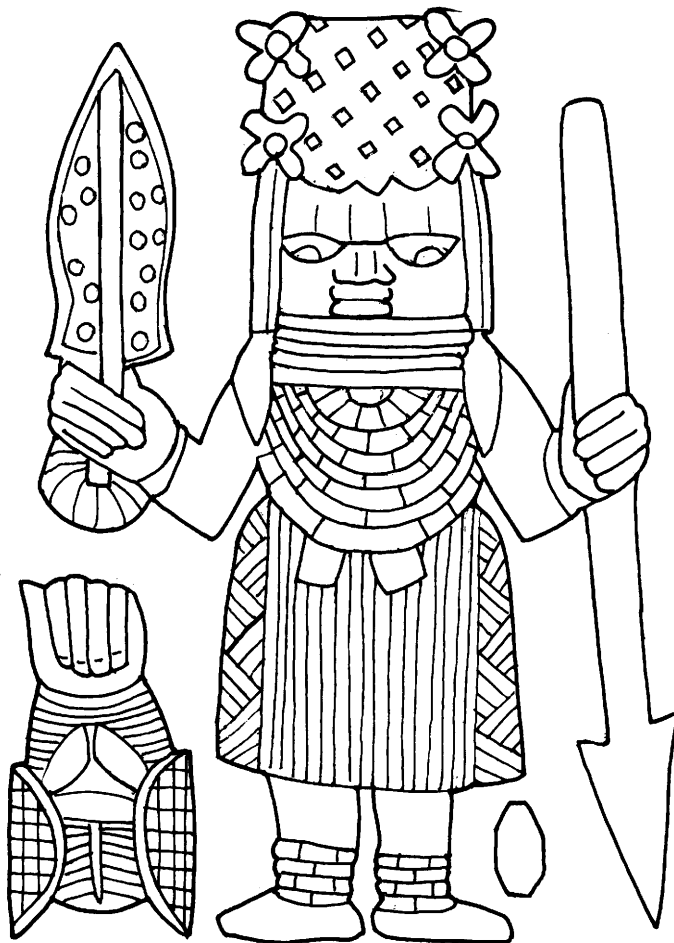






Fig. 28. Ooton, royal priest. Detail of cat. no. 12

in many plaques (see cat. no. 39), is identified by his long dress, coiffure with a projection at the top, and wand for chasing away evil spirits. Above him in the top row is a foreign merchant, distinguishable from the motif of priests in row 1 by his nonslanted eyes.

This tusk commemorating a late-nineteenth-century king, Adolo (r. ca. 1850–88), refers to various aspects of his power, both past and present. Its central figure recalls the triumphs of Oba Ozolua, while other motifs refer to officials who have contributed to Benin's power over the centuries. Balancing these references to the Oba's military strength are images that depict the spiritual aspects of his power. Here again past and present mingle, as some motifs depict priests associated with earlier times, some depict officials whose responsibilities have been constant throughout Benin history, and some represent a type of worship that was especially compelling at the time the tusk was made.

The second tusk in the Perls collection (cat. no. 13) has been attributed to the group of tusks commissioned between 1921 and 1933 by Obas Eweka II and Akenzua II for the altars honoring their fathers (Fagg 1970: pls. 2, 12; Dark 1973: pls. 55, 56, 58). This group of tusks is very similar to those of the previous group, represented by cat. no. 12, in style and choice of motifs. Cat. no. 13 consists of ten rows of figures above a border filled with a guilloche pattern (fig. 22).

Row 1, like that on cat. no. 12, depicts a cross-wearing figure (without a hammer) in the center, flanked by two other priests. The one on the right is similar to those on cat. no. 12. The one on the left has been identified as either Osa or Osuan, the priests of the state gods, Uwen and Ora, who are concerned with rain, sun, air, and the fertility of the soil, all crucial to the well-being of the kingdom. He wears a basketry cap with a tall projection, a collar, and crossed baldrics of beads. He carries an *ada* sword and a magic branch, and an *ekpoki* box for ritual paraphernalia is next to him. As in the first tusk (cat. no. 12), the bottom row represents the various sources of supernatural power at the Oba's disposal.

Row 2 expands upon this theme, illustrating the Oba's occult powers in a specific context (fig. 29). In the center is a chief holding an *eben* sword and a rattle-staff. Blackmun was told that this chief represents the Ihama of Ihogbe, the priest of the royal ancestors, presiding at a human sacrifice. On the right is a priest with crossed arms wearing patterned, spiritually protective clothing; he lacks long hair and a beard, and thus is not entirely based upon the foreign-merchant motif as is the priest below him. On the left is a bound and decapitated victim viewed from the rear, a motif that occurs only on this particular tusk. He is held by an attendant carved on the concave side of the tusk. The victim's head is held by an assistant in row 3 above. While human sacrifice to the royal ancestors has been a feature of Benin religion since the mid-sixteenth century (Ryder 1969:71), it increased dramatically in the late nineteenth century, as the king tried



Fig. 29. Bottom row: Priest of royal ancestors presiding at human sacrifice. Top row: Oba with mudfish legs. Detail of cat. no. 13. Drawing by Joanne Wood

to bolster his declining economic, political, and military power through supernatural means.

Also in row 3 (fig. 29), the Oba is depicted as a figure with mudfish legs, wearing ceremonial garments that include a crown shaped like mudfish barbels. He is holding an *eben* sword and a proclamation staff (*isevberè igho*), one of his insignia of power. This image of the ruler is found frequently in the art of Benin and related areas (see cat. nos. 30, 53, 129–31), and has many levels of meaning. It refers to Oba Ohen (r. ca. early fifteenth century), who is said to have hidden his deformed, crippled legs from his people and was eventually killed for his deception. Ohen's image serves as a warning to rulers not to abuse their subjects' respect. The mudfish-legged figure also refers to the Oba's close association with Olokun, the god of the sea, and the divine nature he derives from it. In row 4, the Oba is shown as part of the linked supporting triad, a motif that also stresses his power coupled with his responsibilities to his people. Above it, in row 5, is another image of the Oba related to

the mudfish-legged king. Although he appears here with human legs, he is holding a crocodile in each hand as a reference to his mastery of the supernatural forces that emanate from Olokun's world. Together these three rows of the tusk present a multilayered image of divine kingship in Benin.

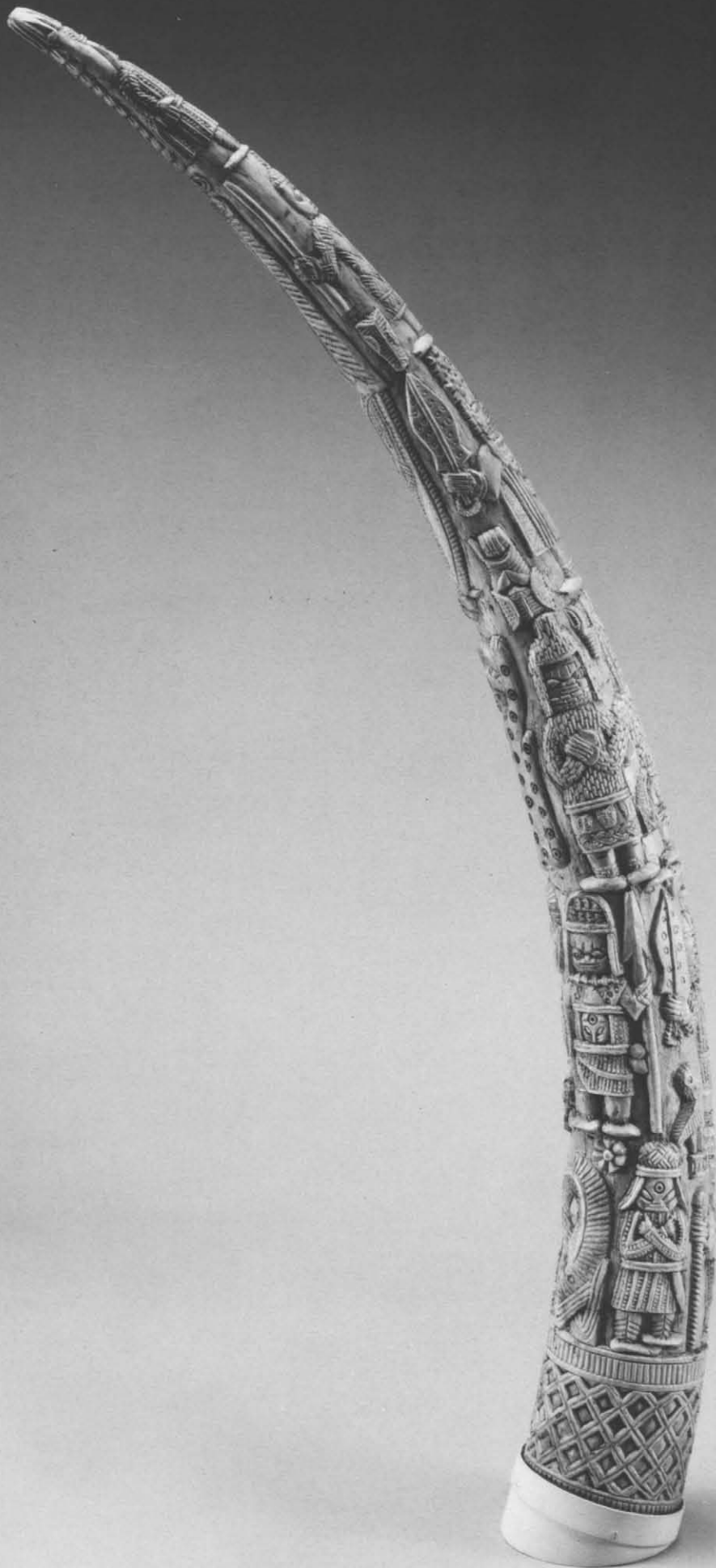
Row 6 portrays Ozolua the Conqueror, who was also depicted in cat. no. 12 (fig. 27). In this instance the victorious Oba is shown with a defeated enemy who holds a gun but whose torso bears a wide diagonal gash, as if Ozolua had slashed him in two with his sword. To the left of Ozolua is a tiny figure of a horn blower, calling the warriors to arms, and to the right is an enemy's severed head. Both motifs reinforce the image of the triumphant Oba.

The figures on rows 7 through 10, like those on rows 1 and 2, emphasize the Oba's spiritual resources. In row 7 is an Ooton, similar to the one on cat. no. 12 (fig. 28). He is wearing his characteristic long gown, but carrying a stone celt instead of a magic branch. Blackmun has interpreted this as a twentieth-century innovation, reflecting the increased popularity in Benin of the Yoruba thunder god, Sango. On the concave side of this row is depicted a woman with a rattle-staff, possibly a priestess of Olokun. A priest holding a rattle-staff appears in row 8, as does a palace page, an *omada*, holding the shackles used to bind a sacrificial victim. Above, in row 9, is another priest and at the very top is the high priest Osuan, with two upraised wands. Osuan's importance in Benin state religion is reflected in his position at the tip of the tusk, where he serves to direct its powers upward to the royal ancestors for whom it was carved.

This tusk, which is larger than cat. no. 12, presents a greater number of images of the Oba and the warriors and priests who serve him. Yet, like cat. no. 12, and carved altar tusks generally, it presents a multifaceted view of Benin kingship: it combines motifs that emphasize the king's military power with those that stress his spiritual aspect; it contrasts the Oba's command of terrifying occult forces with his need to respect the concerns of his subjects; and it merges images of specific kings with those that refer to all rulers past and present. The major difference between this and the previous tusk is the proliferation of priests and the allusions to human sacrifice in cat. no. 13. Both of these features reflect the changes that occurred in Benin at the end of the nineteenth century, the period commemorated in the tusk.

The third tusk (cat. no. 14), unlike the first two in the Perls collection, does not bear figural motifs. Instead it features five bands of guilloche pattern alternating with a motif said to identify all ivory tusks belonging to the king (Roth 1968:96). The guilloche pattern consists of three tightly interlaced bands, each made up of several strands. Interlace patterns are ubiquitous in Benin art and are said to be a hallmark of Igbesamwan, the ivory-carvers' guild (Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:61), although they are found on brass objects as well. Nonfigurative tusks, such as cat. no.

14, have been observed on altars dedicated to the queen mother in the Oba's palace (von Sydow 1938: pl. 1; idem 1954: pl. 28B; Nevadomsky 1987:224). Similar tusks were also placed on the altar established in the twentieth century to honor all the Obas prior to Ovonramwen (see fig. 34; Akenzua 1965:249). The thinness of this example suggests that it may not have been located on a royal ancestral altar at all, but rather on an altar to the hand (see cat. no. 33).



**12. Carved Altar Tusk (view 2)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
1888–97

Ivory; l. (along convex side)

44 in. (111.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

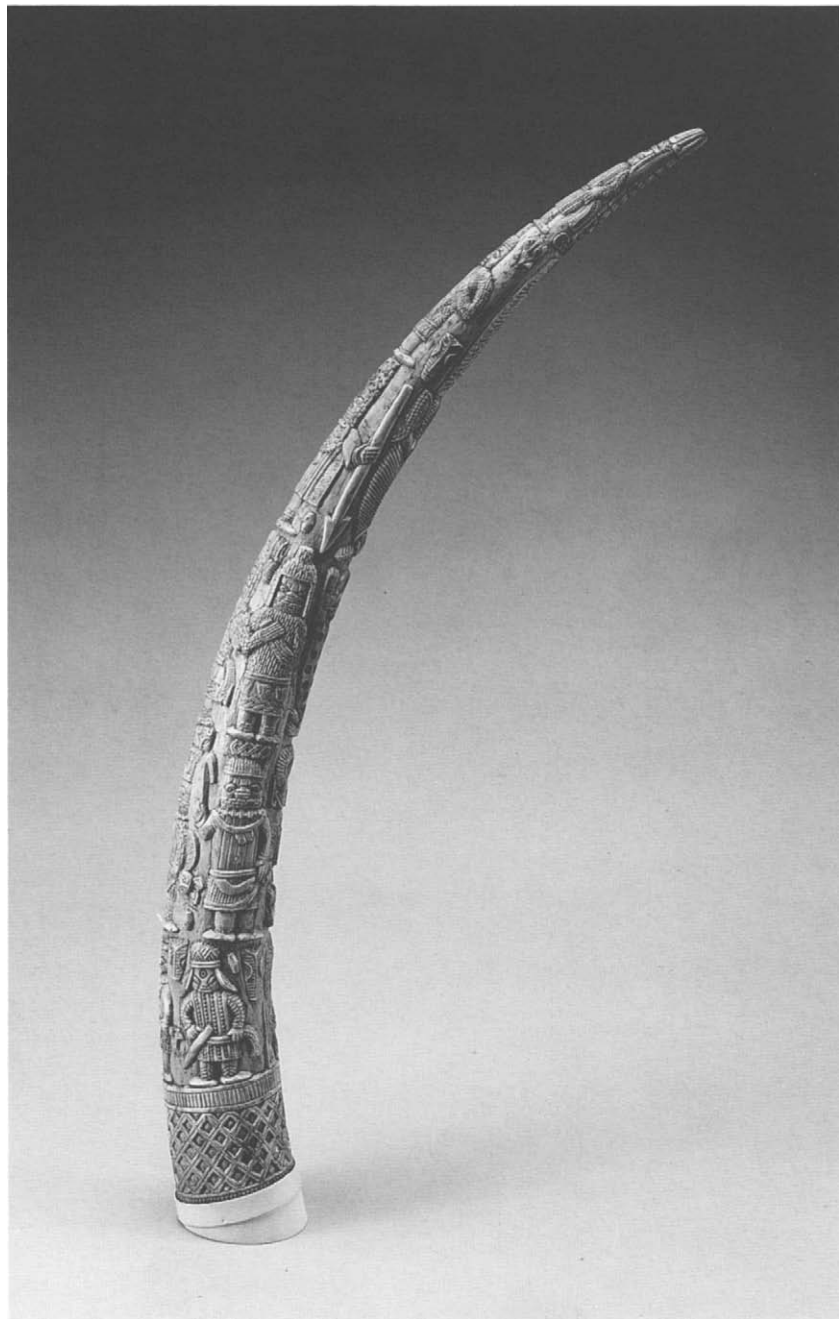
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*References:* London, Christie's, 1976a: lot  
45; Blackmun 1984a: no. 138

*Exhibition:* New York, The Center for  
African Art, 1990: no. 5



**12. Carved Altar Tusk (view 3)**



**12. Carved Altar Tusk (view 4)**



### 13. Carved Altar Tusk

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

1921–33

Ivory; l. (along convex side)

73¾ in. (187.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.106

*References:* London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet and Co., 1977b: lot 351; Paris, Drouot Rive Gauche, 1978: lot 47; Blackmun 1984a: no. 137

*Exhibitions:* Bloomington, Indiana University Art Museum, 1980; Washington, D.C., National Museum of African Art, 1981: no. 62



### 14. Carved Altar Tusk

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Ivory; l. (along convex side)

37¾ in. (95.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.105





# FIGURES



In addition to brass heads and carved tusks, a number of other types of brass sculpture were placed on the Oba's ancestral altars, including freestanding figures, figural groups or tableaus, and leopards (see fig. 16). The placement of figures on the royal altars is first documented in 1823, the year Giovanni Belzoni visited Benin and sketched one of the altars (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 38). That same year, in the *Royal Gold Coast Gazette*, an anonymous author described a similar altar whose figures included "a blacksmith on an ass, and a carpenter in the act of striking with an axe." Belzoni's drawing and this description provide rare evidence for the appearance of Benin royal altars prior to the 1890s, but as Ben-Amos points out, it is not clear how much earlier the altars had been decorated with figures as well as brass heads and tusks (Ben-Amos 1980:42).

The figure described as a "carpenter" as well as the standing figures in Belzoni's drawing were probably similar to cat. nos. 15 and 16. These figures depict a personage distinguished by his shallow-brimmed hat, openwork cloth or beadwork tunic, necklace with a pendant in the form of a cross, and the raised scars that radiate like cat's whiskers from the corners of his mouth. In his left hand he carries an L-shaped hammer (which has broken off in cat. no. 15), and his right hand is clenched. Similarly dressed figures, when portrayed on Benin brass plaques and carved tusks (see fig. 23; von Luschan 1919: figs. 227, 428, 429, pl. 22; Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983: fig. 47), are always shown holding a long, round-headed staff in the right hand. Although he lacks the cross pendant, wears a different type of hat, and holds the hammer and staff in the opposite hands, cat. no. 17 may depict the same personage as cat. nos. 15 and 16.

Three interpretations of this type of figure have been proposed. One suggests that the figure represents a messenger from a powerful ruler called the Ogane, who today in Benin is identified as the Oni of Ife, the Yoruba kingdom from which the present Benin dynasty claims descent (Fagg 1963: pl. 33; Ryder 1965:26–27; Eyo and Willett 1980:133). According to a sixteenth-century Portuguese text, each new

**15. Court Official with Cross Pendant (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century



Fig. 30. Standing Man: Ise of Utekon. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th–19th century. Brass. Benin Museum. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/72/3). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London

Oba of Benin had to be confirmed by the Ogane, whose messenger presented the Oba with a brass hat, staff, and cross necklace to show his approval. The messenger himself received a cross to reward his efforts and to indicate his status as a free man. Another view, first proposed by Ben-Amos, is that figures of this type represent Ohensa, one of the four priests of Osanobua, the Benin Creator God (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 40). Priests of Osanobua wear crosses as their insignia, as a result of their association with Christian missionaries during the reign of Oba Esigie in the early sixteenth century. Finally, it has been suggested, based upon statements made by the late Oba Akenzua II to R. E. Bradbury, that the figure depicts a member of Ewua, a group of palace officials founded by Esigie (Blackmun 1984a:354–56; idem 1988:131–32; Nevadomsky 1987:227–28). The Ewua wake the Oba each morning and perform with him a morning ceremony which recalls the origin of the dynasty. Ewua members also wear crosses, which figure in their rituals.

As disparate as these three interpretations appear, they are all related. They can all be seen as allusions to the origin of the current Benin dynasty, to Esigie, the great sixteenth-century Oba, or to both. Such references to the past are a means by which later Obas reaffirm their ancestral legacy, confirm the legitimacy of their rule, and glorify their own reigns. Benin art and ritual consciously invoke the past, using a variety of motifs in a range of different contexts, creating layers of meaning that reinforce each other. As Blackmun has written, “Although Benin motifs are multilayered and ambiguous, and no single identification would be complete, every interpretation of the cross-wearing figure on the altar tusk [and elsewhere in Benin art] is an assertion that the Oba who commissioned it is the heir to Esigie’s prestigious lineage” (Blackmun 1988:132; idem 1990:67).

Cross-wearing figures, as well as their crosses, hammers, and other distinctive attributes, are sometimes incorporated into other types of Benin objects whose contexts corroborate the interpretations proposed for the altar figures themselves. Crosses and smaller versions of the cross-wearing figure are found on altar tableaus and roosters placed on queen mother altars (von Luschan 1919: pls. 84, 85; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981: no. 77). The association of these motifs with Esigie is thus strengthened, since it was Esigie who first established the title of queen mother for his own mother, Idia, the most famous holder of the title. The hammers held by the cross-wearing figures are *avakala* hammers, which are used by blacksmiths and associated with Ogun, the god of iron. This adds another layer of references to Esigie, since he is credited with encouraging ironworking in Benin. Hammers and crosses also appear on brass headdresses for the Ododua masquerade (Ben-Amos 1980: figs. 98, 101), which celebrates the creation of the Benin royal dynasty by Oranmiyan, the son of Ododua. It was introduced by Oba Eresonyen (r. ca. 1735–50), who is known for creating a conscious program of art and ritual

recalling his predecessor Esigie (Ben-Amos 1984). These comparisons illustrate how the cross-wearing figures are connected to a wide range of other objects that both amplify and intensify their meaning.

The tiny figure of a seated Portuguese man, cat. no. 18, may also allude to Oba Esigie. Although the first contact with Portuguese explorers and traders occurred in 1486, Benin traditions suggest that Esigie, who reigned in the early sixteenth century, strengthened and manipulated the relationships with them, thereby influencing the fate of the kingdom by expanding the wealth, military might, and power of the Oba (Blackmun 1990:67–68). By the early sixteenth century, Benin's ivory carvers were making souvenirs for these foreign visitors to Benin, in the form of ivory spoons and saltcellars that frequently portrayed them in their finery (see cat. no. 122; fig. 60). At the same time, the image of the Portuguese was incorporated into the corpus of motifs used by ivory carvers and brasscasters on objects intended for the Oba and the court. Portuguese figures and heads, always in sixteenth-century dress and with long hair, flowing beards, and moustaches, were used throughout Benin art to denote the power of the king, the wealth he derived from foreign trade, and his association with Olokun, the god of the sea, the realm from which the Portuguese arrived in Benin.

Although the image of the Portuguese is common in Benin art, cat. no. 18 is a unique version of it. Most other Portuguese figures in the round are much larger and depict standing warriors aiming a musket or crossbow (see fig. 7). This seated figure appears to be resting, with his right hand on his knee; his left hand, now broken, was held out in front of him. He may have originally formed part of a larger figural group, such as an altar tableau or a brass altar to the hand, such as that of the Ezomo, which had separately cast elements placed on top (Bradbury 1961: pl. L; see also cat. no. 34).<sup>1</sup> The details of the man's face and costume have been delicately and precisely depicted. Although his face has the enlarged, heavily outlined eyes that are typical of Benin art, the rest of his facial features are stylized differently from those of figures depicting Edo people. He lacks the swollen cheeks, broad nose, and full mouth of cat. nos. 15 and 16, and instead has a prominent beaklike nose, typical of Benin portrayals of the Portuguese. The figure's dress is somewhat more elaborate than that of Portuguese depicted on plaques (see cat. nos. 47, 48) and may indicate this figure's higher status. He wears a patterned, high-crowned hat with a knotted rope decorating its brim, knee breeches, a buttoned doublet with flaring shoulders, a ruffled collar, and patterned sleeves (Wilcox 1945; Reade 1951; Anderson 1979; Boucher 1987). His hair is long at the sides but cut short in the back. His garments and hairstyle are all typical of men's dress in Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The precision with which details of costume are rendered suggests that the figure may have been made during or close to the period in which such dress was worn.



Fig. 31. Incised patterns on wrap skirt. Detail of cat. no. 15

Cat. nos. 19 and 20, which depict court attendants each holding a ceremonial *eben* sword over the left shoulder (in both figures the upper part of the sword has broken off), would also have been placed on royal ancestral altars. Both figures wear a high cylindrical collar of coral beads, as well as beaded headbands, necklaces, and anklets that are the mark of chieftaincy and membership in a Benin palace association. Except for these ornaments and a coral-bead waistband, cat. no. 19 is nude, and cat. no. 20, broken below the waist, appears to be as well. The nudity of these figures suggests that they represent the king's unmarried pages, *emada*, since in the past such men received their first set of clothing only when the Oba granted them permission to marry (Roth 1968:94). The abundance of their coral-bead regalia is puzzling, since today the king's sword-bearers are not as highly ranked as these beads would suggest. Small circles, perhaps leopard's spots, are depicted on the upper arms, chest, lower back, thighs, calves, and feet of cat. no. 19, as if to indicate body painting, perhaps for a particular court ceremony whose identity is unknown. A nude figure with similar body marks is in the Benin Museum (fig. 30). It has been identified as Ise of Utekon, one of Oba Ozolua's sword-bearers who rebelled against the king and was eventually defeated (Egharevba 1969:10–11).

The fan-shaped sword, *eben*, that both figures hold is used in many Benin court ceremonies and appears often in Benin art. Chiefs raise up such swords to show their allegiance to the Oba, as well as to honor their fathers (see fig. 12). Figures holding *eben* swords, such as cat. nos. 19 and 20, conform to the constellation of meaning embodied in royal ancestral altars, which honor the king by commemorating his paternal ancestors.

The Oba himself dances with an *eben* to honor his own father, as is depicted in cat. no. 21. In this figure the Oba is shown in full ceremonial costume made of coral beads, including a crown with many projections, a collar, and long dress. He also wears many bead necklaces, chest bands, and pendants. His attire corresponds in all details to the costume worn at annual palace rituals by the late Oba Akenzua II (Bradbury 1959:187, 190, 193; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 89) and the current Oba, Erediauwa (fig. 2).

Cat. no. 22 is a truncated figure consisting of a head and four attenuated legs. He wears the hairstyle of overlapping rows of ringlets seen throughout Benin art. There are about a dozen similar examples (Dark 1975:90). Although their features are exaggerated, they lack the swollen cheeks that characterize later-period Benin brass heads (see cat. nos. 2–4, 6–8). These figures do not wear any coral-bead regalia, and so probably do not represent a king or a chief. The four legs, lack of a torso and arms, and grotesque features suggest that they represent Ofœ, messenger of Ogiuwu, the god of death. Ofœ usually appears as a head with four limbs carved in relief on wooden friezes placed in back of ancestral altars (Dark 1973:33, pl. 56; Ben-Amos 1980: fig.

49). However, his image seems appropriate cast in brass for placement on the altar itself.

Philip Dark has suggested that heads such as cat no. 22 were made at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Dark 1975:27). The other figures included in this section were probably made over several centuries and show the changes in Benin brasscasting style. Although they portray the same person, cat. nos. 15 and 16 are quite different in their execution. Cat. no. 15 is close in style to the palace plaques, especially in the treatment of the figure's costume. The lacy patterns of the tunic, the Portuguese and Edo heads and other woven motifs incised on his wrapper, and the miniature crosses that decorate the border and center of his sash are extraordinarily delicate and detailed (fig. 31). The figure's face, with its moderately puffed cheeks and outlined eyes, also resembles the plaques and suggests that the figure dates from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century. Cat. no. 16 is a less refined casting with many rough areas, especially on the legs and back, and is not as precise in the depiction of raised or incised patterns. The face, with its more pronounced swelling of the cheeks, resembles late-period heads and suggests a date in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Cat. no. 17, a still cruder and more awkward work, may be a late-nineteenth-century sculpture.

A similar contrast is visible in cat. nos. 19 and 20. Cat. no. 19, smaller, more delicate, and more detailed than cat. no. 20, is close in spirit to the plaques, while cat. no. 20 shares features with the late-period heads, particularly in terms of its swollen cheeks and exaggerated eyes with thick, hatched outlines. Cat. no. 21 resembles altar sculptures cast in the twentieth century for the newly refurbished palace shrines honoring Obas Adolo, Ovonramwen, and Eweka II. It corresponds closely to the altar tableau depicting the Oba from the altar to Eweka II, cast in 1934 (fig. 32; London, Sotheby's, 1987: lot 183). There are similar costume elements, a meticulous, even fussy, attention to detail, and similar treatments of facial features, especially the incised and hatched eyebrows. Cat. no. 21 may not have been cast for a royal altar, but rather for sale to a variety of patrons, including foreign tourists, who in this century are permitted to purchase works from the royal brasscasters. The figures in the Perls collection also show that while styles used by artists in Benin may have varied over time, their choice of subject matter was extremely conservative. Images that successfully communicated the many-layered and profound essence of Benin divine kingship were retained and repeated for centuries.

1. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.



**15. Court Official with  
Cross Pendant (view 2)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century  
Brass; h. 25¾ in. (65.4 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.32

*Ex Collection:* Colonel Le-Poer-O'Shea  
*References:* London, Sotheby and Co.,  
1957: lot 197; Dark 1982: Y8/61; New York,  
Sotheby's, 1986: lot 96; Lehuard 1987: 47

**16. Court Official with  
Cross Pendant**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century  
Brass; h. 22½ in. (55.9 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.30

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus  
Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers  
*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 38,  
figs. 293–94; Dark 1982: 1/70.  
*Exhibitions:* Bloomington, Indiana  
University Art Museum, 1980;  
South Hadley, Mount Holyoke College  
Art Museum, 1984: no. 3, fig. 31





**17. Court Official with  
Hammer and Staff**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Brass; h. 8¼ in. (20.6 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.29



**18. Seated Portuguese Figure**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 4⅞ in. (12.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.31

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Lt.-General  
Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Webster 1895–1901: cat. 21,  
no. 156; Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 46,  
figs. 358–59; Dark 1982: 2/25

*Exhibition:* New York, Center for African  
Art, 1988: fig. 220

**19. Court Attendant with  
Ceremonial Sword**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
17th–18th century

Brass; h. 15½ in. (39.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.148

*Ex Collection:* R. St. Barbe Baker

*References:* London, Sotheby and Co., 1969:  
lot 145; London, South Kensington, Christie's,  
1982: lot 167; Dark 1982: Z21/22, Z5/18





**20. Court Attendant with  
Ceremonial Sword**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Brass; h. 12½ in. (31.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

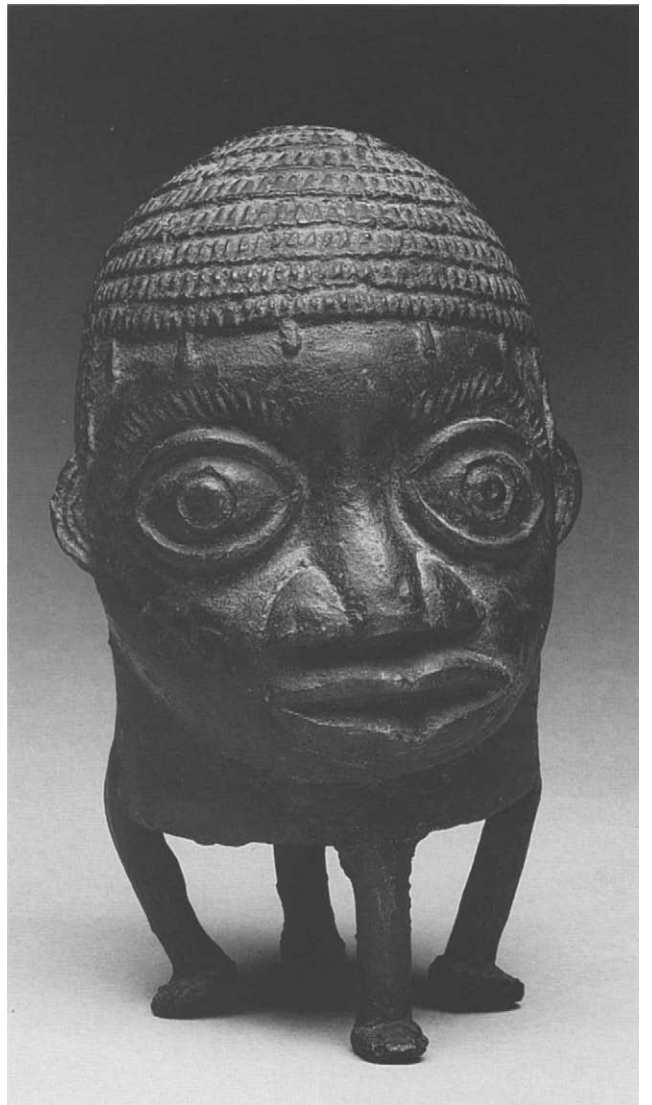
1991.17.34

*Reference:* London, Sotheby's, 1989: lot 100



**21. Oba with Ceremonial Sword**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
20th century  
Brass; h. 11 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (30.2 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.33

**22. Head with Four Legs**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
Late 19th–early 20th century  
Brass; h. 6 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (16.5 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.114





# ALTAR TABLEAUS



Placed at the center of Benin royal ancestral altars, flanked by symmetrically arranged ancestor heads supporting carved tusks, and surrounded by rattle-staffs, brass bells, and other objects, is a cast brass tableau of figures standing upon a rectangular base. One such altar tableau can be seen in fig. 16 on the shrine dedicated to Oba Ovonramwen; another, dedicated to his successor, Eweka II, is seen in fig. 32. A pre-1897 photograph of an altar with a tableau showed a similar arrangement of objects (Roth 1968: fig. 84). These altar tableaus (*aseberia*) depict the commemorated ruler, either the Oba or Iyoba, surrounded by courtiers, chiefs, and other attendants who define their position and in the case of an Oba may even help identify the individual. On the basis of their distinctive costumes, attributes, and surrounding figures, Paula Ben-Amos has linked an altar tableau in the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde specifically with Oba Ewuakpe (r. late seventeenth century; Ben-Amos 1983). Because of their potential for recalling specific individuals and the events that characterized their reigns, Ben Amos refers to these tableaus as “markers of accomplishments, concrete visual memories for the Benin people” (Ben-Amos 1988:27).

Cat. no. 23 is an altar tableau for an Iyoba. It depicts a queen mother and eight female attendants. Such a tableau would be placed on an altar erected by an Oba in his own palace after the death of his mother (Ben-Amos, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:82). The imagery seen on queen mother tableaus is fairly uniform,<sup>1</sup> and it does not appear possible to match this example with any particular queen mother. Rather, her image and those of the attendants who flank her seem intended to convey the importance of her office and to suggest the powers and privileges she shares with men in the Benin political hierarchy.

The figures stand on a rectangular base that has a square opening in the center. Along the side, over a guilloche pattern, are depicted elephant trunks ending in hands holding leaves, mudfish, goat heads, and a ram head. All of these motifs are also found on altars

**23. Altar Tableau: Queen Mother and Attendants (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th century

to the hand and brass roosters made for the Iyoba's ancestral altar; they refer to her wealth, good fortune, and achievements, and to the sacrifices that contributed to them (Nevadomsky 1987:233–39). At the center back of the tableau is the queen mother, larger and more elaborately dressed than her eight attendants. She wears the Iyoba's distinctive teardrop-shaped coral-beaded crown, with beaded headband and bead strands hanging at the sides and back. One strand reaches from her left temple to her waist. Her high collar, short-sleeved shirt, and crossed bandoliers are also of coral beads. In addition she wears a guilloche-patterned wrapper and coral-beaded cuffs and anklets. This is the queen mother's full ceremonial attire, worn when dispensing titles to chiefs or performing rituals (Ben-Amos, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:82).

The queen mother is accompanied by eight female attendants. The six standing in front of her are arranged in two rows. They are naked except for coral-beaded necklaces, waistbands, bracelets, and anklets. Their hair is dressed in crests ornamented with coral-beaded headbands and hanging strands, which vary slightly in the number and configuration of beads. They also exhibit a varying number of supra-orbital scarification marks, some having four and others three. These marks are usually interpreted as indications of gender, but their use here shows that this is not always the case. The front two figures carry fans, the two in the middle carry an *eben* sword and a cylindrical staff, respectively, and the two at the back support the arms of the queen mother. Diagonally behind these six figures and the queen mother, two more female attendants hold up shields and are somewhat distinguished from the other attendants. They wear patterned wrappers and sashes that resemble the garments worn by male chiefs, and their hair is coiffed in layered ringlets, also resembling a male hairstyle. These eight female figures represent women who have been given by their families to the queen mother to serve her until she betroths them either to the Oba or to a chief with whom she would like to strengthen her ties.

The queen mother is considered to have powers equal to the senior Town Chiefs. She has her own palace located in Uselu, formerly a village just outside the capital, but now a part of Benin City proper. Here she maintains her own court, with chiefs and retainers whose titles she has authority to grant. Like the other Town Chiefs she administers her district for the Oba, and she also has power over life and death in her domain. As a woman, the queen mother is in a uniquely powerful position in the Benin political hierarchy.

The manner in which she is portrayed in this and similar tableaus underscores her special status. She wears items of regalia, such as the beaded collar and crossed bandoliers, that are worn only by the highest ranking male chiefs. Other elements, such as the beaded crown and shirt, are even more limited in use, worn only by the Oba, Ezomo, and Edaiken (Ben-Amos, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural



Fig. 32. Royal ancestor altar, dedicated to Oba Eweka II (r. 1914–33), showing altar tableau in center. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958. (58/52/12). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London

History, 1983:82). She is shielded to protect her from the sun, and possibly from other dangers, just as high-ranking chiefs are, as depicted on many Benin plaques (see fig. 40). The somewhat androgynous appearance of the shield-bearers may have been intended to emphasize the queen mother's special status among Edo women.<sup>2</sup> Her arms are supported by attendants in the manner of the Oba (see cat. no. 53; fig. 45), in a gesture that implies both the central figure's dominance over the lesser flanking figures and her need for the cooperation of her subjects (Blackmun 1984a:276). The *eben* ceremonial sword held by one of the attendants is likewise a mark of chieftaincy. Even the nudity of the first six attendants on this altar tableau can be interpreted as a sign of their subservience to the queen mother, likening the power of the *Iyoba* in her domain to that of the Oba in his, where his unmarried male attendants also receive clothes only when given permission to marry by the king (Roth 1968:24; see cat. nos. 19, 20). Just the fact that brass *aseberia* are made for the queen mother indicates her unique role in Benin: only the Oba is similarly honored.

The tradition of queen mother altar tableaus is thought to have been started in the eighteenth century. The revival of the kingdom after the turmoil of the seventeenth century, and especially the renewed emphasis on primogeniture, may have led to the elaboration of the number and types of objects found on royal ancestral altars at that time.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of the queen mother on this *aseberia* resembles the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century queen mother heads, and the almost square base and motifs depicted in relief on it likewise resemble those found on many other eighteenth-century objects.

1. Only a few examples of *aseberia* for queen mother altars are known. See, for example, Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983: figs. 61, 62; von Luschan 1919: figs. 458, 459, pl. 83; Wolf 1970: fig. D-18; London, British Museum 1985: 2D11.

2. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.

3. *Ibid.*





**23. Altar Tableau: Queen Mother  
and Attendants (view 2)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th century

Brass; h. 13½ in. (34.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.111

*Ex Collection:* R. Sturgis Ingersoll

*References:* Robbins 1966: fig. 175;

London, Sotheby and Co., 1974:

lot 75; Dark 1982: Z2/77

*Exhibitions:* Philadelphia, University

Museum, 1959, no. D-1; Bloomington,

Indiana University Art Museum, 1980;

New York, Grey Art Gallery, 1981: no. 24;

South Hadley, Mount Holyoke College Art

Museum, 1984: no. 9, fig. 65

**23. Altar Tableau: Queen Mother  
and Attendants (view 3)**





# ROOSTERS



Brass roosters are placed on ancestral altars commemorating the queen mothers of Benin. Their presence on a royal altar was first noted in the diary of Lt. Commander J. Jeans, who served with troops occupying Benin following the British Punitive Expedition of 1897. Jeans described some of the altars found inside the Oba's compound, including an "altar on which stood a pair of bronze cocks," and on which goats and fowls were sacrificed (Miles 1938:6). Unfortunately, he did not say to whom this altar was dedicated, but it is tempting to think of it as a queen mother altar such as that described by Paula Ben-Amos. She reports that after the death of a queen mother, the Oba establishes an altar in her honor in his own palace, where he performs private commemorative rituals every year (Ben-Amos in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:82). Brass roosters are also placed on the commemorative altars established in the queen mother's own palace in the Uselu section of Benin City. Two such altars were photographed by Eckart von Sydow during his 1936 visit to Benin, and one is reproduced here (fig. 33; von Sydow 1938: pl. 1, fig. 1).

Although both hens and roosters are used for sacrifices in Benin, these sculptures are identified as roosters not merely by their combs, wattles, and distinctive sickle, or tail, feathers, but also by their spurs. In Benin these sharp protuberances are thought to signify the strength and maturity of the male fowl (Nevadomsky 1987:225, n. 6). As Paula Ben-Amos suggests, roosters, hens, rams, cows, mudfish, and other sacrificial animals may refer in Benin art to the wealth required in offering sacrifices, the social hierarchy that is confirmed through the distribution of sacrificial meat, and, more broadly, the ideal world order that is demonstrated by the animals' "submission to the dominance of man" (Ben-Amos 1976b:247).

Beyond the rooster's significance as a sacrificial offering, its placement as a male creature on queen mother altars demands explanation. Joseph Nevadomsky has pointed out that the rooster's gender does not necessarily prevent it from being associated with women in Edo thought (1987:229–31). The rooster is a symbol for the

## 24. Rooster (view 1)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th century?

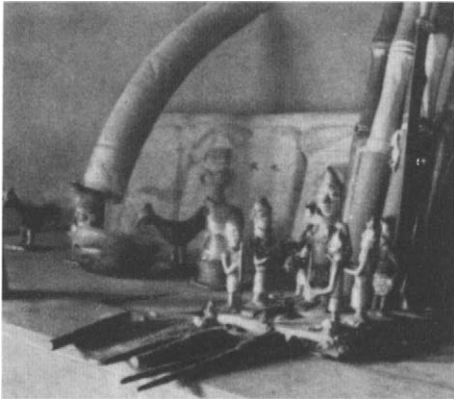


Fig. 33. Royal ancestor altar, dedicated in 1933 to Iyoba Eson III, mother of Akenzua II. Photograph by Eckart von Sydow, 1936 (von Sydow 1954: pl. 28B)

Eson, the senior wife of the Oba. She trains the junior wives in court etiquette and rituals and is responsible for running the women's quarters of the king's palace. Her praise name is "Eson, *Ogoro Madagba*, the cock that crows at the head of the harem," an analogy that denotes both her dominant position among the king's wives and her strong, aggressive character. The Oba's senior wife and the queen mother of his successor are not necessarily the same woman unless the senior wife gave birth to the Oba's first son, as is the case of the present queen mother, who is the mother of Oba Erediauwa and was the senior wife of the late Oba Akenzua II.

The queen mother occupies a unique position among women in Benin. She has the same authority as the senior Town Chiefs, who are all men. Past queen mothers, such as Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie, are renowned for having intervened successfully in the affairs of men, such as warfare and magic. The altar tableaux that decorate altars honoring queen mothers also show them with the trappings of rulership ordinarily reserved for men in Benin (see cat. no. 23). Since the queen mother is different from other women and shares many privileges and powers with men, it is not surprising that a male symbol, the rooster, should be used to honor her.

More than two dozen brass roosters are known in the corpus of Benin art (Dark 1982; Nevadomsky 1987:240). Each stands upon a square pedestal, usually decorated with a guilloche pattern around its sides. Although not present on the two examples in the Perls collection, relief motifs adorn some of the pedestals. Like the motifs on the bases of altar tableaux honoring the queen mother, these depict ram heads, crosses, and elephant trunks ending in hands holding leaves.

Cat. no. 24 depicts a plump bird, almost life size, with magnificent plumage. There is an added sense of realism in the modeling of the beautifully arched sickle feathers and of the wings, including the "saddle," which falls in a U-shaped panel over the rear portion. The feathers and other traits are indicated by fine linear designs that were incised directly in the wax model in a variety of patterns to differentiate the various parts of the rooster's body. For example, leaf-shaped ovoid feathers cover the breast, the wing bow and bar, and the hocks. Smaller versions of these ovoid patterns depict the more delicate feathers at the back of the head. Pointed, hook-shaped designs indicate the longer, more ruffled feathers on the neck, back, and saddle. Long horizontal herringbone patterns distinguish the longer primary and secondary feathers of the wing. Similar herringbone incisions decorate the sickle feathers. (The tips of some of the sickle feathers are missing.) The main tail, visible between the sickle feathers, is decorated with incised vertical or diagonal herringbones. The scaly skin on the shanks of the legs is suggested by a dotted lozenge pattern, and the comb and head are stippled to show their bumpy texture. While these patterns reflect the actual appearance of a rooster closely enough for each part to be distinguished and identified,

each is essentially an abstract decorative pattern. The effect, in which repeated abstract, ornamental motifs seem to encase the surface of an essentially naturalistic and full-volumed sculpture, is somewhat contradictory, but completely typical of the Benin brasscaster's approach to form and decoration.

Cat. no. 25 conforms less closely to the actual anatomy of the rooster. It is a more slender example, in which surface decoration rather than sculptural form dominates. Its feathers are less varied in form and less precisely rendered than those in cat. no. 24, and some seem even to have been stamped rather than incised in the wax model. A number of similar roosters are known (Webster 1895–1901, cat. 21: nos. 12, 151; Eyo 1977: 130 right; Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 40, no. 301).

There is little evidence on which to establish the dates of the Benin brass roosters. We have no evidence for when the roosters began to be used on queen mother altars, although we know that the title of queen mother, and the practice of honoring her with brass commemorative heads, began in the reign of Oba Esigie in the sixteenth century. The brass heads made for queen mother altars fall into two distinct stylistic groups, one attributed to the “early period” and the other to the “late period,” with a hiatus in between (see cat. nos. 6–8; fig. 20). As a basis for dating the roosters is developed, it would be interesting to note whether they can likewise be classified into two such groups based on style. Both William Fagg and Philip Dark have assigned roosters similar to cat. no. 24 to the eighteenth century (Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960:55; Dark 1973:91; Fagg 1978:23). The square pedestal and motifs depicted on some of the roosters also point to an eighteenth-century date, if the dating of altar tableaus and flanged heads with these motifs is also correct. Nevadomsky proposes that some of the roosters may be earlier than the eighteenth century, since a rooster in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich has been dated by thermoluminescence to 1642, plus or minus twenty years (Nevadomsky 1987:231). Cat. no. 25 was probably made in the nineteenth century, as its high zinc content (24 percent) and the use of drawn iron wire for the core pins suggest.



**24. Rooster (view 2)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th century?

Brass; h. 19 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (50.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.54

*Ex Collection:* Jack Whitehead

*Reference:* London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet  
and Co., 1980b: lot 140

**25. Rooster**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th century

Brass; h. 18 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (46.7 cm)

Lent by Katherine Perls







# RATTLE-STAFFS



One of the constant features of Benin ancestral altars, whether commemorating royalty, chiefs, or commoners, is the presence of rattle-staffs (*ukhurhe*). These staffs are generally made of wood, although for royal altars they are also made of brass and more rarely of ivory. Toward the upper end they are pierced by two or more rectangular slits. These open into a hollow chamber containing a wood or clay cylinder that rattles when the staff is shaken or struck on the ground. This sound and the prayers it accompanies are believed to call the attention of the ancestral spirits (Roth 1968:72). When a man dies his senior son will have a rattle-staff carved for his altar and will use it to communicate with his deceased father's spirit, either to help or to curse family members (Ben-Amos 1975:176).

According to R. E. Bradbury, rattle-staffs “represent authority transmitted from a family or village or ward head, or priest, to his successor. In the case of the Oba's *ukhurhe*, they are the symbol of the authority transmitted through his father from all the previous kings” (cited in Dark 1973:26). Paula Ben-Amos has called rattle-staffs “the very symbol of the cyclical socio-temporal order” (in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983: 16; Ben-Amos 1988:26), because their placement and form situate the individual within his societal and generational context. The rattle-staffs are massed in great numbers side by side on the ancestral shrine (fig. 34), emphasizing the importance of the community over the individual and stressing its continuity over many generations. Most rattle-staffs, especially wooden ones, have segmented bamboolike shafts whose form derives from the *ukhurhe-oho* plant, which grows wild in the forest (Ben-Amos, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:16). This plant has small branches that break off when they reach a certain length. Each branch, and thus each segment of the rattle-staff, represents a single life span. By joining together many individual sections on one rattle-staff and by massing together the rattle-staffs on each altar, the connection between individuals within the community and the natural cycle of generations following each other are represented.

## 26. Rattle-Staff: Three Figures (detail)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th century

The segments of the *ukhurhe-oho* plant are visible in the wooden rattle-staff in the Perls collection, in the two constricting sections between the three figures carved on its shaft (cat. no. 26). This staff has the Oba's mark near its base. Similar rattle-staffs, carved with three figures and hung with strands of cowrie shells, are seen in an 1897 photograph of a half-destroyed altar in Benin (von Luschan 1919: fig. 5; Roth 1968: fig. 75). Another similar rattle-staff, which like this one is heavily coated with white pigment, is said to have been used in Olokun rituals in a village outside Benin City (Ben-Amos 1980: figs. 46, 47).

The figure at the top of the Perls rattle-staff is seated upon a round stool; he holds a rattle-staff in his left hand and an unidentifiable round object in his right. He wears a wrapper with a guilloche pattern and two coral-bead necklaces. Although his head is quite eroded, he seems to wear a cap with a tall conical projection on top and a feather projecting upward on the left side, suggesting he may be a priest or a chief. The middle figure is standing and wears the same type of wrapper as the figure above it, with its left side lifted up to reveal another wrapper beneath. This figure holds both hands in front of his torso, with thumb and fingers spread, holding an irregularly shaped object that is too eroded to identify. The bottom figure is kneeling and wears a wrapper lacking the guilloche pattern. He, too, places his hands in front of his torso and holds a tray with four kola nuts. While it is difficult to identify these three figures because many of the objects they hold are so eroded, they seem to portray a priest or chief and his worshipers or attendants.

All three figures are carved in a uniform style, with greatly oversized heads, diminutive legs, and stout necks and torsos. These proportions and the preference for blocklike forms are typical of the style practiced by Igbesamwan, the royal guild of ivory carvers. Igbesamwan carvers are also responsible for the wooden altar to the hand (cat. no. 33), the carved tusks (cat. nos. 12–14), ivory bracelets (cat. nos. 73–75), and ivory boxes (cat. nos. 119–120) in the Perls collection. Typical of Igbesamwan carving are the massive heads, bulging eyes, and blocky noses and lips seen here, and the use of heavily incised grooves to define decorative elements.

While wooden *ukhurhe* are found on ancestral altars of the king, chiefs, and commoners alike, the Oba alone has the right to have a brass rattle-staff, such as cat. no. 27. Another well-known brass *ukhurhe*, depicting the Oba Akenzua I standing atop an elephant who represents the Iyase n'Ode whom the Oba defeated, is also in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 8; Vogel 1978; Ben-Amos 1984). The shaft of the brass rattle-staff in the Perls collection features alternating spheres and knotlike forms that, like the segments of the *ukhurhe* plant, create the effect of repetitive identical units. It has two rattle chambers, ornamented with three-strand guilloche patterns. The staff's square-sectioned base also bears these guilloche patterns.



Fig. 34. Rattle-staffs, bells, tusk, and stone celts on the collective altar for all Obas prior to Adolo (r. ca. 1850–88). Photograph by William Fagg (58/53/3). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London

At the top of the staff is a right hand grasping a coiled mudfish. Wooden *ukhurhe* surmounted by a clenched fist rather than heads or figures are a royal and chiefly prerogative and can be seen on the collective shrine for all the Obas prior to Adolo, in the Obas palace in Benin (fig. 34). Those with hands grasping mudfish, like this one, are restricted to the king (Dark 1973:32; Ben-Amos 1975:176). The top and shaft of an identical, but broken, rattle-staff are in the collections of the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (acc. no. 210331; Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: no. 211), and the Peabody Museum, Harvard University (Hooton 1917: pl. vi, no. 28).

The hand's elegantly tapering thumb and long fingers with their carefully groomed fingernails do not diminish the impact of the mudfish it holds as a potent symbol of Benin kingship. The mudfish has many meanings in Benin art. It is the preferred sacrifice to the sea god Olokun and refers to the Oba's relationship to Olokun and his ability to pass between land and water, between the human world and the world of the spirits. In addition, the coiled mudfish refers specifically to the Oba's ability to cast and then release a curse, to set up obstacles and remove them, to punish and pardon. An adage in Benin, "the one who holds the fish can also let it loose," refers to this aspect of the Oba's power and illuminates the imagery on this rattle-staff (Ben Amos 1980:5, fig. 58; Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:66). Such a reference to the Oba's supreme power to cast maledictions on and grant benedictions to his subjects coincides perfectly with this royal rattle-staff's function as a means of communication with the ancestral spirits of past Obas and the transmission of royal authority from past generations of kings to the present one.



**26. Rattle-Staff: Three Figures**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Wood, cowrie shells, brass bell,  
pigment; h. 59½ in. (151.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.96

*Reference:* New York, Sotheby Parke-Bernet,  
1977b: lot 167

**27. Rattle-Staff: Hand  
Holding Mudfish**

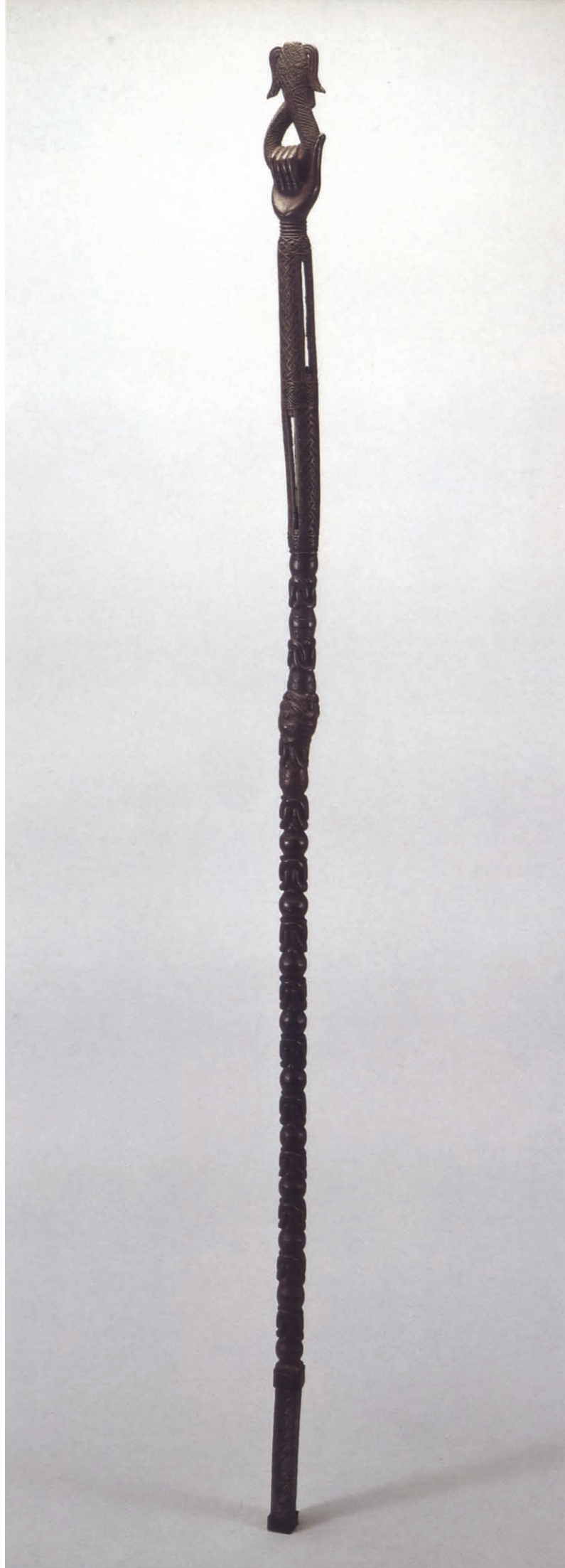
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century

Brass; h. 59¼ in. (150.5 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.99

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Lt.-General  
Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Webster 1895–1901: cat. 17,  
no. 74; Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 25, figs. 161–63;  
von Luschan 1919: 450, fig. 716





# BELLS



Brass bells, like rattle-staffs, are an essential feature of Benin ancestral altars—whether for kings, chiefs, or wealthy commoners. Several bells are placed along the front of each altar (see figs. 16, 34), and they are rung in order to summon the ancestors to hear the prayers of their descendants and to partake of the offerings made at the altar. The bells are usually in the form of a truncated, four-sided pyramid, with a straplike handle at the top and a clapper suspended inside. Although brass bells that signal the presence of spirits are found throughout southern Nigeria, the quadrangular form is unique to Benin (Neaher 1979:46). Small quadrangular bells have been worn prominently on the chest by Benin warriors since the time of Oba Ozolua (r. late fifteenth century; Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:62) and can be seen on many plaques and tusks (see cat. nos. 36, 38; fig. 25). During a military campaign, the sound of the bells identified individual warriors, frightened the enemy, signaled victory, and generally suggested the protective presence of the ancestors (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 97; Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:105–106).

The quadrangular bells are decorated in a variety of ways, including incised linear, geometric, and floral motifs; low-relief heads and figures; and panels of lattice openwork. One side is usually given more elaborate decoration than the others. The more elaborate or unusual the form or decoration of the bell, the higher the rank of the altar it is placed upon.<sup>1</sup> Cat. no. 28 has a Portuguese face cast in relief on the front, closely resembling the faces of the Portuguese traders seen on Benin plaques and other objects (see cat. nos. 47, 48). He has a thin, beaklike nose with narrow nosewings, thinly rimmed eyes, and long sinuous hair, and his moustache and flat ovoid beard are incised with fine wavy lines. His face is carefully modeled; even the slight bulge of flesh connecting the nose and cheeks has been indicated. His hat is decorated with a fish-scale design and has two feathers inserted in it. A very unusual feature is the wire strung in three bands through loops cast onto the bell; hanging from these wires are small cutouts in the shape of *eben* swords. These shimmer when the bell is shaken, and also add a rattling buzz to the bell's tone.

**28. Altar Bell: Portuguese Face**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century  
Brass; h. 7¼ in. (18.4 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.85  
*Exhibitions:* Bloomington, Indiana University Art Museum, 1980; Washington, D.C., National Museum of African Art, 1981: no. 65





Fig. 35. The late Chief Isekhure holding his brass bell and rattle-staff. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky

Cat. no. 29 is a quadrangular bell whose handle, rather than a simple loop, is in the form of a seated figure holding an *ada* sword across his lap. He is wearing a one-piece dress and coral-bead necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. If the textured pattern of his dress is meant to indicate coral beads, this figure represents the Oba, who alone wears such a gown. If not, it may represent one of the high-ranking priests such as Osa or Osuan who wear long one-piece costumes and are among the few priests and chiefs to whom the Oba grants the right to carry an *ada*, a symbol of the king's authority (Nevadomsky 1989:68). Osa and Osuan sit with their *ada* swords held horizontally across their laps when in the presence of the Oba (Blackmun 1984a:320). The hat with a tall central projection and a feather inserted in the side is perhaps the conical basketry crown of *itoto* fiber that is worn by Osa and Osuan and only a few of the highest-ranking chiefs (Blackmun 1984a:266). The bell may have been placed on the ancestral altar of one of these priests. In fig. 35 the late Chief Isekhure is posed with a bell similar to cat. no. 29, its handle in the form of a figure. Like the rattle-staff that he also holds, the bell is an emblem of his link to his ancestors. The thick walls and rather crudely rendered facial features of cat. no. 29, as well as its resemblance to Isekhure's bell, suggest it was made in the nineteenth or twentieth century.

Like Isekhure's bell, cat. no. 30 is not quadrangular, but rather conical in shape. It is divided into two halves by vertical rows of loops, which may once have held dangling elements. On one side is depicted the Oba dressed in beaded regalia; his legs terminate in fish and he grasps a crocodile in each hand. The fish-legged king is one of the most potent images of divine kingship in Benin art, symbolizing the king's association with the occult powers and courtly grandeur of Olokun, the god of the sea. The king's large eyes with thick, hatched rims and his broad, angled lips resemble late-period Benin heads, suggesting a date in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. On the other side of the bell is depicted another sea creature, one of Olokun's minions. The image is somewhat unusual in that it combines the round head and barbels of a mudfish with the four legs of a crocodile. The heads that terminate the king's serpentine legs are also unusual, resembling neither the Benin conventions for mudfish nor those for crocodiles. These peculiarities may be the mark of the brasscaster, who seems also to have taken special delight in the juxtaposition of numerous textured patterns and in the use of thin, raised, hatched borders to delineate the edges of the various parts of the bell as well as of the figures and animals depicted on it.

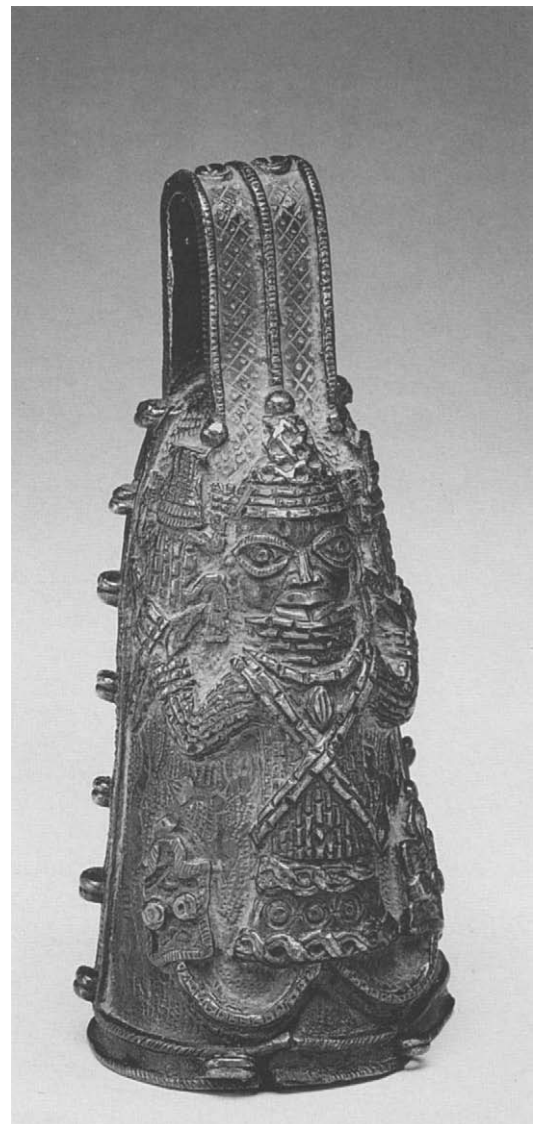
Similar borders are a prominent feature of cat. no. 31. This is not an altar bell, but rather was probably worn suspended from the loop at the top as part of the ceremonial garb of the Oba. Somewhat similar pendants can be seen dangling from the coral-bead baldrics worn by the Oba in his full regalia (fig. 14; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 89). At the

bottom is a spherical rattle chamber with a flange around the center and four slits (the rattle element is now missing). The slightly tapering shaft is divided into three sections, each of which features two identical images facing in opposite directions. The top and bottom sections are aligned and the center section is rotated 90 degrees. The bottom section depicts two foreigners whose long hair, hooked noses, beards, and moustaches derive from early Benin depictions of Portuguese. Here the artist has used thin raised bands with delicately incised marks to define the rectangular outlines of the face and to indicate the hair, lower eyelid, nose, moustache, and beard. Two Edo figures stand back-to-back in the center section. They each wear a single strand of beads at the neck, a wrapper, and a sash, and carry a sheathed sword. The top section features two crocodiles with short square snouts, probably *eghughu*, the docile, short-nosed species that is considered to be “the symbolic equivalent of the mudfish,” an appropriate offering for well-being, prosperity, and success, especially victory over one’s enemies (Ben-Amos 1983:170–71). While quadrangular bells are known in great numbers, having been found on so many ancestral altars in Benin, bells such as cat. no. 31 are much less common. Similar examples can be found in the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde (von Luschan 1919: pl. 105), the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne (Froehlich 1966: no. 36), the Museum of Mankind, London (1897.532; 1947.Af8.4), and the Dresden Museum für Völkerkunde (Webster 1895–1901: cat. 21, fig. 11).

1. Joseph Nevadomsky 1991: personal communication.



**29. Altar Bell: Figure with Sword**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th–20th century  
Brass, iron; h. 7½ in. (19.1 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.87



**30. Altar Bell: Fish-legged King  
(view 1)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century  
Brass; h. 5¾ in. (14.6 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.86

**31. Bell**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

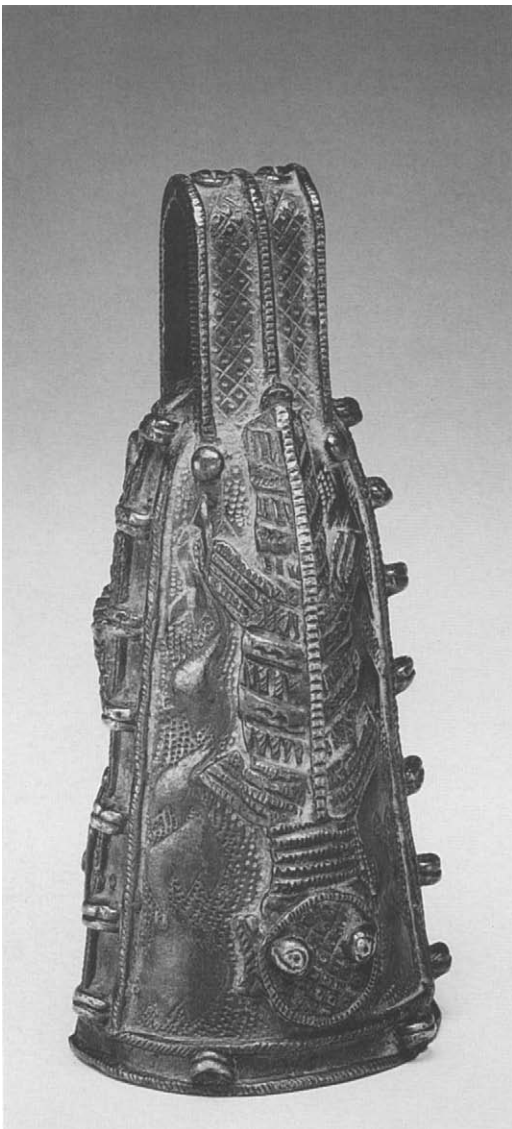
18th–19th century

Brass, iron; l. 10¼ in. (26.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.102

**30. Altar Bell: Fish-legged King (view 2)**





# ALTAR RINGS



The Perls collection includes a brass ring (cat. no. 32) depicting three gagged and severed heads and four bound and decapitated bodies with vultures feasting upon them. Placed prominently at the “front” of the ring (opposite the hinged section at the “back”) is a fourth head, larger than the others. It is not gagged and is wearing an elaborate conical hat with a tall projection from the top and a wide braid down the front. Its eyes appear to be closed and its face is covered with vertical striations, similar to those found on the twelfth- to fifteenth-century brass and terracotta heads from Ife and the fifteenth-century heads from Owo (Eyo and Willett 1980). The severed heads are striated or cross-hatched, but only on their foreheads, possibly indicating that they are not Edo people but foreign captives. Their eyes are wide open, surrounded by thick, hatched rims. The decapitated bodies are rendered very schematically, with the limbs and back depicted as thin strands. Interspersed between the heads and bodies are round pots, like those that hold herbally enhanced water on altars dedicated to Osun, the power inherent in leaves and herbs.

These motifs conjure up the grisly scenes of human sacrifice that confronted the members of the British Punitive Expedition when they entered Benin in 1897. They found a great number of bodies that had been sacrificed on the occasion of Igue, one of the most important palace ceremonies, in order to revitalize the king’s spiritual powers and thereby strengthen the kingdom; still further sacrifices were performed following the massacre of James Phillips and his party, the event that sparked the Punitive Expedition. The image of the sacrificial victims on this ring is a powerful one, conveying at once “the horrific authority of the king, the occult power of the priest, the supernatural forces of the deities” (Nevadomsky 1989:67).

Three stylistically distinct groups of altar rings are known (Vogel 1983). One group, attributed to the court of Benin, is distinguished by fully three-dimensional figures shown seated or standing perpendicular to the surface of the ring in addition to the severed heads and bodies cast in relief (fig. 36). The second group, to which this ring

## 32. Altar Ring

Nigeria; provincial Benin?

17th–19th century

Brass; diam. 8½ in. (21.6 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.134ab

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers; Alvin Abrams

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 25, fig. 158;

Vogel 1983: fig. 26

*Exhibition:* Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 1979

belongs, is designated as “provincial Benin,” perhaps in contrast to the first, since the rings of this group lack the full, ceremonially garbed figures. A third group of rings is smaller and thicker in shape (fig. 37) and has full figures in ceremonial garb shown “standing” (actually lying parallel to the ring’s surface). This group has been attributed to a Yoruba brasscasting center, possibly Ijebu-Ode (Vogel 1983). William Fagg has suggested that the “provincial Benin” rings were made in Owo, or in Benin for use in Owo, although there is as yet no documentation that allows their place of origin to be specified (London, Christie’s, 1979:37). The “provincial” designation of this and similar rings must be used cautiously, until more is known about brasscasting centers in Benin’s sphere of influence, about the variety of styles acceptable to Igun Eronmwon, the royal brasscasters’ guild, and about the intended function of these objects.

Joseph Nevadomsky has suggested several possibilities for the use of these rings (Nevadomsky 1989:61–68). Since the wearing of metal is a sign of subjugation, the rings may have been worn around the neck by slaves of the king, their imagery underscoring the king’s awesome power over them. The ring in the Perls collection is hinged and could easily have fit over a person’s head. Another possibility, favored by Nevadomsky, is that the Benin rings were made for the ancestral altar honoring Oba Ehengbuda (r. late sixteenth century), who was renowned for his command of herbal medicine and occult forces. Ehengbuda is honored in smaller brass rings, actually bracelets believed to embody fearsome spiritual powers (see cat. nos. 84, 85), also featuring heads, some of which are striated. The Benin altar rings are explicit depictions of Ehengbuda’s dual nature—as Oba, with power over life and death of his people, and as healer, with command over supernatural forces. The “provincial” rings may have served a similar purpose, although a full understanding of them must await further identification of the head at the “front” of the ring. Nevadomsky suggests that the Benin rings were commissioned by Ehengbuda’s son Ohuan in the first half of the seventeenth century. The “provincial Benin” rings may have been made at any time since then.



Fig. 36. Altar ring. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, ca. 1600–1650. Brass. London, Museum of Mankind. 1954. Af23.370. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 37. Altar ring. Nigeria, Yoruba, 16th–20th century. Brass. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1976. 1976.239





# ALTARS TO THE HAND



In addition to the royal ancestral altars that are the setting for much of Benin's art, other types of altars also feature sculpture. Worship of the hand is one of three aspects of Benin religion dedicated to physical or metaphysical aspects of one's own being. The other two include the head, which represents one's ability to lead a successful life based upon one's intelligence, judgment, character, and senses, and *ehi*, one's personal destiny, which determines and limits one's capacity for success and happiness especially in regard to childbearing (Bradbury 1961:133–34). While the head and *ehi* are worshiped by most Benin people, the hand is more restricted in its devotees. It is concerned with the individual's ability to achieve success through his own actions, skills, and enterprise, that is, through the work of his own hands. The hand is credited with the acquisition of great wealth or status and with the success of hunters, warriors, craftsmen, and others who depend upon manual skills and physical strength for their achievements. It is worshiped primarily by those who have already achieved outstanding wealth or success.

Benin beliefs about the hand are part of a complex of ideas and rituals found throughout southern Nigeria, among the Igbo, Ishan, Isoko, Urhobo, Igala, and western Ijaw peoples (Bradbury 1961:133). According to Egharevba, the Benin kings and chiefs have worshiped the hand since the time of Oba Ewuare, the fifteenth-century warrior king (Egharevba 1949:88). The wars of expansion that Ewuare waged and won not only gave him the impetus to become a devotee of the hand, but may also have exposed him to other areas in southern Nigeria where hand worship was practiced (Dean, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:33). Bradbury has also suggested that in the past warfare was the primary focus of these beliefs but was ultimately superseded by other hand-dependent occupations, such as farming, trade, medicine, crafts, and politics (Bradbury 1961:135).

Altars dedicated to the hand, called *ikegobo*, are cylindrical wood sculptures with figures carved in relief around their sides (cat. no. 33). The cylindrical form refers to a type of round, legless stool commonly

33. Altar to the Hand (view 1)  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th century

Fig. 38. Altar to the hand. Nigeria, Edo. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky



used by the Edo in the past (Ben-Amos, cited by Dean, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:33). The altar is placed on an altar stand, a semicircular platform whose straight edge is extended at both sides. It too is carved on its top and sides with figures and other motifs in relief. At the top of the altar is a wooden spike, which may have supported an ivory tusk. Such altars were placed in the second public room of the houses of traditional chiefs, on top of a polished and whitened mud platform (fig. 38). Smaller versions, without the semicircular altar stand and with fewer, if any, figures, are owned by nonchiefs and less powerful craftsmen.

This *ikegobo*, like others of its type, depicts persons and objects that refer to the accumulation of power and wealth. At the front of the altar is a figure wearing a wrapper and a band of coral beads across his chest, presumably the chief whose altar this is. Two padlocked chests are placed on either side of him, indicating his wealth, and next to him is a lozenge-shaped coral bead, emphasizing his status as a chief. He carries an *eben* ceremonial sword in his right hand and is supported on the other side by an attendant who holds a shield and spear. On the left side of the altar is another figure holding two spears, one of which has a severed human head impaled on it. Swords, shields, and spears, particularly those with trophy heads, emphasize the often warlike, aggressive character of those who seek success through their own efforts. Around the back and right side of the cylinder are other motifs commonly associated with the worship of the hand: a hand with clenched fist and extended thumb; the feather of a vulturine fish eagle, a bird that symbolizes chieftaincy and longevity; a hammer and pliers, tools of the blacksmith who, like warriors, depends upon his hands for success; a drum and a kola nut.

Similar motifs are evenly and symmetrically arranged in a frieze along the front of the altar stand. Three figures appear to be carrying trays or baskets of cowrie shells, the traditional form of currency in Benin and a further reference to the wealth resulting from the worship of the hand. In addition, there are two crocodile heads, two *ada* ceremonial swords, two clenched fists, two fish-eagle feathers, kola nuts, and the blacksmith's hammer and pliers. On the top surface of the altar stand are depicted two kola nuts, two mudfish, and two crocodiles, all favored as objects of sacrifice. The crocodiles are likely to be *eghughu*, the docile, short-nosed variety that is sacrificed to ensure successful ventures and to achieve dominance over one's

enemies, particularly on altars to the hand (Ben-Amos 1983:170–71). Throughout the altar are reiterated the themes of wealth (cowries, chests), success (the feathers, coral bead, and swords of chieftaincy), prowess (weapons and smithing tools), the sacrifices necessary for success (mudfish, crocodiles, kola nuts), and the very source of success and power—the hand itself. Almost identical iconography is found on other wooden altars to the hand.<sup>1</sup>

The manner in which these motifs are carved is consistent with the carving style of Igbesanmwan, the Benin royal guild of wood and ivory carvers. The figures are blocky and squat in their proportions, with the body divided roughly in thirds—the head, torso, and wrapper and feet. Figures and objects alike are characterized by the repetition of heavy parallel grooves. These grooves serve to unify the disparate individual motifs depicted on the altar and altar stand, and to enliven the surface with interesting textures, much like the finely incised patterns on Benin cast brass sculptures.

Wooden altars to the hand such as cat. no. 33 are owned by Benin chiefs. The Oba, queen mother, and certain other privileged chiefs had the right to own cast brass examples (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. IX, figs. 1, 2; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 1). Cat. no. 34, for example, appears to be a portion of the brass *ikegobo* made for the Ezomo, one of the seven Uzama and the Oba's most powerful military chief (Bradbury 1961:129–33, pl. L; see also Ben Amos 1980: fig. 34). According to Bradbury, the Ezomo's altar depicts Ezomo Ehenua, whom Oba Akenzua I (r. ca. 1715–35) rewarded by making the title hereditary. Ehenua contributed greatly to the consolidation of Akenzua's power by defeating the Oba's enemy, the Iyase n'Ode, and by reconquering weakened parts of the kingdom.

Around the altar's sides are figures of Ehenua, his warriors, and attendants (Bradbury 1961: pl. L). At the top of the altar, surrounded by figures of Portuguese soldiers and a horn blower, a box carrier, and a healer, is the separately cast figure of the Oba seated on a dais (cat. no. 34). He is surrounded by three sacrificial animals—a cow, a goat, and a ram—tethered together on a rope. Unlike most representations of the Oba, this one does not portray him in ceremonial attire. He wears instead a simple unpatterned wrapper and a single strand of coral beads. He lacks the beaded crown seen in most depictions of the Oba. He appears much less prepossessing than the larger, more elaborately and powerfully attired figure of Ezomo Ehenua that appears immediately below him on the altar. The Oba holds in his left hand a rattle-staff used in communicating with ancestral spirits (see cat. nos. 26, 27) and in his right a kola nut. Placed on the dais next to him are a round bowl for sacrificial offerings (similar to cat. no. 114) and a calabash for palm-wine libations. According to Bradbury, the Oba's "lack of ceremonial costume indicates that the sacrifices he is making are contingent ones rather than part of an annual festival (*ugie*). Ezomo's interpretation is that he is sacrificing to his ancestors for

Ehenua's success in war" (Bradbury 1961:132). This image of the Oba, although unusual in many respects, reflects the importance of the theme of sacrifice that was seen also on the wooden altars to the hand.

If this altar to the hand had been made during the lifetime of Ezomo Ehenua and Oba Akenzua I, it would date from the early eighteenth century. However, William Fagg has suggested that the style of the figures—presumably their lack of finely incised surface detail and the relatively rough treatment of the Oba's hair and facial features—indicates that the altar may have been made later, possibly for a nineteenth-century descendant of Ezomo Ehenua (Bradbury 1961:132; Vogel 1978:100).

1. See Bradbury 1961: pl. N; Dark 1973: figs. 36, 110; Dark 1982: illus. 5; Fröhlich 1966: pl. 73; Gainesville 1967: fig. 35; von Luschan 1919: fig. 868, pl. 123; Pitt-Rivers 1900: figs. 259, 335; von Sydow 1954: pl. 29 D, E.



**33. Altar to the Hand (view 2)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Wood; h. 20 in. (50.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.112ab



33. Altar to the Hand (view 3)



**34. Oba with Sacrificial Animals  
(view 1)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Brass; h. 4 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (12.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.113

*Reference:* Bradbury 1961:130, fig. 1; pl. L

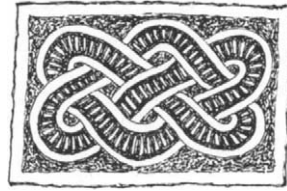


34. Oba with Sacrificial Animals (view 2)





# PALACE PLAQUES





# PALACE PLAQUES



The Oba's palace in Benin, the setting for the royal ancestral altars, was also the backdrop for an elaborate court ceremonial life in which the Oba, his warriors, chiefs and titleholders, priests, members of the palace societies and their constituent guilds, foreign merchants and mercenaries, and numerous attendants and retainers all took part. An engraving published in 1668 by Olfert Dapper shows some of the palace's high-turreted buildings and a lively procession of the king and his courtiers (fig. 5). Dapper reported, "The King shows himself only once a year to his people, going out of his court on horseback, beautifully attired with all sorts of royal ornaments, and accompanied by three or four hundred noblemen on horseback and on foot, and a great number of musicians before and behind him, playing merry tunes on all sorts of musical instruments, as is shown in the preceding picture of Benin City. Then he does not ride far from the court, but soon returns thither after a little tour. Then the king causes some tame leopards that he keeps for his pleasure to be led about in chains; he also shows many dwarfs and deaf people, whom he likes to keep at court" (quoted in Roth 1968:74).

The palace, a vast sprawling agglomeration of buildings and courtyards, was also the setting for one of the most fascinating art forms created in Benin, rectangular brass plaques whose relief images portray the persons and events that animated the court. The only contemporary reference to the plaques occurs in an eyewitness description of the palace complex written in the early seventeenth century and recorded by Dapper: "It is divided into many magnificent palaces, houses, and apartments of the courtiers, and comprises beautiful and long square galleries, about as large as the exchange at Amsterdam, but one larger than another, resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered with cast copper, on which are engraved the pictures of their war exploits and battles, and kept very clean" (quoted in Roth 1968:160).

About nine hundred of these plaques survive today; contrary to Dapper's account, their figures were not engraved but were cast in

**36. Plaque: Warrior Chief, Warriors, and Attendants**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

relief with details incised in the wax model. They were hung on the pillars of the palace by nails punched directly through them. When the palace was seized by the British Punitive Expedition, the plaques were no longer on display, but according to Reginald Hugh Bacon, an eyewitness, were found “buried in the dirt of ages, in one house” (cited in Freyer 1987:40). This is an apparent exaggeration: they were not literally buried, but rather stored, probably in the part of the palace belonging to Iwebo, the palace society that includes the keepers of the regalia and the guilds of craftsmen who create it (Blackmun 1984a:204). One elderly chief who was a palace attendant prior to 1897 recalled that the plaques “were kept like a card index up to the time of the Punitive Expedition, and referred to when there was a dispute about courtly etiquette” (Willett 1971:105).

The rectangular plaques exist in two formats. In one, the long vertical sides are turned back, creating an edge about ½ inch deep, usually decorated with an incised guilloche pattern (e.g., cat. nos. 35, 36, 44). In the other format, which is much narrower, the turned-back edges are missing and the design of the plaque background ends abruptly, as if cut off (see cat. nos. 37, 39, 40). These variations probably reflect in some way the size and shape of the pillars and the arrangement of the plaques on them.

The plaques are generally about ⅛ inch thick. Their backs feature roughly shaped hollows where the figures are located, so that the metal is of uniform thickness throughout. Marks in a variety of patterns, such as the raised linear design near the bottom in fig. 39, are found on quite a few of the plaques, but their significance is not known.

The backgrounds on the front of most of the plaques are incised with foliate patterns with one to four leaves, which Dark identified as *ebe-ame*, or the “river-leaf” design (1973:73). According to Ben-Amos, these leaves are used in healing rites by priestesses of Olokun, the god of the sea (1980:28). A few of the plaques have as their background design a circled cross (Fagg 1963: pl. 20), which Ben-Amos also associates with Olokun, along with the relief designs in the corners of some of the plaques (e.g., cat. nos. 35, 38, 41, 43, 44). These include rosettes, signifying the sun that falls into the sea each day, crocodiles, fish, and the heads or torsos of Portuguese.

Although some of the plaques represent “war exploits and battles” as Dapper reported (see, for example, Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 27), the vast majority of them depict the ceremonial life of the court. Most of the plaques portray static figures singly, in pairs, or in small groups hieratically arranged around a central figure as seen in fig. 40. The subject of this plaque may well be one of the royal processions described by Dapper. The king on horseback is attended by warriors who shield him and pages who support his arms. The figures’ heads are generally large in relation to the rest of the body, and the scale of the figures reflects their importance within the composition. This use of

“hierarchical proportions” is one of the key features of Benin art. While it disregards the actual size of figures and objects and ignores perspective, it allows the Benin brasscasters to emphasize what is important to them: the relationship of one figure to another in the Benin court hierarchy. Costumes, ornaments, hairstyles, weapons, musical instruments, and other objects used in the palace are portrayed in meticulous detail that clarifies the role, status, and specific action of the figures. The identity of these figures can sometimes be determined by comparing their costumes and regalia to those seen at Benin palace ceremonies today. However, as Joseph Nevadomsky has pointed out, this must be done cautiously, since much of contemporary ceremonial costume in Benin has been reintroduced and based upon styles of dress visible in the pre-1897 art forms, including the plaques (Nevadomsky 1986:46).

Dating the palace plaques is one of the key questions in the history of Benin art and has yet to be fully and satisfactorily resolved. According to an oral tradition collected by Lieutenant E. P. S. Rouppell, one of the British colonial officers who occupied Benin after the Punitive Expedition, the plaques were first produced during the reign of Oba Esigie in the early sixteenth century. In this account (quoted in Roth 1968:229–30), a “white man” named Ahammangiwa (a name of uncertain origin) came to Benin with others in the reign of Esigie and “made brasswork and plaques for the king. . . . The king gave him plenty of boys to teach.” The next Oba, Esigie’s son Orhogbua, waged war against the Igbo, and when he returned with his captured enemies, “Osogbua [*sic*] called Ahammangiwa and his boys, and asked them if they could put them in brass; they said ‘We can try,’ so they did and those are they—then the king nailed them to the wall of his house.” Paula Ben-Amos points out that while it is not clear whether this tradition refers to the origin of the plaques or the origin of brasscasting in general, it nevertheless places the origin of the plaques in the period of Portuguese contact with Benin and shows the conscious relationship between the plaques and historical events (Ben-Amos 1980:28; Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:13).

William Fagg proposed that the plaques were made from the middle of the sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century. He used the period of plaque production to define the middle period in his tripartite chronology of Benin art (see cat. nos. 1–5; Fagg 1963:33). He used the oral tradition recorded by Rouppell to establish the mid-sixteenth century as the *terminus post quem* for the creation of the plaques and proposed the end of the seventeenth century as the *terminus ante quem* because of the absence of any references to the plaques in European descriptions of the palace after that date. David van Nyendaël, for example, a Dutch trader who visited Benin in 1699 and 1702, described in some detail the palace architecture and the wood and brass sculptures within it, but he made no mention of the plaques (Bosman 1967:463–64).



Fig. 39. Rear view of plaque, cat. no. 39

Subsequent scholars have attempted to refine the dating of the plaques. Ben-Amos, in discussing the numerous references in the background and corners of the plaques to Olokun and the Portuguese who came to Benin from across his realm beginning in 1485, seems to suggest a strong connection between plaque production, Portuguese presence in Benin, and the reign of Esigie, a time when “the powers of the sea worked behind the Oba to strengthen and expand the kingdom” (Ben-Amos 1980:29). Such a connection implies that the making of the plaques began before the middle of the sixteenth century, a belief shared by Philip Dark, who further suggested that the plaques ceased to be made about 1640, when oral traditions say that Oba Ahenzae dissipated the royal treasury, depleting its reserves of brass and the means with which to make the plaques (Dark 1975:58). Irwin Tunis, an American scholar of Benin art, also suggests that plaque production ended early in the seventeenth century (Tunis 1983:52). Until further information or analysis is available, however, it seems safest to assume that the plaques were made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Attempts have also been made to arrange the plaques into a developmental sequence. Fagg isolated a few plaques that stand out from the others because of their active compositions, incorporation of motion and space, and imaginative use of the rectangular format. He attributed these to a few individual brasscasters (e.g., Master of the Circled Cross, Master of the Leopard Hunt, Master of the Cow Sacrifices), who he assumes flourished during the early years of plaque-making, before the “vertically regimented and thoroughly static mode came to be actively preferred” (Fagg 1963:33–35). Dark divided the plaques into three groups based upon the depth of relief, and proposed that those with the lowest relief are the earliest, those with the highest relief the latest (Dark 1975:58–59; Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960:21–22). These two views are based upon an underlying assumption regarding Benin art in general: that it developed from relative naturalism to relative exaggeration of the human form, from simple to complex, from “classic” to “baroque” forms, and from thin to thick and heavy castings. At this point in Benin studies, however, we need to know more about the style, iconography, placement, and technique of the plaques before a meaningful chronological sequence can be proposed. Paul Craddock, archaeometallurgist at the British Museum, has shown that analysis of the metal content of the plaques is not a useful criterion for dating them (Craddock and Picton 1986:11).

The origin of the plaque form itself has also been a topic of interest to scholars. Fagg and Dark have suggested that their rectangular format and relief technique reflect European influence (Fagg 1963:33; Dark 1973:4). Dark lists a number of items that the Portuguese may have carried in their ships and that may have inspired the plaque format, including European illuminated books, small ivory caskets with carved lids from India, and Indian miniature paintings. The quatrefoil “river leaves” incised on the background of the plaques

and the relief rosettes cast in the corners may also have their origin in European or Islamic art (Sieber, cited in Ben-Amos 1980:28). In contrast, Babatunde Lawal, a Nigerian art historian, feels that the plaques are indigenous to Benin or elsewhere in southern Nigeria. He cites examples of relief carving in southern Nigerian art, including carved wooden doors, drums, and boxes, which might have suggested the idea for relief decoration on the pillars (Lawal 1977:199). A local Benin source for the concept of relief figures within a rectangular format can possibly be identified in figurative panels held up on poles as part of *ekasa*, a dance performed after the death of an Oba or Iyoba (Nevadomsky 1984:49, 51). The *ekasa* panels contain relief figures made of cloth and are decorated with mirrors and brass cutouts. The figures are arranged in the stiff, symmetrical, usually tripartite compositions that are also frequently seen on the brass plaques. Like the plaques, *ekasa* is said to have originated during the reign of Esigie. Further study of *ekasa* may illuminate questions pertinent to the plaques.

We may never know precisely how the plaques were arranged on the pillars in the Oba's palace, but we do know that they were not viewed as separate entities. Their interpretation depends to a large extent on their relationships to each other (Tunis 1981:31). Barbara Blackmun has suggested that the plaques were arranged to illustrate concepts or events, along the lines of the arrangement of individual figures on the carved altar tusks (Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:84). This could have been done, for example, by arranging the single-figure plaques so that the most important ones were in the center, flanked by subordinates. Furthermore, as Blackmun points out, since an individual may wear a variety of different regalia on different occasions, the context in which he is shown, expressed through the arrangement of the plaques, is all the more important in interpreting the figures on them. Blackmun's comprehensive analysis of the figures on the tusks, as well as her cogent remarks about the interpretation of a plaque in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, point the way toward future studies of Benin plaques (Blackmun 1984a; Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:84–86).

Cat. no. 35 is an example of the importance of context in interpreting the figures on the plaques. It depicts a figure wearing a coral-bead covered cap with a feather on one side, a high beaded collar or *odigba*, and long strands of beads on his chest. He also wears spiral bracelets and beaded anklets, and at least two wrapped skirts of richly patterned and textured cloth tied with a sash. While most of these elements are worn by many high-ranking chiefs, the swag or belt of beads at the figure's right hip is found on few figures depicted in Benin art. It was noted as part of the king's regalia by the English sea captain James Fawcner, who visited Benin in 1825 (Roth 1968:26). Identically garbed figures, complete with the bead belt, are seen on other plaques. He may appear, as here, as a single figure, but more fre-



Fig. 40. Plaque: Mounted King and Attendants. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th–17th century. Brass; h. 19½ in. (49.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965. 1978.412.309



quently he appears as the central figure flanked by attendants, as in fig. 40 (see also von Luschan 1919: figs. 221, 222, pl. 24; Dark 1973: pls. 11, 49). His appearance on such multifigure plaques further suggests that the figure on cat. no. 35 represents a person of great importance. Barbara Blackmun has found similar figures on carved altar tusks, where he is often accompanied by foreign figures, which led her informants to identify the figure as Oba Esigie, who reigned in the early sixteenth century when Portuguese presence in Benin was at its peak (Blackmun 1984a:351–52). She cautions that identical figures on the plaques and on the tusks may have different meanings. Knowing what plaques were placed next to this one on the pillars might help to confirm whether the figure depicts Esigie, as it does on the tusks.

The figure holds a slender rod in his right hand. It represents a peeled branch known as *unwenrhiontan*, or “squirrel’s whip,” “a

medicinally fortified wand, which functions as a pilot or guide and deflects danger on the path” (Nevadomsky 1989:66). These wands are found on many other plaques, in the hands of a variety of figures (see cat. nos. 39, 45). They were noted as early as the 1590s by Dutch chronicler D. R. and are part of the paraphernalia of many types of worship in Benin (Blackmun 1984a:266, 269; Roth 1968:108–9, fig. 75). Although it is impossible to provide a definitive interpretation of the figure without knowing the placement of this plaque and the plaques arranged around it, he probably depicts an Oba engaged in a ritual requiring the use of the “squirrel’s whip.”

In cat. no. 36, the idea of hierarchical relationships between figures is incorporated directly into the composition, as it was in fig. 40. The plaque depicts a warrior chief in the center, larger and in higher relief than the other figures. His identity as a warrior is indicated by the leopard-tooth necklace he wears, and his status as a high-ranking chief is shown by his coral-studded cap with a feather inserted in one side, his coral-bead collar, his lavishly woven wrap, and the brass ornament at his left hip. He raises a ceremonial sword in his right hand, a gesture of honor and loyalty offered by chiefs to the Oba, and grasps a spear in his left hand. On either side of him, slightly smaller and in lower relief, are two warriors. In addition to their leopard-tooth necklaces, they wear other paraphernalia of Benin warriors, including a shield, a quadrangular bell, and a tunic decorated with a stylized leopard’s face. Such tunics were worn by Benin warriors to frighten their enemies (Ben-Amos 1980: figs. 97, 99).

Between the warrior chief and two warriors are four other attendants whose diminutive scale indicates their low status. Of the top two, one attendant carries a fan used to fan the warrior chief and the other a side-blown trumpet that announces the chief’s presence (figs. 41, 53). One of the attendants below carries a box in the form of an antelope or cow head (fig. 42), usually for bringing gifts of kola nuts to the Oba, while the other bears a sheathed sword and an unidentified clapper-like object (fig. 43). Both lower figures are naked, their bodies covered with painted patterns. They probably represent palace pages or swordbearers, *emada*, who were naked until granted clothes by the Oba (Roth 1968:94). This plaque, which is a virtual catalogue of Benin regalia and court objects, seems a visual counterpart of D. R.’s late-sixteenth-century description of Benin military leaders: “This Captaine hath some soldiers under him, and goes always in the middle of them, and they goe round about him, singing and leaping, and making great noise, and joy. Those captaines are very proud of their office, and are very stately, and goe exceedingly proudly about in the streets” (quoted in Hodgkin 1975:158).

The warrior chiefs were selected from the Uzama, the Palace and Town Chiefs, and the Ekaiwe, an association composed mainly of descendants of the Oba’s daughters. Each warrior chief had warriors under his direct command and drew larger pools of warriors as needed



Fig. 41. Attendant holding a fan. Detail of plaque, cat. no. 36

(Bradbury 1957:44). It is not possible to say which of the warrior chiefs is depicted here, although since there are similar plaques that clearly represent the Iyase with his distinctive hat (fig. 4), perhaps cat. no. 36 depicts the Iyase's rival, the Ezomo.

Several plaques depict similarly dressed and arranged figures (von Luschan 1919: pl. 19; Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 19A). Still others depict the warrior chief wearing military gear, including the leopard-face tunic and bell (Dark 1973: pl. 45; von Luschan 1919: pl. 11; Freyer 1987: nos. 17, 18; Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 22, no. 131). The difference in costume may differentiate the various warrior chiefs or may represent the same chief on a different occasion. Cat. no. 36 may depict the warrior chief at Otue, the greeting ceremony, which is performed during Ugie Erha Oba and Igue, the two most important palace ceremonies. In Otue, the chiefs greet the Oba in order of seniority and receive gifts of kola nuts and wine from him, thereby paying him homage and accepting their place within the court hierarchy (Ben-Amos 1980:82, 85, fig. 84). The plaques depicting the warrior chief dressed in his war costume may show him participating in another palace ceremony, Isiokhuo, a ritual that honors Ogun, the god of iron and war, in which warriors in military attire march in procession through the capital (Bradbury 1957:58; Ben-Amos 1980:93, fig. 97).

Cat. no. 37 depicts a warrior chief, probably participating in Isiokhuo, wearing military garb, and raising an *eben* sword. His costume is distinguished by the basketry cap with a feather inserted on one side and the elaboration of his leopard's-face tunic. Attached to the tunic are numerous tied bundles, which may be protective charms, and across his chest is a broad band, also hung with bundles. This band, *ukugba olila*, is filled with medicines that ward off hunger and thirst, important for a warrior (Blackmun 1984a:324). He carries a sword beneath his left arm, perpendicular to his body and the plaque surface, so that only the pommel is visible; a human-face hip ornament and a conical bell adorn his left hip.

The basketry cap may help to identify this warrior chief as a junior Town Chief known as Edogun, since hats woven of *itoto* fiber, believed to have come with Oranmiyan from Ife, are restricted to the Oba, the seven Uzama, the high priests Osa and Osuan, and Edogun. The junior Town Chiefs had military or ceremonial functions and were appointed to their titles from Ekaiwe, the association composed mainly of descendants of the Oba's daughters. The Edogun, whose title is hereditary, led the junior Town Chiefs in war and was second in command to the Iyase (Bradbury 1973:56, 69, 71). He is depicted on the carved altar tusks (Blackmun 1984a:340) as well as on other plaques (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 15, no. 1; Freyer 1987: no. 15; von Luschan 1919: pl. 17A). However, one plaque depicts two identically dressed figures (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 23, no. 3), thus raising the possibility that chiefs other than the Edogun may have had identical regalia.

Another warrior is represented in cat. no. 38. This one carries a shield and spear, and wears the leopard-tooth necklace and quadrangular bell associated with warriors. From his tunic, which does not have the usual leopard face, hang several bands terminating in small cup-shaped bells. Although he lacks the *odigba*, or coral-bead collar, and the beaded anklets worn by title-holders, his tall conical hat is one usually worn by the highest-ranking Town Chiefs (see figs. 3, 12). The hat is plain in front but has overlapping layers of red flannel, *ododo*, at the sides, resembling the scales of the pangolin, or scaly anteater, an animal that signifies invulnerability because it curls into a protective ball when in danger (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 77). Other plaques depict warriors with similar hats, both with the coral regalia of chiefs (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 22, no. 2; pl. 29, no. 6; von Luschan 1919: figs. 249–51), and without (von Luschan 1919: pls. 7, 8, fig. 248). Like cat. no. 37, this plaque probably depicts the warrior during *Isiokhuo*, the war ceremony, although his identity as a title-holder is ambiguous.

The figure in cat. no. 39 wears a long gown, with a prominent bulge at the chest. He has a distinctive hairstyle with a tall projection from the top and carries a peeled wand, *unwenrhiontan*, or “squirrel’s whip.” This figure has been identified as an Ooton, a type of palace priest (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 85; Blackmun 1984a:268–70). Ooton priests are descended from past Obas, and they must be present at all palace ceremonies in which sacrifices are made to the Oba’s head or to his ancestors, including Igue and Ugie Erha Oba. The plaque probably depicts an Ooton at such a ceremony.

Oootons wear the jawbones of deceased Town Chiefs beneath their robes, creating a bulging chest as in cat. no. 39. Since these chiefs are often in opposition to the Oba, when they die the Oba collects their jawbones, representing their organ of speech, to show his dominance over all opponents (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 85). Ooton is depicted on other plaques (von Luschan 1919: pl. 41; Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 22, no. 6) as well as on carved altar tusks (see fig. 28).

Cat. nos. 40 and 41 depict Benin titleholders, identified by their coral-bead collars, caps, and other regalia, playing a musical instrument known as *ukuse*. This instrument, which was noted by the Dutch chronicler D. R. in the 1590s, consists of a calabash covered with a beaded net, which rattles when shaken (Roth 1968:108, fig. 103). Often the *ukuse* player will insert the middle finger into a hole in the top of the rattle, as is shown in these plaques. The *ukuse* is played at many palace celebrations, often by women (see fig. 12). In 1978 *ukuse* were played by newly appointed titleholders as part of the rites honoring the accession of Erediauwa to the title of Edaiken, or crown prince (Nevadomsky and Inneh 1983:53). Since it is played with the hands, it was the only instrument permitted for them to play in a dance known as “thanksgiving to the hand,” which celebrated their good fortune. Cat. nos. 40 and 41 may represent such an occasion, serving as a permanent record of the new titleholders’ gratitude to the king. A number of similar plaques exist (von Luschan 1919: pl. 39).



Fig. 42. Attendant holding a box in the form of a cow or antelope head. Detail of plaque, cat. no. 36



Fig. 43. Attendant wearing a sword and holding an unidentified clapperlike object. Detail of plaque, cat. no. 36

The figure in cat. no. 42 holds a square object aloft in his right hand while resting his left hand on his hip. He wears a rounded pot-shaped helmet from which a braid descends on either side, a type worn by a variety of other figures on the plaques, including musicians, warriors, and bowmen (von Luschan 1919: pls. 26, 31; figs. 289, 290, 309–11, 314, 316). An *odigba* covers his neck, and multiple rows of beads adorn his ankles. His bare chest is incised with five lines, probably representing scarification marks or tattoos. Around his waist is a cloth wrapper with a relatively plain outer layer and an exposed inner layer decorated with tassels, braid, and fringe.

There are numerous examples of plaques with figures holding square objects such as this, always depicted in similar dress (von Luschan 1919: pl. 36, figs. 309–11). Female attendants accompanying the queen mother also hold this square object; they are depicted on brass waist pendants (Hooton 1917: pl. 5), freestanding brass figures (von Luschan 1919: pl. 106); and ivory tusks (von Luschan 1919: fig. 769). It has been suggested that the square object they hold represents a protective charm made out of woven basketry or wood and incorporating a mirror (Blackmun 1984a:306–11; idem 1990:65). Today in Benin a female titleholder, *Ekpate*, bears such a charm at palace ceremonies, but in the past this role was also performed by men, as seen on the plaques. In Benin thought, mirrors have a mystical importance and are associated with the worship of the sea god *Olokun*. A mirror's reflective surface “enables its spiritually gifted owner not only to see danger approaching before its presence is discerned by others, but also . . . ‘to scatter evil away’” (Blackmun 1984a:310). The charm-bearing titleholder depicted on cat. no. 42 was probably meant to accompany in a protective way a figure of much greater rank, depicted on an adjacent plaque.

Many of the plaques, such as cat. nos. 43 to 46, depict the numerous lesser-ranked participants in palace activities, who lack the high coral-bead collar and beaded anklets that are conferred upon important titleholders. Cat. no. 43 depicts a man whose bare chest is deformed, protruding in a point at the center. His hair is coiffed in a distinctive style of long thick locks combed over the forehead, with every other lock terminating in a bead. He wears a single strand of beads at his neck, bracelets on each wrist, anklets that resemble metal rattles, and an unusually short, wrapped skirt tied with an *ovibiovu*, a leather belt with two leaf-shaped ends. In his left hand he holds what appears to be a staff with a cylindrical shaft and a narrow, flat blade.

The figure is probably a junior-ranking court official. His hairstyle and garments can be seen on a number of other plaques, worn by figures bearing *ekpoki* (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 91); by traders with manillas, the brass rings obtained in trade with Europeans (Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960: pl. 5); and by shield-bearing warriors accompanying the *Oba* or senior chiefs (fig. 40). All of these figures are in subordinate positions. According to Bradbury, the two lowest of

the three untitled grades in the Benin palace associations wore a hairstyle different from all other titleholders (Bradbury 1957:38). One can only speculate that the hairstyle depicted on cat. no. 43 was such an indication of junior status.

Other features, including the staff he holds and his deformed chest, suggest that he may be a member of Ibiwe, one of the three palace associations. His staff resembles an *asan errie*, a type that identifies various representatives of the Oba while on official business, particularly members of Ibiwe association (see cat. no. 86). The figure's deformed chest suggests that he might be one of the cripples<sup>1</sup> said to have guarded the section of the palace that housed the Oba's wives, who numbered several hundred (Bradbury 1957:41). Since Ibiwe is the palace association responsible for the Oba's wives, perhaps this plaque represents an untitled, junior-ranking member of Ibiwe.

The figure in cat. no. 44 wears the same hairstyle as that in cat. no. 43, and his relatively simple dress suggests that he too is an untitled junior member of a palace association. He holds a sword, whose sheath is worn under his left arm slung on a strap across his chest. Other plaques depict similarly coiffed figures bearing swords (Hooton 1917: pl. 2, fig. 5), including some who also carry bundles of fruit on their heads (von Luschan 1919: figs. 187, 188). The similarity of cat. no. 44 to these fruit-bearers and to the participants in a cow sacrifice depicted on another plaque (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 75) suggests that he too is a member of Ibiwe, since it is this palace association that is responsible for provisioning the palace, obtaining materials for sacrifice, and bringing them to state ceremonies (Bradbury 1957:37; idem 1973:61, 65).

Cat. no. 45 depicts a figure dressed in a simple, sparsely decorated wrapper, with a double strand of coral beads at the neck and a single strand on each ankle. His hair is arranged in overlapping rows of short locks, a style that distinguishes him from the figures portrayed in cat. nos. 43 and 44. He wears a feather in his hair, inserted over his left ear, a feature seen also in cat. nos. 35–37. This is a white tail feather of the fish-eagle, *oghohon*, worn by chiefs at ceremonial occasions to symbolize their high status, achievement, maturity, and purity (Nevadomsky 1988:75). Like the figures in cat. nos. 35 and 39, this chief holds an *unwenrhiontan*, and his role at a palace ceremony may have been to deflect evil from a person of higher rank. Similar figures are depicted on other plaques (von Luschan 1919: figs. 351, 352; Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: no. 263; Hagen 1918: pl. 2, fig. 2).

The figure depicted in cat. no. 46 also wears his hair in short tiered locks, but with long braided strands hanging at the sides. His wrapped skirt consists of two layers of patterned and textured cloth. At his waist is a belt with many hanging bells or tassels, and a long strap ending in a bell crosses his chest and hangs at his side. Figures

with the same hairstyle and related costumes are portrayed in other plaques, either simply standing, as in cat. no. 46 (von Luschan 1919: pls. 25B, 33A and B, figs. 199–201), holding *ekpoki* (Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960: pl. 21; Paris, Musée Dapper, 1990:51), or accompanying the Oba from battle (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 21). In this example his precise role cannot be determined.

In portraying the people who had roles to play at the court of Benin, the plaques are not limited to Edo subjects, but also include the Portuguese seamen, traders, and soldiers who were active there beginning in 1485. The Portuguese dominated European trade with Benin until the mid-sixteenth century, when they were overshadowed by the English and Dutch. Even after they ceased to be a major presence in Benin, their image, in sixteenth-century dress, continued to be used to depict all foreigners and the wealth and power the Oba derived from them. The Portuguese had an important impact on Benin court life, in terms of the imported European goods they brought, especially coral and glass beads, cloth, hats, and, most important, metal. The copper and brass manillas that the Portuguese used as a form of currency increased the availability of metal for brasscasting, perhaps even making possible the scheme to decorate the pillars of the palace with hundreds of brass plaques.

Cat. no. 47 depicts two Portuguese men clasping hands, their foreign origin conveyed by their long, straight hair, aquiline noses, and clothing. Though similar in appearance, the two figures are differentiated by both size and gesture. The larger figure on the left places his right hand on his chest, grasping the end of his long, broad beard. The other figure, smaller and beardless, clutches a small satchel with his left hand. Their dress has been carefully observed and rendered by the Edo brasscaster: a tight-fitting upper garment fastened with buttons, sleeves with stippled diagonal stripes, a pleated skirt whose folds are alternately decorated with an incised crosshatched pattern, a simple, knotted belt at the waist, and notched breeches. Both wear rounded helmets with small brims; the larger figure's helmet is further embellished with three raised circles. Their toes are not delineated, as are toes in portrayals of the Edo, so it is likely that the figures wear shoes.

In a similar plaque in the Field Museum of Chicago, both figures have beards (von Luschan 1919: fig. 52). Another plaque depicts two small, beardless Portuguese figures holding the hands of a larger, bearded central figure who is more elaborately dressed (von Luschan 1919: pl. 6D). The size and dress of the figures denotes their relative status, just as on the plaques depicting Edo chiefs and their subordinates (cat. no. 36, fig. 40). On cat. no. 47, the smaller, beardless figure is of lesser status than his companion and may also be younger.

The Portuguese are usually portrayed in Benin art either with military accoutrements or as merchants, accurately reflecting the roles they played in Edo society. Although the figures in this plaque do not carry weapons, their costume suggests their military roles, and

similarly dressed Portuguese figures with weapons appear on some plaques (von Luschan 1919: pls. 2, 3). Both figures wear a doublet, a neck-to-waist garment that is attached to the hose, and a base, a short skirt set with rounded folds. Both the doublet and base were common military wear in Spain and Portugal during the 1500s (Anderson 1979:45, 53, 55, figs. 64, 65). Furthermore, multilayered sleeves with slashes in the outer layer, while fashionable, also permitted soldiers to use heavy weapons without putting a strain on the seams (Reade 1951:195). Even the hairstyles of the two Portuguese are characteristic of Hispanic fashion during the period. Hair was grown long, and warm wax applied to the beard so that it spread out flat and broad (Anderson 1979:33–35, figs. 24, 25), as it appears in the larger figure.

Two bearded Portuguese figures are shown in cat. no. 48, almost overshadowed by the two rows of outsized C-shaped manillas that fill most of the plaque. They are dressed more elaborately than those on cat. no. 47. Their triangular hats are edged with trim, embellished with three raised circles, and topped with jaunty plumes set at an angle. This type of hat most resembles the button cap, which was popular in the sixteenth century among scholars, merchants, and even peasants throughout Europe (Harrison 1960:84; Anderson 1979:35, 43). The button cap had a roughly triangular shape with an upturned brim fastened by aglets, round metal tags, or jewels. Over their doublets, the Portuguese in cat. no. 48 also wear sleeveless jerkins. Unlike the doublet, which features prominent buttons or other fastenings down the front, the jerkin typically exhibits no such opening, fitting rather like a vest (Anderson 1979: fig. 66). The cap, sleeveless jerkin, and tight-fitting patterned sleeves are all representative of early-sixteenth-century dress.

The manillas that dominate the plaque were made of copper or brass and were used as a form of currency in southern Nigeria from the late fifteenth to the mid-twentieth century (Grey 1951:52; see cat. no. 148). Although it is unclear whether manillas are of African or Portuguese origin, it is known that by 1505 they were produced in quantity by the Portuguese, who had access to large amounts of copper and brass, for use in trade with Benin (Grey 1951:54–55). It has been suggested that the influx of manillas owing to Portuguese trade, along with the switch in their composition from copper to brass, resulted in the increase and improvement of Benin brasscasting in the early sixteenth century (Ryder 1969:40).

The pairing of the Portuguese with manillas occurs frequently in Benin art, although the composition found in cat. no. 48 is unique. Oversized manillas, such as those seen here, are occasionally found in relief on the background of plaques depicting single figures or heads of Portuguese (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 13; von Luschan 1919: figs. 45, 46). Other plaques feature a Portuguese figure holding one or more naturalistically scaled manillas (von Luschan 1919: figs. 55–58, pl. 5c, d). All of them, including cat. no. 48, emphasize the importance



of the Portuguese as merchants, a role that largely defined the relationship between the Edo and Europeans for four centuries.

Many of the Benin palace plaques depict animals, fish, or objects rather than human beings. Judging from the arrangement of similar images on altar tusks, these plaques probably did not have a central location on the pillars of the palace. They may have represented sacrifices made at the various palace ceremonies or creatures and objects whose symbolic qualities express the powers of the Oba. The mudfish depicted in cat. nos. 49 to 51 served both purposes. One of the most frequent motifs in Benin art, mudfish are identified by their catfishlike barbels, which are found on several varieties of fish in the environs of Benin. They are among the most popular sacrifices in Benin. According to Ben-Amos, "the mudfish is the freshest, most robust, and most delicious of all fish and is considered very attractive and desirable. It represents prosperity, peace, well-being and fertility through its association with the water, the realm of the sea god, Olokun" (Ben-Amos 1976b:245). Jacki Gallagher, an American art historian, points out that some species of mudfish have special qualities that give them additional layers of meaning as royal symbols in Benin. The fish known as *orrirri* (*Malapterurus electricus*), for example, can deliver a powerful electric shock (Gallagher, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:93). Such a creature corresponds to the Oba's terrifying aspect, which is graphically portrayed in images of the Oba with legs that terminate in mudfish (see cat. no. 53). Other mudfish genera, *Synodontus* and *Clarias*, are capable of surviving out of water for long periods of time, thus embodying the Oba's dual nature as lord of the land and of the sea.

According to Gallagher, Benin artists do not distinguish between the various species of mudfish (Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983: figs. 67, 68). Some representations have trilobed tails, others forked tails; some have dorsal fins, others do not; some, like cat. no. 50, which is shown in profile, even lack the identifying barbels. Cat. no. 49 depicts two mudfish, covered from head to tail with incised patterns in typical Benin fashion. Cat. no. 50 is a fragment of a plaque that likewise depicted two mudfish. Cat. no. 51 is unusual. It is the central portion of a plaque whose top, including the mudfish head, has been broken off. The present head, which is cast in the round and includes an open mouth, projects beyond the edge of the plaque; it is a recent addition.

Cat. no. 52 depicts two fluted oval gourds. According to Ben-Amos, this type of gourd is characteristically offered to the creator god Osanobua in place of a cow, which is the most important domestic sacrifice (Bradbury 1957:52; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 45). This plaque, and others like it, record the gourd's role in palace rituals (Hagen 1918: pl. 8, fig. 6; von Luschan 1919: fig. 422). It also appears on other objects used at court (see cat. no. 110).

Cat. no. 53 is a different type of plaque and was probably not part of the palace pillar decoration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is roughly semicircular or U-shaped (although plaques of this type are often called D-shaped in the literature of Benin art). It depicts an Oba with mudfish legs in the center, flanked on either side by kneeling supporters who hold up his arms. The space behind the figures is left open. The figures are almost identically dressed, wearing beaded hats with tall projections, high beaded collars, long-sleeved shirts covered with beads, and patterned wrappers. Two horizontal bands decorated with raised bosses and twisted rope patterns run behind the figures, at the level of their heads and waists. Six frogs are depicted along the U-shaped outer edge of the plaque, along with short sections of a guilloche, twisted and knotted rope patterns, river leaves, and bosses, all raised in relief.

This plaque, and others like it,<sup>2</sup> combine two of the most powerful images of divine kingship in Benin art—the mudfish-legged king and the linked supporting triad. Both have many layers of meaning, referring to the king's role both in this world and the supernatural one (Blackmun 1984a:248–52, 273–76). The mudfish-legged king refers specifically to Oba Ohen (r. early fifteenth century), whose legs became paralyzed. Although he attempted to hide this infirmity from his people, it was revealed by the Iyase. Ohen had the Iyase killed, but when this was known, he was stoned to death for his deception. On this level the motif is a warning to the Oba not to overstep his authority and abuse his royal prerogatives. The motif also refers to Ohen's divine nature; he is the son of Olokun and the grandson of Osanobua, the creator god. In addition, it embodies the idea that the king is the earthly counterpart of Olokun, as powerful as the sea god himself. The mudfish legs express his terrifying powers, since they suggest *orrirri*, the fish that can give a jolting electric shock. While the mudfish-legged king expresses the most awesome powers of the Oba, it is also a reminder of the limits of royal power. The same is true of the linked supporting triad. The king's *enobore*, or supporters, express the balance between the Oba's overwhelming religious and political power with his need for the support of his people. It is simultaneously a statement of dominance and dependence.

Unfortunately nothing is known about the use of plaques such as cat. no. 53, either their placement within an architectural setting or their role in a particular ceremonial context. Prominent on all of them are motifs such as the elephant trunk terminating in a hand holding leaves and the looped strap and twisted rope patterns. These motifs have been associated with the revival of brasscasting that occurred during the mid-eighteenth century (Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960:19). When compared to the others of its type, cat. no. 53 is unusual. It is the only one lacking the trunk/hand motif; the figures do not wear waist pendants; its background motifs are poorly articulated and

asymmetrical; and it lacks any means of suspension, either holes or loops. This may indicate that cat. no. 53 is a later version of an important eighteenth-century art form.

I am grateful to Kokunre Agbontaen, Christa Clarke, and Alisa LaGamma, who contributed significantly to this section.

1. The deformed chest on an almost identical figure led von Luschan to identify it as a dwarf (von Luschan 1919: pl. 41).

2. Eight similar plaques attributed to Benin are known (von Luschan 1919:285, pl. 43B, figs. 424–26; Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960: pl. 34; Ogbemudia 1969:n.p.; Talbot 1926: fig. 69). Three other closely related U-shaped plaques, with stylistic and iconographic affinities to the art of Benin, Ife, and the “Tsoede bronze” tradition, are also known (see fig. 46; Willett 1973: figs. 17, 19, 20).



**35. Plaque: Oba or Chief**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 19½ in. (49.5 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.16





36. Plaque: Warrior Chief, Warriors, and Attendants (detail)

**36. Plaque: Warrior Chief,  
Warriors, and Attendants**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

Brass; h. 18 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (47.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1990  
1990.332

*Ex Collection:* Paul Rose; Robert Owen  
Lehman

*Reference:* London, Sotheby and Co., 1964:  
lot 114

*Exhibition:* New York, Center for  
African Art, 1988: fig. 188



**37. Plaque: Warrior Chief**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 16½ in. (41.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.11

*Ex Collection:* British Museum, London

*Reference:* Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 27,  
no. 3

*Exhibitions:* Bloomington, Indiana Univer-  
sity Art Museum, 1980; South Hadley, Mount  
Holyoke College Art Museum, 1984: no. 12

**38. Plaque: Warrior**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 17 in. (43.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.12

*Reference:* London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet  
and Co., 1977a: lot 199

*Exhibition:* Bloomington, Indiana Univer-  
sity Art Museum, 1980

An arrow is slightly raised in relief on the  
lower back of the plaque.



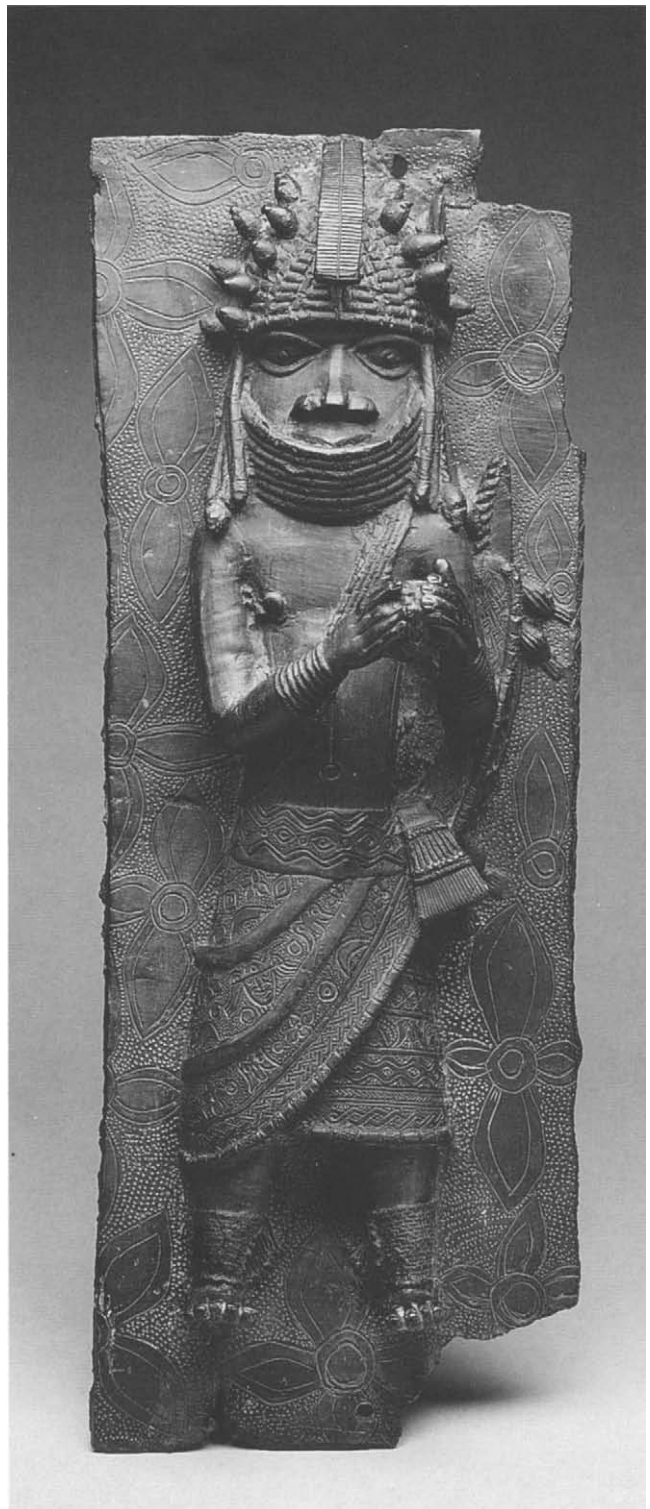




**39. Plaque: Palace Priest (Ooton)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century  
Brass; h. 18½ in. (47.0 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.25  
A bulb-shaped line is lightly raised in relief on the lower back of the plaque.

**40. Plaque: Titleholder with Calabash Rattle**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century  
Brass; h. 17¾ in. (45.1 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.17  
*Reference:* London, Sotheby and Co., 1971:  
lot 238





**41. Plaque: Titleholder with  
Calabash Rattle**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 17 in. (43.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.10

*Ex Collection:* Museum für Völkerkunde,  
Berlin

*Reference:* von Luschan 1919: pl. 39A

*Exhibition:* Bloomington, Indiana Univer-  
sity Art Museum, 1980

**42. Plaque: Court Official with Protective Charm**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

Brass; h. 17 in. (43.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.20

*Ex Collection:* Museum für Völkerkunde,  
Berlin; E. Hentze

*References:* von Luschan 1919: pl. 36B;  
London, Sotheby & Co., 1971: lot 238A;  
Robbins and Nooter 1989: fig. 560



**43. Plaque: Junior Court Official**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 14½ in. (36.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.21

*Reference:* New York, Sotheby's, 1985: lot  
136

**44. Plaque: Junior Court Official  
with Sword**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 19<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (49.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.23



**45. Plaque: Court Official with  
Magic Staff**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

Brass; h. 18¼ in. (46.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.22



**46. Plaque: Court Official**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

Brass; h. 15¼ in. (38.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.26



**47. Plaque: Two Portuguese**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

Brass; h. 20½ in. (52.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.18

*References:* Paris, Drouot Rive Gauche, 1976:  
lot 173; London, Christie's, 1979b: lot 255  
*Exhibition:* New York, Center for African  
Art, 1988: fig. 216

An X is lightly raised in relief on the lower  
back of the plaque.







48. Plaque: Two Portuguese with Manillas (detail)

**48. Plaque: Two Portuguese with  
Manillas**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 18 in. (45.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.13





**49. Plaque: Two Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 9 in. (22.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.24

*Ex Collection:* H. Ling Roth; University  
Museum, Philadelphia

*References:* Roth 1968: fig. 270; Hall 1922:  
fig. 49

**50. Plaque Fragment: Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 13¼ in. (33.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.27

*Ex Collection:* Karl Knorr; Linden-Museum,  
Stuttgart; Benno Mattel

*References:* von Luschan 1901: fig. 44; idem  
1919: fig. 413





**51. Plaque: Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 13 3/8 in. (34.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.15

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Hans Meyer

*References:* Hermann 1953: 115; New York,

Sotheby Parke-Bernet and Co., 1977b:

lot 566; New York, Sotheby Parke-Bernet,

1983: lot 35

*Exhibition:* New York, Grey Art Gallery,

1981: no. 15



**52. Plaque: Two Fluted Gourds**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 13 in. (33.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.14

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 38, fig.

290; von Luschan 1919: fig. 423; London,

Sotheby and Co., 1972b: lot 244



53. U-Shaped Plaque: Mudfish-  
Legged King and Supporters  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–20th century  
Brass; h. 16 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (42.2 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.28



**COURT AND  
CEREMONIAL  
OBJECTS**





# PECTORALS, HIP ORNAMENTS, AND WAIST PENDANTS



Chiefs and titleholders in Benin wear a variety of brass ornaments as part of their elaborate costumes for palace ceremonies. Most are worn singly at the left hip, covering the closure of their wrapped skirts (fig. 44). They are often worn at an angle or horizontally and are held in place by large loops located at the top and bottom of the back of the ornament. The Oba himself and some other notables wear a series of pendants suspended from the waist. Although usually made of brass, waist pendants carved of ivory are worn by the Oba at Emobo, the ceremony at which he drives evil forces out of Benin (fig. 47). The waist pendants are suspended from one or more loops at the top. They are semicircular or U-shaped and are usually much flatter than the hip ornaments, with images of animals or figures cast in relief. A third category of Benin pendant ornament is worn on the chest. These pectorals usually depict human faces. They are suspended from two lugs at each side, above and below the ears.

Cat. no. 54 is an example of a pectoral mask. Within its oval format it depicts a human face symmetrically framed by an ornamental flange with loops for small metal rattles, called crotals, at the bottom, below the ears, and by a row of projecting trapezoids at the top, above the ears. The hair, within an angular hairline, consists of rows of small concentric circles. The forehead is inlaid with two iron rectangles and the pupils of the eyes are also inlaid with iron. According to Joseph Nevadomsky, these iron inlays are known as *ikan aro* (“cane of eye”) and *ikpen aro* (“ray or menace of eye”) respectively. They give the face the look of determination, seriousness, firmness, and power that is appropriate to a ruler (Nevadomsky 1986:42). On either side of the rectangular forehead inlays are four raised keloid scarification marks known as *ikharo* (“tribal mark [of eye]”) which may indicate either gender or ethnicity. Sculptures of both Edo females and non-Edo males have four such marks, although their use is not always consistent.

**56. Hip Ornament: Human Face**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century





Fig. 44. A human-face hip ornament worn by a warrior chief over his left hip. Detail of plaque, cat. no. 36.

The features of the face resemble works attributed to the early period, particularly type I commemorative heads (figs. 17, 18, 20) and the ivory pectoral masks associated with Oba Esigie (Newton, Jones, and Ezra 1987:85; Dark 1973: pls. 33–35). This can be seen especially in the eyes, which have a distinct upper lid and are outlined by thin raised lines; in the sensual mouth with a deep groove between the nose and the top lip; and in the subtle modeling of the brow and cheeks.

This pectoral appears to be one of two that have been documented as belonging to the Amapetu of Mahin, in the lagoon area east of Lagos (Fagg 1980:359), or to the Olugbo of Ugbo, a Yoruba village near Mahin (“Exploring in Nigeria” 1947:359). It and others like it are believed to have been distributed by the Oba of Benin to vassal rulers, including non-Edo kings absorbed into the kingdom. The best-known examples are the two brass pectorals still owned by the Ata of Idah, king of the Igala, whose ancestor was conquered by Oba Esigie in the sixteenth century (Clifford 1936: pl. xxvi; Dike 1984:71, figs. 5, 6). Some Igala oral traditions state that these two objects were seized from Benin warriors possibly in the eighteenth century (Dike 1984:71), although other Igala legends use them to support claims of Benin origin and sanction for the Igala royal dynasty (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 17).

In addition, Benin-style pectorals have been found in many parts of southern Nigeria, from Omuo, a Yoruba village near Ilorin in the far north (Williams 1974:218) to Kiagbodo, in the Niger River delta, in the extreme south (Horton 1965: pl. 6A).<sup>1</sup> Others include the two pectorals documented by Fagg in Ewohimi, an Ishan village,<sup>2</sup> one owned by the Oludasa of Owo (fig. 62), and another that is part of the regalia of the Eze Nri of Oreri, an Igbo village a mile away from the archaeological site of Igbo Ukwu (Shaw 1970, II: pls. 511, 512; Jeffreys 1941:140–41). A number of other stylistically similar brass pectorals are known, although their places of origin have not been documented (London, Sotheby and Co., 1975: lot 182; Shaplin 1969: fig. 2; Robbins 1966: fig. 173; London, Sotheby and Co., 1968: lot 153; London, British Museum, 1985:1E02). Charting the location of these and other such masks would provide information about the extent and nature of relations between Benin and non-Edo groups in southern Nigeria. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were the period of the kingdom’s greatest expansion, but campaigns to conquer border areas and reconquer them if they rebelled continued throughout Benin history. The distribution of emblems of authority such as these pectorals was just one of the strategies used to maintain control over these vassal areas and promulgate Benin concepts of kingship (Ben-Amos 1980:18).

The ornaments that chiefs wear over their left hip most often depict the human face but are somewhat different in form than the pectorals. They have a decorative flange around the lower portion of the face, usually representing either coiled mudfish (cat. nos. 55–57), an openwork lattice or guilloche pattern (cat. nos. 58, 59), or a fluted

collar (cat. no. 60), with a row of small loops below or directly behind it. Directly beneath the chin is depicted a collar of coral beads. Above the face is a latticework coral-bead cap with clusters of coral beads at the edges. A coral-bead headband crosses the forehead, and braided, bead-tipped locks of hair hang in front of and behind the ears. The eyes are large with heavy, often striated rims. The faces have three raised keloid scarification marks (*ikharo*) above each eye, and the eyes are often inlaid with iron pupils. Some of these masks, such as cat. no. 56, are also inlaid with a strip of copper-rich metal down the forehead and nose. Philip Dark identified such marks as representing the traces of sacrificial blood applied by a priest to participants in rituals (in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:87), but it seems more likely to indicate the area where a protective mixture of herbs and chalk, known as *urebo*, was rubbed on the nose and forehead to ward off danger during festivals (Nevadomsky 1986:42). The bead regalia depicted on the hip ornaments suggest that they represent the chiefs and titleholders who wear them as a way of reflecting and reinforcing their status.

William Fagg has attributed hip ornaments with relatively delicate features and more elaborate and carefully executed details, such as cat. no. 56, to the mid-eighteenth century, when Benin experienced a resurgence of brasscasting and a renewed emphasis on regalia (cited in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:96; London, Christie's, 1989: lot 84). He dates those that more closely resemble late-period heads, such as cat. nos. 55 and 58, to the early nineteenth century (London, Christie's, 1977b: lot 159; London, South Kensington, Christie's, 1988: lot 85). However, similar hip ornaments are depicted on numerous brass plaques that were made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (fig. 44). This suggests that the same type of hip ornament was being made over a period of more than three hundred years, and that further stylistic criteria are needed before these masks can be precisely dated.

Less common than hip ornaments displaying the human face, and more restricted in terms of who wears them, are those that depict a leopard head, such as cat. no. 62. This ornament, which has a heavy loop at the back for attachment at the hip, resembles the pectorals in that it has decorative flanges above and below the face with two lugs between them on each side. Because of the lugs, it may also have been worn as a waist pendant, as Fagg has suggested (London, Christie's, 1976b: lot 55), or as a pectoral. The head displays the conventions used for leopards in Benin art—overlapping fangs, three whiskers at each side of the face, slanted eyes whose upper lids overlap the lower lids at the inner corners, and leaf-shaped ears. The leopard spots, which appear as smooth raised bosses against a stippled background, are actually copper tacks that were inset into the wax model before casting.

Numerous Benin plaques show leopard-head hip ornaments

being worn by the Oba's military chiefs, who can be identified by their leopard-tooth necklaces and by the shield-bearing warriors that often accompany them (see von Luschan 1919: pls. 18, 19a, 25c; Read and Dalton 1899: pl. XIX, 1; London, British Museum, 1985:5C07, 8A09, 8A10). Some of the war chiefs are portrayed bearing gifts or sounding gongs, presumably in honor of the Oba at palace ceremonies (London, British Museum, 1985: 6A09, 7C09). The Iyase, the senior military chief among the Town Chiefs, also wears such a leopard ornament, as shown in a brass figure representing him (Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983: fig. 72). At times his hip ornament is in the form of a full leopard (fig. 4).

In Benin thought, the leopard is considered a counterpart of the Oba. He is seen as terrifying and ferocious but also as a leader in the animal kingdom (Ben-Amos 1976b:246). The applied leopard faces on Benin warriors' costumes (see cat. no. 36) refer to the dangerous aspects of the Oba's nature, and provide protection to the warriors (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 99). The leopard-head hip ornaments are badges of honor bestowed upon war chiefs, serving both as protective devices and as symbols of the power over life and death that the Oba has delegated to them (Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:63). According to Ben-Amos, leopard-head hip ornaments also refer to the Edo proverb, "It is the head of the leopard that accomplishes things for the leopard," that is, for the king, and they have a "special meaning for the war chief, for it was upon him that the Oba, the 'leopard of the Home,' relied to carry out his conquests" (Ben-Amos, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:55).

As shown in some of the brass plaques, the Oba wears several pendants that hang from his waist, rather than a single ornament on his hip (Read and Dalton 1899: pls. 16–18; von Luschan 1919: pls. 20, 43). These particular plaques portray the Oba in highly formalized and symbolic compositions that convey Benin ideas about the nature of divine kingship. He is shown as the king with mudfish legs or with mudfish projecting from his waist, or as part of what Blackmun calls the "linked supporting triad," in which the Oba's arms are supported by two subordinates (1984a:242–56, 271–76). Both compositions emphasize the Oba's mystical powers and dominance. It is likely that the accoutrements worn by the Oba in these plaques, including the waist pendants, reinforce his exalted position.

One plaque depicting the linked supporting triad (fig. 45) shows the Oba wearing three waist pendants in the form of Portuguese faces, similar to cat. no. 63. The Oba's *enobore*, or supporters, each wear three waist pendants in the form of crocodile heads, like cat. no. 64. Other plaques depicting the Oba show him wearing crocodile pendants or pendants resembling the Edo faces on hip ornaments (Read and Dalton 1899: pls. 16–18).

Relatively few pendants in the form of Portuguese faces exist (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 79; Jacob 1974:24; London, British Museum,



Fig. 45. Plaque: Oba and Two Supporters. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th–17th century. Brass; h. 17¾ in. (45.1 cm). London, Museum of Mankind, 98.1-15.27. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

1985: 1E11), as befits an object that was probably restricted to use by the Oba. Cat. no. 63 has the narrow, sharp nose, long, curled locks, and beard that characterize Benin portrayals of Portuguese, and he wears a three-cornered hat with a pleated crown. That such waist pendants were worn only by the king himself may reflect the fact that the Oba controlled relations between the Benin kingdom and European traders—first the Portuguese and later the English and Dutch—and his wealth and power were augmented by his associations with them.

Since they arrived in Benin from across the sea, the Portuguese are also linked to Olokun, the god of the sea and source of wealth and fecundity. They serve to reinforce the Oba's association with this god. The crocodile, also the subject of waist pendants worn by the Oba and his supporters, is likewise a symbol of Olokun. Known for its vicious and tenacious nature, the crocodile is Olokun's policeman who punishes evildoers by overturning their canoes (Ben-Amos 1976b:247).

There are relatively few examples of crocodile waist pendants (see von Luschan 1919: pl. 97; London, South Kensington, Christie's, 1986: lot 101; Fagg 1965: no. 65; Dark 1982: illus. 49). The one in the Perls collection (cat. no. 64) depicts the crocodile head as two flat rectangular planes that meet along the center of the face. The two half-oval eyes bulge out from the side of the face, and the nostrils are circles in relief near the lower edge. The pupils, nostrils, and a strip down the center of the face are inset with a copper-rich alloy. At the top are rows of textured bumps that represent the large horny plates arranged in regular patterns over the crocodile's neck and body. Around the edges of the pendant are loops from which crotal bells would have been suspended. Both sides of the crocodile's face are decorated with stippled dots forming diagonal rows of loops. With uncharacteristic asymmetry, an endless knot pattern was incised directly into the metal over these looped rows of dots on the right side.

Cat. no. 65 is a leopard head that has two suspension loops at the top, indicating that it was worn as a waist pendant. Unlike cat. no. 62, it portrays the leopard head as essentially flat, with only the long nose and slightly bulging forehead fully sculpted. The leopard head has been modified to fit the pendant's elongated U-shaped outline. The leaf-shaped ears and other features, depicted by striated relief lines, conform to the same Benin conventions for depicting leopards that were seen in cat. no. 62, but here they are even more geometricized, appearing as linear patterns floating on the pendant's textured surface. Although this leopard-head waist pendant is cast, its design is so flattened that it easily lent itself to versions made of hammered brass (Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: pl. 21).

In some examples the semicircular or U-shaped surfaces of Benin waist pendants are treated as a background field on which images are portrayed in relief. Cat. no. 66 depicts a pair of extremely elongated mudfish, whose L-shaped bodies intersect to create a lozenge pattern, a common device in Benin art, seen also in cat. no. 77. Cat. nos. 67 to 69 depict an Edo chief riding sidesaddle, as was the custom in Benin. Cat. no. 70 has an unusual, square format, and it is not clear how this pendant was worn. It depicts a chief, or possibly the Oba, flanked and supported by two subordinates. Because the figures lack crowns and other regalia, this is a rather unceremonial version of the "linked supporting triad" motif.

Many Benin pendants incorporated semicircular or shield-shaped fields into their designs, as in cat. nos. 71 and 72, which are suspended from a single wide loop at the top. In cat. no. 71, a wide fan-shaped element spreads out below a ram head. The ram has thin, forward-curving horns, large, bulging oval eyes placed vertically at the sides of the face, and a slightly swelling muzzle with flared nostrils. The fan-shaped section below the head is decorated with concentric bands of bosses and chevrons and is edged with a row of loops for the attachment of crotals.

This ram-head pendant is related to several others, which can be divided typologically into three groups. The group most similar in form to cat. no. 71 features the fan-shaped element below the ram head, and includes two ram-head pendants in the Benin Museum (Willett 1973: figs. 3, 4), the pendant excavated at Apapa, Lagos, and now in the Museum of Mankind, London (Dark 1982: illus. 54), and another pendant in the Museum of Mankind (London, British Museum, 1985: 9B04). These ram heads are more naturalistic in style than the one in the Perls collection; they feature rounded, fleshy muzzles, “beards,” and spiral horns that curve down and back around the ears. In the second group of pendants the ram heads have somewhat more square, stubby muzzles, their horns curve downward but in a single plane, and the decorative element below the head is much more rectangular in shape, resembling the flanges on Benin human-face hip ornaments (see cat. nos. 55–57). Examples of this group of ram-head pendants are found in the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde (von Luschan 1919: fig. 574) and the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford (Fagg 1965: no. 64); another example was sold at Christie’s in London (1977a: lot 228). In the third group of ram-head pendants, only the ram head is depicted, and except for rows of loops for suspending crotals, they lack decorative elements below the head. Examples can be found in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin and in Dresden (von Luschan 1919: pl. 97B, fig. 573). Ram heads are also incorporated as subsidiary motifs on other semicircular pendants (von Luschan 1919: figs. 588, 190).

Oba Ewuakpe (r. late seventeenth century to ca. 1715) is depicted wearing a ram-head pendant suspended from his right hip on an altar tableau in the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde (von Luschan 1919: pl. 81; Ben-Amos 1983: fig. 3), and a large semicircular plaque depicts an Oba wearing a ram-head pendant that hangs from the center of his waist (von Luschan 1919: fig. 426). These examples confirm that such pendants were part of the Oba’s regalia.

There is also evidence that the ram-head pendants were insignia of rulers outside of Benin and are important in understanding Benin’s links with other southern Nigerian cultures. Fig. 46 shows the central figure on one of three semicircular plaques found in the palace in Benin and now in the Benin Museum (Ben-Amos 1983: figs. 6, 8, 10; Willett 1973: figs. 17, 19, 20). These plaques combine many of the features, including ram-head pendants worn by the figures on the right hip, found on objects from Benin and Ife, and on some of the Tsoede bronzes. For example, ram-head pendants are also depicted on a terracotta fragment from Ife (Eluyemi 1975: fig. 14) and on the warrior figure from Tada, one of the Tsoede bronzes (Eyo and Willett 1980: no. 93). Ram-head pendants thus seem to be an aspect of regalia used in several southern Nigerian cultures, and they are important for understanding the historical and artistic relationships between these areas (Willett 1973:13; Ben-Amos 1983:175–79); Vogel 1983:344).

Fig. 46. Central figure from a U-shaped plaque. Brass; h. 9¼ in. (23.5 cm). Benin Museum. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/71/2). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London



This widespread use of ram-head pendants complicates the attribution of pendants such as cat. no. 71 strictly to Benin. William Fagg considers only pendants with rectangular extensions below the ram head to have been made by Benin brasscasters in the middle period or early late period; he attributes the others, including those most similar to cat. no. 71, to Owo or artists from Owo working in Benin (London, Christie's, 1977a: lot 228). Since none of the brass ram-head pendants have been found in Owo, and there is no strong evidence for a long-standing tradition of brasscasting there, the removal of these pendants from the Benin corpus to that of Owo seems premature and unwarranted.

Because of the ram's reputation for bravery and aggressive behavior, it is considered an animal suitable for a chief to sacrifice on the altar to his hand—the source of his wealth, success, military prowess, and other achievements (Bradbury 1973:264, 270). For similar reasons, the ram symbolizes an especially powerful enemy (Blackmun 1987:91). Ram-head pendants may have been worn by the Oba or other notables as emblems of their own ramlike qualities—virility, aggressiveness, courage—or of their dominance over their enemies.

Cat. no. 72 is a pendant depicting a Portuguese soldier on horseback. His chest, head, and hands extend above the upper edge of the semicircular plaque, which is decorated with incised leopard spots against a stippled ground. The face and legs of the figure, as well as the horse, are shown in profile, although his torso and outstretched arms are shown frontally. His long hair and aquiline nose conform to other Benin depictions of the Portuguese. The soldier wears a helmet, tuniclike armor secured with a belt around the chest, and breeches ending at the knees. A sword or dagger is fastened at his waist; he holds a halberd in his right hand and the reins in his left. His dress and accoutrements, as well as his lack of a beard, are very much like those of Benin figures of Portuguese standing musketeers (fig. 7). The details of costume and the patterns of the garments and background have all been incised with great delicacy.

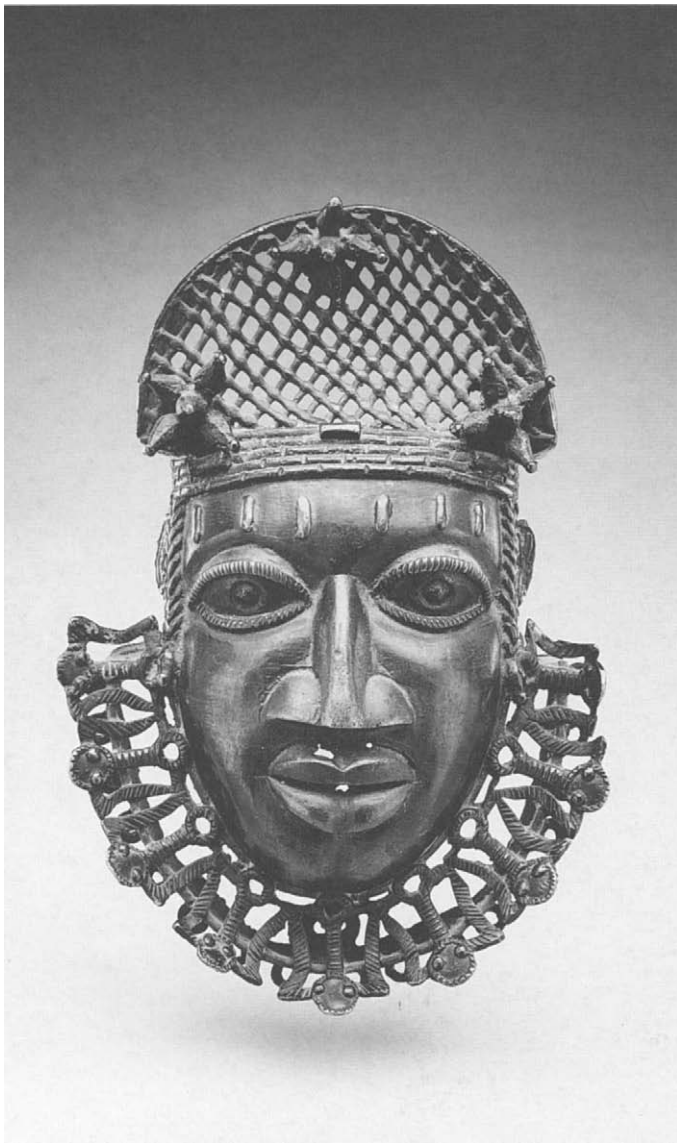
Several other examples of this type of pendant exist (e.g., London, South Kensington, Christie's, 1990b: lot 95; Lallemand 1932: 257; von Luschan 1919: fig. 576, pl. 98; Hagen 1918: pl. 5, fig. 4; Pitt-Rivers 1900: fig. 112). It is not known who would have worn such pendants, although it is possible that, like the waist pendant in the form of a Portuguese face (cat. no. 63), they were worn by the Oba himself. Images of the Portuguese, and especially those of Portuguese soldiers, are associated with Oba Esigie (r. early sixteenth century), who was aided by Portuguese soldiers in his battle against the Ata of Idah, leader of the Igala.

1. I would like to thank Paula Ben-Amos for these and ensuing references to Benin pectorals and hip ornaments found in vassal areas.

2. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives, 59/20/5-7).







**55. Hip Ornament: Human Face**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 6½ in. (16.5 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.42

*Reference:* London, South Kensington,  
Christie's, 1988: lot 85



**56. Hip Ornament: Human Face**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass, iron, copper; h. 7¾ in.

(19.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.48

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; James Tregaskis

*References:* Webster 1895–1901, cat. 29: no.

6; von Luschan 1919: 375, fig. 538;

London, Christie's, 1989

**54. Pectoral: Human Face**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

15th–17th century

Brass; h. 7½ in. (19.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.50

*References:* "Exploring in Nigeria" 1947:359;

Fagg 1980:66



**57. Hip Ornament: Human Face**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 7 3/8 in. (18.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.49

*Ex Collection:* Adolph Schwartz

*References:* London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1980a: lot 7; London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1989: lot 101

*Exhibition:* London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1967: no. 13



**58. Hip Ornament: Human Face**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

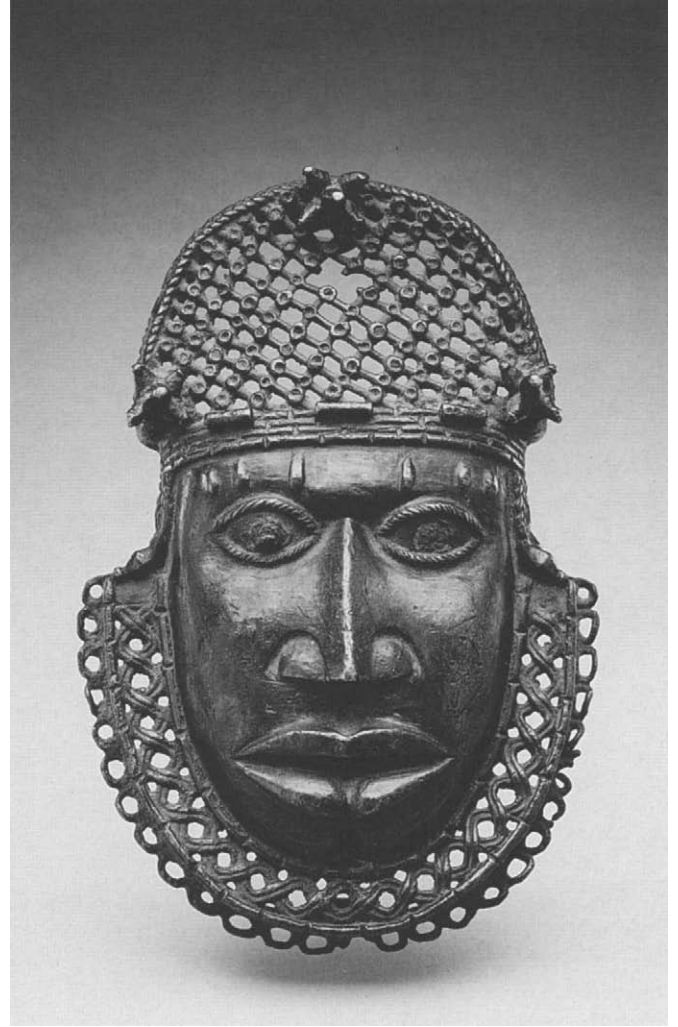
16th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 7 1/2 in. (19.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.52

*Reference:* London, Christie's, 1977b: lot 159



**59. Hip Ornament: Human Face**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.44

*Ex Collection:* Arman

*Reference:* Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 1972: lot 50



**60. Hip Ornament: Human Face**

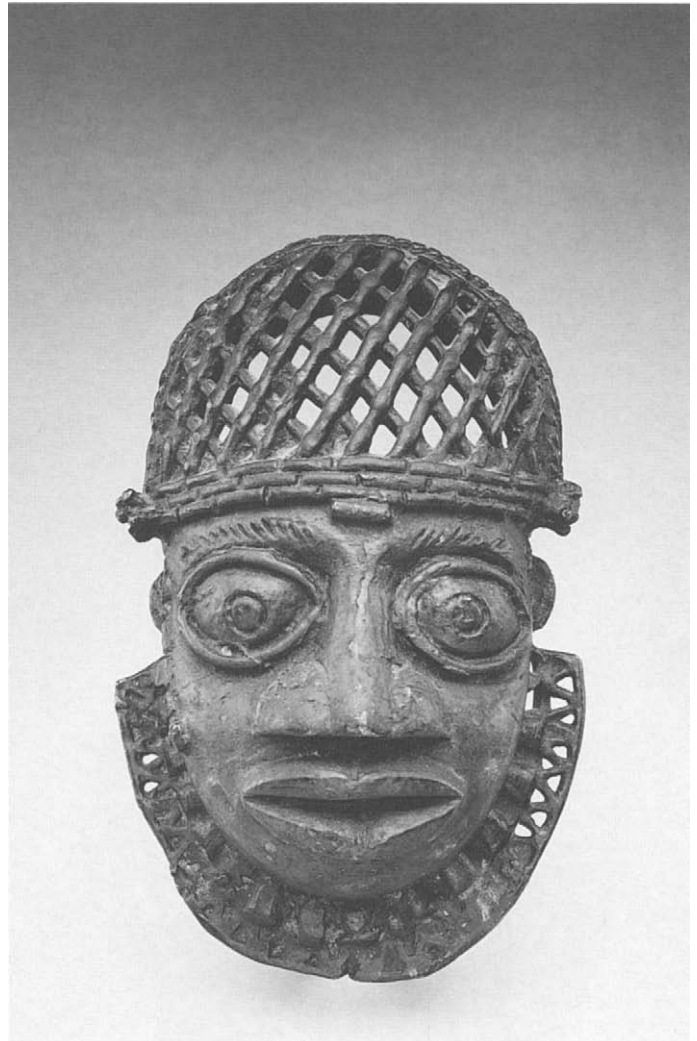
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 5 7/8 in. (14.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.147



**61. Hip Ornament: Human Face**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; h. 6 3/8 in. (16.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.35

**62. Hip Ornament: Leopard Head**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 7 1/2 in. (19.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.36

*Ex Collection:* James Hooper

*References:* von Luschan 1919: fig. 570;

Hooper and Burland 1953: pl. 58; London,

Christie's, 1976b; Phelps 1976; 392; Dark

1982: R6/2

*Exhibitions:* Bloomington, Indiana Univer-

sity Art Museum, 1980; New York, Grey Art

Gallery, 1981: no. 51







**64. Waist Pendant: Crocodile Head**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 16th–19th century  
 Brass, copper; h. 7¼ in. (18.4 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.51



**65. Waist Pendant: Leopard Head**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 16th–19th century  
 Brass; h. 7⅛ in. (18.1 cm)  
 Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls  
*References:* London, Sotheby and Co., 1974:  
 lot 94; Dark 1982: Z2/70

**63. Waist Pendant or Hip  
 Ornament: Portuguese Face**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 16th–19th century  
 Brass, iron; h. 7⅝ in. (19.4 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.162.9  
*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-  
 Fox Pitt-Rivers  
*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 44, figs.  
 343, 344; von Luschan 1919: fig. 560ab;  
 Dark 1982: 2/17





**66. Waist Pendant: Two Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; h. 5 3/8 in. (13.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.40

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; W. O. Oldman;

University Museum, Philadelphia; Ernst

Anspach

*References:* Webster 1895–1901, cat. 29;

no. 108; “The Art of Benin” 1912: fig. 41



**67. Waist Pendant: Man on Horseback**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass;

h. 5 3/8 in. (14.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.46

**69. Waist Pendant: Man on Horseback**

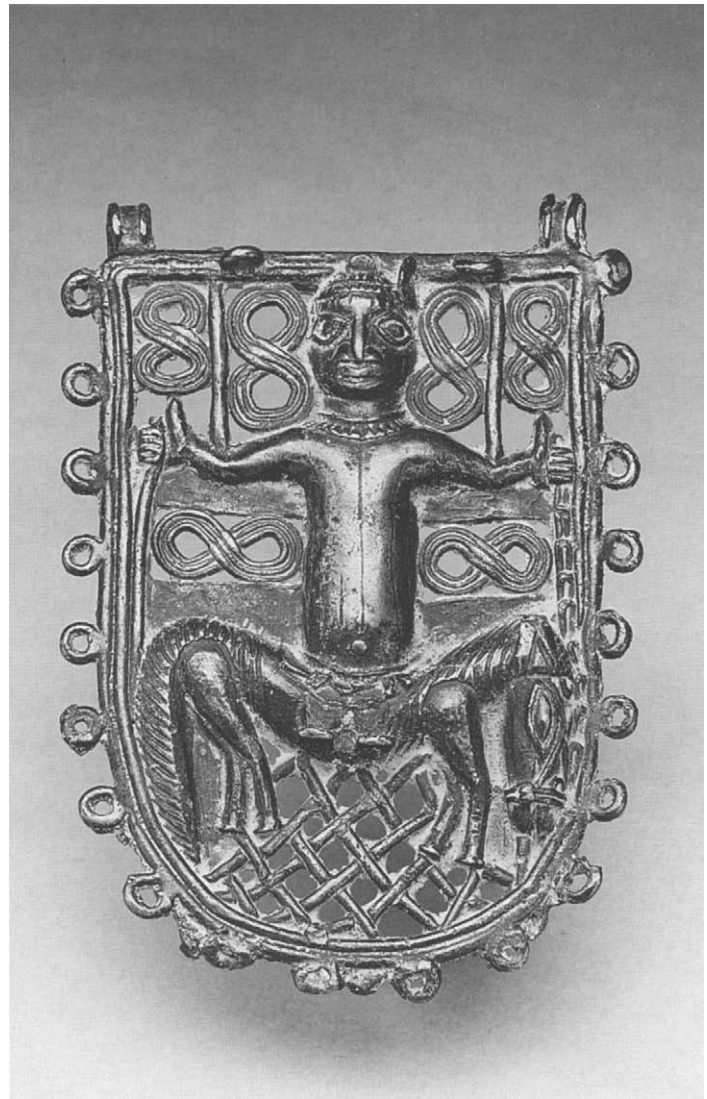
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century

Brass; h. 5½ in. (14.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.38

*Ex Collection:* Josef Mueller

*References:* London, Christie's, 1978a:  
lot 122; London, Christie's, 1981: lot 329;  
Dark 1982: P8/19



**68. Waist Pendant: Man on Horseback**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century

Brass; h. 5⅝ in. (14.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.47



**70. Pendant**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Brass; h. 2 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (7.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.118

**71. Pendant: Ram Head**

Nigeria; Court of Benin or related area

17th–19th century

Brass; h. 6 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (15.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.41

*Ex Collection:* Irwin and Marcia Hersey

*Reference:* New York, Sotheby's, 1987:

lot 27





**72. Pendant: Portuguese Horseman**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–18th century  
Brass; h. 6¼ in. (15.9 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.39

*Reference:* London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet,  
1976: lot 171  
*Exhibitions:* South Hadley, Mount Holyoke  
College Art Museum, 1984: no. 94; New  
York, Center for African Art, 1988:  
no. 191



# BRACELETS

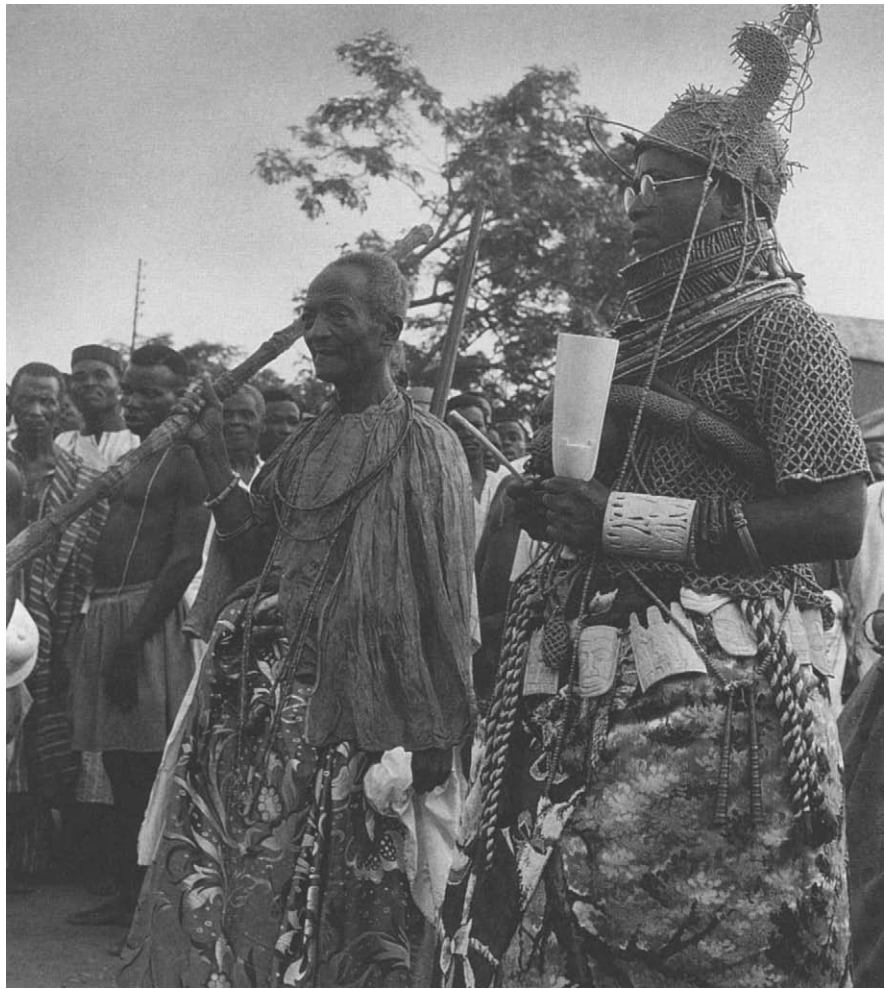


In addition to coral-bead collars and other regalia, sumptuous layers of cloth, and brass hip ornaments, the Oba and chiefs of Benin wear pairs of ornate bracelets at palace festivals. These long cylindrical cuffs are worn at the wrist, and can be seen in many of the Benin brass plaques (see cat. nos. 35, 40–42, 45). The ivory versions are usually reserved for the king, while those worn by chiefs are made of cast or hammered brass (see figs. 47, 48). The Oba and chiefs also wear thin circular bracelets of brass, iron, or leather and bracelets of coral beads (fig. 47), which are also worn at times other than festivals and may be worn by commoners as well.

The pair of ivory bracelets in the Perls collection (cat. nos. 73, 74) was probably made for a chief rather than for the Oba himself. During the reigns of weaker kings, such bracelets were worn by chiefs who were eager to appropriate for themselves the trappings of higher power and were willing and able to pay Igbesanmwan carvers to make them (Blackmun 1984a:223). These bracelets, of which many similar examples exist, each depict four figures surrounded by leafy branches. Two of the figures are Portuguese soldiers in profile mounted on horseback, with reclining leopards above their heads. The other two are standing Edo chiefs, shown frontally, with an *eben* sword pointed downward at their left hips and a thin paddlelike staff raised in their right hands. One figure of each type is shown upside down and the other is right-side up, so that the images can be read easily by both wearer and viewer. Today in Benin, Portuguese figures are associated with the great sixteenth-century warrior king Esigie, because of the Portuguese soldiers who assisted him in his battle against the Ata of Idah. On these bracelets, the Oba, in the guise of a leopard, appears above the mounted figure (Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:70, n. 7), and the “bird of prophecy,” which Esigie encountered and ordered killed on this campaign, stands next to the Edo figures (see cat. nos. 88–96).

75. **Bracelet: Four Figures (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
1888–97

Fig. 47. The late Oba Akenzua II striking an ivory gong at Emobo, a ceremony to drive evil forces out of Benin. At Emobo, the Oba wears a pair of ivory bracelets and several ivory waist ornaments. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/65/5). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London



These bracelets are heavy and thick. Their style is distinguished by the sloping, rabbitlike profile of the Portuguese soldiers' faces and their large slanted, almond-shaped eyes. Portuguese figures carved in this style appear frequently on a group of altar tusks that Barbara Blackmun has determined were commissioned by Oba Osemwende (r. 1815–50), suggesting that the bracelets were made during his reign or that of one of his successors (Blackmun 1984a:221).

Another cylindrical ivory bracelet (cat. no. 75) also depicts four figures alternately upside down and right-side up. A leopard perches above them and they are surrounded by fernlike branches. All of these figures have long hair and wear garments derived from sixteenth-century Portuguese costumes, as seen on early Benin depictions of foreigners (see cat. no. 47). The figures have extremely slanted eyes and drilled dotted circles on their foreheads. Two of the figures are shown holding umbrellas above their heads (view 2), and the other two grasp long curved objects at their sides (view 1). Blackmun has traced the transformation of this motif from its original meaning, a foreign trader holding strands of coral beads, manillas, or bolts of cloth, to its present one, an Edo priest or healer wearing patterned, textured, and

amulet-laden garments (Blackmun 1988). Such figures of Edo priests, with the characteristic drilled circle-dot motif, are found on the tusks carved during the reign of Oba Ovonramwen (r. 1888–97; see cat. no. 12, fig. 24), and the bracelet probably dates from the same period. This bracelet's deep red-brown color is the result of applications of red palm oil and spirits (Blackmun 1984a:35).

A brass bracelet in the Perls collection (cat. no. 76) also depicts figures in Portuguese clothing, including a buttoned doublet, pleated skirt, boots, and brimmed hat. These figures lack the long hair that usually characterizes portrayals of Portuguese in Benin art, and their features are more like those of Edo figures than other images of Portuguese. Like similarly garbed figures on the ivory bracelets and tusks, they may represent Edo priests or healers. The openwork lattice design that fills the panels between the figures and the openwork guilloche at the borders are seen on many Benin brass bells and pendant masks, and on some hand-held clappers. This particular example exhibits numerous casting flaws, where the metal either failed to fill the mold or flashed and flowed over it.

As can be seen from the way the figures on the ivory bracelets alternate direction, Benin bracelets are interesting for what they reveal about the Edo sense of surface design. This is also evident in the brass bracelets in which two motifs are repeatedly juxtaposed, alternating checkerboard fashion in rows both across and around the bracelet. In cat. no. 77, the two motifs are Portuguese heads and pairs of intertwined mudfish. The Portuguese heads resemble the one on the quadrangular brass bell in the Perls collection (cat. no. 28), and those depicted on brass plaques (cat. nos. 47, 48). The mudfish have been stylized to form a square pattern whose corners are defined by the exaggerated L-shaped barbels. Overlying this square is a cruciform design whose vertical element is formed by the lozenge-shaped heads of the two fish and another lozenge created by the intersection of their two L-shaped bodies. The horizontal element of the cross is formed by the two mudfish tails. Separating the three rows of motifs that encircle the bracelet are delicate strands of a vinelike plant motif incised against a stippled background.

Alternating Portuguese heads and mudfish are common motifs in Benin art and can be seen on numerous brass bracelets almost identical to this one (see von Luschan 1919: figs. 594, 595; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981: no. 73), on ivory bracelets (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984: fig. 16), and on an ivory pendant mask (Newton, Jones, and Ezra 1987:85). The images of both mudfish and Portuguese are multilayered royal symbols alluding to the Oba's identification with Olokun, the god of the sea, and to his wealth and power. The fact that the two motifs are so similar in meaning is often underscored by the similar way in which the two motifs are stylized. Here both the long locks of the Portuguese's hair and the barbels of the mudfish have been depicted by thin parallel lines.



Cat. no. 78 also depicts alternating Portuguese heads and single coiled mudfish. In this example the individual motifs are more widely spaced, with vinelike plants separating them. The conventions for stylizing the heads and mudfish are different from the previous example. The Portuguese faces have been given a rectangular format, bordered on the sides by the raised, hatched lines of their hair and on top by the edge of their narrow, domed hats. Their bulging eyes are placed at the very top edge of their faces. The rectangular raised outlines of their faces are reminiscent of the treatment of the two Portuguese faces on the bell in the Perls collection (cat. no. 31). The mudfish too are given a somewhat rectangular shape, defined by their elongated L-shaped barbels. Their form is very close to that of the mudfish on some Benin hip ornaments (see cat. nos. 55–57). The mudfish and faces were cast of a different copper-rich alloy, redder in color than the brassy metal of the rest of the bracelet. These coppery insets were pressed into the wax model and, because copper has a higher melting point than brass, did not melt with the wax when the mold was heated and molten brass was poured in around them.

Eight mudfish in alternating directions are depicted around cat. no. 79, which is cast very thinly. The fish bodies are lightly incised, except for the outline of their heads, and their necks, eyes, and dorsal fins, which are in low relief. Their bodies are filled with rather loosely executed, noncontinuous sections of interlace patterns or overlapping chevrons. The fish themselves and the plant motif that forms the background are less clearly defined in this example than in the others.

The motifs on cat. no. 80—alternating leopard heads and *eben* swords—are small and densely spaced. They refer to the king's power and authority. In Benin thought the Oba is "Leopard of the Home," while the leopard is "king of the bush" (Ben-Amos 1976b:246), an analogy that is based upon the aggressiveness and ferocity of both king and leopard and their dominance in their respective realms. The ceremonial *eben* sword is the implement with which chiefs honor the king by raising their swords and tossing them in the air while dancing. Worn by a chief, this bracelet would have conveyed the idea of honor and respect due to the king because of his leopardlike qualities.

A different solution to the problem of decorating long cylindrical bracelets is seen in a pair of bracelets (cat. nos. 81, 82): a spiral band of incised, crosshatched half-ovals and dotted lines, set within raised, striated borders, coils around the bracelets and terminates at top and bottom in long, tapering crocodile heads. The heads have incised perpendicular lines on their snouts, rows of bumps on the forehead, and bulging eyes set close to the sides of the face. Atypically, the lines and dots decorating these bracelets were incised in the metal after casting, rather than in the wax model. Like the mudfish and Portuguese, the crocodile in Benin art is a recurring reference to the Oba's close affiliation with Olokun.

These bracelets, and the preceding one (cat. no. 80), are made of

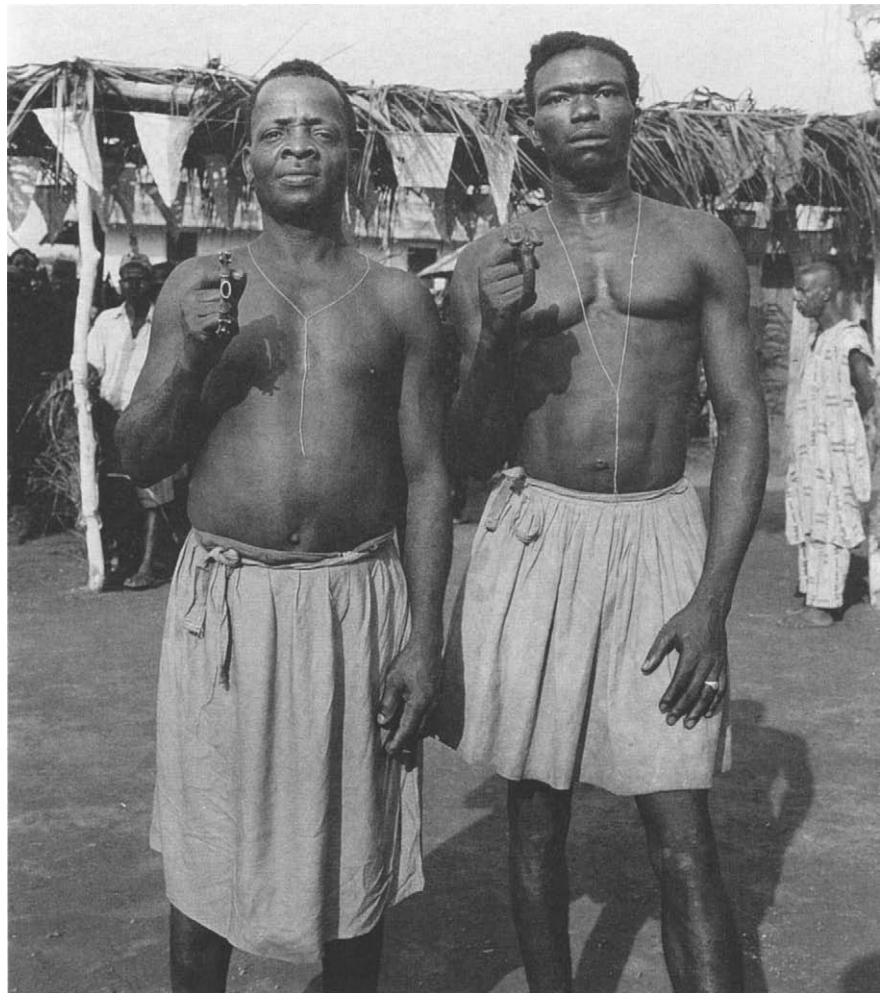


Fig. 48. A leather box (*ekpoki*), said to be filled with gifts from the Oni of Ife, is brought to the Oba during Igue. The titleholder on the left wears cylindrical brass bracelets in addition to his coral-bead collar and other regalia. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/73/12). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London

gilt brass, as their shiny golden surface indicates. It is not known when (or even if) the technique of mercury gilding was introduced to the brasscasters of Benin. The Oba had very few gold ornaments, and gold was virtually nonexistent in the kingdom (Ryder 1969:138, n. 1; 163). The gilding could have been done by a European craftsman visiting Benin. Archaeologist Timothy Garrard has found documentary evidence of a Dutchman living on the Gold Coast in the mid-eighteenth century who was engaged in gilding small objects (Garrard 1989:12), and it is possible that someone with such skills was operating in Benin. The gilding could also have been done elsewhere (Roth 1899:32), even in Europe. In the nineteenth century, *eben* swords were sent to Birmingham, England, to be silverplated and then were returned to Nigeria (Roth 1968:61). According to William Fagg, Benin gilt-bronze objects all date from the late seventeenth to the middle or late eighteenth century (London, Christie's, 1976b: lot 57), although the gilding on cat. nos. 81 and 82 appears to be more recent than that.<sup>1</sup>

Like the previous pair, cat. no. 83 is conceived as a spiral whose overlapping ends terminate in crocodile heads. Their long, pointed snouts are ornamented with a dotted lozenge pattern, and above their bulging eyes are the rows of stippled bumps always seen in Benin representations of crocodile heads. Around the circumference of the

Fig. 49. Two Ifiento holding magical brass bracelets to clear the path for the Oba during the celebration of Igue. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/60/12). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London



bracelet are two additional crocodile heads, quite abbreviated, alternating with three leopard heads. Between each animal head is a narrow, incised guilloche pattern bordered by raised and striated bands. The animal heads and decorative bands are rendered in precise detail, although they are extremely schematic, almost seeming closer to abstract geometric patterns than to naturalistic animal forms. Despite its narrow format, the elaborate decoration of this bracelet suggests it was worn at palace festivals as were the long cylindrical bracelets.<sup>2</sup>

A similar example of the way Benin brasscasters transform animal forms into repetitive abstract motifs can be seen in cat. no. 84. Here the bracelet's thin band is encircled by crocodile heads, the tip of each snout nudging the top of the head in front of it. Each crocodile head is curved upward at forehead and snout, creating open spaces below them and giving the bracelet a scalloped silhouette. The rhythmic repetition of these concave forms (heads) punctuated by rows of bumps (forehead), bulging semicircles (eyes), serrated lines (center ridge of snout), and short bars (nostrils), creates an abstract pattern that all but overpowers its crocodilian features.

Cat. no. 85 consists of a ring of brassy metal that contrasts with three human heads whose reddish brown color suggests a copper-rich alloy. The heads are identical, with high coral-bead collars under their chins, serrated rows of hair, large eyes with serrated eyelids, and three scarification marks above each eye. Many similar bracelets exist, with two, three, or four heads, some of which have striated faces (von Luschan 1919: pl. 100, upper right).

Narrow bracelets, such as cat. nos. 84 and 85, are known as *egbae* (sing. *egba*) in Edo. Worn on the forearm or upper arm (see figs. 14, 47), they are treated with herbs and other medicinal ingredients to protect and strengthen the wearer (Nevadomsky 1989:63–65). They are made in a wide variety of shapes and designs—from knots and other abstract motifs to human and animal heads (see von Luschan 1919: pls. 100, 101; Roth 1899:29–30). In this way each bracelet, and its specific function, can be distinguished from others. Some of the bracelets provide protection in battle and can be seen in Benin plaques depicting warriors (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 19, figs. 4–6); others prevent or treat illness or ensure safe childbirth; and still others are useful in stimulating romance. Some are able to repel evil and immobilize enemies. At Igue, the annual festival at which the Oba’s spiritual powers are renewed, such bracelets are carried like mystically charged weapons by the Ifiento, palace officials who march back and forth clearing a space for the Oba and controlling the crowd (fig. 49). The bracelets are considered so powerful that they can “stun a man into quivering helplessness and make the most fecund woman barren” (Nevadomsky 1989:65).

The convergence of decorative and protective functions in these bracelets reflects the heightened dangers and corresponding need for spiritual aid during the Benin palace ceremonies. The myriad elements that make up the extraordinary costumes worn by the Oba and chiefs at these festivals, of which bracelets are just one, are intended not merely to enhance and glorify their appearance but to safeguard them and to augment and demonstrate their innate spiritual powers.

1. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Objects Conservation Department 1991: personal communication.

2. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.



**73, 74. Pair of Bracelets: Horsemen and Standing Figures**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
1815–97

Ivory, wood, or coconut shell; l. 5¼,  
5⅜ in. (13.3, 13.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.76, 77

*Ex Collection:* Sir Jacob Epstein

*References:* Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 1980: lot  
225; Bassani and McLeod 1989: no. 195

A roughly carved X appears on the inside of  
1991.17.76



**75. Bracelet: Four Figures (view 2)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

1888–97

Ivory; l. 5⅞ in. (13.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.84

*References:* London, Sotheby & Co., 1966:

lot 147A; London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet,

1979a: lot 145



**76. Bracelet: Four Figures**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Brass; l. 5⅞ in. (13.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.150

*Ex Collection:* Ernst Anspach



**77. Bracelet: Portuguese Heads  
and Mudfish (view 1)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–18th century

Brass; l. 5 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (13.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.79

*Ex Collection:* E. C. Gaze and R. H. H.  
Barneby

*Reference:* London, Sotheby & Co., 1965a:  
lot 127

One of the inner edges is incised with a pair  
of double concentric circles.

77. Bracelet: Portuguese Heads and Mudfish (view 2)







**78. Bracelet: Portuguese Heads  
and Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Brass, copper; l. 6 in. (15.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.78

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-  
Fox Pitt-Rivers

*Reference:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 49, fig. 384



**80. Bracelet: Leopard Heads and Ceremonial Swords**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

17th–19th century

Gilt brass; l. 5  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (13.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.74

*Ex Collection:* Jay C. Leff

*Exhibitions:* Pittsburgh, Carnegie Institute, Department of Fine Arts, 1959: no. 283; New York, Museum of Primitive Art, 1964: no. 37; Gainesville, University of Florida, University Gallery, 1967: no. 32; Pittsburgh, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, 1969: no. 177; Bloomington, Indiana University Art Museum, 1980



**79. Bracelet: Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; l. 5  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (13.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.151



**81, 82. Pair of Bracelets:  
Crocodile Heads**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
17th–19th century  
Gilt brass; l. 5 ¼ in. (13.3 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.80, 81



**83. Bracelet: Crocodile and Leopard Heads**

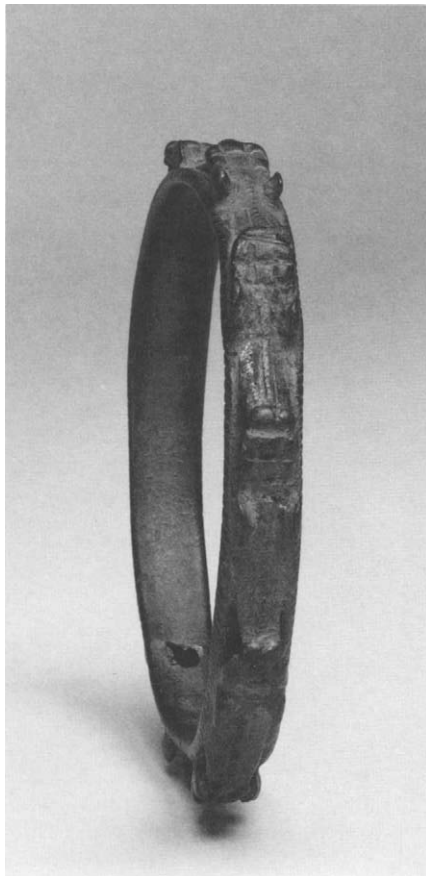
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century

Brass; diam. 4 in. (10.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.75

*Reference:* London, Christie's, 1979b:  
lot 253

*Exhibitions:* South Hadley, Mount Holyoke  
College Art Museum, 1984: no. 92; Green-  
vale, N. Y. C. W. Post Art Gallery, 1980:  
no. 73; New York, Grey Art Gallery, 1981:  
no. 54



**84. Bracelet: Crocodile Heads**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century

Brass; diam. 3 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (9.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.83



**85. Bracelet: Three Human Heads**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century

Brass, copper; diam. 4 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (11.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.82



# STAFFS OF OFFICE



In Benin, staffs of brass, iron, wood, and ivory are emblems of identity that indicate the title, status, and profession of their bearers. They may also help to identify specific individuals or particular occasions. For example, the eighteenth-century kings Ewuakpe, Akenzua, and Eresonyen used rattle-staffs (*ukhurhe*) with special shapes or distinctive iconography to convey their personal triumphs (see fig. 8; Vogel 1978; Ben-Amos 1983; idem 1984). The Oba also appears on some ceremonial occasions carrying a proclamation staff (*isevberé igho*), to underscore the threatening authority of his words (Ben-Amos 1980:68). Other people at court, be they traders, healers, priests, or attendants, are likewise identified by their distinctive staffs (Ben-Amos 1980: figs. 24, 40, 54, 85).

Cat. no. 86 is a brass staff consisting of a long narrow blade riveted onto a long handle with a pair of back-to-back figures at each end. Separating the two sets of figures on the handle is a five-sectioned shaft with pierced and solid sides facing opposite directions. Both blade and handle are incised with crisp guilloché patterns. Read and Dalton noted that staffs such as this “have been brought to Europe in considerable numbers” (1899:26), and many similar examples are known (see von Luschan 1919: pl. 102; Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 29).

The back-to-back figures at the end of the handle depict a chief wearing a hat with a distinctive bulbous protuberance on top and feathers at the sides, similar to the hats of scalloped red cloth worn by chiefs at Ugie Erha Oba, the palace ceremony that honors the Oba’s paternal ancestors (figs. 3, 12; Bradbury 1959:191). They also wear high coral-bead collars, crossed baldrics, and wrapped skirts. They hold *eben* swords in their left hands and raise narrow-bladed swords or staffs in their right hands. The *eben* swords are not only a sign of their own status as chiefs, but when twirled and tossed in the air at palace ceremonies are one of the means by which they honor the Oba. The figures at the base of the handle, where it meets the blade, are dressed similarly. They hold clappers surmounted by the “bird of prophecy” and the rods used to strike them (see cat. nos. 89–94). These clappers

## 86. Staff for Oba’s Representative (detail)

Nigeria, Edo: Court of Benin  
18th–19th century

are sounded by chiefs at Ugie Oro, a palace ceremony that recalls Oba Esigie's triumph over the Igala army in the sixteenth century and by extension celebrates the power of all Obas. Both pairs of figures thus represent chiefs paying homage to the Oba.

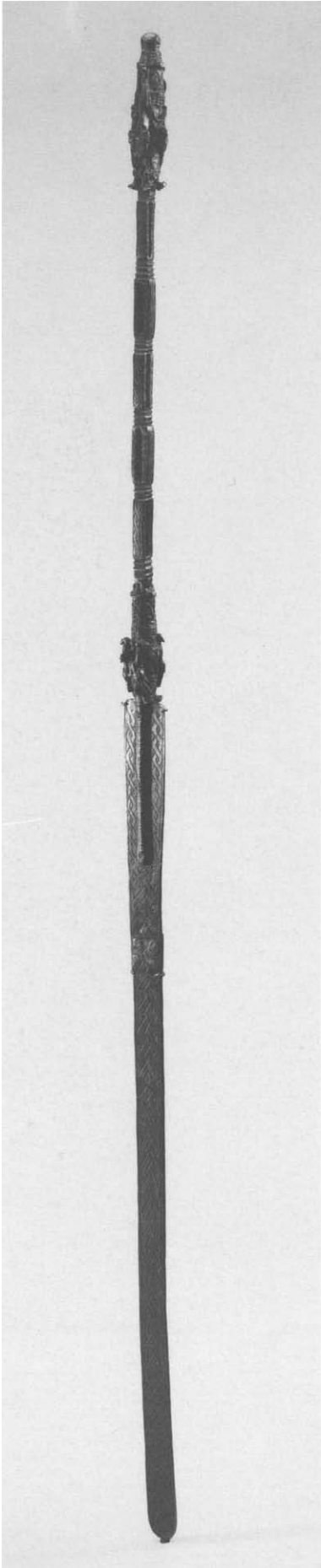
Such staffs, called *asan errie*, are carried by representatives of the Oba while on official business (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 74; Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:70, n. 11; Blackmun 1984a:318). For example, they are carried by members of Idemwin, a group of officials within the Ibiwe palace society responsible for procuring animals from Edo villages for sacrifice in the capital, and by other officials, also drawn from Ibiwe, who accompany the Oba's wives when they appear in public. Similar flat, narrow-bladed staffs, but without figurative handles, are also depicted on brass plaques, where they are held by warriors (von Luschan 1919: figs. 357, 365; Chicago, Museum of Natural History, 1962: pls. 32, 33).

If cat. no. 86 honors the Oba by showing officials with attributes that pay him homage, cat. nos. 87 and 88 do so even more directly, by depicting the Oba himself. In both, the Oba is shown seated, identified by the crossed baldrics and large central bead on his chest. Below him is a ring of small loops for attaching bells. In cat. no. 87 a nude attendant kneels below the Oba, holding a bowl of sacrificial offerings. The short shaft of this staff ends in a point, perhaps to enable it to be implanted in the ground. Cat. no. 88 depicts the Oba as a double image, back-to-back like the pairs of figures in cat. no. 86. Its shaft extends both above and below the Oba figures, and appears broken at both top and bottom. Cat. no. 88 thus seems to be a fragment of a much longer staff, like those in the Berlin and Hamburg Museums für Völkerkunde, in which three or four images of the Oba identical to those in cat. nos. 87 and 88 alternate with sections of the shaft (von Luschan 1919: pl. 110; Hagen 1918: pl. 7, fig. 1). Below the topmost figures in both the Berlin examples there is a cluster of metal projections, dangling bells, and small chameleons, resembling the tops of the iron staffs that identify priests of Osun, the mystical force inherent in leaves and herbs (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 54). Not surprisingly, both cat. nos. 87 and 88 are cast around iron cores, thus fusing the power of iron and its god Ogun with the imagery of Osun, as is the case in the Osun staffs themselves.

The imagery of Osun pervades cat. nos. 87 and 88, which have as their theme the Oba's occult powers. He holds a neolithic stone celt or "thunder stone" in his left hand and a rattle-staff in his right. The rattle-staff is a means of calling the spirits, and indicates the Oba's special ability to communicate with them (see cat. nos. 26, 27). Stone celts are believed to have been hurled down to earth by Ogiuwu, the god of death, and are also particularly associated with the gods Osun and Ogun (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 36; Bradbury 1961:131). When they are held by an Oba with their sharpened blade up, as in these two staffs, they are said to intensify his blessings and curses (Nevadomsky

1989:67), presumably because of their threatening destructive power. Occult power is also suggested by the snakes that slither along the shafts of these staffs and cluster around the Oba's hat. Snakes in Benin art often represent Osun, and are "the symbol of potent and effective medicines, something like the Rx on modern prescription bottles" (Nevadomsky 1988:82). Ritual specialists, *ebo* (sing. *obo*), are said to transform themselves into poisonous snakes in order to attack evildoers. Their presence on these staffs along with the image of the Oba with a thunder stone and rattle-staff reinforces the idea of the Oba as a supreme ritual specialist (Blackmun 1984b:17). As Nevadomsky has written in discussing Benin altar rings with related imagery, "since the king is believed to be the embodiment of the welfare and continuity of his people, the divine monarch whose health and strength have continually to be ensured by the manipulation of the immanent world, the medicine imagery. . . in conjunction with the symbols of kingship, reflect and reinforce this association [of sacred kingship and magical medicine]" (Nevadomsky 1989:68). While always part of the Oba's nature, this aspect of divine kingship was accentuated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the Oba's military, political, and eventually economic powers were on the wane (Ben-Amos 1980:34). Judging from the exaggerated facial features and rough castings, these two staffs were probably made at that time.





**86. Staff for Oba's Representative**  
 Nigeria, Edo: Court of Benin  
 18th–19th century  
 Brass; h. 33½ in. (85.1 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.97  
*Ex Collection:* Jack Whitehead  
*Reference:* London, Sotheby Parke Bernet  
 and Co., 1980b: lot 139



**87. Staff: Seated Oba**  
 Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 18th–19th century  
 Brass, iron; h. 25¼ in. (64.1 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.98  
*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-  
 Fox Pitt-Rivers  
*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 36, figs.  
 279, 280; London, Sotheby and Co. 1965b:  
 lot 134; New York, Sotheby's, 1987: lot 26



**88. Staff Fragment: Seated Oba**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century  
Brass, iron; h. 13½ in. (34.3 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.162.8



# HAND-HELD CLAPPERS



Hand-held clappers are among a vast and varied category of “self-sounding” musical instruments, known collectively as idiophones, that produce sound without the addition of a stretched membrane or a vibrating string or reed (Nketia 1974:69). The most common form of clapper in the Benin corpus consists of a cylindrical shaft surmounted by the figure of a long-beaked bird with outstretched wings. They are played by striking the bird figure on its beak with a metal rod. The vast majority of the bird clappers are cast in brass, although they are also made in carved ivory (Brinard 1989: no. 99; Wolf 1963b). Ivory clappers more frequently depict human figures, either standing or mounted on horseback.

The bird figures atop Benin clappers are characterized by very long curved beaks in which they grasp a round object, usually interpreted as a ball of medicine or magical substances (Ben-Amos, cited in Curnow 1983:222). In some examples, such as cat. nos. 93 and 94, the bird grasps a short cylindrical object instead. The bird has a small head and a rather long neck, often with small wattles and a narrow “bib” below the beak (cat. nos. 89, 90). It is always shown with wings outstretched, prominently displaying the longer, more widely spaced, pointed feathers at the back edge of the wing. The rest of the wings, as well as the neck, breast, and back, are covered with overlapping rows of ovoid feathers whose central ribs are indicated by raised lines and whose diagonal filaments are incised. The feathers often extend to the middle of the legs; the scaly skin below the feathers is sometimes depicted by an incised lozenge pattern (cat. no. 89).

Despite the uniformity of these features, the birds vary in their posture and quality of execution. Of the six brass clappers in the Perls collection, cat. nos. 89 and 90 are the most carefully and regularly executed, with each feather crisply and precisely indicated. In cat. no. 89, the bird stands erect, with its back strongly arched, its head thrown back, and its outstretched wings curving forward. In contrast, the bird in cat. no. 90 leans dramatically forward, with its wings angled backward like the wings of a jet. In this example the artist has

## 89. Hand-held Clapper with Bird of Prophecy

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century  
Brass, iron; h. 13 in. (33.0 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.89

*Ex Collection:* Adolph Schwartz

*References:* Leuzinger 1972: no. K13; idem 1976:8, 209; London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1980a: lot 13

*Exhibitions:* London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1967: no. 15; Zurich, Kunsthaus, 1970: no. K11.



Fig. 50. Chiefs striking clappers depicting the bird of prophecy at Ugie Oro. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky

emphasized the wide spacing of the long wing and tail feathers, so much so that they must be reinforced with brass bands stretching across the feathers on the front of the wings and the underside of the tail. Consequently the front of the wings is not decorated with feathers as it is in the other clappers. In cat. nos. 91 to 94, the position of the wings and body varies between these two extremes, and the feathers are more roughly and irregularly portrayed; the fine parallel lines of cat. nos. 89 and 90 give way to thicker, choppier, more widely spaced lines. In cat. no. 93, the artist has departed from the norm by arranging the feathers horizontally along the wing rather than vertically.

According to oral tradition, these brass clappers surmounted by birds were first made during the reign of Oba Esigie in the early sixteenth century to commemorate an incident in his war against the Igala and their leader, the Ata of Idah. The war with the Ata of Idah posed a grave threat to Benin, and the Igala army came dangerously close to attacking the capital. As Esigie was setting out to force the Igala army back north, he and his troops encountered the “bird of prophecy,” whose cry portends disaster. Esigie’s diviners advised retreat, since they predicted the confrontation with Igala would end badly for Benin, and many of Esigie’s troops turned back. Nevertheless, Esigie rallied his troops with the admonition, “Whoever wishes to succeed in life should not heed the bird that cries disaster,” and ordered them to proceed. He also ordered the ill-boding bird to be killed, and in some accounts it is the Portuguese soldiers accompanying him who executed this order. Under Esigie’s command the Benin army went on to defeat Igala, a victory that brought with it the expansion of the Benin kingdom and greater control of the Niger River, a major thoroughfare for trade. Upon his triumphant return to Benin, Esigie commissioned the royal brasscasters to create idiophones depicting the “bird of prophecy” and decreed that chiefs should sound them at court ceremonies that commemorate Esigie’s victory (Nevadomsky 1986:42, 44; idem 1988:76–78).

This ritual, known as Ugie Oro, was introduced by the fourth Oba, Ewedo, but was expanded by Esigie to include references to his victory over Igala. Formerly the Ugie Oro ceremony lasted about three



Fig. 51. Plaque: Three Men Striking Clappers with the Bird of Prophecy. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th–17th century. Brass; h. 18<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (47.3 cm). London, Museum of Mankind, 98.1–15.117. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

months, during which time the king and chiefs performed every five days, dancing in procession wearing their most lavish dress (Ben-Amos 1980:75). In 1985 the ceremony was performed for the first time since the reign of Eweka II (r. 1914–33), although it was abbreviated to less than two weeks because of the constraints of modern life in Benin City. Palace and Town Chiefs, grouped according to their role and rank, danced to the accompaniment of royal bards. In the presence of the Oba, each chief struck the beak of the bird atop his brass clapper (Nevadomsky 1986:45–46). Fig. 50 shows a group of chiefs dancing with their clappers in the Ugie Oro festival of 1985. The brass plaque in fig. 51 depicts three chiefs beating similar bird-topped clappers, perhaps as participants in an Ugie Oro festival of the sixteenth or seventeenth century.

The “bird of prophecy,” and by extension the triumph of Esigie, is also commemorated in other objects besides those used at the Ugie Oro festival (Nevadomsky 1988:77). The Perls collection includes a small cast brass figure of the bird on a square base (cat. no. 95). A similar bird figure was in the Pitt-Rivers collection (Pitt-Rivers 1900: fig. 271). Such figures may have been placed on royal ancestral altars in Benin where they would recall Esigie’s victory and the divine power of all Obas. However, William Fagg has suggested that another such

bird figure was made soon after the Punitive Expedition of 1897 for the British officers in Benin (London, Christie's, 1978b: lot 215).

The “bird of prophecy” is usually referred to as *ahianmwēn-oro*, the bird of Oro. It has many other names in the Edo language, including *ahianmwēn-utioye*, “bird that calls disaster,” and *odibosa*, “messenger of god” (Nevadomsky 1986:44). It has proved difficult to identify, and suggestions have included the vulture (Read and Dalton 1899:12), ibis (von Luschan 1919:269; Chicago, Museum of Natural History, 1962:46; Dark and Hill 1971:72), and kingfisher (Ben-Amos 1976b: 249, n. 20). Recently Joseph Nevadomsky has put forward another identification based on the dried body of a bird called *ahianmwēn-oro* sold in an apothecary shop for traditional healers in Benin City (Nevadomsky 1988:76–78). The bird Nevadomsky identified is the white-tailed ant thrush (*Neocossyphys poensis*), a small, short-beaked bird with a slate-brown body, tawny chest, and dark brown tail whose outer feathers are tipped with white. It is these white-tipped tail feathers that are said to give the “bird of prophecy” its ability to predict danger. Nevadomsky admits that this bird does not seem to resemble the long-beaked, long-legged bird with dramatically spread wings depicted on the cast brass musical staffs. He suggests that the brasscasters were not obligated to portray the actual features of the bird, but rather exaggerated the size of the beak since this was the source of its prophesying call. This explanation seems questionable, however, especially when one looks at the care with which Benin artists observed and portrayed the salient features of other birds and animals, notably roosters and leopards (see cat. nos. 24, 25, 106, 107). While their depictions are always stylized and removed from nature to some degree, the characteristic elements—whether the arch of the sickle feathers on the rooster's tail or the slant-eyed, fanged face of the leopard—are immediately recognizable.

The difficulty that scholars have in identifying the “bird of prophecy” may have several causes. The bird that Esigie encountered and caused to be depicted on the clappers may no longer exist, if it ever did. Since *ahianmwēn-oro* is a bird of magical and mythical powers, it may not refer to any single, actual bird but rather to a fictitious composite (Freyer 1987:36). Today in Benin, descriptions of the *ahianmwēn-oro* vary as to color, size, and other identifying features.<sup>1</sup> The “bird of prophecy” may have been created by Edo diviners and exploited by Esigie to make the most of his victory over Igala.

Ivory hand-held clappers, which most often depict human figures rather than the “bird of prophecy,” have sometimes been referred to as flywhisk handles (von Luschan 1919: fig. 639a). In addition to contemporary evidence for their use as clappers (Nevadomsky 1986: figs. 5–8), they are also depicted being used as clappers on Benin plaques of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (von Luschan 1919: pl. 38). Cat. no. 96 and, to a lesser extent, cat. no. 97 show a pattern of wear consistent with being held on the shaft and struck on the face.

The two ivory examples in the Perls collection depict standing figures atop square-sectioned handles. Cat. no. 96 depicts a queen mother, wearing a wrapper and sash as well as her coral-bead regalia, including the distinctive conical crown, a high collar, crossed bandoliers on her chest, bracelets, and anklets. She is portrayed striking a gong. Cat. no. 97 depicts the Oba himself, wearing a coral-bead cap, headband, collar, crossed bandoliers, anklets, and bracelets, as well as a wrapper with a lattice pattern. This figure is identified as the Oba because he alone wears the single large bead that is shown at the intersection of his crossed bandoliers (Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:64). His arms reach forward, both hands clenched in a fist; there is a cylindrical opening in his left hand, as if the figure were meant to hold something.

Like the brass clappers, ivory clappers are also used at the Ugie Oro festival, where they are played by the two top-ranking Uzama (Nevadomsky 1986:46). Examples photographed at the Ugie Oro festival of 1985 depict figures mounted on horseback. Although there is much disagreement in Benin about the identity of these equestrian figures, they have been interpreted by Nevadomsky as portrayals of the Ata of Idah. According to Nevadomsky, the beating of the clapper represents the humiliation of the Ata of Idah by the Uzama, some of whom colluded with him in Igala's war with Benin. As Barbara Blackmun has suggested,<sup>2</sup> the figure of a queen mother atop a clapper would hardly be "punished" in the same way at the Ugie Oro festival celebrating Esigie's victory, since Esigie's triumph had been greatly aided by the intervention of his mother, Idia, the first to be granted the title of queen mother. The figure of the queen mother may refer instead to Idia's powers of protection and those afforded by queen mothers in general. She is shown playing the double gong, the instrument played by the Oba at Emobo, the annual festival in which the Oba uses his newly refreshed mystical powers to drive away evil forces from the kingdom (fig. 47; Ben-Amos 1980:89, 93; Blackmun 1991:60). This further underscores the queen mother's protective role.

The festival of Ugie Oro is meant to demonstrate the power of the Oba over the natural and supernatural forces that affect mortal men. By recalling Esigie's ability to overcome the ill omen of the "bird of prophecy" and to defeat the Igala army, it shows Esigie's—and by extension every Oba's—divine power to protect the Benin kingdom and its inhabitants. The beating of the clappers depicting the "bird of prophecy" underscores the Oba's domination of the bird's terrifying powers. The beating of the ivory clappers depicting the queen mother and the Oba (possibly Idia and Esigie themselves) may invoke their presence at the very rite that honors their great deeds.

1. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.

2. Barbara Blackmun 1991: personal communication.





**91. Hand-held Clapper with Bird  
of Prophecy**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 13 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (33.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.94



**90. Hand-held Clapper with Bird  
of Prophecy**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; h. 12 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (32.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.95



**92. Hand-held Clapper with Bird of Prophecy**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century  
Brass; h. 8 in. (20.3 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991. 17.91

**93. Hand-held Clapper with Bird of Prophecy**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century  
Brass; h. 12 in. (30.5 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.92

**94. Hand-held Clapper with Bird of Prophecy**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century  
Brass; h. 13 in. (33.0 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.93







**95. Bird of Prophecy**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century

Brass; h. 5 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (14.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.60

*Reference:* Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 1990b: lot 155

**96. Hand-held Clapper with Queen Mother**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

Mid-18th–19th century

Ivory; h. 12 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (31.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.88

*Ex Collection:* James Hooper

*References:* London, Christie's, 1976b: lot  
60; New York, Center for African Art, 1988:  
fig. 218; Phelps 1976: pl. 234





97. **Hand-held Clapper with Oba**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
Mid-18th–19th century  
Ivory; h. 13 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (34.9 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.90



# IVORY TRUMPETS



*Akohen* are large, side-blown trumpets carved of ivory and played by the Oba's retainers when he appears in full ceremonial dress at palace rituals (Melzian 1937:7). William Fagg photographed the royal trumpeters at Igue, the ceremony in which the king's spiritual powers are strengthened (fig. 52), and R. E. Bradbury heard the sounding of these horns at Iron, the mock battle between the Oba and the seven Uzama that constitutes the final rite of Ugie Erha Oba, the principal ceremony honoring the Oba's paternal ancestors (Bradbury 1959:193). Bradbury was told by Oba Akenzua II that the Oba had six or seven such trumpets, which were played by musicians from Use (cited in Blackmun 1984a:371). The ivory trumpets appeared at other rituals, including those at which human sacrifice was performed. The French captain J. F. Landolphe, who visited Benin in the late eighteenth century, observed one such event at which a dozen horn blowers "blew like madmen" (cited in Roth 1968:77), and similar incidents were witnessed by the English trader Cyril Punch a century later (Roth 1968:65). The use of side-blown trumpets, although not necessarily the ivory *akohen*, was apparently more widespread in earlier centuries. D. R., a Dutch trader who visited Benin in the late sixteenth century, observed attendants playing "Hornes and Fluits" in the entourage of the king's "Gentlemen" (Hodgkin 1975:157). D. R.'s report is confirmed by the numerous Benin plaques that depict horn blowers among the many attendants accompanying warriors and chiefs (fig. 53).

Two *akohen* are included in the Perls collection. They have rectangular mouthpieces located on the convex side of the tusk; side-blown trumpets from other parts of Africa have the mouthpiece on the concave side. Cat. no. 98 is a large horn whose carved decoration is concentrated around a slight bulge near the closed, pointed end. This section consists of two hollow rattle chambers with slit openings and a cylindrical rattle element inside, like Benin rattle-staffs (see cat. nos. 26, 27). A similar side-blown trumpet with rattle chamber is visible in fig. 52. The decoration around the rattle chamber includes three bands of guilloché pattern, the mark of Igbesanmwan, the royal

98. Side-blown Trumpet (*detail*)  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century



Fig. 52. Trumpeters blowing ivory trumpets at Igue. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/61/8). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London

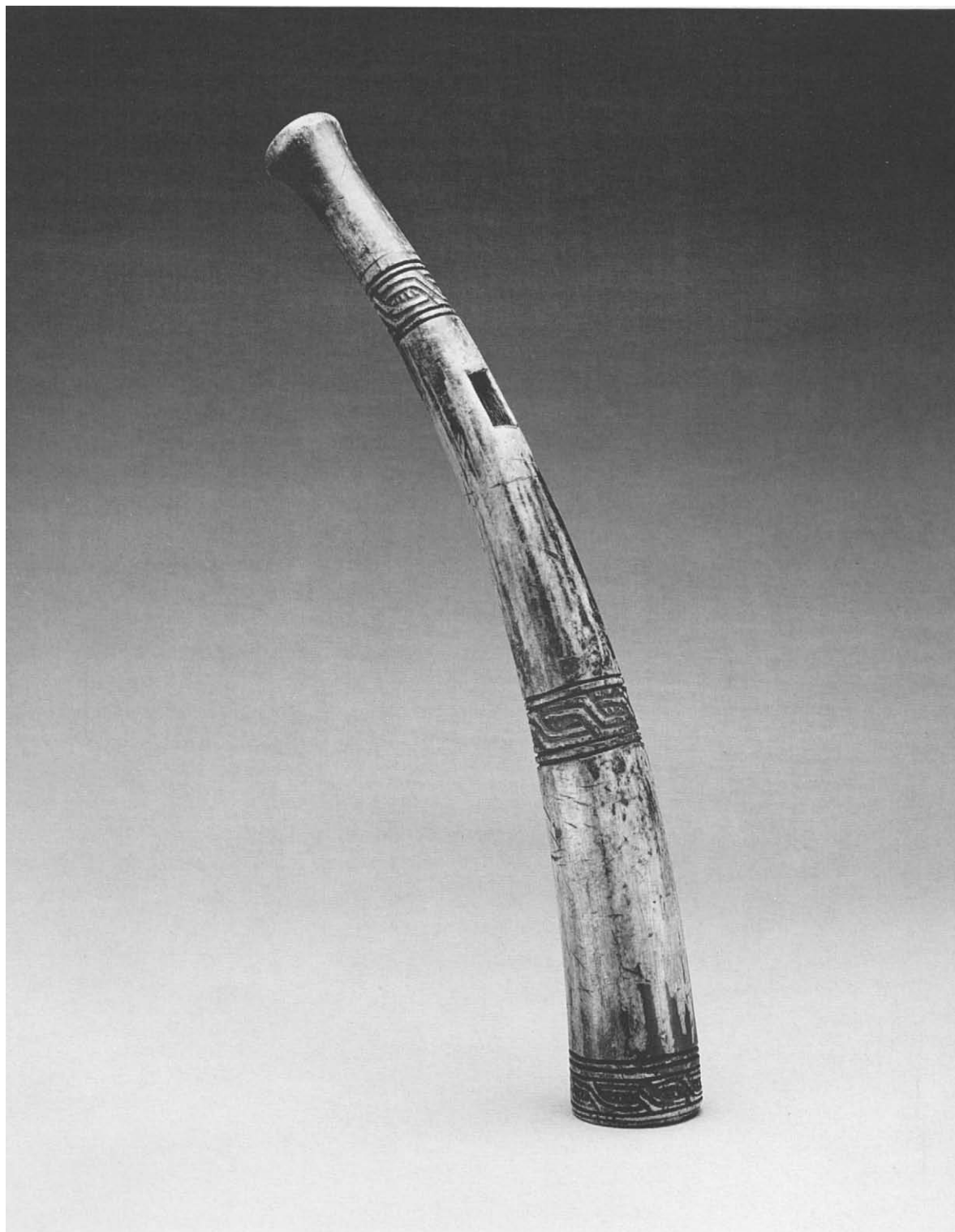
ivory carvers, as well as alternating panels filled with pairs of intertwined mudfish and a basketweave pattern. The other ivory *akohen* in the Perls collection (cat. no. 99) is much smaller but also features three bands of the guilloche pattern that indicate its use in a royal context. According to oral tradition, the *akohen* were introduced by Oba Eresonyen (r. 1735–50; Bradbury 1961: no. 4; Egharevba 1960:42), although other types of side-blown trumpets existed earlier. The *akohen* glorify the Oba musically, with their deep, piercing sounds, and visually, their white ivory signifying the Oba's wealth, strength, and purity.





Fig. 53. Attendant playing a side-blown trumpet. Detail of plaque, cat. no. 36





**98. Side-blown Trumpet (*akohen*)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century  
Ivory; l. 46  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (118.8 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.103

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 40, figs. 302, 303; Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 1990a: lot 56

**99. Side-blown Trumpet (*akohen*)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Ivory; l. 14  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (36.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.109

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*Reference:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 34, fig. 261



# HEALING AND DIVINING INSTRUMENTS



The Benin court today, and as it is depicted in the palace plaques of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is richly adorned with sculptures, ritual objects, personal ornaments, musical instruments, and insignia of office, all made of cast brass or carved ivory. This is especially true during palace ceremonies in which the Oba and his entourage appear in their most elaborate, elegant, and symbol-laden attire. But the court is also dangerous and threatening; the complex hierarchy of the Benin political and religious system, expressed so beautifully and articulately in its art, leads to intrigue, competition, and jealousy. According to a saying in Benin, “going to a palace ceremony is like going to war” (Ben-Amos 1980:70). Consequently, participants in court life must protect themselves spiritually as well as physically from many potential dangers. Ritual specialists are trained to combat negative forces, and, as would be expected, their equipment is often given the same aesthetic treatment as other objects used at the court of Benin.

*Ebo* (sing. *obo*) are Edo traditional doctors who pursue a variety of specialties. While some cure illnesses, others divine the future, explain the past, or combat witches, a major cause of illness and bad fortune. A fourth category of *ebo*, no longer practicing, once administered ordeals to suspected wrongdoers to determine their innocence or guilt (Melzian 1937:157–59; Bradbury 1957:59). A survey published in 1981 showed that there were over forty thousand of these traditional doctors in what was then called Nigeria’s Bendel State, with Benin City as its capital (cited in Nevadomsky 1988:72). The *ebo* derive their abilities from Osun, the power inherent in leaves and herbs (Ben-Amos 1980:49–52). Osun is a spiritual force rather than an anthropomorphized deity, and its powers are essentially neutral, “equally . . . capable of inflicting instant death as providing health and riches” (Ben-Amos 1980:51). While all heads of extended families, chiefs, and titleholders have their own Osun shrines and are somewhat versed in the use of Osun’s power, the *ebo* are specially trained and particularly knowledgeable.

104. Side-blown Trumpet (view 1)  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th century



Fig. 54. Pendant with Dangling Chains and Medicine Container. Nigeria; Benin or related area. Brass. London, Museum of Mankind, 1949.Af41.1. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

The Perls collection contains several objects used by the *ebo* in their work. Cat. nos. 100 and 101 are brass containers for protective medicines, to be worn suspended on a thong or chain around the neck or diagonally across the chest. Small calabashes filled with medicinal charms are depicted in Benin art, most frequently worn by warriors (see cat. nos. 128 and 129; Bradbury 1961:131–32, pls. L, M), and some brass containers clearly represent these small gourds (London, British Museum, 1985:3C04). The round bottoms and narrow necks of the brass containers in the Perls collection suggest that they too are based upon the calabash form, which has been transformed into a human torso by the addition of a face and arms in relief. A more elaborate example in the British Museum depicts a pregnant female figure, with one hand on her breast and the other on her swollen abdomen (London, British Museum, 1985: 3C06). The facial features on these containers tend to be less carefully rendered than on other Benin brass objects, but the heavy outlines around the eyes and modeling of the lips, especially on cat. no. 100, are clearly in Benin style. Cat. no. 100 consists of two identical, separately cast containers that are joined together by a hide thong and by the sacrificial materials and chicken feathers packed around and between them. The figure on cat. no. 101 is shown wearing its own container of medicines around its neck. It still retains its red stone-bead stopper, and is filled with a burnt black powder that leaks through a small casting flaw; many herbal medicines used by Edo *ebo* are activated by burning.<sup>1</sup> An almost identical container, in which the figure holds a staff and a hammer, is one of several charms dangling from a pectoral or waist pendant depicting a warrior on horseback (fig. 54). The pectoral is in an unusual style and may have been made outside of Benin. Ownership of these objects was not restricted but was open to anyone with the means to purchase them from the brasscasters.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to providing protective or curing medicines, many *ebo* use the power of Osun for divination. Several methods of predicting the future and interpreting the past are used, including one called *Ewawa* (Melzian 1937:45, 158; Bradbury 1957:59; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 52). In this procedure, small brass images of humans, animals, and objects, along with cowrie shells and pieces of chalk and charcoal, are placed on a drum, and chewed kola nut is spat upon them to activate their power. These diverse items are then placed in a cup, like cat. no. 102, shaken, and thrown back onto the drum. The *obo* analyzes the resulting arrangement of objects. If, for example, the figure of a man falls into a miniature canoe, it indicates that someone will die. If a tiny brass goat touches the canoe, it shows that a sacrifice is required for some purpose, perhaps to cure an illness (Melzian 1937:45). The *Ewawa* diviner then fabricates the appropriate charm for his client's needs. The equipment used in the *Ewawa* divination process is shown in figs. 55, 56.

Cat. no. 102 is a brass cup for *Ewawa*. It consists of a hemispheri-



Fig. 55. Instruments of an Ewawa diviner: drum, divination cup, and tray with small objects. Photograph by Paula Ben-Amos



Fig. 56. Tray of small objects to be interpreted by an Ewawa diviner, including cowrie shells, coins, and small brass figures; a small figure of Ofoe, the messenger of the god of death, is included in this group. Photograph by Paula Ben-Amos

cal bowl with a handle in the form of a half-figure. The figure wears no beads or other chiefly regalia, and holds a small ivory trumpet in one hand and a neolithic stone celt in the other. Ivory side-blown trumpets are also part of a diviner's kit (cat. nos. 104, 105), as are the celts, believed to be "thunder stones" hurled down from the sky by Ogiuwu, the god of death. The figure on the cup thus depicts an *obo*, probably the Ewawa diviner himself, with some of the tools of his trade. On the dome of the cup is a human face in relief surrounded by radiating



ridges. Similarly haloed faces are found on other brass objects associated with Osun, including *egba* bracelets that are stewed in medicines to provide a variety of benefits to the wearer (von Luschan 1919: pls. 100D and F; London, British Museum, 1985:4B10). The surface of the divination cup is covered with a thin crust that may have resulted from such a stewing or from spraying with chewed kola nuts and a type of hot pepper known as alligator pepper. Ewaise, young apprentices who serve the Ewawa diviners, are responsible for periodically “reviving” the charms and implements with such a mixture (Melzian 1937:171). A few brass cups used by Ewawa diviners are found in other museum collections (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 52; von Luschan 1919: pl. 107B).

Ewawa is just one of several methods of divination practiced by *ebo* in Benin. Oronmila, a system related to the Ifa divination of the Yoruba, uses sixteen palm kernels to create a pattern that can be interpreted by the diviner (Melzian 1937:159, 168). The paraphernalia used by Edo diviners resembles that of Yoruba Ifa priests, such as the ivory tappers used to call the attention of Oronmila, the god of fate, at the beginning of the divination process (cat. no. 103). Like many Yoruba Ifa tappers, this one depicts a nude kneeling woman, holding her breasts. The conical tapper, which symbolizes the “inner head” or destiny, extends upward from the actual head (Abiodun, in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:111). In this example an additional inverted head appears at the bottom. While the iconography of this tapper follows its Yoruba sources closely, it is in the style of Igbesanmwan, the Benin guild of ivory carvers. This is evident especially in the woman’s stout face, heavily outlined eyes, and wide nose and mouth. She wears a single strand of coral beads on her chest, has the indented hairline and neat rows of hair typical of Benin art, and displays three tribal marks above each eye. According to Bradbury, divination by the Yoruba method is widespread in Benin, and Oronmila diviners who work for the king use special palm kernels obtained in Ife (Bradbury 1957:54). The popularity of this method may be due to the long-established tradition that holds that the present royal dynasty and major features of the Benin political and religious systems come from the ancient Yoruba capital of Ife.

Another category of Edo traditional doctor are those who use their considerable knowledge of Osun to combat the antisocial behavior of people known as *azen*, or witches. The Edo define witches as individuals who have the ability to turn their own life-force into vicious night-flying birds of prey who can capture and devour the life-force of their intended victim, a human being transformed for this purpose into a helpless goat or antelope. The Osun specialists who combat witches have knowledge and powers similar to those of their opponents, but they are used for positive rather than negative ends (Ben-Amos 1980:52). One way of battling witches is to propitiate them with gifts of food, often placed at crossroads, where the witches tend to congregate

(Melzian 1937:157; Bradbury 1957:60). When doing this, the *obo* will call the witch by sounding a small side-blown trumpet, such as cat. nos. 104, 105. Known as *oko*, these trumpets may be made of buffalo or antelope horn or, as in the case of these two examples, carved ivory. Their shape resembles that of the large ivory *akohen* trumpets used to announce the presence of the king (cat. nos. 98, 99), but they are generally smaller and lack the guilloche and other patterns that indicate a royal context. Instead, cat. no. 104 is decorated with the figure of an Edo man dressed in a wrapper and a single strand of coral beads. Like the figure on the Ewawa divination cup, he holds the tools of his trade—a side-blown trumpet and a stone celt. The figure appears to be most similar in style to those on royal altar tusks carved during the reign of Oba Adolo (r. 1850–88).<sup>3</sup> The concave side of the trumpet is decorated with vertical and horizontal rows of cowrie shells. These shells, synonymous with wealth in Edo culture, are also seen on cat. no. 105, where rows of them alternate with the knotted bands similar to those on some *egba*, bracelets that have been medicinally treated by an *obo* (von Luschan 1919: pl. 101D).

1. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.
2. Ibid.
3. Barbara Blackmun 1991: personal communication.

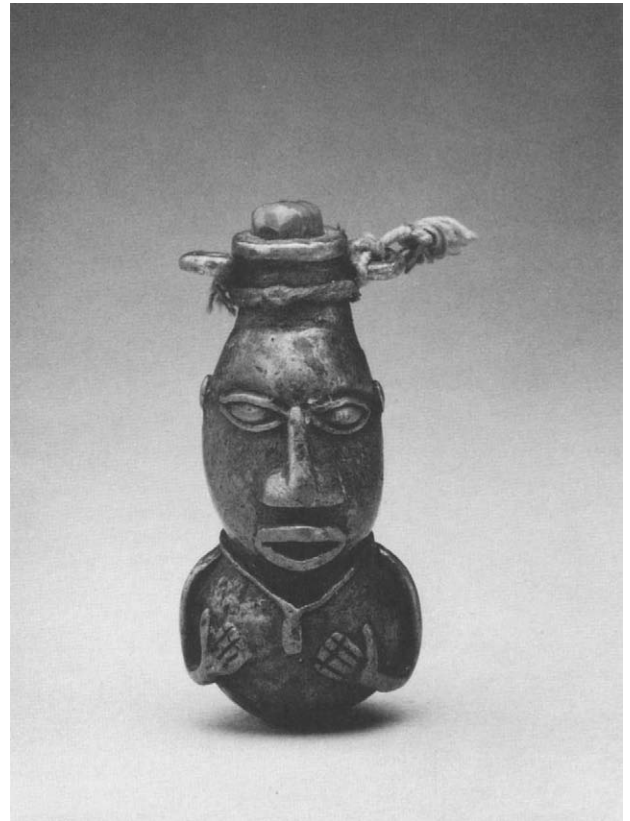


**100. Medicine Container:  
Two Figures**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century

Brass, hide, feathers, sacrificial  
materials; h. 2 in. (5.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.65



**101. Medicine Container: Figure**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century

Brass, stone head, cord; h. 2½ in.  
(6.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.37

*Ex Collection:* Ernst Anspach



**102. Divination Cup**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Brass; h. 4 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (12.4 cm)

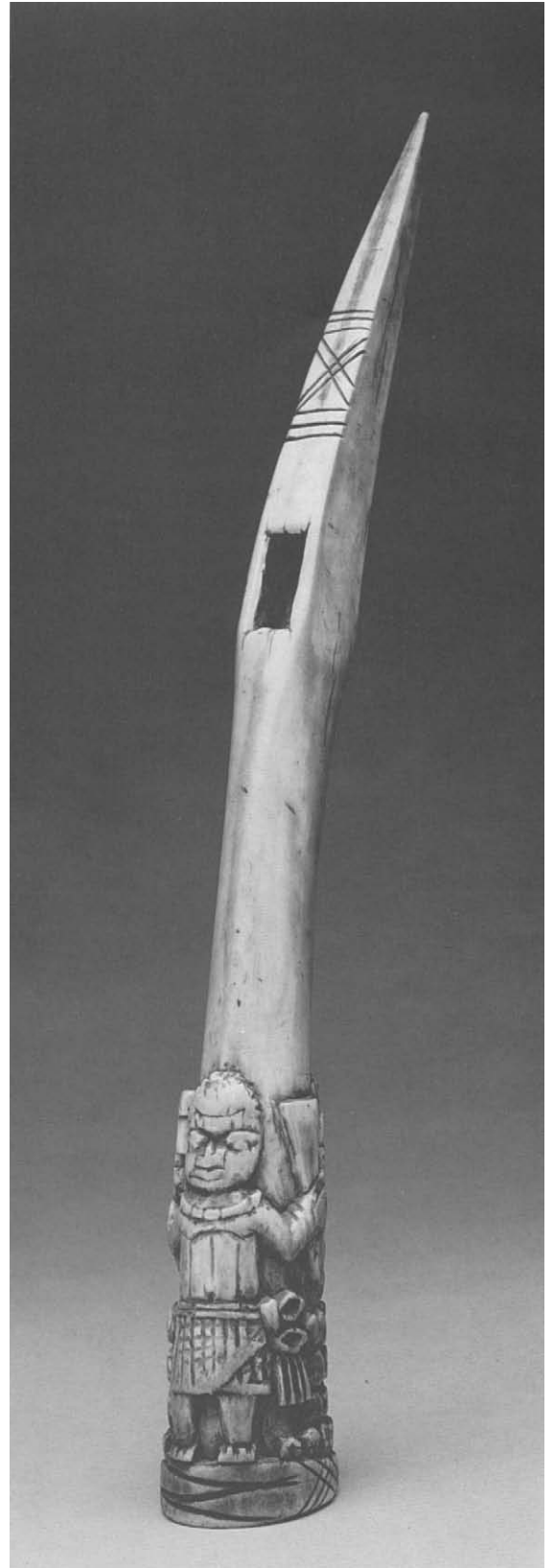
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.119



**103. Divination Tapper**  
 Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 19th century  
 Ivory; l. 13½ in. (34.3 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.117  
*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Lt.-General  
 Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers  
*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 28, figs.  
 190, 191; New York, Sotheby's, 1989: lot 99

**105. Side-blown Trumpet (*oko*)**  
 Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 18th–19th century  
 Ivory; l. 14½ in. (36.8 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.108  
*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Lt.-General  
 Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers  
*Reference:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 27, fig. 178



**104. Side-blown Trumpet (*oko*)**  
 (view 2)  
 Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 19th century  
 Ivory; l. 14½ in. (36.8 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.107  
*Ex Collection:* E. Clarke Stillman; Adolph  
 Schwartz  
*References:* "Exhibition of African Art" 1955–  
 56: 32; London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet 1980a:  
 lot 20  
*Exhibitions:* Brooklyn Museum 1954;  
 Oberlin, Ohio, Allen Memorial Museum,  
 1955; London, Arts Council of Great Britain  
 1967: no. 23





# BRASS VESSELS AND IMPLEMENTS



A variety of brass vessels was made in Benin, including buckets, bowls, jugs, boxes, and aquamanile in the form of leopards and rams. Oba Ewuare the Great, who reigned in the mid-fifteenth century, is credited with the original acquisition of these containers for use in palace rituals. According to oral traditions told to R. E. Bradbury (cited in Blackmun 1984a:367; idem 1988:132), Ewuare obtained the brass vessels, along with coral-bead regalia, from the underwater palace of Olokun, the god of the sea. These spiritually charged objects, called *iru*, were in use on the shrine to Olokun's father, Osanobua, the creator god. When Ewuare found them he heard voices within them repeating "*ise, ise, ise,*" a ritual response akin to "amen." He brought the vessels back to his own palace, where they were placed on the Benin state shrine, Ebo n'Edo. After Ewuare's death, his successor, Oluwa, broke the magical brass vessels in order to see the spirits inside them. Finding nothing, he ordered replacements to be made, and instructed the ancestral priests henceforth to cover their mouths while saying "*ise,*" to disguise the fact that the words did not come from the vessels themselves. The spirit-containing vessels have been documented by European visitors to Benin. Based on observations made in the early seventeenth century, Olfert Dapper noted that people in Benin believe in spirits that communicate by sounds said to come from a pot (cited in Blackmun 1984a:366).

In Benin today, ritual specialists known as Emuru, who serve the Ebo n'Edo shrine, carry brass vessels filled with protective substances (Blackmun 1988:132). Ebo n'Edo is dedicated to deities, such as Uwen and Ora, who control the well-being of the entire Benin kingdom. Uwen and Ora accompanied Oranmiyan from Ife to Benin when he came to found the present royal dynasty. The Ebo n'Edo shrine, its spirits, the priests who serve them, and the objects used in their rituals are seen as references to the origin of the dynasty and the authority inherited by the Obas, who are all descendants of Oranmiyan. Benin brass vessels, then, are not merely utilitarian containers. They refer to the Oba's ancestral authority, to Ewuare, one of the greatest of

108. **Bucket: Leopard and Prey**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century





Fig. 57. Lion Aquamanile. North German. 14th–15th century. Bronze; h. 10 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (25.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931. 32.100.198

all Obas, and, because of the circumstances under which Ewuare acquired the first vessels, to the earthly riches and spiritual powers that stem from the Oba's relationship to Olokun, the god of the sea.

The legendary underwater source of Ewuare's magical brass vessels may actually have been the European ships that crossed Olokun's realm to reach Benin. This is suggested by the surprising number of Benin brass vessels that correspond to European types. The most dramatic examples are the aquamaniles, vessels in animal form that are used, as their name suggests, for washing the hands. Cat. no. 106 is an aquamanile in the form of a leopard. It has a small, round, hinged opening at the top of the head through which it could be filled with water, which was poured out through the pierced nostrils. The tail, arching over the back, served as a handle. Aquamaniles were made in Europe from about 1100 to about 1500, and were used in both secular and religious contexts (Bloch 1982; von Falke and Meyer

1935). The most common type depicted a lion. Many had hinged openings and holes for pouring identical to cat. no. 106, although some had spouts projecting from the mouth or chest. The handle, which curved over the lion's back, was often, though not always, formed by the animal's tail. Figure 57 depicts a North German lion aquamanile made in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. It is possible that similar vessels were carried aboard the Portuguese—and later Dutch—ships that traded with Benin.

Aquamaniles in Benin were also used for hand washing. After dressing for Ugie Erha Oba, the ceremony that honors his paternal ancestors, the Oba washes his hands with water poured from an aquamanile in the form of a leopard. One of the Enisen, a group of junior titleholders in the Iwebo palace association, is responsible for carrying the aquamanile (fig. 58).<sup>1</sup> The leopard aquamanile is kept on the altar dedicated to Ewuare when not in use (Ben-Amos 1980:76).

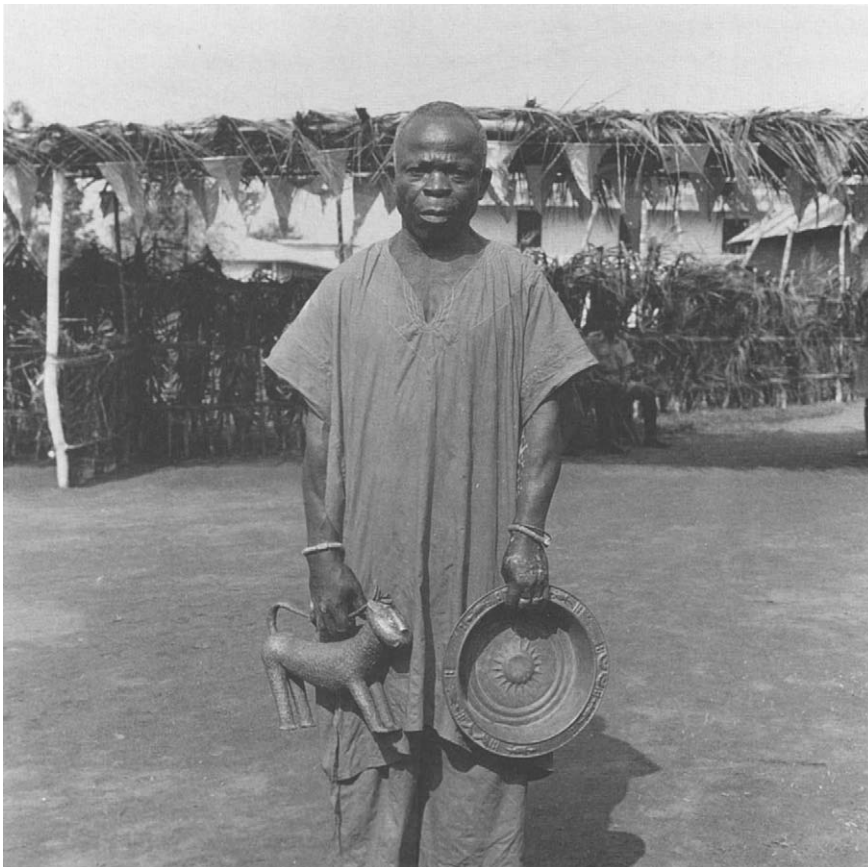


Fig. 58. An Enisen with brass leopard aquamanile and brass basin at Igue. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/60/6). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London

The leopard is the most common form of zoomorphic aquamanile made in Benin, although there are also examples in the form of rams (Eyo 1977:122; Fagg 1963: pls. 45–47; Roth 1968: fig. 258; London, British Museum, 1985:3B08-9; Ben-Amos 1980:77). The leopard, “king of the bush,” is one of the principal symbols of the Oba in Benin art, expressing his ferocious, aggressive nature. He is often shown, as in cat. no. 106, with his tail curved over his back, indicating that he is on the prowl, or, as in cat. no. 107, crouching and ready to pounce (Ben-Amos 1976b:246). The leopard is particularly associated with Ewuare the Great, the legendary source of brass vessels. According to oral tradition, before Ewuare became Oba he lived for a time in the deep forest. One night, while sleeping under a tree, he felt liquid dripping on his head, and when he awoke he discovered a leopard on a branch above him, with blood oozing from its mouth. Ewuare killed that leopard and every year thereafter sacrificed another one. Later he “proclaimed a link between the leopard and his personal destiny” (Blackmun 1990:65; Egharevba 1960:17).

The brasscaster who made cat. no. 106 fashioned the features typical of leopards in Benin art: the slanted eyes with upper lids that overlap the lower ones, three whiskers on each side of the face emerging from a single spot, overlapping fangs and distinctly rendered molars, and perky, leaf-shaped ears. In this example the artist has emphasized the beast’s sturdy, muscular legs and given him spots in the shape of double concentric circles set against a stippled ground.

Cat. no. 107 is an aquamanile in the form of a crouching leopard. A similar one is in the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde (von Luschan 1919: fig. 456; Hagen 1918: pl. 4, fig. 2). It is unusual in that its head is detachable, allowing the vessel to be filled through the opening in the neck, which is decorated with a collar of coral beads. The liquid flowed through an open space between the leopard’s front teeth. While possessing the conventional features of Benin leopards seen in the previous example, this leopard is conceived somewhat differently: its face is wider and squarer, its whiskers shorter and more vertically oriented, and its eyes are not slanted. With its stout face and the ungainly position of its legs, it seems less fierce than some others in Benin art.

On the lid of cat. no. 108, a leopard, modeled fully in the round, presides over his prey, an antelope, rendered in relief. Like the aquamanile, the truncated conical form of the vessel seems to be based on a European prototype. Bronze and brass buckets of this shape were made in Germany from the twelfth to the seventeenth century (Theuerkauff-Liederwald 1988). In the seventeenth century the Dutch added “copper buckets” to the inventory of manufactured goods traded to Benin (Ryder 1969:98). The Benin bucket is richly ornamented with delicately incised patterns. In the central band, a vinelike plant motif is interspersed with five-lobed leaves or flowers. Above and below are narrower bands of interlocking oval rings and the ubiquitous guilloche,



Fig. 59. Plaque: Priests with Cup, Bowl and Jug. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th–17th century. Brass. London, Museum of Mankind, 98.1–15.44. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

all against a stippled background. While surely intended for use in the Oba's palace, it is uncertain whether this vessel had a ritual or secular function. For all its charm, the ferocity of the leopard—and by extension, the Oba—is confirmed by the antelope lying limp before it on the lid.

The hinged lid, now lost, and the flat straplike handle of cat. no. 109 suggest that it too was based on a European model. Bronze and tin jugs of similar form were made in England in the fourteenth century and tankards made of tin or stoneware with metal lids were produced in Germany in the seventeenth century (Theuerkauff-Liederwald 1988: cat. nos. 272–78, figs. 58, 59. Scholz 1978: figs. 20, 73, 75). Two of

the fourteenth-century English jugs, one associated with Richard II, were found in an Akan kingdom of southern Ghana (Fagg 1970: pl. 32; McLeod 1981:134), and similar ones surely made their way to Benin. Benin craftsmen also made lidded jugs with feet and spouts, likewise modeled upon European ewers (von Luschan 1919: figs. 643, 644).

The Benin jug in the Perls collection has large metal rings cast around the neck, possibly for hanging crotals. An almost identical jug is in the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde (von Luschan 1919: fig. 647); another similar one in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago is decorated with snails and tortoises in place of some of the rings (Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: no. 360). Such a jug, along with two other vessels resembling European containers, is depicted on a palace plaque (fig. 59). The three vessels are held by attendants whose spiral-curved hair suggests a priestly role (Blackmun 1984a:366–68). Although we cannot be certain, these may be Emuru, the specialists who care for the *iru*, ritual brass vessels filled with protective substances used in palace ceremonies. Alternatively, the jugs may have had another, nonritual function within the palace.

Benin court etiquette called for elaborate containers for things other than liquids, such as kola nuts, which were distributed in rituals and offered to guests to show hospitality. Kola nuts are a symbol of civilization, sociability, and rank in Benin (Ben-Amos 1976b:244–45). Cat. no. 110 is a kola-nut box in the form of a fluted gourd, which von Luschan identified as *Telfairia occidentalis* (von Luschan 1919:424). Such gourds are typically offered to Osanobua, the creator god, in place of a cow, a much more expensive sacrifice. As Paula Ben-Amos has pointed out, the gourd-shaped container is thus “a visual play on the concept of offering” (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 45). This is typical of Benin kola-nut boxes, which are often in the form of sacrificial animals, such as the wood or ivory box in the form of an antelope or cow head seen in figs. 4 and 42. In cat. no. 110 the gourd is elevated on a stem rising from a fluted base, similar to the neck and base on just such an antelope-headed kola box (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 84).

Another box that may have held kola nuts or other small gifts is in the form of a dovelike bird (cat. no. 111). It stands on short, spindly legs and has a small head and neck and a flat, rounded tail. The bird’s high, humped back forms the lid. Stippled dots create a pattern of overlapping scallops on most of the body, and incised chevrons suggest feathers on the back. This is an unusual form of bird in Benin art, where roosters and the “bird of prophecy” are much more commonly depicted, and it has been suggested that this container may not have been made in Benin.<sup>2</sup> A few related examples, however, have been found in Benin (Cordwell 1952: pl. 7, fig. 4) and in Ugbo, a Yoruba village near Mahin within the Benin sphere of influence (“Exploring in Nigeria” 1947:360; Fagg 1980:66).

Cat. no. 112 is an *ekpoki*, a spool-shaped lidded box that is most

commonly made of wood, bark, or leather, and sometimes covered with leopard skin. These boxes vary in height, as demonstrated by the two *ekpoki* in fig. 63. Cat. no. 112 is less than four inches high. *Ekpoki* contain kola nuts, personal ornaments, sacrificial offerings, or secret materials used by healers (Blackmun in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:85–86). An *ekpoki* said to be filled with gifts from the Oni of Ife is offered to the Oba of Benin as part of the Igue festival (fig. 48).

The *ekpoki* in the Perls collection is made of beaten, rather than cast, brass. Its low relief designs are pushed up from the back by the repoussé technique. In addition to brass boxes, cylindrical bracelets and other costume ornaments were made with this technique, primarily in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Benin repoussé objects were made by the brasscasters' guild and have the same motifs found on cast objects. In cat. no. 112 we see the mudfish-legged king holding two crocodiles, surrounded by river leaves, heads of Ofoe, the messenger of death, guilloche, and other typical Benin decorative designs. The repoussé versions are usually rendered in a more casual, less precise manner than the cast ones. William Fagg has suggested that this *ekpoki* was made sometime between 1892 and 1897 (London, Christie's, 1978a: lot 263). In 1892, England signed a trade agreement with Benin, after which substantial quantities of metal were exported to Benin, primarily for construction and decoration in the palace. The lid and base of this *ekpoki* both still bear industrial tool marks and the stamp of the Bristol Battery Company that produced the brass disks from which they were made.

Benin brass containers are made in a variety of other forms. Cat. no. 113 is a small oval box of cast brass decorated with the head of a Portuguese, suggesting that it was intended for royal use, perhaps as a container for the king's personal belongings. Cat. no. 114 is the bottom portion of a type of covered bowl also made in ivory in Benin (Eyo and Willett 1980: no. 91). It is doughnut-shaped, with a circular hole in the center of both bowl and lid. (To show the outside decoration clearly, the bowl has been photographed upside down.) This type of bowl is depicted next to the small figure of an Oba surrounded by sacrificial offerings (cat. no. 34). Cat. no. 114 is lavishly decorated with a plant pattern bordered by bands of guilloche. The foliage is interrupted by three crescent-shaped insets of a redder, more copper-rich metal. According to Paula Ben-Amos, these are moons, "a symbol of peace and joy," and a "sign of royal ancestral approval" (Ben-Amos 1983:168).

In addition to containers, other useful items in the Benin palace were made out of brass. Cat. no. 115 is a key, based on a European model, that would have been used to lock storerooms in the Iwebo section of the palace, where the king's regalia was kept (Egharevba 1969:30). Its ring-shaped handle is decorated on both sides with four

faces in relief and has a head, modeled in the round, at the top, surmounted by a suspension loop. Similar keys are found in the Museum of Mankind, London, the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, and the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (London, British Museum, 1985:8C07-8; Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: pl. 24; von Luschan 1919: pl. 103).

Cat. no. 116, a hollow, flattened brass sphere, has no known parallels in Benin art. The hole in its top suggests that it may have served as a container. The function of cat. no. 117, a leopard head, is also unknown. It is more fully three dimensional than the hip and waist ornaments in the shape of leopard heads (cat. nos. 62, 65), and lacks the loops for attachment at top and bottom. Instead it has three holes on each side. Because of these holes, its simply finished edges, and irregular shape, it seems unlikely to have been the lid of a container. It most resembles the heads of the remarkable ivory leopards pieced together out of separately carved elements (Fagg 1963: pl. 48; Paris, Musée Dapper, 1990:67). However, on the ivory leopard heads the lower side of the jaw is carved and here it is left open. Although its use is unknown, it displays the characteristic features of Benin leopards to a particularly powerful degree—its spots are inlaid with iron, its slanted eyes have elegantly recurved outlines, and its bared teeth seem especially fierce. An almost identical leopard head, said to come from “mid-western Nigeria,” is in the Nigerian National Museum.<sup>4</sup>

The rows of figures that decorate cat. no. 118 are concerned with the themes of royalty and sacrifice, but the nature of the object and the context in which it was used are unknown. Its tapering, curved shape resembles that of a side-blown trumpet, and although these exist in brass (von Luschan 1919: figs 729, 731, 732; Roth 1968: fig. 65), the U-shaped notch at the narrow end of this example could not have functioned as a mouthpiece. Some Benin brass staffs or clubs have a similar shape, but since they are held with the wide end at the top, the figures on this object would appear upside down to onlookers (Roth 1968: fig. 157). Its shape and symmetrical rows of relief figures are most reminiscent of the carved altar tusks (cat. nos. 12, 13), and it is possible that this object, like the tusks, was placed on a royal altar. The figures are arranged like those on the altar tusks, with the most important ones in the center and subsidiary ones at the sides. The bottom row depicts a kneeling man, with a bowl on his head; he is flanked by a standing man leading a ram and a kneeling one holding a rooster, both animals clearly about to be sacrificed. The central figure in the middle row sits cross-legged, with a bowl containing four kola nuts in his lap and a whistle in his mouth. The kneeling figures to either side of him hold a bowl and a calabash, again suggesting ritual offerings. The top row portrays a standing figure in the center, holding a rattle-staff in his left hand and a short cylindrical object in his right, flanked on either side by cross-legged figures with pressure drums

under their arms; leopards, symbols of the king, float above them. The iconography—leopards, sacrificial animals, other offerings, drummers, and a figure holding a rattle-staff that is used to call ancestral spirits—suggests that this object was intended to record a royal ritual.

1. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication, based on R. E. Bradbury's field notes.
2. Paula Ben-Amos and Hermione Waterfield 1991: personal communication.
3. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.
4. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, AF8 Benin K-36.





**106. Leopard Aquamanile**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; l. 8¾ in. (22.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.53

*Reference:* Robbins and Nooter 1989: fig. 562

**107. Leopard Aquamanile**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; l. 7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (20.0 cm)

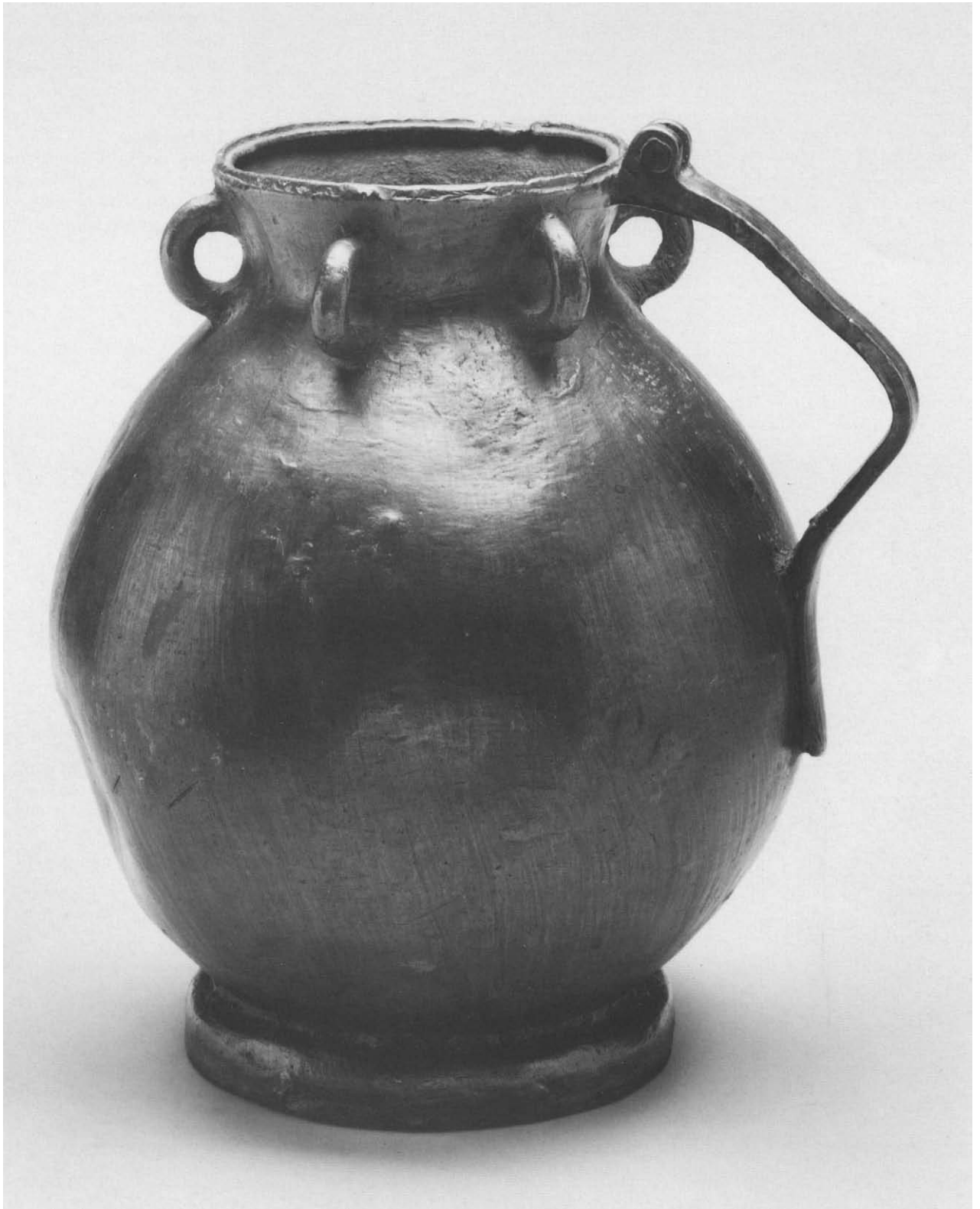
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.58ab

*Reference:* London, Sotheby & Co., 1972a:  
lot 246





108. **Bucket: Leopard and Prey**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century  
Brass; h. 6 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (15.6 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.72ab



**109. Jug**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; h. 9 in. (22.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.73

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-  
Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 24, fig. 142



**110. Container and Lid: Fluted Gourd**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

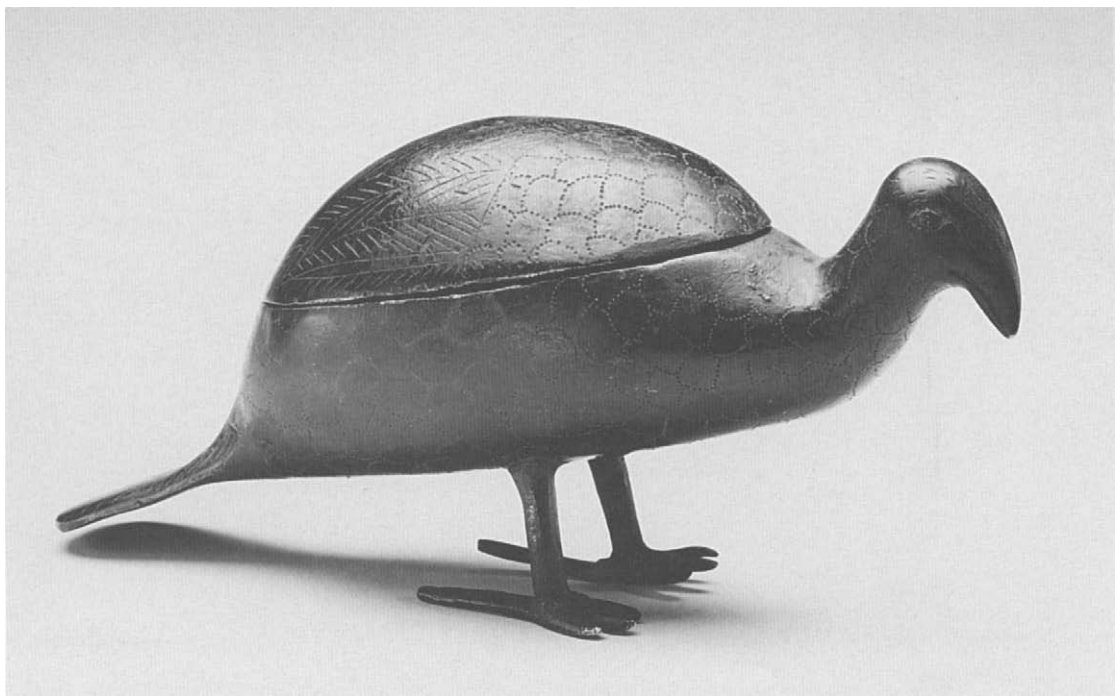
16th–19th century

Brass; h. 7½ in. (19.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.66ab

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 9, figs. 51–52; von Luschan 1919: fig. 665; London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1979a: lot 147; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 45



**111. Container: Bird**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin?

16th–20th century

Brass; l. 9½ in. (24.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.162.6ab



**112. Box and Lid (*ekpoki*)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
1892–97

Brass; diam. 18 in. (45.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.68ab

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Lt.-General  
Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 21, figs.  
122–23; von Luschan 1919: fig. 683; Lon-  
don, Christie's, 1978a: lot 263



**113. Box and Lid: Portuguese Face**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century  
Brass; l. 4½ in. (11.4 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.145ab

**114. Bottom of a Lidded Bowl**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–19th century  
Brass, copper; diam. 6⅞ in. (17.5 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.71  
*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Lt.-General  
Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers  
*Reference:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 30,  
figs. 225–26



**115. Key**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

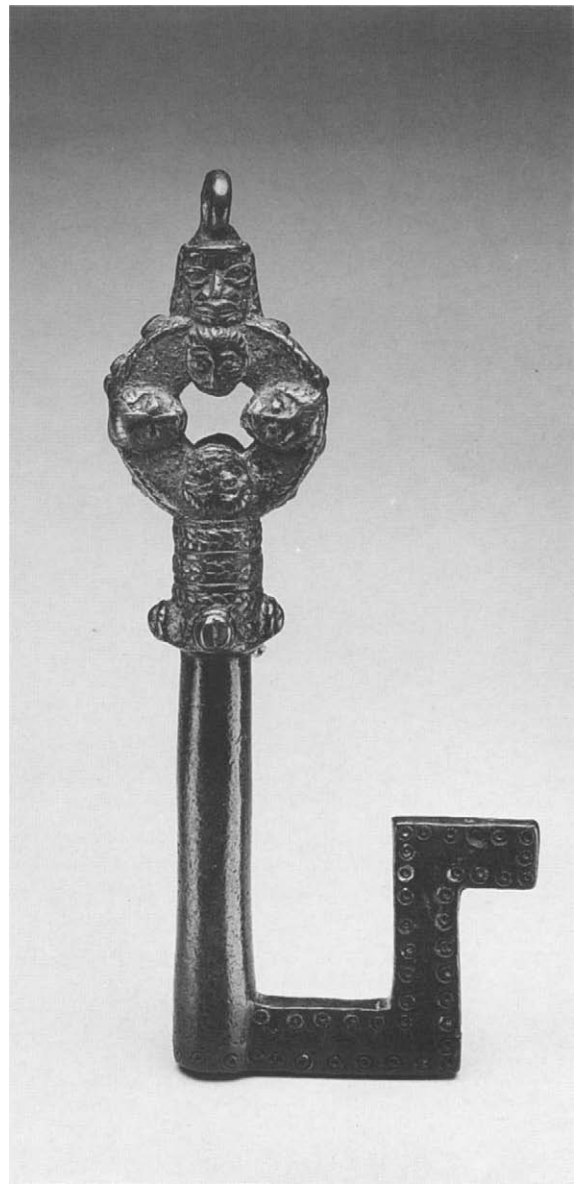
16th–19th century

Brass, iron; l. 7½ in. (18.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.116

*Reference:* London, Sotheby's, 1989: lot 92



**116. Container?**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; diam. 5⅛ in. (13.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.121

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 49, fig. 387







**117. Leopard Head**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–19th century

Brass; l. 7¾ in. (19.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.55

**118. Ritual Object (view 1)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–20th century

Brass; l. 10½ in. (26.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.153

*Exhibition:* New York, Grey Art Gallery,  
1981: no. 63



**118. Ritual Object (view 2)**





# IVORY CONTAINERS AND IMPLEMENTS



Brass was not the only medium for creating precious containers for the kola nuts and other items exchanged by the Oba and chiefs as part of the elaborate court ceremonies of Benin. These boxes were also made of ivory whose use, like brass, was restricted to the king and those to whom he allowed it. During the reigns of less powerful kings, ambitious chiefs may also have deliberately sought the prestige conferred by articles made of creamy white elephant ivory.<sup>1</sup> These elaborately carved boxes served to elevate the value of the gifts they held.

Ivory kola-nut boxes are generally small, just large enough for a few kola nuts. Most are rectangular, like cat. nos. 119 and 120, but some are oval, others are raised on pedestals, and still others are in the form of human head, coiled mudfish, or other animal (von Luschan 1919: figs. 832, 840, pl. 117A; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984: no. 17). Carved by members of Igbesanmwan, the ivory carvers' guild, they often portray motifs seen also on the royal altar tusks, ivory bracelets, or other ivory objects made by the guild. The image on cat. no. 119, for example, is especially reminiscent of the Portuguese horsemen carved on ivory bracelets (see cat. nos. 73–74). It depicts a Portuguese soldier mounted on horseback, surrounded by leafy boughs, a leopard resting on a tree branch, and a bird eating a snake. The mounted Portuguese soldier is seen in profile and dressed in garments that date to the early sixteenth century, when Portuguese involvement with Benin was at its peak. It is a frequent motif in Benin art, one that continued to be represented in both brass and ivory long after the Portuguese themselves had departed. Such foreign figures recall the period in the early sixteenth century when Oba Esigie expanded the wealth, power, and extent of the Benin kingdom, largely through his commercial, military, and political relationship with the Portuguese. They may even be used to represent Esigie himself (Blackmun 1984a:126). The distinctive rabbitlike profile of the Portuguese figure on this box indicates that it was carved in the nineteenth century, when this stylistic feature appeared also on

**119. Box: Portuguese Horseman**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
Late 19th century

carved altar tusks and ivory bracelets (Blackmun 1984a:221). It was probably made in the late nineteenth century because the bird holding the serpent by the tail and the long, leafy branch do not appear on the ivory tusks before the reign of Ovonramwen (r. 1888–97).<sup>2</sup>

In cat. no. 119, the motifs fill the rectangular field of the lid without regard for perspective, scale, or spatial relationships in a manner typical of Benin ivory carving. A similar approach to space is seen on another rectangular kola-nut box in the Perls collection (cat. no. 120). This one depicts an Edo man grasping a leaf-eating goat in one hand while raising a knife in the other, presumably to slaughter the goat as a sacrifice in one of Benin's many palace ceremonies. The sharp-nosed crocodile on the man's other side is possibly the dangerous type known in Benin as *agbaka*, enforcer of Olokun's wishes (Ben-Amos 1976b:247; idem 1983:170). A coiled mudfish, symbol of a curse, fills the space between the crocodile and the man. Like the crocodile, this motif refers to the vast powers of Olokun transmitted to the Oba, who alone can control them and release the curse (Blackmun 1984a:387). This box was made in the nineteenth century, possibly during the reign of Adolo (r. ca. 1850–88), when the goat with lozenge-shaped spots began to be carved on royal altar tusks and the dotted circles drilled on the sides of the box were gaining popularity.<sup>3</sup> The use of the dotted circles, rather than the guilloche seen on the sides of cat. no. 119, suggests that it was made for a chief and not for the Oba himself.

In addition to these rectangular boxes, other luxury items for use at the court of Benin were also made of ivory. Cat. no. 121 is a conical container on a circular base, possibly used as a drinking vessel or a mortar for crushing medicine, spices, or cosmetics.<sup>4</sup> Its shape is vaguely reminiscent of some types of European footed goblets, which may have served as models for this type of object. The impact of European tableware on Benin brass vessels has already been discussed (see cat. nos. 106–9; fig. 59), and European stemmed wineglasses, tumblers, and cups with handles were also copied in wood, brass, and ivory (von Luschan 1919: fig. 671; Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 7, figs. 33, 34; Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: no. 362). Alternatively, the base and decoration of this container are sufficiently related to local Benin and Owo objects that European models need not have been used.

Cat. no. 121 is carved in relief with two registers, each with two alternating motifs. On the top row Portuguese heads, identifiable by their dome-shaped hats, long hair, and beards, alternate with leopards seen in profile. On the bottom row the motifs are elephant heads and mudfish. The elephant heads have forked trunks, each end of which terminates in a hand holding a long leafy branch, and the mudfish have forked tails and barbels as long as their bodies. Both motifs are so highly stylized that they seem almost identical. While mudfish and elephant trunk/hands are common symbols of the Oba's wealth, power,



Fig. 60. Saltcellar: Portuguese Figures. Nigeria, Edo; Bini-Portuguese, late 15th–16th century. Ivory; h.  $7\frac{1}{8}$  in. (18.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Louis V. Bell and Rogers Funds, 1972. 1972.63ab

and personal achievement, on cat. no. 121 their form is somewhat atypical. Versions of all these motifs are found on royal altar tusks.

The ivory carvers of Benin did not work exclusively for the Oba. Powerful chiefs occasionally commissioned ivory bracelets and boxes, and for a brief period, from the late fifteenth to the end of the sixteenth century, members of Igbesanmwan also produced works in ivory for European visitors. Known as Bini-Portuguese, these include ivory saltcellars, trumpets, and spoons (Fagg 1959; Curnow 1983; New York, Center for African Art, 1988). Fig. 60 illustrates a Bini-Portuguese saltcellar. The four Portuguese figures carved around it reflect the same attention to details of dress and concern for indicating relative rank that is seen on objects made for use at the Benin court.

The earliest written reference to ivory carving in Benin concerns the Bini-Portuguese spoons. James Welsh, master of an English trading ship that reached Benin in 1589, noted the “pretie fine mats and baskets that they make, and spoones of Elephants teeth very

curiously wrought with divers proportions of fowles and beasts upon them” (quoted in Ryder 1969:84). Cat. no. 122 is one of about fifty surviving examples of these spoons. It has an ovoid bowl carved so thin as to be virtually translucent, with a narrow, raised rib down the center of the convex side. Typical of Bini-Portuguese spoons is the flared overhang that curls over the bowl where it joins the stem. On the stem an open-mouthed crocodile head and a fish, both decorated with incised cross-hatching, face each other on either side of a tapering element. Like this example, most of the Bini-Portuguese spoons depict fish or animals, often separated by short sections of the stem. The delicacy and skill of carving seen on these spoons, the love of textured surfaces, and the lively interest in the creatures of the natural world is typical of Igbesanmwan, whether in works intended for the Oba or the foreign visitors to his court.

1. Barbara Blackmun 1991: personal communication.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Kathy Curnow-Nasara 1991: personal communication.

**119. Box: Portuguese Horseman  
(detail)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

Late 19th century

Ivory; l. 5¾ in. (14.6 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.64ab

*Reference:* New York, Center for African  
Art, 1988: fig. 234





**120. Box: Man with Goat and Crocodile**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
Mid-19th century

Ivory; l. 5½ in. (14.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.70ab

*Ex Collection:* E. C. Gaze; R. H. H. Barneby

*Reference:* London, Sotheby and Co., 1965a:  
lot 124





**121. Container**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Ivory; h. 7¼ in. (18.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.162.7

*Reference:* London, South Kensington,  
Christie's, 1990b: lot 109



**122. Spoon**

Nigeria, Edo; Bini-Portuguese

Late 15th–16th century

Ivory; l. 8¼ in. (21.0 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.143

*Ex Collection:* Dover Museum, Kent; James

Hooper; Marc and Denyse Ginzberg

*References:* London, Christie's, 1976b; Phelps

1976: pl. 234, no. 1817; Curnow 1983: cat.

no. 110; New York, Center for African Art,

1988: no. 176



# WOOD BOXES AND COCONUT-SHELL CONTAINERS



Cat. nos. 123 to 126 are long, narrow, rectangular wood boxes that were used to contain sacrificial offerings, medicines, kola nuts, and other small gifts. They are distinguished from the ivory boxes in the preceding section not only by their different material and larger size, but also because they were made by a different group of craftsmen. The ivory boxes were made by members of Igbesanmwan, the royal guild of wood and ivory carvers. Igbesanmwan is a part of Iwebo, the palace society that includes the keepers of the king's regalia and the craftsmen responsible for making it. Its members carve the royal altar tusks, ivory horns, clappers, gongs, bracelets, boxes, and other ivory objects used in palace rituals and ceremonies, as well as wood rattle-staffs, altars, ancestor heads, animal-head boxes, and other wood objects used at court. Rectangular wood boxes, as well as stools, chairs, beams, doors, panels, coconut shell containers, and coral beads, are all carved by royal pages, members of the organization called Omada. Omada is included in another palace association, Iweguae, which is made up of the personal and domestic servants of the Oba. The Omada carvers and their work have been studied by Paula Ben-Amos (Ben-Amos 1975; idem, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:51–58).

Omada members (sing. *omada*; plural *emada*) are primarily responsible for bearing the Oba's *ada* sword when he appears in public and for the general maintenance of the palace. Fig. 61 shows Oba Eweka II (r. 1914–33) surrounded by a group of *emada*, one of whom holds an *ada*. Unlike Igbesanmwan, which is a hereditary guild, Omada membership is open to all. Parents often enroll their sons in Omada between the ages of six and ten, as a way of providing them with the basis for future advancement within the court and establishing a good relationship with the Oba. The boys are taught to carve wooden objects in classroomlike settings, which is very different from the apprenticeship system used in Igbesanmwan. The *emada* are then free to sell their products to anyone, including the king, chiefs, or foreign

## 123. Box: Oba Ozolua and Two Chiefs

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Wood, metal tacks; l. 25 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (63.8 cm)

Lent by Katherine Perls

*Ex Collection:* Harry Beasley

*Reference:* New York, Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1972: lot 93

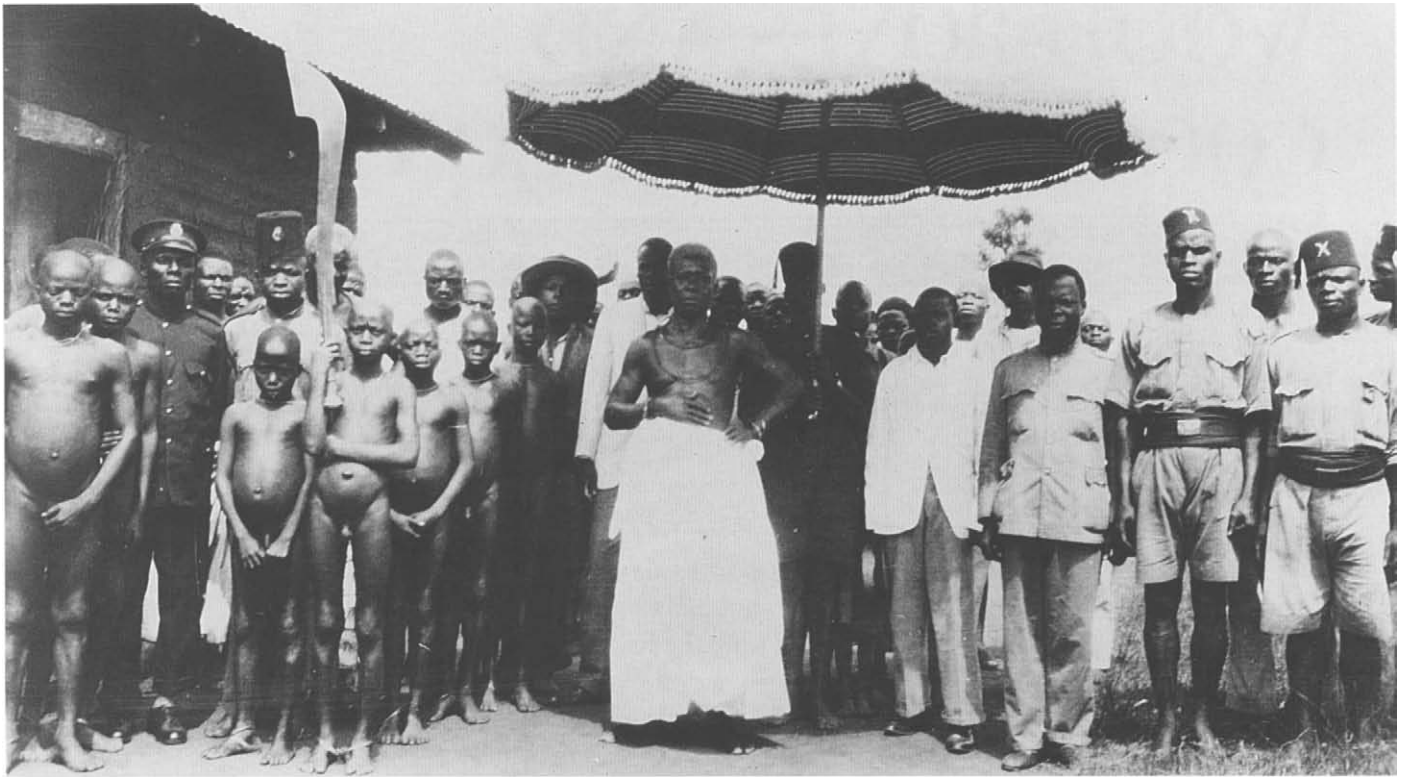


Fig. 61. Oba Eweka II (r. 1914–33) with swordbearers (*emada*) and attendants in colonial uniforms. Photograph by W. H. Hambly, ca. 1930. Courtesy of the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Neg. no. 71235

visitors to Benin, thus earning money that they can eventually use to purchase a title. Young men generally leave Omada in their twenties. Omada pages or sword-bearers were frequently depicted in Benin art (cat. no. 19; figs. 42, 43).

The origin of Omada carving is not chronicled in Edo oral tradition, as is that of Igbesanmwun, but it is believed to have been in existence in the mid-nineteenth century, at least by the reign of Oba Adolo (r. ca. 1850–88). The number of Omada-made objects collected by the Punitive Expedition of 1897 confirms this. In the twentieth century, Eweka II also did much to encourage the *emada*, and the commercialization of Benin art generally.

Omada carving is very different from that of Igbesanmwun, because of the diverse family backgrounds of its members, the variety of patrons for whom they work, and the fact that carving was a commercial rather than a ritually sanctioned activity. Where the ivory carvers draw upon a commonly held, long-established repertoire of motifs related to philosophical and religious concepts of kingship, the Omada carvers are free to invent new motifs, many of which reflect the secular world around them, including the foreign people and objects that appeared in Benin in increasing numbers in the late nineteenth century. Omada carvings often depict Europeans and their trappings—boats, barrels, cannon, clothing, umbrellas, weapons, jugs, and so on. Igbesanmwun carving is generally symmetrical, frontal, and hieratic, whereas Omada work incorporates profile figures, active

scenes, and more freely arranged compositions. Members of Igbesanmwan work collectively, upon the orders of the Oba, and must take many ritual precautions, whereas *emada* work solely for their own personal enrichment. Igbesanmwan work expresses solemn, profound, and spiritually sanctioned ideas, whereas Omada carving is decorative, light-hearted, secular, and motivated by individual inventiveness and competition.

Nevertheless, many Omada objects portray the great heroes of Benin's past, just as Igbesanmwan carvings do. Cat. no. 123 is a wooden box whose lid is divided into three equal fields. The figure in the center most likely represents Oba Ozolua the Conqueror (r. late fifteenth century), because of his similarity to contemporary representations of this great warrior king (Blackmun 1990: figs. 4, 12; Ben-Amos in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:51; Blackmun in *ibid.*:49–50). Ozolua was known for his love of battle and his fierce nature. In both Igbesanmwan and Omada carving, he is shown wearing the “iron coat” that protected him in battle. This long garment usually has strips of an unspecified material hanging from beneath the arms. It is cinched at the chest by an *ukugba olila* belt, which fends off hunger and thirst; a warrior's quadrangular bell hangs over the chest. Ozolua's beaded crown also has hanging panels at the sides, protecting his neck. In cat. no. 123 Ozolua holds a cutlass in his right hand and in his left an object that resembles a proclamation staff (*isevberé igho*), a brass staff that emphasizes the power behind the Oba's words (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 70).

Below Ozolua a senior chief is depicted wearing a robe of scalloped red flannel cloth that resembles the skin of the pangolin, an animal that symbolizes invincibility. Before 1897 such costumes were worn on ceremonial occasions by senior Town Chiefs, who thereby proclaimed their ability to oppose the Oba unscathed (Ben-Amos in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:54). In the twentieth century, senior Palace Chiefs, traditionally loyal supporters of the Oba, have also taken to wearing this type of costume. The chief also wears a “pangolin skin” hat, a coral-bead necklace, bracelets, anklets, and a hip ornament in the form of a human face. A “hand of wealth” (*abuwa*), a leather ornament covered with red cloth and sheet-brass cutouts, is shown below the hip ornament. Figs. 3 and 12 show similarly dressed chiefs participating in palace ceremonies.

In one hand the chief holds an animal head, possibly the head of a sacrificial ram or cow, or a kola-nut box in the form of one. In his other hand he raises an *eben* sword. Both gestures indicate loyalty and submission to the king. The figure above Ozolua probably also depicts a chief paying homage to the Oba, although his identity is difficult to establish. Shown with profile head and feet, he wears a long patterned robe and trousers and carries a spear and a sword.

The lower figures on both cat. nos. 124 and 125 also depict Ozolua the Conqueror wearing his distinctive “iron coat” and war

crown. In both images he holds up a cutlass in his right hand. On cat. no. 125 he holds a simple stick in his left hand, while on cat. no. 124 he holds a spear with an odd ovoid thickening of the shaft. This may allude to the magical oval shield with which he is sometimes shown (Blackmun 1990:65, figs. 4, 12). On both these boxes the upper figure depicts another Oba, although which one is difficult to determine. This Oba wears his complete coral-bead regalia, including winged crown, collar, shirt, crossed baldrics with large central bead, bracelets, and anklets, as well as an elaborately patterned wrapper that features three Portuguese faces at the waist. He holds up an *eben* sword with which he honors his ancestors, and a gong-shaped proclamation staff, which invests his pronouncements with the force of his divine heritage. Both boxes refer to the power of Benin kings generally and the glorious deeds of one king in particular.

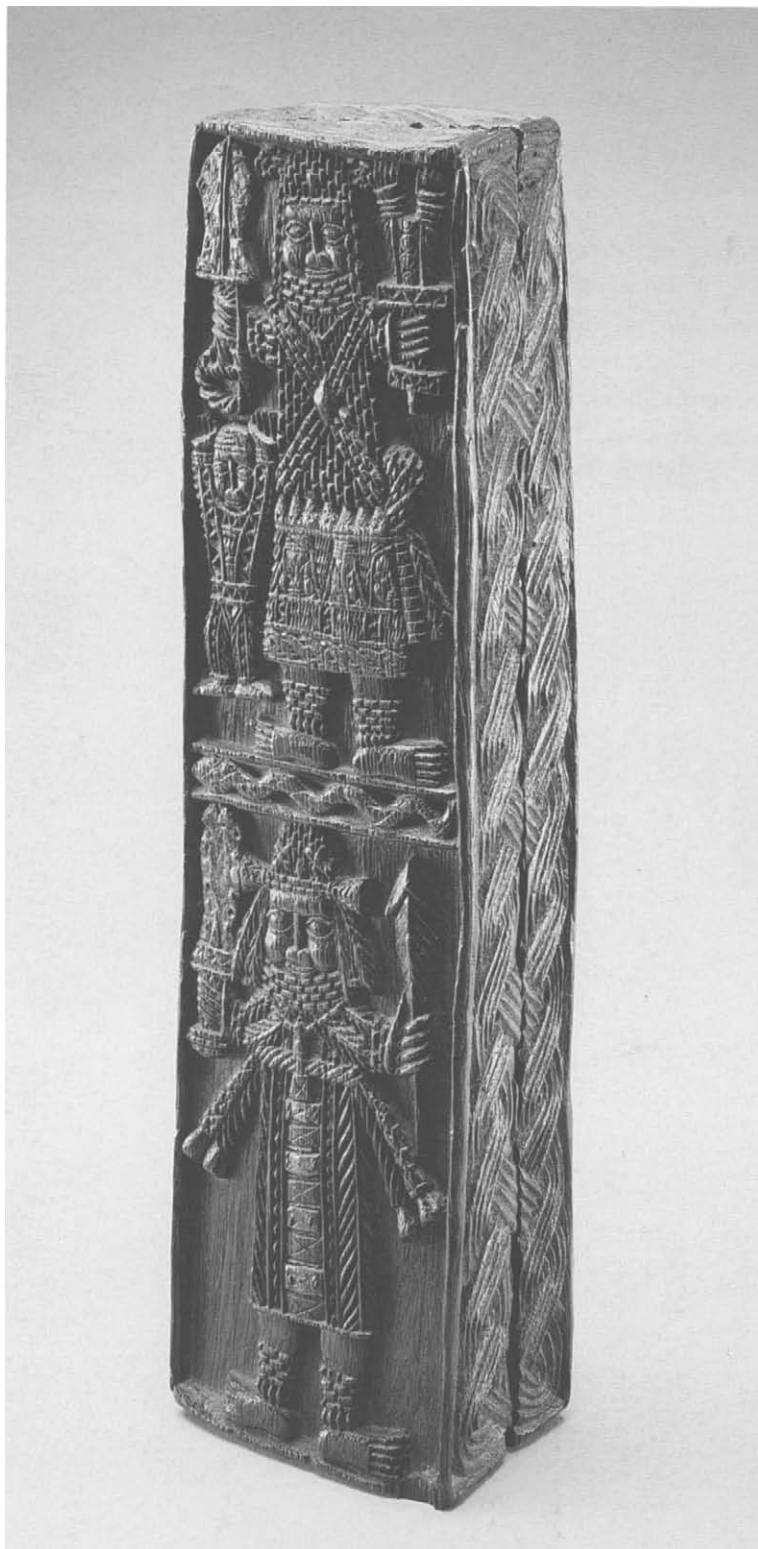
While cat. nos. 123 to 125 depict subjects that also figure prominently in the objects made by Igbesanmwan, cat. no. 126 represents a figure who is not at all part of their repertoire of motifs relating to royal power. This box portrays a European man standing in a boat, dressed in late-nineteenth-century attire—long-sleeved jacket, high, standup collar, and top hat. He holds an umbrella and a sword, and in the boat with him are two objects, possibly kegs or cannon. European traders were increasingly frequent in Benin in the nineteenth century, especially after the 1892 trade agreement between Queen Victoria and Oba Ovonramwen. While Igbesanmwan carvers continued for centuries to represent foreigners with the image of Portuguese that was codified in the early sixteenth century, Omada carvers were not constrained by this tradition and could introduce more contemporary attributes.

The image of the European in a boat was used frequently on objects carved by *emada*. It appears on chairs and stools (cat. no. 130; Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983: fig. 31; Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 12, fig. 27; von Luschan 1919: figs. 846, 849, 851), on carved wooden panels (von Luschan 1919: 124), and on containers made of carved coconut shell such as cat. no. 127 (see also Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 30, fig. 219; Roth 1968: fig. 232). Although some of these Omada-carved coconut shells are cut in half to form a bowl and lid, others, like cat. no. 127, have a small opening at the top carved with lugs from which the container was suspended (Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 30, figs. 219–21; Roth 1968: figs. 231–32).

The European man standing in a boat is one of three motifs carved on the coconut-shell container in the Perls collection. He is shown wearing shorts and brandishing a spear and a paddle. A barrel floats in the space beside him, perhaps containing the palm oil that became the principal trade interest of the British in Nigeria in the nineteenth century. His plain garments and rather rough facial features suggest that this container was made by a novice *omada*; *emada* often practiced their technique on these small, amusing objects

(Ben-Amos 1975:184–85). Cat. no. 127 also depicts an Edo man slung by a rope from a palm tree, which he is tapping for palm wine, a popular beverage that this container may even have been meant to hold. In the third scene another Edo man holds a knife in one hand and carries an ax or a hoe over his shoulder. The profile heads and feet of these figures are awkwardly combined with frontal torsos. This feature, the more elongated proportions, and the exuberant portrayals of everyday life are hallmarks of Omada carving style and distinguish it from the works of Igbesanmwan.





**124. Box: Oba Ozolua and Unidentified Oba**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th century

Wood, sheet metal; l. 14¾ in. (37.5 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.69ab

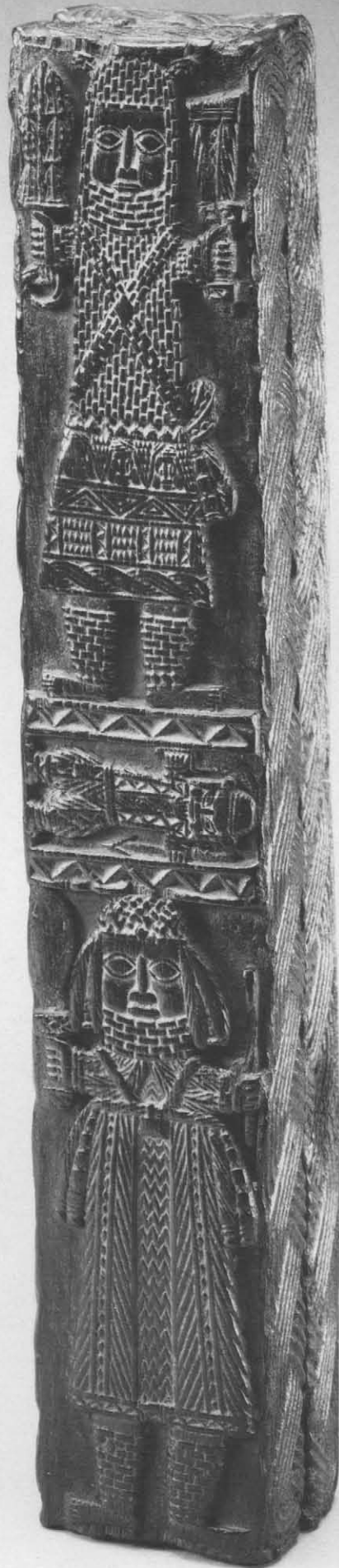
*Ex Collection:* James Hooper

*References:* London, Christie's, 1976b:  
lot 63; Phelps 1976: pl. 239; Dark 1982: R6/3

**125. Box: Oba Ozolua and Unidentified Oba**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th–20th century

Wood; l. 21⅜ in. (54.3 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.67ab





**126. Box: European in a Boat**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th–20th century

Wood; l. 15½ in. (39.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.63ab

**127. Coconut-Shell Container**

(view 1)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

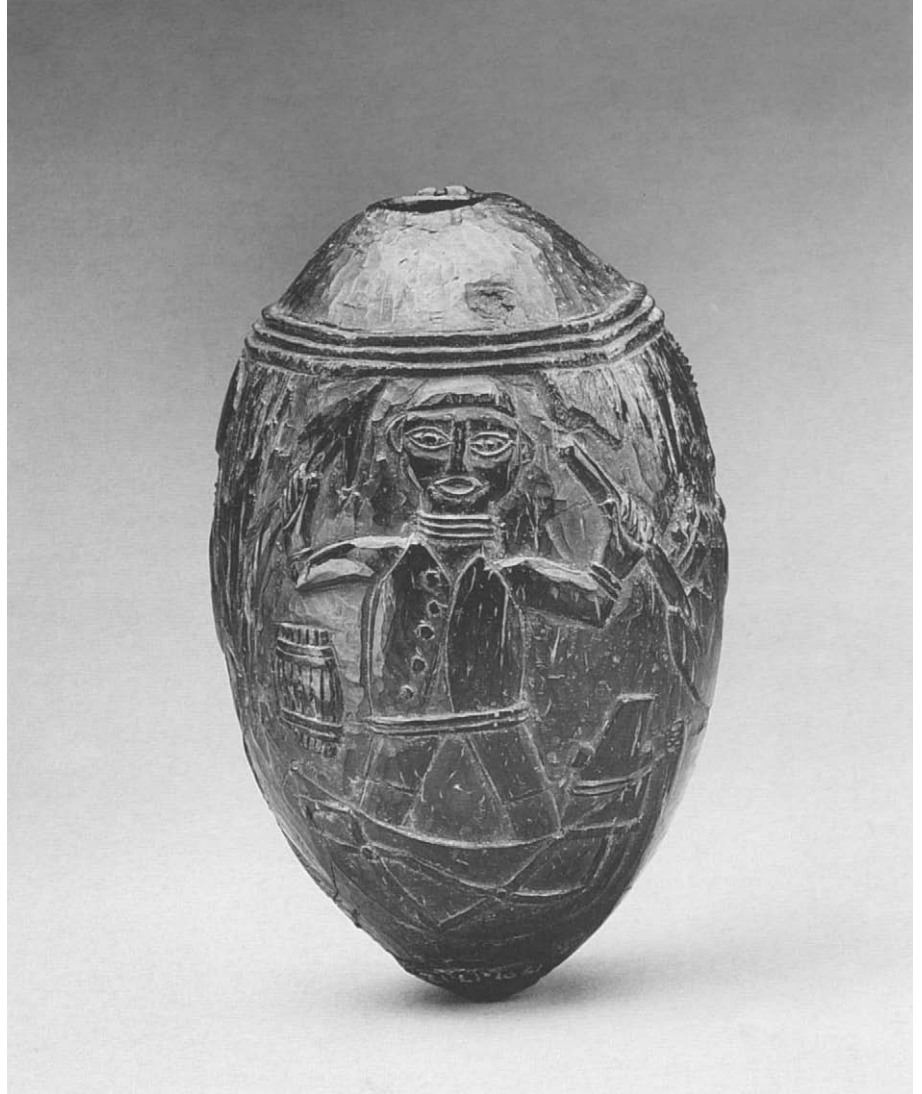
Coconut shell; h. 5 in. (12.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.120

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Lt.-General  
Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*Reference:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 30, figs.  
217-18



127. Coconut-Shell Container (view 2)



# STOOLS AND CHAIRS



In the Perls collection are two rectangular wooden stools of the type known in Benin as *agba*. Two other types of ceremonial stools are also used in Benin: *erhe*, a round seat covered in white cloth that serves as the Oba's throne, and *ekete*, a round-topped stool made of wood or brass whose central support is in the form of intertwined snakes (Ben-Amos, cited in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:41). Of the three, *agba* is considered in oral traditions to be the oldest, dating from the period when the Ogiso kings ruled Benin. With the founding of the present dynasty by Oranmiyan around 1300, *ekete* replaced *agba* as the seat of kingship, but *agba* continued to be symbolically and functionally important. When the authority of Ewedo, the fourth Oba in the present dynasty (r. fourteenth century), was threatened by the Uzama, chiefs associated with the Ogiso dynasty, he acquired their *agba* in order to affirm his power (Egharevba 1960:10; Ben-Amos 1980:15). Even today, the deeply rooted political importance of the *agba* is reflected in an Edo phrase meaning to convene a meeting, which translates literally as "to bring out an *agba*" (Ben-Amos 1980:15). Today *agba* are used by the king, chiefs, and some priests (Ben-Amos, cited in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:41).

Unlike most indigenous African forms of sculpture and furniture, the *agba* is pieced together out of several sections rather than carved out of a single piece of wood. Mortise and tenon joints fix the stretchers to the legs and the legs to the seat. The seat is further secured with three large round-headed nails at each corner. The *agba*'s form and manner of construction suggest the possibility of a European prototype, despite the fact that oral traditions place its origin before Europeans arrived in Benin in the late fifteenth century (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 10). Noting the disparity between formal evidence and oral tradition, Catherine Hess, a student of Benin stools, has postulated that the original form of the *agba*, now lost, may have changed to the present one after European contact (Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:43).

128. Stool: Oba and Chiefs (view 1)  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th century

Like other ceremonial wooden objects that are central to the proclamation of Benin royal power, some *agba* are made by members of Igbesamwan, the royal guild of wood and ivory carvers. In these, the entire surface of the seat and legs is carved with intricate guilloche patterns, rosettes, and other motifs associated with royal patronage (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 10; Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983: figs. 28, 29). By the mid-nineteenth century, however, *agba* were also being produced by carvers in Omada, the association of young men who serve the Oba as palace pages and sword bearers, and who make wood-carvings for sale in their spare time. Like the wood boxes and coconut-shell containers carved by the Omada (see cat. nos. 123–127), these *agba* are decorated overall with prominent figures from Benin history, palace ceremonies, and scenes of everyday life, including the increasingly numerous European traders and their goods. Omada carving is distinguished from that of Igbesamwan by its more innovative iconography and more active and varied compositions. Nevertheless, as Paula Ben-Amos has shown in her analysis of the imagery on an *agba* in the Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, Omada-carved stools present complex and coherent decorative programs that express the political, military, and magical powers of Benin kingship (Ben-Amos, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:51–58).

The seat of cat. no. 128 (view 1) depicts an Oba in full coral-beaded regalia supported by a high-ranking chief and holding a rattle-staff surmounted by an elephant. Ben-Amos has suggested<sup>1</sup> that this rattle-staff, while not identical to the brass one commemorating the triumph of Oba Akenzua I over his rival the Iyase n'Ode, shares its elephant imagery and is perhaps meant as an allusion to that great mid-eighteenth-century king (see fig. 8; Ben-Amos 1984; Vogel 1978). On the left side of the seat stands a senior chief in ceremonial garb raising an *eben* sword, a sign of homage to the king. The right side portrays a lower-ranked chief (shown smaller and with few beaded ornaments) raising an enormously exaggerated sword whose sheath hangs at his side. In front of him is another attendant holding a rope and a bound victim, who is perhaps about to be beheaded. Human sacrifice, which was an increasingly important feature of Benin palace rituals in the nineteenth century, was a way of demonstrating the king's absolute power over his subjects. A less gruesome means of expressing the terrifying powers of the king are the leopards and coiled mudfish that appear in each of the stool's four corners. These corner designs incorporate the large round-headed tacks that secure the legs to the seat.

The figures on the legs further support the general theme of the king's power. On the front side (view 2), the right leg depicts Oba Ozolua the Conqueror (r. late fifteenth century), who was also a common image on the wood boxes carved by the Omada (cat. nos. 123–125). He stands above a leopard, perhaps a reference to his

ferocious, warlike nature and to his praise name “the leopard cub with strong claws.” At Ozolua’s side is a vanquished enemy, his body literally sliced in two by Ozolua’s sword. The left leg depicts a soldier with upraised sword and ax. Judging by his long hair, hat, and beard, he is probably a Portuguese. The central medallion and triangular side elements of the stretcher also depict a Portuguese figure and heads. On the other side of the stool (view 3), a similar Portuguese figure appears on the left leg, holding an umbrella and a sword. The right leg represents a war chief, identified by the leopard-head ornament at his left hip, raising an *eben* sword in honor of the Oba. The medallions on the stretchers on the stool’s short sides portray Edo hunters pursuing birds with a crossbow and a bow and arrows (views 4 and 5). In Benin art Portuguese soldiers are often allusions to the great sixteenth-century Oba Esigie, who conquered the Igala army with the assistance of Portuguese soldiers and enriched the royal coffers through trade with Portuguese ships. This *agba* thus explicitly depicts one great Oba, Ozolua, and may allude to two other heroic kings, Akenzua I and Esigie, surrounding them with figures that display their acceptance of the king’s awesome power.

Another famous king is honored in cat. no. 129. The seat of this *agba* (view 1) depicts the Oba with mudfish legs, portrayed as a beautiful tapestry of contrasting textured patterns. He is holding an *eben* ceremonial sword and gong-shaped proclamation staff. On one level, this image refers to Oba Ohen, who reigned in the early fifteenth century and whose legs are said to have become deformed and paralyzed. It also refers to the intimate relationship thought in Benin to exist between the king and Olokun, god of the sea, and to his dual nature, both human and divine. The mudfish-legged king is a core image of Benin kingship and appears on many types of court objects in both ivory and brass (fig. 29; cat. nos. 30, 53). Here the king is flanked by a chief and a priest. On the left, a chief holds a rattle-staff surmounted by a clenched fist, used to summon the royal ancestral spirits (see fig. 34), and on the right, a priest holds a paddle-shaped staff that may be an *ovbeve*, a charm used to dispel evil that could potentially harm the Oba (Blackmun 1984a:317–18). Much smaller in scale, a third attendant wearing a medicine container holds a three-pronged staff next to the Oba. All these figures appear to be bringing their spiritual powers to bear in support of the Oba.

The legs on the front side of this stool (view 2) depict identical figures who appear to be warriors. They hold swords and spears, with additional sheathed knives hanging at their sides, and wear tunics with leopard spots and very stylized leopard eyes. A similar, though less stylized, warrior figure appears on an *agba* in the Field Museum of Natural History (Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: pl. 14). On the rear of the stool (view 3), the figures on the legs represent two senior chiefs, identically dressed in “pangolin skin” wrappers and



hats and holding *eben* swords in honor of the Oba. Their leopard-face hip ornaments, and the cutlasses depicted next to them, suggest that they provide military service as well as ceremonial loyalty to the king. On the narrow ends of the stool (views 4 and 5), the medallions of the stretchers between the legs depict a variation on the image of Ofoe, the messenger of Ogiuwu, the god of death. Ofoe is usually portrayed as a head with limbs projecting above and below his bodiless head (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 49). Here, his lower limbs resemble mudfish, a reference both to the mudfish-legged image of the Oba on the seat and to the occult powers that appear throughout the stool. As in cat. no. 128, the theme of this *agba* is royal power, but in this case it is expressed through images that emphasize the Oba's spiritual and military resources.

Cat. no. 130 is a chair whose form is clearly based upon a European prototype. During the nineteenth century, imported European household items were brought to Nigeria in ever-increasing numbers, and many European visitors commented upon the quantity and variety of European-made goods that could be found in chiefs' homes (Hess, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:43). Although its form is European, the decoration of the chair is rooted in the rich and varied bank of images used by Omada carvers. The figures on the seat are oriented sideways, perhaps reflecting the carver's lack of familiarity with the European form.

The most prominent figure is the mudfish-legged king, who here has a metal-spotted snake as well as mudfish emerging from his patterned skirt, as if to underscore his association with the sea and its vast spiritual connotations. Next to the king is a leopard who has decapitated an animal, a clear symbol of the Oba's fierce and deadly power. On the king's other side is a warrior mounted on horseback, a sword in his raised fist and a medicine container dangling from his elbow, providing protection in battle. The leopard heads at the four corners of the seat reiterate the aggressive, dangerous aspect of the Oba expressed by these figures. In the space below, blissfully oblivious to the awesome presence of the Oba above him, a European man reclines in a boat. This image is also a frequent one on Omada-carved objects (see cat. nos. 126, 127). Here his legs are casually crossed and he grasps a paddle in one hand and a chain connected to a barrel in the other. A cannon is placed behind him, perhaps explaining his apparent nonchalance.

The stools and chair in the Perls collection typify the strange hybrids of form and imagery that are found in Omada carving. The palace pages create ancient, ritually sanctioned types of objects, such as the *agba*, as well as newly introduced foreign ones, such as the chair. In decorating them they draw on the time-honored motifs devised long ago by Igbesamwan to express deep, philosophical concepts, but they also depict people and things that had only recently

appeared in Benin, and had no spiritual connection to the concept of kingship. They often juxtapose these images in odd but amusing ways, crowding them in off-beat, asymmetrical compositions. Omada works are a witty and lighthearted contrast to the solemn, tradition-bound nature of much of Benin art.

1. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.



128. Stool: Oba and Chiefs (view 2)  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
19th century  
Wood, metal tacks; w. 22¼ in.  
(56.6 cm)  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls

128. Stool: Oba and Chiefs (view 3)





128. Stool: Oba and Chiefs (views 4 and 5)



129. Stool: Oba with Mudfish Legs  
(view 1)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Wood, metal tacks; w. 25 in. (63.5 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.61

*Reference:* Dark 1973: pl. 19, figs. 37, 38

*Exhibition:* New York, Center for African  
Art, 1990: no. 7



129. Stool: Oba with Mudfish Legs (view 2)



129. Stool: Oba with Mudfish Legs (views 4 and 5)



129. Stool: Oba with Mudfish Legs (view 3)





130. Chair (detail, top view)

**130. Chair**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Wood, metal tacks; h. 36½ in.

(92.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.62

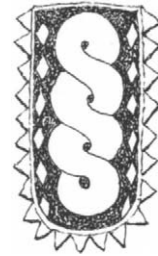
*Ex Collection:* Rear Admiral H. H. Rawson

*Reference:* von Luschan 1919: fig. 853





ART OF  
YORUBA  
KINGDOMS





# OWO



Located on the far eastern edge of Yorubaland, Owo is a town about seventy miles north of Benin and eighty miles east of Ife, the ancient Yoruba capital from which the reigning dynasty in Benin traces its origin. Owo's rulers likewise claim descent from the divine kings of Ife, and archaeological excavations at Owo have revealed terracotta sculptures probably made in the fifteenth century that closely resemble the highly naturalistic brass and terracotta sculptures of Ife (Eyo and Willett 1980). About the middle of the fifteenth century, Owo also came under the influence of Benin, as Oba Ewuare expanded the kingdom of Benin through his military exploits. Although the people of Owo claim never to have been conquered by Benin, oral traditions in Benin and the presence of Benin-influenced institutions in Owo suggest otherwise. At times, Owo's rulers had to be confirmed by the Oba of Benin and pay tribute to him, and many of the words for chiefs' titles and insignia in Owo are derived from Benin (Poynor 1976:90). Owo regalia is more like that of Benin than of other Yoruba kingdoms. Red beads, both coral and jasper, are worn by the Olowo, or king of Owo, and his chiefs, in the form of baldrics, high collars, caps, and network shirts similar to those worn in Benin (Eyo and Willett 1980: fig. 10; Poynor 1976: figs. 1, 2). Two Olowos in particular are credited with introducing Benin ideas, objects, and titles to Owo—Osogboye, who served as sword-bearer to Oba Ehengbuda (r. late sixteenth century), and Elewuokin, who reigned in the eighteenth century (Poynor 1989:138).

Owo's own distinctive art forms were first identified in 1951 by William Fagg, who recognized the similarity between ivory carvings then in use in Owo and objects found in Benin in 1897, and was thus able to separate Owo works from the corpus of Benin art (Fagg 1951). Elephants had been abundant in the forests surrounding Owo, and the town was known as a supplier of ivory to Benin and a center for ivory carving (Poynor 1978:22; Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:104). The fact that so many ivories in the Owo style were found in the palace in Benin suggested to Fagg that Owo ivory carvers had been recruited to work for Igbesanmwan, the royal guild of ivory carvers in Benin.

131. Lidded Bowl (view 2)  
Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo  
17th–18th century

Owo ivories can be distinguished from those of Benin by their facial features: lips shown as separate, parallel forms that do not meet at the corners of the mouth; eyes with half-lowered lids and pupils inlaid with dark wood or coconut shell; a flattened nose with wide, sharply defined nose wings; and a caplike, crosshatched coiffure with an indented hairline. The figures are shown both frontally and in profile, and they often appear flattened or carved in very low relief. Owo ivory objects show a delight in decorative textured patterns, such as basket weave, zigzags, herringbones, and beading, and many also incorporate pierced or openwork areas that add to their delicacy and virtuosity.

Among the most spectacular ivory objects from Owo are a group of lidded bowls (cat. no. 131). They were probably used by the Olowo to hold small items, usually gifts, in the reception area of the palace, and the Olowo may have presented the bowls themselves as gifts to distinguished visitors (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:108). These vessels consist of an egg-shaped container connected to a circular base by a short stem, which in the case of cat. no. 131 is in the form of a metal anklet with five rattle chambers. Four groups of figures surround the lid, with spaces cut between them through which the dome of the lid is visible. The figures on this bowl all express in some way the mystical, sometimes terrifying powers possessed by the divine king.

The figures are connected at the top by a ring formed by the body of a snake, which emerges from the center of the lid and terminates in an enormous head, swallowing the legs of a man (view 1), while another man stands to the side. Rowland Abiodun, a Nigerian art historian who specializes in Yoruba art, sees in this image “the *oba*’s venomous potential to deal ruthlessly with his adversaries” (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:106). When one considers the nature of the king portrayed in the other three groups of figures, this violent image would seem to be a logical outcome of the powers expressed in them. The relationship between the victim and the bystander requires further clarification, however, since they both hold on to a staff from which hang three snail shells. The Yoruba consider the fluid inside snail shells to be an especially soothing, cooling substance, which is perhaps meant to balance the violent destructiveness of the snake/king.<sup>1</sup>

The next motif on the vessel’s lid, moving in a counterclockwise direction, explores the king’s relationship to the sea and its denizens as a metaphor for his power. View 2 shows a ruler, wearing crossed baldrics and a crown, grasping the tails of two crocodiles who in turn hold fish in their mouths. In this hierarchy of power the ruler is clearly at the top, dominating even the most fearsome creatures of the sea god’s realm.

Continuing counterclockwise around the lid, the next image is a “snake-winged bird,” which grasps its own coiled wings and which has



Fig. 62. Chief Oludasa of Owo, wearing an *orufanran* costume of scalloped red cloth with a Benin brass pendant over his chest. Photograph by William Fagg, 1958 (58/58/10). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London

two feathers emerging from its head, as on the Olowo's crown (view 3). Frank Willett has shown that the "snake-winged bird" was used by a variety of cultures in southwestern Nigeria, including—but not limited to—Benin, and is found on objects associated with royalty (Willett 1988:124). He traces the motif to representations of bats, a mammal that has wings and flies like a bird but is also furry and suckles its young. In southwestern Nigeria, the bat's liminal nature makes it an appropriate symbol for kings, who are considered partly human and partly divine. The Yoruba in particular associate bats with the supernatural powers that operate at night and must be mastered by the king (Drewal in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:125).

The final image, in front of the snake's tail (view 4), is a king wearing crossed, beaded baldrics (*pakato*) and a conical crown into which two ivory feathers are inserted, similar to the regalia worn by Owo's rulers even today (fig. 62; Poyner 1976: fig. 2). The king's legs terminate in mudfish, and he is flanked by two chiefs, each of whom holds up a fish and a smooth conical object. This image combines two motifs frequently found in Benin art, the king with mudfish legs and the triad of king and two attendants (see figs. 26, 29, 45; cat. nos. 30, 53, 112, 129). In Benin, the mudfish-legged king refers to the king's intimate association with Olokun, the god of the sea, and his ability to bridge the realms of earth and water and of god and man. When used in Owo, the watery imagery of the fish-legged figure is viewed as a reference to the vast and mysterious powers of the Olowo, one of whose praise names is "the mighty and expansive ocean whose bottom [i.e. secrets] can never be known" (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:106).

The images on the lid are highly codified symbols of the awesome powers of the king. With the exception of the devouring snake, they are also formal and symmetrical. The four smaller motifs that decorate the bowl share these properties and echo the lid's theme of royal power. Beginning again at the snake's head and proceeding counterclockwise, these motifs include a "snake-winged bird" or bat (view 1); a round-eyed, skull-like or simian face with leaves emerging from the wide, toothy mouth (view 2); an upside-down elephant head portrayed with two trunks that cross over each other and end in hands holding leaves, a variation of a motif common in Benin art (view 3); and an unusually

intricate interlace pattern in which a mudfish, two fish, two snakes, and possibly a horse head can be identified (view 4).

The skull-like face, snake-winged bird, and devouring snake are also found on a group of bronzes from southwestern Nigeria whose precise origin or date have long puzzled scholars. These include two bronze stools from Benin (Tunis 1981), a third bronze stool found in Ijebu-Ode (Drewal in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:120–27), and two of the so-called Tsoede bronzes, the Jebba bowman and the Tada warrior (Eyo and Willett 1980: nos. 93 and 94). The similarity in iconography has caused some scholars to propose Owo as the source of these bronzes (Fraser 1975; Fagg 1981). While no evidence that Owo was a brasscasting center has as yet been found, the relationship between the ivory bowls such as cat. no. 131 and the bronzes suggests the important role of these ivories in creating or disseminating the vocabulary of royal power throughout southwestern Nigeria.

There are two ivory bowls very similar to cat. no. 131 in the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde (von Luschan 1919: pl. 121, left and right; figs. 825, 827). A second group of bowls, closely related in form, is exemplified by the bowl formerly in the Hooper collection and now in the Museum of Mankind, London (London, Christie's, 1976b: lot 52; for other examples of this type, see von Luschan 1919: figs. 826 and 828; New York, Center for African Art, 1988: fig. 260). These vessels depict the man-devouring snake motif, but otherwise the lids consist of evenly spaced friezes of hunters, warriors, foreigners, and various attendants, sometimes leaving out the ruler entirely. The bowl sections of this group of containers contain some of the same motifs seen on cat. no. 131, but they also include human figures and faces as well as depictions of chickens, antelopes, monkeys, and other animals. While the carving style is very similar to that of cat. no. 131, the iconography appears much less formal and more varied in this second group of Owo bowls. A third group of Owo ivory bowls features a lidless hemispherical bowl supported by an openwork ring of standing figures (London, South Kensington, Christie's, 1987: lot 67; Hall 1926).

The Perls collection contains another ivory cup (cat. no. 132) with motifs similar both to cat. no. 131 and to the second group of lidded bowls. Smaller and without a lid, this cup has a circular base and short stem like cat. no. 131. The figures are arranged in two registers, and do not include the devouring snake motif. On the top row the motifs include the round-eyed, skull-like head with leaves emerging from its jaws (view 1); an antelope eating leaves (view 2); a bird, with a single, long feather on its head, eating a snake (view 3); and an elephant with upraised trunk (view 4). The motifs on the bottom row are a monkey eating; an upside-down elephant head with two intertwined trunks ending in hands holding leaves; a human face with the typical Owo crosshatched coiffure and three Benin-like supraorbital scarification marks; and a hunter in a European-style hat with his prey.

This ivory cup was registered in the collection of the prince de Ligne (Château de Beloeil, Belgium) before 1825 (Santa 1958; London, South Kensington, Christie's, 1988: lot 85), which is about the time the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde acquired its Owo ivory-lidded bowls (Rumpf and Tunis 1984: fig. 1). A related Owo ivory vessel, the so-called Yoruba-Portuguese saltcellar, now in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, also first appeared in a collection inventory in the early nineteenth century (New York, Center for African Art, 1988:191–96, no. 179). This collection data, and the similarities noted above between the ivory bowls and the Benin bronze stools, one of which was cast during the reign of Oba Eresonyen (r. 1735–50; Tunis 1981), suggest that cat. nos. 131 and 132, if not all the Owo ivory bowls, were made in the eighteenth century or possibly earlier. How much earlier, and under what influences, has yet to be fully understood.

Bassani and Fagg suggest that the double-chambered bowl in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum is a saltcellar made by Owo artists for a Portuguese patron, but they are careful to differentiate it from bowls such as cat. no. 131, whose “form, decoration, and iconography . . . show no trace of contact with Europe” (New York, Center for African Art, 1988:193, 195). Rather, we have seen that the iconography of these lidded vessels is closely related to a wide range of brass and ivory objects made for rulers in southwestern Nigeria. Their form can also be related to other types of Yoruba and Benin objects. For example, the circular base and stem of the ivory bowls are found on Owo wooden human and ram heads placed on ancestral altars (Fagg and Pemberton 1982: figs. 25, 26), on Benin wood and ivory kola-nut boxes in the form of cow or antelope heads (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 84; von Luschan 1919: pl. 122), and on the unusual Benin ivory cup in the Perls collection (cat. no. 121). In addition, the combination of a spherical lidded vessel surrounded by a ring of figures with open spaces between them can be seen in the large wooden bowl for Ifa divination paraphernalia carved by the Yoruba artist Areogun (Fagg and Pemberton 1982: pl. 56). While the historical relationships between the Owo lidded bowls and these other objects (some of which are much more recent in date) cannot be determined, their similarities suggest an indigenous origin for the form of the ivory bowls. Yet it is also clear that the Owo ivory carvers were familiar with European forms of vessels, since they created at least two ivory tankards, one now in the Museum of Mankind, London (Joyce 1931: pl. A) and the other in the Bernisches Historisches Museum, known from a clay reproduction (von Luschan 1919:483, pl. 117G). Both are decorated with motifs identical to those found on the Owo lidded bowls. According to A. F. C. Ryder, the British historian who studied European trade with Benin, European-made utilitarian objects, including the pewter ware that could have inspired the ivory tankards, were not commonly imported to Benin until the seventeenth century (Ryder 1969:95–98). It is possible that the two ivory tankards and the lidded bowls were



Fig. 63. The regalia of Chief Oludasa of Owo, kept in two cylindrical boxes. His ceremonial *udamalore* sword with beaded sheath lies in front of the larger box. Photograph by William Fagg, 1949–50 (49-50/58/1). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, Photograph Study Collection, The William B. Fagg Archives. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London



made as early as the seventeenth century. However, the decoration of the tankards indicates that the Owo artists were applying to this newly imported vessel shape a preexisting carving style and vocabulary of motifs, suggesting that the tradition of Owo ivory vessels is even older.

In addition to these luxurious ivory containers, the Olowo and his most important chiefs also make use of ivory costume elements in order to demonstrate their exalted status. In fig. 63 the regalia of the Oludasa of Owo, including his ivory bracelets and ivory-ornamented crown, is shown with its cylindrical storage boxes. Among the most striking ivory insignia are the ivory ceremonial swords, called *udamalore*, which the Olowo and high-ranking chiefs wear at their hip at Igogo, the most prominent ceremony in Owo today, and at other major celebrations (cat. no. 133). *Udamalore* literally means “sword of the well-born,” and it indicates that the wearer “hails from a respected and famous family [and] is looked upon as mature, powerful, and influential” (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:109; 241, n. 46). The sword’s handle is in the form of a long-necked human head with heavy-lidded inlaid eyes, parallel lips, and coiffure with projections, features that are typical of Owo. Its curved blade is divided into two parts: nearest the handle a solid section is decorated with two knot patterns; and an upper section depicts an Owo chief in ceremonial dress, wearing his own *udamalore* sword horizontally at his left hip. The space around the figure is pierced, but the sword’s gently curved outline is maintained by delicate bands of ivory, and by the curved sword the chief holds in his right hand and the bird who perches on his left, pecking his crown. The upraised sword is an *uda*, a sword used for defense, and the bird is associated with the spiritual powers of “our mothers,” elderly Yoruba women whose protective presence is often implied by images of birds in Yoruba art. These emblems combine to create an image of a ruler who is physically and spiritually equipped to meet all challenges (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:109).

The *udamalore* in the Perls collection illustrates some of the distinctive features of Owo ivory carving—the virtuosic use of open space and the juxtaposition of richly patterned areas, in this case zigzags, knot patterns, thick oval diagonal beading, and—on the reverse—basketweave and herringbone. An *udamalore* sword identical to this one was in the possession of the Ojomo of Owo, the Olowo's military chief equivalent to the Ezomo in Benin (Poynor 1976:40, fig. 5; 90; Poynor 1989:fig. 5, 146, n. 6). The Ojomo's sword had six ivory chains ending in ivory bells suspended from the holes along its lower edge, thus enhancing its grandeur both visually and aurally. Abiodun has suggested that the ivory sword in the Perls collection was made in the seventeenth or eighteenth century (in New York, Center for African Art, 1989: fig. 111), perhaps because of its resemblance to the figures on Owo lidded bowls, while Robin Poynor, an American art historian who has studied the arts of Owo, has proposed that similar examples were made in the nineteenth century (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981:133).

The opulent tastes of the Olowo and other chiefs of Owo can be seen in another costume that incorporates ivory ornaments. Called *orufanran*, it is worn by the Olowo and those chiefs whose titles were created and granted by past Olowos, especially those traditionally associated with military duties, such as the Ojomo (Poynor 1989:134–35, 139). *Orufanran* consists of a jacket, skirt or trousers, and hat (see fig. 62; Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989: fig. 105). The jacket is made of cotton cloth to which scallops of red wool flannel have been sewn, imitating the scales of the pangolin, an animal that rolls itself into a ball when in danger so that its scaly skin will protect it. This costume and the sword usually carried with it, are most likely derived from similar costumes and the *eben* swords of Benin (see figs. 3, 12) and may have been introduced to Owo either by Osogboye in the late sixteenth century (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:108; Poynor 1976:42; idem 1978:149) or by Elewuokun in the eighteenth (Poynor 1989:139). What is distinctive about the Owo version is the proliferation of ivory (or brass) ornaments that are attached to the jacket (cat. nos. 134–38). These include human faces as well as heads of rams, leopards, and crocodiles, all resembling the hip masks and waist pendants of Benin (see cat. nos. 62, 64, 65). Additional ivory pieces attached to the upper arms of the *orufanran* costume depict two figures flanked by a monkey on each side. The *orufanran* attachments resemble amulets or charms sewn on the garments worn by healers and priests, and it is no coincidence that the animals they represent are used, especially by war chiefs, in making charms for good luck and riches (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:109).

The attachments worn on the *orufanran* costume may be derived from Benin art forms, but they display the distinctive characteristics of Owo style. The use of inlaid wood to depict leopard spots (cat. nos.

135, 136) and crocodile scales (cat. no. 137), or merely to define and decorate surfaces, is an Owo invention. Owo ivory carvers also introduced the piercing of ivory to create space and define figures, as in the teeth of the crocodile (cat. no. 137) or the silhouetting of the monkeys and figures in cat. no. 138. Certain textures and patterns seen on these ivory attachments are typical of Owo, such as the dotted, crosshatched incisions of the crocodile head and the thick, heavy, parallel ovoid forms that fill its snout.

A number of magnificent ivory bracelets have been attributed to Owo or other parts of eastern Yorubaland, and Abiodun postulates that they were worn at Ore, an ancient ceremony, long discontinued in Owo, which was concerned with Owo's origins in Ife (in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:104–6). Chiefs are said to have worn their most opulent regalia at Ore, much of it made of ivory. The bracelets include such technically brilliant examples as the interlocking, double-cylindrical, openwork bracelet in the Paul and Ruth Tishman collection (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981: no. 72) and others like it (von Luschan 1919:404–5). A pair of these bracelets in the Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen (Fraser 1975: figs. 12, 13), inventoried in 1689, and a second pair of much simpler narrow bracelets in the Weickmann collection at the Ulmer Museum, catalogued in 1659, confirm the historical importance of Owo and other Yoruba ivory-carving traditions.

The bracelet in the Perls collection (cat. no. 139) is much thicker, heavier, and more massive than the other Owo cylindrical ivory bracelets, yet it includes many features of Owo style: the use of pierced, open space to define figures, the combination of both profile and frontal figures; and the equal division of the figures into upside-down and right-side-up sections, so that they can be “read” properly by both the wearer and an observer. The flattened faces, heavy-lidded eyes, inlaid pupils, and conical coiffures with projecting elements are also typical of Owo ivories. This bracelet is almost identical to one owned by the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde and, like most objects now attributed to Owo, was originally believed to have been made in Benin (von Luschan 1919:398). William Fagg has raised the possibility that this bracelet, its pair in Berlin, and some related examples were made in Ijebu-Ode rather than in Owo (London, South Kensington, Christie's, 1987: lot 66). There is no evidence that Ijebu-Ode was an ivory-carving center and, as Kathy Curnow-Nasara, a specialist in African ivories, has pointed out, it is more likely that these are Owo works (Curnow 1983:195).

The Perls bracelet depicts two figures dressed as rulers, on opposite sides of the bracelet, one upside down and the other right side up. Between them are many other figures, arranged in two registers, again so that one row always appears upside down. These figures include fish-legged figures, attendants, figures smoking a pipe or blowing a flute, bound captives or sacrificial victims, a warrior on

horseback, a warrior with a severed head, and crocodiles. The figures' large, flattened faces resemble other Owo ivory works, but their spidery limbs and awkward, relatively undetailed bodies are distinctive. The figures seem to be linked together in a groundless, depthless space where motion, rather than stability and order, predominates.

In addition to the Olowo and other high-ranking chiefs, Owo ivory carvers also provide prestigious luxury objects for Ifa diviners, who are priests of Orunmila, the Yoruba god of fate, and, according to one oral tradition, the father of Olowo, king of Owo (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:93). The Perls collection includes an ivory tapper (cat. no. 142), which is used to invoke Orunmila's presence during the divination session, and an ivory bowl supported by a female figure (cat. no. 140), used either to hold the sixteen palm-kernel nuts that are part of the divination or to contain small gifts, such as kola nuts, presented to the diviner. Both tapper and bowl depict nude kneeling female figures, an image considered effective in honoring the gods and influencing them to act positively toward mankind. Though clearly in Owo style, the figures on both the tapper and the bowl have broad, strong-jawed faces and stout, fleshy bodies, more substantial than the flattened bodies carved in relief or silhouetted on the Owo bowls, swords, or bracelets. The figures display the five long scarification marks on the torso that are typical of Benin and the three short scars above each eye that usually denote a male or a foreigner in Benin art; their meaning in Owo is unclear. The broken element on the head of the figure on the tapper is probably the remains of a section containing a clapper that was sounded when shaken, also to invoke Orunmila. The tapper is atypical in that the conical section extends below the figure's feet instead of rising above her head. Although other examples are known (Bascom 1969: pls. 13A, B; Krieger 1969, II: fig. 158), this arrangement contradicts the close association between the tapper and Yoruba concepts of the head and destiny, *ori* (Abiodun in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:111).

Cat. no. 141 represents a chief on horseback, standing upon an inverted conical base that may have served as the handle of a flywhisk or a knife, thereby adding to the prestige of its high-ranking owner. The theme of horse and rider immediately conveys the idea of wealth, necessary to maintain horses in southern Nigeria, and of military power, since Yoruba warriors were often mounted. The chief's head, which dominates everything else in this compact sculpture, is more prognathous than is usual in Owo works. Other features, such as the eye form, the use of wood inlay for the pupils as well as to decorate the snake-topped staff held in the chief's right hand, and the textured surfaces, are consistent with Owo style.

1. Henry Drewal 1991: personal communication.



131. Lidded Bowl (view 1)  
 Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo  
 17th–18th century  
 Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 8¼ in.  
 (21.0 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.126ab  
*References:* London, Christie's, 1981:  
 lot 334; Vogel 1989: 89.  
*Exhibitions:* New York, Center for African  
 Art, 1988: figs. 236, 259; idem, 1989:  
 fig. 110

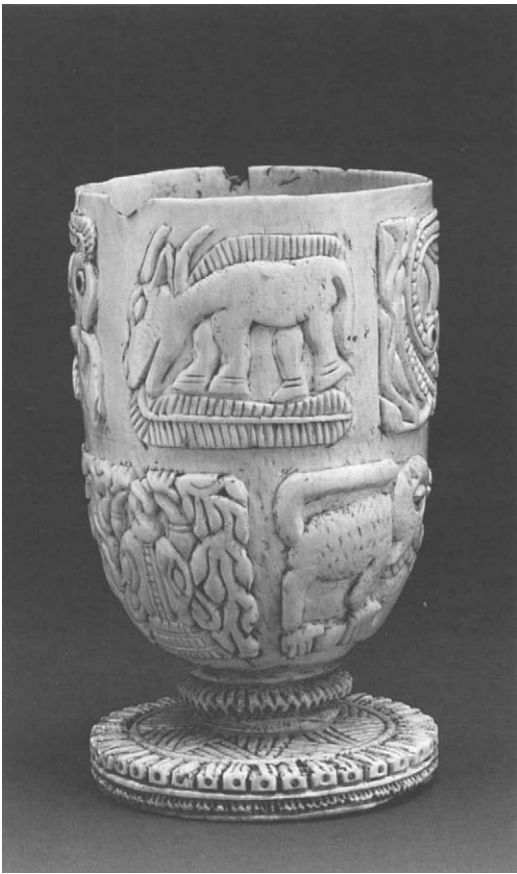


131. Lidded Bowl (view 3)

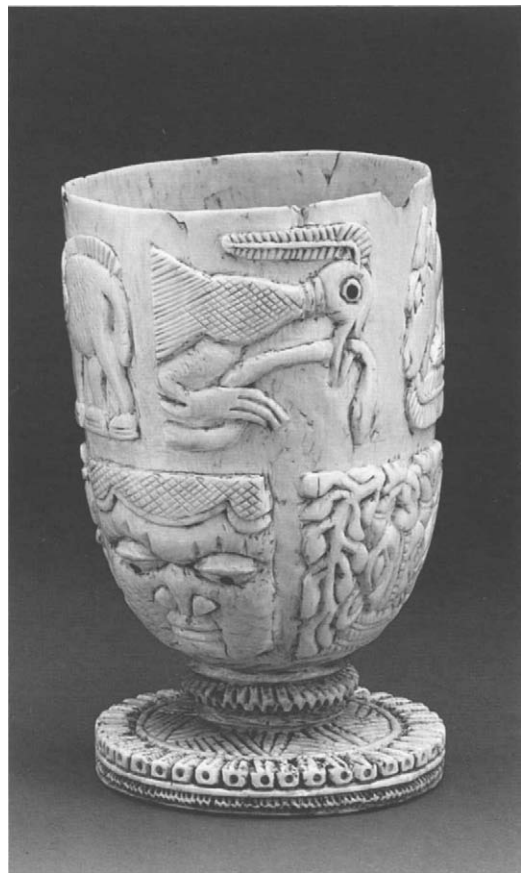
131. Lidded Bowl (view 4)







132. Cup (view 2)



132. Cup (view 3)

**132. Cup (view 1)**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo

17th–18th century

Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 5 in.

(12.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.129

*Ex Collection:* Prince de Ligne, Belgium

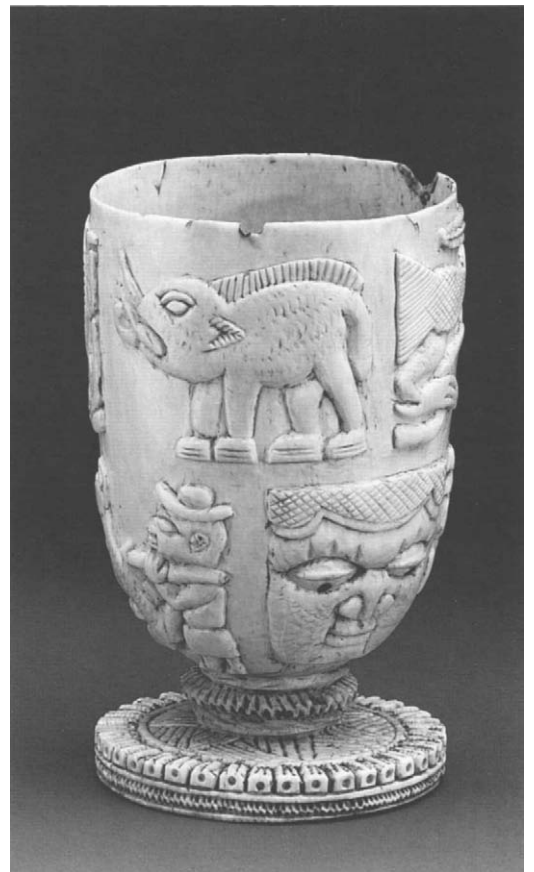
*References:* della Santa 1958: 11–16;

London, Sotheby and Co., 1968: lot 145;

London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet & Co., 1981:

lot 262; London, South Kensington, Chris-

tie's, 1988: lot 85



132. Cup (view 4)





**133. Ceremonial Sword (*udamalore*)**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo

17th–19th century

Ivory, wood or coconut shell; l. 19¼ in.  
(48.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.122

*References:* Poynor 1976: 40, fig. 5; idem  
1989: 141, fig. 5

*Exhibitions:* Washington, D.C., National  
Museum of African Art, 1987: no. 57; New  
York, Center for African Art, 1989: fig. 111



**134. Costume Attachment: Ram  
Head**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo

17th–19th century

Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 6 in.  
(15.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.123

*Reference:* New York, Center for African  
Art, 1989: fig. 106

*Exhibition:* New York, Center for African  
Art, 1988: fig. 198



135. **Costume Attachment:**  
**Leopard Head**  
Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo  
17th–19th century  
Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 5¾ in.  
(14.6 cm)  
Lent by Katherine Perls



**136. Costume Attachment:  
Leopard Head**  
Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo  
17th–19th century  
Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 6 in.  
(15.2 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.162.5



**137. Costume Attachment:  
Crocodile Head**  
Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo  
17th–19th century  
Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 5½ in.  
(14.0 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.125

**138. Costume Attachment: Humans  
and Monkeys**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo

17th–19th century

Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 6⅛ in.

(15.6 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.162.4





139. Bracelet (view 1)

Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo

17th–19th century

Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 7½ in.

(19.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.138

*References:* London, South Kensington,  
Christie's, 1987: lot 66



139. Bracelet (view 2)



**140. Bowl with Caryatid Figure**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo

17th–19th century

Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 6 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.

(16.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.127

*Ex Collection:* Richard and Nancy Bloch

*Exhibition:* New York, Center for African Art, 1988 (not ill.)

**141. Chief on Horseback**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo

17th–20th century

Ivory, wood or coconut shell; h. 6 in.

(15.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.124



**142. Ifa Divination Tapper**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Owo

17th–19th century

Ivory, wood or coconut shell; l. 11 $\frac{1}{2}$  in.

(29.2 cm)

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls

*Ex Collection:* Ernst Anspach

*References:* New York, Grey Art Gallery, 1981: no. 34; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984: no. 19





# IJEBU



Just as Owo is considered to have been an important source of ivory and ivory carvings for Benin, another Yoruba kingdom, Ijebu, is known for its work in metal, particularly brass. As early as the late fifteenth century, the Portuguese explorer Duarte Pacheco Pereira described the flourishing trade with Ijebu, known as “Geebuu,” in which brass bracelets, or manillas, were exchanged for slaves (quoted in Hodgkin 1975: 120). The importance of these brass imports, and the close symbolic association between metal and power in Ijebu culture, is conveyed in the title *Olurin*, “Owner-of-the-Metal,” given to all Ijebu rulers (Drewal in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:117).

The Ijebu kingdom is located near the coast, roughly between the Ogun and Osun rivers; its capital, Ijebu-Ode, is about 120 miles west of Benin. Like those of Benin and Owo, Ijebu’s traditions of origins point to Ife. The structure of chieftaincy in Ijebu, like that of Owo, also has many features in common with Benin, because Benin is said to have ruled Ijebu in the sixteenth or seventeenth century (Drewal in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:120, 241 n. 14). Again as at Owo, these contacts with Benin influenced the works produced in Ijebu.

Ijebu’s brasscasters created many major works of great complexity, including an impressive brass stool, large figures, staffs, and bells (Drewal in New York, Center for African Art, 1989: figs. 120, 126, 133, 141, 142). The altar rings attributed to the Yoruba may also have been made in Ijebu (see fig. 37; Vogel 1983:351). The Perls collection includes several smaller brass ornaments which likewise demonstrate the complicated imagery and intricate craftsmanship that characterize Ijebu work.

Cat. nos. 143 to 145 are cylindrical brass bracelets. Like most Ijebu bracelets, they are decorated with four motifs, two each of two alternating designs. These are arranged around the circumference of the bracelet and oriented so that they are perpendicular to its long axis. As art historian Marie-Thérèse Brincard has pointed out (New York, African-American Institute, 1982:63), this is different from the arrangement of the design elements on bracelets from both Benin (cat. nos. 73, 74, 77) and Owo (cat. no. 139).

143. **Bracelet (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Yoruba; Ijebu  
18th century?

Ijebu art frequently depicts creatures that are composites of human, animal, bird, and fish forms. Some of these are related to motifs found in Benin and Owo, yet treated in distinct ways characteristic of Ijebu. In cat. no. 143, one of the motifs is a mudfish with sinuous barbels, whose tail terminates in a hand with a clenched fist. It thus combines two symbols of kingship and power prominent in Benin art, but in a way that is not found there. The second motif on this bracelet is a ram head. A coiled rope is tied around his horns and his delicately crosshatched tongue protrudes, suggesting that he has already been slaughtered for sacrifice. Tethered ram heads are found in the art of Ife and Owo (Willett 1967: pl. 41; Poyner 1976: fig. 8), and rams are also depicted in Benin art (see cat. no. 71). Cat. no. 143 is the most clearly articulated and refined of all the Ijebu bracelets in the Perls collection. Even the flange around each edge has been treated so that it resembles an elaborate, openwork chain, more intricate and sculptural than the incised chain pattern commonly seen on the other examples.

The motifs on cat. no. 144 are softer and less sharply defined than on the preceding one. This bracelet also depicts a ram or goat head, although in this instance it has whiskers similar to the mudfish barbels in the previous example, and like the mudfish, it has a hand with a clenched fist rising from the top of its head, a version of the motif unique to Ijebu. Alternating with this composite ram-mudfish-hand is a human face with bulging eyes, wide ears, a beard, and a conical cap. There are two raised scarification marks in the center of his forehead.

Cat. no. 145 is somewhat larger than the first two bracelets, and has dangling crotals. The two motifs that alternate twice around its circumference both feature symmetrical arcs emerging from the top of a head. In one, the face is distinctly human but with bulging features and two opposed crescents in relief above the eyes. The arcs emerging from this head are decorated with zigzags and terminate in a triangular form, from which hang three small cones. In the other motif, the face seems to combine features of the human and ram heads seen on the other two bracelets. From below its chin emerge two symmetrical looped designs, rather like the wings of a snake-winged bird (see cat. no. 131). The arcs above the head end in upside-down human faces. Cat. nos. 143 to 145 display the mottled blue-green-brown surface associated with copper alloy objects that have been buried.

Cat. no. 146 is somewhat different from the previous three. It depicts four identical figures against an openwork background of abstract linear patterns. These ladderlike patterns are typical of much of Ijebu brasscasting (New York, Center for African Art, 1989: figs. 126, 129–31). The figures wear crossed baldrics and conical crowns with angular projections. These zigzagging forms are mirrored by similar ones below the torso that extend upward at each side of the figures and may be intended to suggest the king with mudfish legs.

Ijebu bracelets such as these four examples were once thought to have been worn exclusively by members of the Osugbo society, a powerful association “consisting ideally of the eldest and wisest male and female elders in a community” who serve as judges and king-makers (Drewal in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:136). Osugbo is especially prominent in the Ijebu area, and similar bracelets have been observed worn by Osugbo members and preserved in the Osugbo lodge houses (London, South Kensington, Christie’s, 1985: lot 133). Recent archaeological excavations of the tomb of a warrior chief in Ijebu indicate that these brass bracelets, as well as brass anklets and necklaces, were more widely used and “not necessarily restricted to royalty, priests, or Osugbo members. They . . . must have adorned the bodies of powerful Ijebu persons, whether in life or in death” (Drewal in New York, Center for African Art, 1989:132). The brass ornaments excavated from that tomb are thought to have been made in the eighteenth century.

Cat. no. 147 is a costume ornament in the form of a human face. As is characteristic of Yoruba objects, this pear-shaped face is full and its semicircular, projecting lips do not meet at the corners. The two opposed crescents on the forehead are often considered a sign of affiliation with Osugbo and of an Ijebu provenance, although Brincard has shown that neither is consistently the case (New York, African-American Institute, 1982:63). According to Henry Drewal,<sup>1</sup> an American art historian who has specialized in Yoruba art, pendant masks related to this are worn by priests of several deities, although not normally by members of Osugbo. Whatever its original context, the head on this small ornament, with its elegantly coiled hair and dramatically enlarged eyes, testifies to the power of Yoruba brasscasters in Ijebu.

1. Henry Drewal 1991: personal communication.



**143. Bracelet (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Yoruba; Ijebu  
18th century?  
Brass; l. 2 3/4 in. (7.0 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.130  
*Reference:* London, Christie's, 1978c: lot 54  
*Exhibition:* South Hadley, Mount Holyoke  
College Art Museum, 1984: fig. 26



**143. Bracelet (view 2)**

**144. Bracelet (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Yoruba; Ijebu  
18th century?  
Brass; l. 3 in. (7.6 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.139



**144. Bracelet (view 2)**



145. **Bracelet (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Yoruba; Ijebu  
18th century?  
Brass; l. 4¾ in. (12.1 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.133  
*Ex Collection:* Ernst Anspach  
*Reference:* Brincard 1980: fig. 21a,  
cat. no. 18

145. **Bracelet (view 2)**





**146. Bracelet**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Ijebu

18th–19th century

Brass; l. 5 3/8 in. (13.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.142

*Ex Collection:* Ernst Anspach

*Reference:* Brincard 1980: cat. no. 53



**147. Costume Ornament: Human Face**

Nigeria, Yoruba; Ijebu

18th–19th century

Brass; h. 4 1/2 in. (11.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.45





## APPENDIX

The Perls collection contains a few African objects not made in Benin or the related Yoruba kingdoms of Owo and Ijebu. For the sake of completeness these are included here, although they are not exhibited in *Royal Art of Benin from the The Perls Collection*.



149. **Base for a Saltcellar**  
Sierra Leone; Sapi-Portuguese  
Late 15th–16th century



**148. Manilla**

Western Europe

16th–19th century

Brass; w. 2¼ in. (5.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.152



**150. Gold Weight: Chief with Attendant**

Ghana; Akan

19th–20th century

Brass; h. 3½ in. (8.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.136

*Ex Collection:* Ernst Anspach



**149. Base for a Saltcellar**

Sierra Leone; Sapi-Portuguese

Late 15th–16th century

Ivory; h. 6¼ in. (15.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

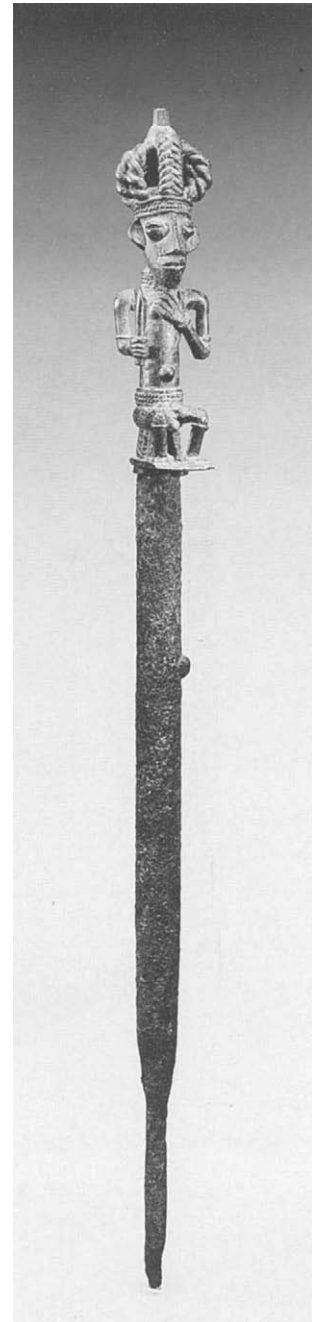
1991.17.144

*Ex Collection:* Sidney Burney

*References:* London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet,

1976: lot 173; New York, Center for African

Art, 1988: fig. 159, cat. no. 7



**151. Ogun Staff: Seated King**

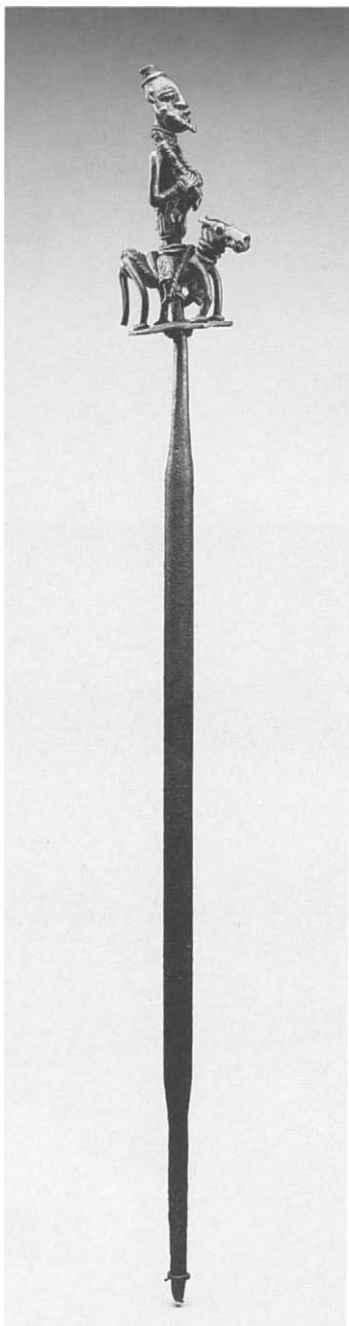
Nigeria; Yoruba

19th–20th century

Brass, iron; h. 20½ in. (52.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.135



**152. Ogun Staff: Chief on Horseback**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 19th–20th century  
 Brass, iron; h. 28 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (73.3 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.132



**153. Edan Ogboni**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 19th–20th century  
 Brass; h. 10 in. (25.4 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.137



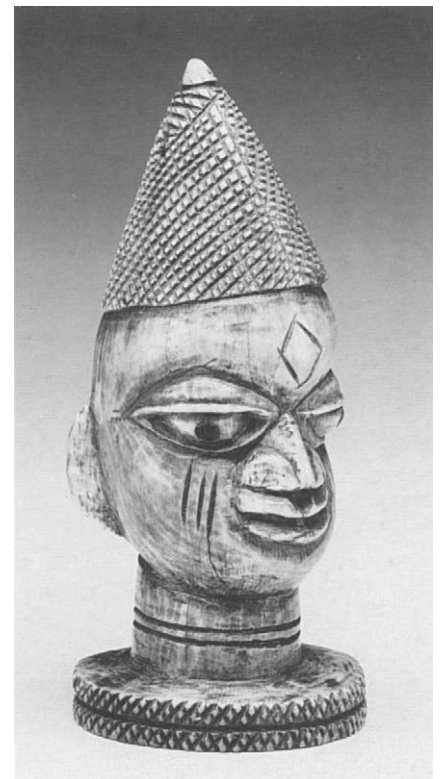
**155. Ornament: Human Face**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 19th–20th century  
 Brass; h. 5 in. (12.7 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.43



**154. Staff: Female Figure**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 19th–20th century  
 Brass; h. 4 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (12.1 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.128



**156. Head**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 19th–20th century  
 Ivory; h. 3 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (9.8 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.162.1



**157. Horse and Rider**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 19th–20th century  
 Ivory; h. 4 in. (10.2 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.162.3



**159. Woman with Child and Bowl**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 19th–20th century  
 Ivory; h. 6 1/8 in. (15.6 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.162.2



**158. Horse and Rider**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 19th–20th century  
 Ivory; h. 4 1/2 in. (11.4 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.131



**160. Side-blown Trumpet**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 18th–19th century  
 Ivory; l. 11 1/4 in.  
 (28.6 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.110  
*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Lt.-General  
 Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers  
*Reference:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 28,  
 figs. 192, 193



**161. Rattle**

Nigeria; Yoruba  
 18th–19th century  
 Ivory; l. 11½ in. (29.2 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.100  
*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-  
 Fox Pitt-Rivers  
*Reference:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 40, figs.  
 302, 303



**162. Bell: Horse Head**

Nigeria; “Lower Niger Bronze Industry”  
 16th–20th century  
 Brass; h. 5¼ in. (13.0 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.140  
*Reference:* London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet  
 and Co., 1980b: lot 143



**163. Bell: Human Head**

England, in the style of the “Lower Niger  
 Bronze Industry”  
 ca. 1900  
 Brass; h. 6¼ in. (15.9 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.141



**164. Staff: Animal Head**

Zaire; Kongo  
 19th–20th century  
 Ivory; l. 10¾ in. (27.3 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.101  
*Reference:* New York, Rolin and Co., 1978:  
 no. 17

# CHRONOLOGY OF BENIN KINGS

	Ogiso dynasty
	Oranmiyan
c. 1300	1. Eweka I
	2. Uwakhuahen
	3. Ehenmihen
	4. Ewedo
late 14th century	5. Oguola
	6. Edoni
	7. Udagbedo
early 15th century	8. Ohen
	9. Egbeka
	10. Orobiru
	11. Uwai fiokun
mid-15th century	12. Ewuare
	13. Ezoti
	14. Olua
late 15th century	15. Ozolua
early 16th century	16. Esigie
	17. Orhogbua
late 16th century	18. Ehengbuda
	19. Ohuan
	20. Ahenzae
	21. Akenzae
	22. Akengboi
	23. Akenkpaye
	24. Akengbedo
	25. Ore-Oghene
late 17th century	26. Ewuakpe
	27. Ozuere
c. 1715–1735	28. Akenzua I
c. 1735–1750	29. Eresonyen
c. 1750–1804	30. Akengbuda
c. 1804–1815	31. Obanosa
	32. Ogbebo
c. 1815–1850	33. Osemwende
c. 1850–1888	34. Adolo
c. 1888–1897	35. Ovonramwen
1914–1933	36. Eweka II
1933–1978	37. Akenzua II
1979–	38. Erediauwa

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This compilation is based upon Bradbury 1973:17–43; Egharevba 1960; Ryder 1969; Ben-Amos 1980.

# GLOSSARY

Wherever possible, the spelling of Edo words is based on Agheyisi 1986.

- abuwa* “Hand of wealth,” a leather ornament covered with red cloth and sheet-brass cutouts, worn by chiefs.
- ada* State sword with curved blade ceremonially borne before the Oba as symbol of authority; it is also carried before certain senior chiefs and native religious priests.
- agba* Rectangular stool used by the Oba and chiefs.
- agbaka* Dangerous species of crocodile associated in Benin with fearsome qualities of the king.
- ahianmwun-oro* “Bird of prophecy,” also known as *ahianmwun-utioye* (“bird that calls disaster”) and *odibosa* (“messenger of god”); Oba Esigie overcame its predictions of disaster to vanquish his enemies in the 16th century.
- akohen* Large, side-blown trumpets carved of ivory, and played by the Oba’s retainers at palace rituals.
- asan errie* Staff identifying various representatives of the Oba while on official business.
- aseberia* Multifigure sculpture with a square base placed on royal altars.
- azen* Antisocial person who preys upon the lifeforce of others.
- ebe-ame* River-leaf pattern; a symbol of Olokun.
- eben* Ceremonial sword with fanlike blade.
- ebo* See *obo*.
- Ebo n’Edo Palace shrine, concerned with the well-being of the Edo nation.
- Edaiken Crown prince or heir to the throne in Benin.
- ede* Crown, particularly the tall projection from the top of the Oba’s beaded crown.
- edion* Village elders.
- Edo Name of the people and language of Benin, and at times the name of the kingdom and capital city.
- Edogun Title of a war-chief.
- egba* Narrow bracelets steeped in medicinal substances (pl. *egbae*).
- Eghaevbo Nogbe Palace Chiefs, one of three orders of chieftaincy in Benin.
- Eghaevbo Nore Town Chiefs, one of three orders of chieftaincy in Benin.
- eghughu* Docile, short-nosed variety of crocodile.
- ehi* Guardian spirit or personal destiny; one of the three principal aspects of Benin traditional religion.
- ekasa* Dance performed at funeral of Oba to celebrate his successor’s coronation.
- ekete* Leather throne of the Oba.
- ekpoki* Cylindrical box made of leather or brass.
- emada* See *Omada*.
- Emobo Annual palace festival in which the Oba drives away evil forces from the kingdom.
- Emuru Ritual specialists who serve the Ebo n’Edo shrine; they carry brass vessels filled with protective substances.
- Enisen Junior titleholders in the Iwebo palace association.



- enobore* Those who support the king's arms at palace ceremonies.
- erhe* A copper stool said to have been sent to the Oba of Benin by the Portuguese.
- errie* Women's quarters of the palace.
- Ewaise* Apprentices who serve the Ewawa diviners; the Oba's doctors.
- Ewawa* Method of divination practiced by Osun priests.
- Ewua* Group of palace officials founded by Oba Esigie, who wake the Oba each morning and perform with him a morning ceremony recalling the origins of the dynasty.
- Eze Nri* Title of an Igbo religious leader.
- Ezomo* One of the seven Uzama, the hereditary nobles who constitute the highest order of chieftaincy in Benin; one of two supreme military commanders with the Iyase.
- Ibiwe* Palace association, responsible for Oba's wives and children.
- Idemwin* Group of officials within the Ibiwe palace association; responsible for procuring animals for sacrifice.
- Ifa* Yoruba method of divination.
- Ifiento* Palace officials with specially plaited hair who march back and forth clearing a space for the Oba in certain palace ceremonies.
- Igbesamwan* Royal guild of ivory and wood carvers.
- Igue* Palace festival to revitalize the king's spiritual powers and thereby strengthen the kingdom.
- Igun Eronmwon* Royal guild of brasscasters.
- Ihogbe* Priests of the Oba's ancestors.
- ikan aro* Two iron rectangles inlaid in the forehead of some brass sculptures, meaning "cane of the eye."
- ikegobo* Altars dedicated to the hand.
- ikharo* Scarification marks made above each eye.
- ikpen aro* Iron inlays in pupils of eyes on some brass sculptures, meaning "ray or menace of eye."
- Iron* Mock battle between the Oba of Benin and the seven Uzama comprising the final rite of Ugie Erha Oba.
- iru* Brass vessels obtained by Oba Ewuare from the underwater palace of Olokun.
- ise* Response to a prayer or blessing implying "So may it be!"
- isevbere igho* Gong-shaped proclamation staff.
- Isiokhuo* Palace ceremony honoring Ogun, the god of iron and war, in which warriors in military attire march in procession through the capital.
- itoto* Fiber made into a conical basketry crown, with a tall central projection, worn by only a few of the highest-ranking chiefs in Benin.
- Iwebo* Palace association responsible for the Oba's regalia and wardrobe.
- Iweguae* Palace association comprising the Oba's personal attendants: servants, cooks, and pages.
- Iyase* Leader of the Town Chiefs; with the Ezomo, the Iyase was one of two supreme military commanders.
- Iyoba* Queen Mother, mother of the Oba.
- manilla* Imported brass or copper C-shaped ring or bracelet used as currency in trade.
- Oba* Divine ruler of Benin.
- obo* Priest; traditional healer (pl. *ebo*).
- odibosa* See *ahianmwon-oro*.
- odigba* Coral-bead collar worn by the Oba and some chiefs.
- Odionwere* Title of oldest man in an Edo village.
- ododo* Red cloth used for ceremonial garments by chiefs and priests of various gods.
- Ododua* Edo name for Oduduwa, the founder of the Yoruba kingdom and father of Oranmiyan; masquerade referring to the creation of the Benin royal dynasty by Oranmiyan.

- Ofoe The messenger of Ogiuwu, the god of death.
- Ogane Powerful ruler, now identified as the Oni of Ife.
- Ogbe Section of Benin City where the palace is located.
- Oghenne Edo name for the Oni of Ife.
- oghohon* Vulturine fish-eagle; its feathers are used in ceremonial costumes.
- Ogiso Title of the first rulers of Benin, prior to the founding of the present dynasty.
- Ogiuwu God of Death.
- Ogun God of iron; patron of smiths, hunters, and warriors.
- Ohensa Priest of Osanobua, the Benin high god.
- Ojomo Military chief of Owo, equivalent to the Ezomo of Benin.
- oko* Side-blown trumpet made of ivory or horn, blown by native doctors in some of their rituals.
- Olokun God of the sea who bestows wealth and fertility on his followers.
- Olowo Ruler of the Yoruba kingdom of Owo.
- Omada Organization of palace pages, sword-bearers, and servants of the Oba. An individual member is an *omada* (pl. *emada*).
- Omebo Skilled amateur artists who make mud shrine sculptures.
- Oni Title of the king of Ife, the Yoruba kingdom regarded as the ancestral home of all Yoruba people.
- Onigie Title of hereditary ruler of some Edo villages.
- Ooton Palace priest whose presence is required at sacrifices to the Oba's head and to his ancestors.
- Ora Wife of Uwen, worshipped as state god concerned with rain, sun, air, and fertility of the soil, all crucial to the well-being of the Benin kingdom.
- Oranmiyan Yoruba divine prince sent to Benin to rule; founder of present dynasty of Benin kings.
- Ore Nokhua Section of Benin City that is home to the Town Chiefs and many occupational specialists who work for the Oba.
- orhue* White chalk, symbol of happiness and good fortune.
- orriiri* Variety of fish capable of giving a strong electric shock.
- Oronmila Yoruba god of fate.
- orufanran* Ceremonial costume worn by certain chiefs in Owo.
- Osa With Osuan, priest of the state gods Uwen and Ora.
- Osanobua Benin supreme god.
- Osuan With Osa, priest of the state gods Uwen and Ora.
- Osugbo Yoruba association of elders who serve as judges and kingmakers.
- Osun Power inherent in leaves and herbs, source of healing power.
- Otue Greeting ceremony, part of the palace festivals.
- ovbebe* Charm used to dispel evil from the Oba.
- Ovia The name of a river and the worship of its spirit.
- ovibiovu* A leather belt with leaf-shaped ends.
- Owinna n'Ido Royal guild of weavers.
- pakato* Beaded baldrics worn by certain chiefs of Owo.
- Sango Yoruba god of thunder.
- Tsoede Legendary founder of the Nupe kingdom.
- uda* Defensive sword in Owo.

*udamalore* Ceremonial sword worn by the Olowo and high-ranking chiefs.

*ugie* General term for palace ceremony in Benin.

*Ugie Erha Oba* Annual festival honoring the Oba's father.

*Ugie Oro* Palace festival commemorating Benin's victory over the Igala in the sixteenth century.

*uhunmwun* Head, one of the three principal aspects of Benin religion, based on physical or metaphysical parts of one's own being.

*ukhurhe* Rattle-staff placed on ancestral shrines and shaken to confirm the words of prayers.

*ukhurhe-oho* Wild bamboo-like plant that is source of form and meaning of *ukhurhe*, rattle-staffs.

*ukugba olila* Magic belt that fends off hunger and thirst.

*ukuse* Musical instrument consisting of a round calabash covered with a network of beads.

*unwenrhiontan* "Squirrel's whip," a type of plant from which medicinally fortified wands that deflect danger are made.

*Uwen* Deified Osun specialist, worshipped as state god concerned with rain, sun, air, and the fertility of the soil, all crucial to the well-being of the Benin kingdom.

*Uzama* Hereditary nobles who constitute the highest order of chiefs in Benin, considered the descendants of the chiefs who requested a new ruler to found the present royal dynasty.

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# INDEX

(Page numbers in *italic* refer to the illustrations and their captions)

- Abiodun, Rowland, 278, 283, 284  
*Abuwa*, 252, 255  
*Ada* (state swords), 9, 10, 30, 33, 58, 98, 108, 253, 265, 266, 270, 273  
Adams, John, 4  
African art in Perls Collection not included in exhibition: Base for Saltcellar (Sierra Leone), 305, 306; Bell: Horse Head (Nigeria), 311; Bell: Human Head (England), 311; *Edan Ogboni* (Nigeria), 309; Gold Weight: Chief with Attendant (Ghana), 308; Head (Nigeria), 309; Horse and Rider (Nigeria; 2), 310; Manilla (Western Europe), 308; Ogun Staff: Chief on Horseback (Nigeria), 309; Ogun Staff: Seated King (Nigeria), 309; Ornament: Human Face (Nigeria), 309; Rattle (Nigeria), 311; Side-blown Trumpet (Nigeria), 310; Staff: Animal Head (Zaire), 311; Staff: Female Figure (Nigeria), 309; Woman with Child and Bowl (Nigeria), 310  
Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, Netherlands, 34  
*Agba* stools, 9, 24, 263–66  
Aghahowa N'Ovbi Erua (Iyoba), 41  
Ahammangiwa ("white man"), 119  
Akan kingdom, Southern Ghana, 230  
Akpata, Akitola, 33  
Altar rings, 102–5, 193: three stylistically distinct groups known, 103–4; Yoruba, attributed to Ijebu, 299  
Altar tableaus (*aseberia*), brass, 15, 30, 68, 69, 71, 79, 81: of Ewuakpe, 14, 159; Queen Mother and Attendants, 78, 79–81, 82, 83  
Altar tusks, carved, 15, 17, 23, 30, 50, 51, 52–53, 62–65, 93, 121, 124, 177, 219, 232, 246, 247: cross-wearing figures, 52, 54, 55, 58; 18th-century development of, 54; foreign merchant, 53, 58; with guilloche bands, no figures, 60–61, 65; Oba holding crocodiles, 52, 59–60; Oba with arm-supporting attendants, 52, 59; Oba with mudfish legs, 52, 59; Ootons, 52, 56–58, 60, 125; Ozolua triumphant, 52, 60; page holding shackles, 52, 60; priest with rattle-staff, 52, 60; priests, 52, 55, 56–58, 59, 60; removed by British Punitive Expedition, 17, 54; warrior, 52, 56; woman with rattle-staff, 60  
Altars, ancestral, 16–17, 107, 117, 199: altar tableaus on, 78–83; brass figures on, 66–77, 70; collective, for all Obas before Adolo, 93; commemorating Oba's father, 29, 31; described, 30; with ivory tusks on brass heads, 15, 17, 23, 30, 50–65; to Iyoba Eson III, 85, 86; to queen mothers, 41–45, 60–61, 85, 86, 87; rattle-staffs accompany, 91, 92; wood heads on, 10  
Altars, other, 107  
Altars to the hand (*ikegobo*), 79–80, 106–13: Altar to the Hand, 106, 109, 110, 111; Oba with Sacrificial Animals, 109–10, 112, 113; structure and shape of, 107–8; symbolism of, 107, 108; of wood or brass, 109  
Amapetu (ruler) of Mahin, 154  
Anklets: beaded, 126; brass, 301  
Aquamaniles, 225, 226–28: Leopards (2), 226–28, 234, 235; Lion, 226, 227  
Areogun, 281  
Arts and Crafts School, Benin, 17  
Aruaran, 14  
*Asan errie*, staff, 127  
Ata of Idah (ruler of Igala), 14, 56, 154, 161, 175, 198, 201  
*Avakala* hammers, 67, 68  
Aveiro, João Afonso d', 12  
*Azen*, 218–19  
Bacon, Reginald Hugh, 118  
Barros, João de, 12  
Bassani, Ezio, 281  
Bats, 279  
Beads, red-stone, 11, 12, 24, 216: Jasper also used in Owo, 277; sole property of Obas, 24; *see also* Coral beads  
Bells, pyramidal brass, 177, 192: Altar Bell: Figure with Sword, 98, 100; Altar Bell: Fish-legged King, 98, 100, 101; Altar Bell: Portuguese Face, 96, 97; altar ornaments, 30, 41, 93, 96–101; Bell, 98–99, 101; Chief Isekhure holding bell and rattle-staff, 98; conical, 124; military significance of, 97, 255; on plaques, 123, 125, 127; quadrangular form unique to Benin, 97, 123, 125, 177, 255  
Belzoni, Giovanni, 30, 67  
Ben-Amos, Paula, 32, 67, 68, 79, 85, 91, 118, 119, 120, 156, 230, 231, 253, 264  
Benin, kingdom of, 1–2: groups of chiefs, functions of, 5; peoples, 2, 3; relations between villages and central authority, 2–3, 6–7  
Benin City, 2, 7, 9, 11, 14, 21, 48, 80, 85, 92, 199, 200, 215: Ogbe, 7; Ore Nokhua, 8, 22; partial destruction by British Punitive Expedition, 16; royal palace, 8, 11, 16, 117  
Benin Museum, 32, 47, 48, 70, 159  
Bernisches Historisches Museum, 281  
Bini-Portuguese: Saltcellar, 247; Spoon, 247–48, 251  
"Bird of Prophecy" (*ahianmwun-oro*), 56, 175, 191, 196, 197–98, 199–200, 201, 206, 230: ball of medicine in beak, 197; in Edo language, many other names for, 200; origin of name, 198, 200; posture varies, 197–98  
Blackmun, Barbara, 54, 55, 58, 60, 121, 122, 156, 176, 201  
Bow and arrows, 265, 269  
Boxes, brass: Box and Lid: Portuguese Face, 231, 240; Container: Bird, 230, 238; Container and Lid: Fluted Gourd, 230, 238; *ekpoki* (Box and Lid), 231, 239  
Boxes, *ekpoki*, 20, 24, 52, 58, 126, 128, 179, 230–31, 282  
Boxes, wood, 253: European in a Boat, 256, 260; Oba Ozolua and Two Chiefs, 252, 255; Oba Ozolua and Unidentified Oba (2), 255–56, 258, 259

- Bracelets, 246: Crocodile and Leopard Heads, 179–80, 189; Crocodile Heads, 180, 189; cuffs, long cylindrical, 175, 179, 180; Four Figures (brass), 177, 183; Four Figures (ivory), 174, 176–77, 183, 245; Horsemen and Standing Figures (2), 175–76, 182, 245; Ijebu, of brass, 298, 299–301, 302–5; of ivory or brass, 175, 176, 179; Leopard Heads and Ceremonial Swords, 178, 187; Mudfish, 178, 187; Owo, of ivory, 282, 284–85, 295; Pair of Bracelets: Crocodile Heads, 178, 188; Portuguese Heads and Mudfish (2), 177, 178, 184, 185, 186; surface design, Edo sense of, 177; thin circular, 175, 179–81, 189; Three Human Heads, 181, 189; *see also Egbae*
- Bradbury, R. E., 31, 68, 91, 107, 109, 126–27, 209, 218, 225
- Brass heads and figures seized by British Punitive Expedition, 17
- Brasscasting, 9, 11, 14, 15, 104, 129, 131, 155, 160: excellent craft in Ijebu, 299; guild for, important, 23; lost-wax technique, 23; mercury gilding, 178–79
- Brincard, Marie-Thérèse, 299, 301
- Bristol Battery Company, 231
- British Museum, 25, 31, 120, 216
- British Punitive Expedition, 16, 17, 19, 25, 29, 85, 103, 118, 119, 200, 254
- Buckets, 225: Leopard and Prey, 224, 228–29, 236
- Calabashes, 232: small, with medicinal charms, 216; *ukuse* rattles, 20, 125, 139
- Cellini, Benvenuto, 25
- Celts, neolithic “thunder stones,” 30, 34, 60, 93, 192, 217, 219
- Chair, 266, 273–74
- Chalk (*orhue*), 51, 55, 216
- “Chicken’s beak” coiffure, 40, 41, 42–45
- Clappers, hand-held, 177, 191–92, 196–207: with Bird of Prophecy (6), 196, 197–98, 202, 203, 204, 205; chiefs striking, depicting bird of prophecy, 198, 199; generally brass, some ivory, 197, 201; of ivory, sometimes called flywhisk handles, 200; ivory, with Oba, 201, 207; ivory, with queen mother, 201, 206
- Confiscation of art by British, 16, 17, 254
- Containers, brass, 232, 241: Bottom of a Lidded Bowl, 231, 240; *see also* Vessels, brass
- Containers, carved coconut-shell, 256–57, 261
- Containers, ivory, 246–47, 250: Box: Man with Goat and Crocodile, 246, 249; Box: Portuguese Horseman, 244, 245, 248; boxes, kola-nut, 245–46; Saltcellar: Portuguese Figures, 247
- Coral beads, 4, 5, 11, 12, 16, 18, 21, 24, 70, 108, 121, 123, 126, 127, 133, 155, 181, 189, 191, 219, 228, 256, 258, 259: ceremonial attire of Iyoba, 80; ceremonial use also in Owo, 277; necklaces, 92, 94, 109, 218, 222; for Oba’s collar and crown, 31, 32, 33, 35–39, 47, 56, 57, 70, 77, 175, 179, 201, 206, 255, 262, 264; queen mother crowns (*ede Iyoba*), 40, 41, 42, 78, 80; sole property of Obas, 24, 25; traditional source of, 225
- Court ceremonies. *See* Rituals, royal ancestral
- Cowrie shells, 2, 12, 92, 108, 214, 216, 219, 222, 223
- Craddock, Paul, 120
- Crocodiles, 52, 59–60, 98, 99, 101 108–9, 157–58, 231, 276, 278: *agbaka*, 246, 249; *eghughu*, 99, 101, 108–9; heads, 178, 179–80, 188, 189, 283
- Crossbows, 265, 269
- Crosses, wearing of, 12–13, 52, 54, 55, 58, 66, 67, 68, 69
- Crotals, metal rattles, 153, 158, 159, 230, 300
- Curnow-Nasara, Kathy, 284
- Cutlasses, 252, 255, 256, 258, 259, 266
- Dapper, Olfert, 8, 9, 117, 118, 225
- Dark, Philip, 31–32, 33, 34, 71, 87, 118, 120, 155
- Divine kings (Obas), 1, 3, 156, 193, 199, 201
- D. R. (Dutch chronicler), 123, 209
- Drewal, Henry, 301
- Ebe-ame*, 118, 120–21, 131
- Eben* swords, 6, 7, 18, 20, 30, 52, 58, 59, 70, 78, 80, 96, 97, 108, 123, 124, 134, 135, 175, 178, 187, 191, 252, 255, 256, 258, 259, 262, 264, 265, 266, 268, 271, 283: sent to England for silverplating, 179
- Ebo* (sing. *obo*), 193, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219: abilities derived from Osun, 215; *oko* used by, 219
- Ebo n’Edo, 225
- Edaiken, 5, 8, 80, 125
- Ede*, 4, 22, 51, 176
- Edion*, 2: Odionwere (oldest man), 2
- Edo people, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16, 29, 33, 41, 48, 69, 71, 81, 85, 99, 101, 103, 108, 128, 153, 156, 158, 175, 177, 181, 200, 215, 216, 218, 225, 246, 257, 263, 265; Igalá, 107, 154
- Egbae* (sing. *egba*), 22, 175, 176, 179–81, 189, 219: power of, 19, 181, 218
- Egharevba, Jacob, 107
- Eghughu*, 99, 101, 108–9; *see also* Crocodiles
- Ehi*, 107
- Ekaiwe, association of descendants of Obas’ daughters, 123, 124
- Ekasa*, 121
- Ekiti region, 2
- Ekpate, 126
- Ekpoki*. *See* Boxes, *ekpoki*
- Elephants, 208: heads, 246; hunters, guild of, 15; rattle-staff topped by, 262, 264
- Elmina (Gold Coast; Ghana), 12
- Emada. *See* Omada
- Emobo, 20, 176, 253
- Emuru, 225, 230
- Enisen, 24: with leopard aquamanile and brass basin, 227
- Enobore*, 18, 52, 56, 57, 59, 122, 131, 149, 156, 157, 158
- Ere, Ogiso king, 23
- Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* (Pereira), 12
- Eson, 86
- Ethnographic museums holding Benin art, 25
- European in a Boat, 256, 260, 261, 266, 273
- European trade, 12, 15–16, 157, 227–28, 51, 69, 231, 256
- Ewaise, 218
- Ewawa, 216–18: Divination Cup, 216–18, 219, 221; objects used for, 216–17, 218
- Ewere* (leaves of joy), 20
- Ewohimi (Ishan village), 154
- Ewua, 55, 68
- Eze Nri (ruler) of Oreri, 154
- Ezomo, 5, 6, 15, 54, 69, 80, 124, 283: Ehenua, 109, 110; Ekeneza, 54; Odia, 54; Osifo, 54
- Fagg, William, 31, 32, 33, 34, 87, 104, 110, 119, 120, 154, 155, 160, 179, 199–200, 209, 231, 277, 281, 284

- Fawckner, James, 121
- Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, 93, 128, 230, 265
- Figures, brass, 66–77: “carpenter,” 67–68; Court Attendants with Ceremonial Sword, 70, 75, 76; Court Official with Cross Pendant, 66, 72, 73; Court Official with Hammer and Staff, 74; Head with Four Legs, 70–71, 77; incised pattern on wrap skirt, 69, 71; interpretations of cross-wearing figure, 67–68; Oba with Ceremonial Sword, 70, 77; Seated Portuguese Figure, 69, 74; Standing Man: Ise of Utekon, 68
- Fish eagle, vulturine (*oghohon*), 127
- Flywhisk: and crown of coral and redstone beads, 24; handles, 200, 285
- Frogs, 131
- Gallagher, Jacki, 130
- Garrard, Timothy, 179
- Goats, 216, 246
- Gongs, 201
- Guilds, artists’, 16, 17, 22–25: brass-casters and ivory and wood carvers most important, 23; membership hereditary, 22; *see also* Igbesamwan and Igun Eronmwon
- Guilloche patterns, 52, 58, 60, 79, 80, 92, 118, 131, 154, 177, 180, 190, 191, 208, 209–10, 212, 213, 219, 228, 231, 246, 264
- Halberd, 161
- “Hands of wealth” (*abuwa*), 6, 252, 255
- Hats: European top hat, 256, 260; tall conical, 125, 137, 178, 186, 265–66, 271
- Heads, ancestral, 8, 9, 10, 17, 20: cast brass, 29, 30, 31, 47, 48, 51, 103; dating of, attempts at, 31–34; head of a man, 39: (type 1) 31, 48; head of a queen mother, 40, 42–45; head of an Oba, 28, 29, 35–38: (type 2) 33; queen mothers’ of two types, 41–42, 81, 87; symbolic function of, 31; terracotta, 9, 29, 46–49, 103; wooden, 9, 29, 47
- Healing and divining instruments, 214–23: Medicine Container: Figure, 216, 220; Medicine Container: Two Figures, 216, 220; Pendant with Dangling Chains and Medicine Container, 216; Side-blown Trumpets (*oko*), 2, 214, 217, 219, 222, 223; *see also* Ewawa
- Helmets, 126, 128, 140, 161, 173
- Hess, Catherine, 263
- Hip ornaments, brass, 153, 175, 178, 283: Human Faces (8), 116, 152, 154–55; Leopard Head, 155–56, 167; Portuguese Face(?), 168
- Hooper collection, 280
- Human sacrifice, 15–16, 52, 58, 59, 60, 103, 209, 264, 284
- Hunters, 280: Edo, 265, 269
- Ibiwe, 5, 127, 192
- Idemwin, 192
- Idiophones, 197, 198
- Idunmwun Ivbioto, 47
- Idunmwun Ogiefo, 47
- Ifa, 218, 297
- Ife, 3, 11, 13, 19, 24, 32, 47, 103, 124, 159, 179, 218, 225, 231, 277, 284, 299
- Ifiento, 19, 180, 181
- Igala people, 107, 154
- Igala, vassal kingdom, 14, 154, 161, 192, 198, 200, 201, 265
- Igbesamwan, 23–24, 54, 55, 60, 92, 109, 175, 209–10, 218, 245, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 264, 266: Owo carvers recruited for, 277
- Igbo people, 2, 11, 107, 119, 154
- Igbo Ukwu, archaeological site, 154
- Igogo (Owo ceremony), 282
- Igue, 4, 6, 19, 20, 21, 31, 103, 124, 125, 179, 180, 181, 210, 227, 231
- Igueghae, 11, 47
- Igun Eronmwon, 23, 24, 104
- Ihama of Ihogbe, 52, 58, 59
- Ijaw people, 2, 107
- Ijebu, Yoruba kingdom of, 26, 298–305: -Ode, 56, 104, 280, 284, 299; Olurin, “Owner-of-the-Metal,” title given to all kings, 299
- Ijebu art, 298–305: bracelet design arrangement different from Benin and Owo, 299; bracelet with openwork design, 300, 305; bracelets, cylindrical brass, 298, 299–300, 302–4; Costume Ornament: Human Face, 301, 305; known for brass work, 299, 301
- Ikan aro*, 153
- Ikharo*, 33, 42, 153, 155, 162
- Ikpen aro*, 153
- Ilorin, Nigeria, 154
- Ineh n’Igun Eronmwon, 47
- Iron, 19, 21, 209
- Iru*. *See* Vessels, brass
- Ise, ise, ise* (ritual response), 225
- Ise of Utekon, 68, 70
- Isekure, Chief, holding bell and rattle-staff, 98
- Ishan area, 2, 15
- Ishan people, 107, 154
- Isiokhuo, 124, 125
- Isoko people, 107
- Itoto fiber, conical basketry crown of, 98, 124, 136
- Itsekiri people, 2
- Ivory, 3, 8, 12, 15, 25, 108: Akenzua II wearing, 176; altar tusks, carved, 15, 17, 23, 30, 50–65, 93, 121, 124, 177, 219, 232, 246, 247; carving, 15; covered bowls, 231; earliest reference to carving, 247–48; greater individualism shown by nonguild carvers, 24; hand-held clappers sometimes of, 197; Igbesamwan, carvers’ guild, 23–24, 54, 55, 60, 92, 109, 175, 209–10, 218, 245; royal monopoly, 51; souvenirs for foreigners, 69, 247; supplied by Owo, 277; *see also* Altar Tusks, Boxes, Bracelets, Clappers, Containers, Healing and divining instruments, Owo art, and Trumpets
- Iwebo, 5, 22, 118, 253: Enisen, junior titleholders, 24, 227
- Iweguae, 5, 253
- Iyase, 6, 7, 52, 56, 124, 132; distinctive headgear of, 6, 7; n’Ode, 15, 92, 109, 264
- Iyobas. *See* Queen Mothers
- Jeans, Lt. Commander J., 85
- Jebba, 280
- John II of Portugal, King, 12
- Jugs, 229–30, 237
- Key, brass, 231–32, 241
- Kiagbodo, Nigeria, 154
- Kola nuts, 19, 108, 109, 123, 124, 216, 218, 230, 231, 232, 245, 253, 285: box for (Container and Lid: Fluted Gourd), 230, 238; boxes for, 7, 125, 230
- Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, 281
- Lagos, Nigeria, 2, 154
- Landolphe, J. F., 54, 209
- Lawal, Babatunde, 47, 121
- Leopards, 34, 156, 175, 200, 233, 244, 245, 246, 264, 266, 273: cast, as aquamaniles, 226–28, 234, 235; heads, 155–56, 158, 167, 169, 178, 180, 189, 232, 242, 265, 266, 268, 273, 283; ivory heads, 232
- Leopard-tooth necklaces, 116, 123, 125, 134, 135, 156
- Ligne, prince de, 281
- Linked supporting triad. *See* Enobore

- Lion Aquamanile, 226, 227
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 121
- Lozenge pattern, 158, 177, 197, 246, 249
- Luschan, Felix von, 25
- Manillas, 12, 126, 128, 129–30, 144–45, 299
- Mirrors, mystically important, 126
- Mudfish, 33, 59–60, 79, 85, 93, 95, 98, 99, 101, 108, 109, 130–31, 146–48, 149, 154, 156, 177, 178, 231, 246, 249, 264, 265, 266, 279, 280, 287, 298, 300, 302
- Museum für Völkerkunde: Berlin, 25, 79, 99, 159, 192, 232, 280, 281, 284; Dresden, 99, 159; Hamburg, 159, 192, 228, 230; Munich, 87
- Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, 264
- Museum of Mankind, London, 25, 99, 159, 232, 280, 281
- Nails, as used for *agbas*, 262, 263, 264
- Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, 284
- National Museum, Nigeria, 232
- Nevadomsky, Joseph, 32, 33, 47, 85, 87, 104, 119, 153, 193, 200, 201
- Niger: Delta, 1, 15, 154; River, 1, 2, 198
- Nigeria, 1, 15, 97, 107, 121, 129, 154, 159, 266, 285: Bendel State, 215; fusion of Britain's territories in, 16; National Museum, 232; regions of Benin influence, 2; Southern Protectorate of, 16; southwestern, 279, 280, 281
- Nudity, 70, 80, 81, 123, 192, 218, 222, 285, 296, 297
- Nyendaël, David van, 8, 30, 54, 119
- Obas, 1, 2–8, 9, 12–13, 14–17, 18–21, 29, 30, 51, 58–59, 60–61, 80, 81, 85, 98, 109–10, 117, 123, 124, 130, 154, 156, 177, 180, 181, 192–93, 209, 225, 231, 246, 253, 255–56, 258, 259, 263–66, 277, 278: Adolo, 29, 54, 55, 58, 71, 93, 219, 246, 254; Ahenzæ, 120; Akengbuda, 54; Akenzua I, 15, 54, 92, 109, 110, 191, 264, 265; Akenzua II, 22, 29, 55, 58, 68, 70, 86, 209; Akenzua II striking ivory gong at Emobo, 176; attendants supporting wrists and elbows, 18, 52, 56, 57, 59, 122, 131, 149, 156, 157, 158(?); with ceremonial sword, 70, 77; Ehengbuda, 14, 104, 277; Erediauwa, 1, 3, 4, 18, 19, 29, 41, 47, 55, 70, 86, 125; Eresonyen, 15, 54, 55, 68, 191, 210, 281; Esigie, 12, 13–14, 23, 41, 55, 56, 68, 69, 87, 119, 120, 121, 122, 154, 161, 175, 192, 198, 199, 200, 201, 245, 265; Ewedo, 10–11, 263; Eweka I, 3, 10; Eweka II, 16–17, 19, 29, 55, 58, 71, 79, 81, 199, 253, 254; Eweka II with swordbearers (*emada*) and attendants in colonial uniforms, 254; Ewuakpe, 14–15, 79, 159, 191; Ewuare, 7, 11, 19, 23, 24, 33, 54, 107, 225, 227, 228, 277; “Leopard of the Home,” 156, 178; Obanosa, 33, 54; Oguola, 11, 23, 29, 32, 47; Ohen, 59, 131, 265; Ohuan, 14, 104; Olua, 225; Orhogbua, 14, 119; Osemwende, 32, 33, 54, 176; Ovonramwen, 16, 29, 30, 55, 56, 61, 71, 79, 177, 246, 256; Ozolua (the Conqueror), 11–12, 52, 56, 57, 58, 60, 97, 252, 255–56, 264–65, 268; as patrons of arts, 22–25; ram's significance to, 160; rattle-staffs of, 91; supreme ritual specialists, 193
- Odigba*, 125, 126, 140
- Ododo* cloth, 6, 11, 20, 24, 125, 252, 255
- Ododua, 68: masquerade, 68
- Ofoe, 70, 217, 231, 266
- Ogane, 12–13, 67, 68
- Oghohon*, 127
- Ogiso, 3, 9, 10, 23, 29, 47, 54, 263
- Ogiuwu, 30, 70, 192, 217, 266, 271
- Ogun, 68, 192
- Ogun River, 299
- Olokun, 14, 24, 48, 51, 59, 60, 69, 93, 98, 118, 120, 126, 130, 131, 157, 177, 225, 226, 246, 265, 279: rituals, 92
- Olowos, 277, 279, 282, 285: Elewuokin, 277, 283; Ojomo of Owo, 283; Osogboye, 277, 283
- Oludasa of Owo, Chief, 154, 279: regalia of, in two cylindrical boxes, 282
- Olugbo of Ugbo, 154
- Omada, 17, 24, 52, 56, 60, 70, 123, 253–55, 256–57, 264, 266
- Omebo, 48
- Omua, Yoruba village, 154
- Oni of Ife, 3, 11, 13, 20, 67, 179, 231
- Onigies, 2
- Ootons, 52, 56–58, 60, 125, 138
- Ora, 58, 225
- Oranmiyan, 3, 10, 24, 68, 124, 225, 263
- Ore, ancient, discontinued Owo ceremony, 284
- Oreri, Igbo village, 154
- Ori, destiny, 285
- Oronmila (Orunmila), 218, 285
- Orrirri, 130, 131
- Orufanran* costumes, 279, 283: Costume Attachments, 282, 283–84
- Osa and/or Osuan (high priests), 52, 56, 58, 60, 98, 124
- Osanobua, 55, 68, 131, 225, 230: Ohensa (his priest), 55, 68
- Osugbo society, 301
- Osun, 103, 192, 193, 215, 216, 218: staff (emblem of god of medicine), 32–33, 192; *see also* Ewawa
- Osun River, 299
- Otue, 19, 124
- Ovbebe*, 265, 270
- Ovia (masquerade), 55
- Ovia River, Benin, 12
- Ovibiovu*, 24, 126, 140, 141
- Owinna n'Ido, 24
- Owo, Yoruba kingdom of, 26, 56, 103, 104, 154, 160, 246, 277
- Owo art, 276–97: Bowl with Caryatid Figure, 285, 296; bracelets, ivory, 282, 284–85, 295; Ceremonial Swords, 282–83, 290; Chief on Horseback, 285, 297; chiefly of ivory, 277–85; Costume Attachments, 283–84; Ram Head, 290; Leopard Heads (2), 291, 292; Crocodile Head, 284, 293; Humans and Monkeys, 284, 294; Cup, 280–81, 288–89; dating and distinguishing, 281–82, 284; differences between Owo and Benin ivories, 278; Ifa Divination Tapper, 285, 297; Lidded Bowl, 276, 278–80, 286–87; other bowls, 280; round-eyed, skull-like heads, 276, 279, 280, 288; “snake-winged bird,” 278–79, 280, 286; Yoruba-Portuguese saltcellar, 281
- Pakato*, 279, 287
- Palace Chiefs (Eghævbo Nogbe), 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 14, 16, 123, 255: three associations of, 5; Unwague (head of), 12
- Palm: -kernel nuts, 285; oil, 256; wine, 257
- Panels, carved wooden, 256
- Pangolins, 6, 125, 255, 265–66, 271, 283
- Peabody Museum, Harvard University, 93
- Pectorals, 153–54: Human Face, 153–54, 162; of ivory, 154
- Pendants, waist, 177: appear on brass plaques, 156; of brass or ivory, 153, 279, 283; Crocodile Head, 158, 169; forms related to Ram Head, 159–60; Leopard Head,

- 158, 169; Man on Horseback (3), 158, 170–71; of Portuguese, rare, 156; Portuguese Face, 156–57, 168; Portuguese Horseman, 161, 173; Ram Head, 158–59, 172; Two Mudfish, 158, 170
- Pereira, Duarte Pacheco, 12, 299
- Perls Collection of Benin Art (Metropolitan Museum of Art), 25–26, 33, 34, 55, 58, 60, 71, 86, 92, 103, 104, 158, 177, 178, 197, 199, 201, 209, 210, 216, 230, 231, 246, 256, 263, 266, 280, 281, 283, 284, 285, 299
- Phillips, James, 16, 103
- Pitt-Rivers: Lt. Gen. Augustus, 25; Museum, Oxford, 159, 199
- Plaques, cast brass, 21, 25, 32, 56, 71, 81, 97, 116–49, 177, 192, 200: Attendant holding box, 115, 125, 134; Attendant holding fan, 116, 124, 134; Attendant wearing sword, holding clapperlike object, 116, 126, 134; bracelets visible in many, 175; Central figure from U-shaped, 159, 160; court life, majority show, 118; Court Official, 127–28, 142; Court Official with Magic Staff, 127, 142; Court Official with Protective Charm, 126, 140; dating, difficulties in, 119–20; hip ornaments depicted on, 155–56; hollows in backs indicate figures on front, 118, 119; Junior Court Official, 126–27, 140; Junior Court Official with Sword, 127, 141; Mounted King and Attendants, 118–19, 121–22; Mudfish (2), 130, 147, 148; Oba and Two Supporters, 156, 157; Oba or Chief, 121–23, 133; Oba wearing ram-head pendant, 159; origin of form, 120–21; Palace Priest (Ooton), 125, 138; Priests with Cup, Bowl, and Jug, 229, 230; showing horn blowers, 209; Three Men Striking Clappers with Bird of Prophecy, 199; Titleholders (2) with Calabash Rattles, 125, 138, 139; Two Fluted Gourds, 130, 148; of two formats, 118; Two Mudfish, 130, 146; Two Portuguese, 128, 142; Two Portuguese with Manillas, 129–30, 144–45; U-shaped Plaque: Mudfish-Legged King and Supporters, 131–32, 149; Warrior, 125, 137; Warrior Chief, 124, 136; Warrior Chief, Warriors, and Attendants, 116, 123–24, 125, 134, 135
- Portuguese influence in Benin, 12–14, 13, 55, 68, 69, 74, 96, 97, 99, 101, 109, 118, 119, 120, 122, 128–30, 143, 144–45, 157, 161, 175, 176, 177, 178, 198, 227, 231, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 256, 258, 259, 265
- Portuguese Soldier with Flintlock, 13, 69, 161
- Poynor, Robin, 283
- Prester John, 12
- Proclamation staffs (*isevberè igho*), 52, 59, 252, 255, 256, 258, 259, 265, 270
- Protective charms, 126, 140
- Punch, Cyril, 209
- Queen Mothers (Iyobas), 8, 14, 41, 61, 109; altar tableaux of, 78, 79–80, 81–83, 86; altars to, in Iyoba's palace and in Oba's, 41; brass heads on altars to, 41; ceremonial attire, 80, 201; Eson, an Oba's senior wife, 86; Idia, 41, 68, 86, 201; Ose, 54; powers of, 79–81; protective role of, 201
- Ram Heads, 159–60, 283; on Ijebu bracelets, 300, 302, 303; as Pendant, 158, 172
- Rattle-staffs (*ukhurhe*), 15, 30, 41, 58, 59, 60, 90–95, 109, 112, 113, 191, 192, 209, 232, 233; Akenzua I standing on elephant, 15, 92; always present at altars, 91, 92; on collective altar, 93; construction of and uses for, 91; Hand Holding Mudfish, 93, 95; with hands grasping mudfish, 93, 95; multiple usage of, 91, 93; only Oba has brass, 92; symbolism of, 91, 93, 192; Three Figures: detail, 90; 92, 94; topped by clenched fist, 265, 270; *see also* Staffs of office
- Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne, 99
- Read, C. H., and O. M. Dalton, 191
- Repoussé technique, 231, 239
- Richard II, of England, 230
- Ritual Object, 232–33, 243
- Rituals, royal ancestral, 3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 15, 16–17, 18–21, 70; arts, important role of, 18, 19; *ebo*, specialists in, 193; Emobo, 20, 153, 176; equipment for, 215; human sacrifice in, 15–16, 52, 58, 59, 60, 103, 209; Igue, 4, 6, 19, 20, 21, 31, 103, 124, 125, 179, 180, 181, 210; Iron, 19, 21, 209; Otue, 19, 124; palace festivals, 18–21; Ugie Urha Oba, 18, 19, 20–21, 30, 124, 125, 191, 209, 227; Ugie Igun, 19; Ugie Oro, 192, 198–99, 201
- Roosters, cast brass, 41, 42, 80, 84–89, 200, 230, 232; association with queen mothers, 85–86; commemorate queen mothers, 85; crosses and cross-wearing figures on, 68; symbol for Esos, 86
- Rouppell, Lt. E. P. S., 119
- Royal ancestor altar to Oba Ovonramwen, 30
- Royal Gold Coast Gazette, 67
- Ryder, A. F. C., 281
- Sacrifices, 109–10, 112, 113, 130, 232, 233, 246, 249; human, 15–16, 52, 58, 59, 60, 103, 209, 264, 284; ram on altar to hand, 160
- Sango, 60
- Shields, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 108, 123, 125, 156, 256
- Slave trade, 3, 12, 299
- Snakes, 21, 244, 245, 266, 273, 278, 280; occult power of, 193
- Snake-winged bird, 278–79, 280, 286, 300
- Spears, 108, 116, 123, 125, 134, 135, 252, 255, 256, 258, 265, 270
- Staffs of office, 190–95, 232; emblems of identity, 191; iron, of priests of Osun, 192; for Oba's Representative (*asan errie*), 127, 190, 191–92, 194; proclamation, 52, 59, 252, 255, 256, 258, 259, 265, 270; Seated Obas (2), 192–93, 194, 195; thin paddlelike, 175, 182; *see also* Osun staffs, Proclamation staffs, and Rattle-staffs
- Stools: *agba*, 9, 24, 263–66; bronze, 280; *ekete*, 263, *erhe*, 263; Oba and Chiefs, 262, 264–65, 268–69; Oba with Mudfish Legs, 265–66, 270–71; round, legless, 107–8
- Sydow, Eckart von, 85
- Tada, 159, 280
- Tappers, ivory, for divination, 218; Divination Tapper, 218, 222; Ifa Divination Tapper, 285, 297
- “Thanksgiving to the hand,” celebratory dance, 125
- Tishman, Paul and Ruth, collection, 284
- Town Chiefs (Eghaevbo Nore), 3, 5–7, 8, 11, 14, 15, 16, 20, 123, 125, 255; Edogun, junior chief, 124; Four Pillars, 6; Iyase, 6, 7, 15, 52, 56, 124, 156; the Iyoba, 41, 80, 86
- Tribute units (fiefs), 2–3



- Trumpets, ivory, side-blown: *akohen* for Oba's retainers and attendants, 116, 123, 134, 135, 208, 209–10, 211, 212, 213, 219; *oko*, for use by *ebo* in divination, 214, 217, 219, 222, 223; with rattle chambers, 208, 209–10; Trumpeters blowing, at Igue, 210
- Trumpets, side-blown brass, 232
- Tsoede bronzes, 159, 280
- Tunis, Irwin, 120
- Uda* swords, 282
- Udamalore* swords, 282–83, 290
- Ugbo, Yoruba village, 154
- Ughoton (Gwato), Benin, 12
- Ugie, 109: Erha Oba, 18, 19, 20–21, 30, 124, 125, 191, 209, 227; Igun, 19; Oro, 192, 198–99, 201
- Ukhurhe*. See Rattle-staffs
- Ukhurhe-oho* plant, 91–92
- Ukugba olila*, 124, 255
- Ukuse* calabash rattles, 20, 125, 139
- Umbrellas, 256, 260, 265, 268: Four Figures, 176, 183
- Unwenrhiontan*, 122–23, 125, 127, 133, 138, 142
- Urebo*, protective application, 155
- Urhobo people, 107
- Use, 209
- Uselu, 8, 41, 80, 85
- Uwen, 58, 225
- Uzama, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 15, 19, 21, 54, 109, 123, 124, 201, 209, 263; members of, 5
- Vessels, brass (*iru*), 230: aquamaniles, 225, 226–28, 234, 235; boxes, 230–31, 238; buckets, 224, 225, 228–29, 236; containers, 231, 232, 240, 241; *ekpoki* (Box and Lid), 231, 239; jugs, 229–30, 237; traditional origin of, 225–26; variety of, 225; see also Containers, brass
- Victoria, Queen, 256
- Warrior, mounted, 266, 273
- Webster, W. D., 25
- Weickmann collection, Ulmer Museum, 284
- Welsh, James, 247–48
- Willett, Frank, 32, 276
- Yoruba people, 2, 3, 10, 11, 15, 26, 32, 56, 60, 67, 104, 154, 218, 277–85, 299–302

