Benin Bronzes

AMBASSADORS OF THE OBA

The kingdom of Benin, located in the south-central region of present-day Nigeria, is renowned for the exceptional quality and diversity of its royal arts fashioned in copper alloy, ivory, terracotta, wood, iron, and coral beads. In 1897 during a raid on Benin, the British burned and looted the royal palace, and exiled the *oba* (king). The British confiscated all royal treasures, giving some to individual officers and taking most to auction in London. An estimated 3,000 objects eventually made their way into museums and private collections around the world.

The artworks in this exhibition are part of the 29 objects that were legally transferred to their country of origin, Nigeria, by the Smithsonian Institution in fall 2022.

All works are by Edo artists, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, and from the Collection of the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments.

Plaque

Mid-16th to 17th century

Copper alloy

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

2-2022-2

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Oba of Benin

Benin Punitive Expedition, 1897

Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, Farnham, United Kingdom, before 1900

Pitt-Rivers estate, United Kingdom, 1900

Private collection, New York, before 1982

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1982–2023

Global influencer

| Musicians and a page holding a ceremonial sword *(eben)* flank a high-ranking warrior, possibly a war chief or the *oba* himself, while half figures depict Portuguese traders. Beginning in the late 15th century, trade between Benin and Portugal increased the wealth and power of the *oba* and his court and provided the ingots that were recast into works of art such as this plaque.

According to court historians and the accounts of early 17th-century Dutch travelers, the *oba* of Benin once covered the posts of his palace courtyard with hundreds of copper alloy plaques. Today, some 900 plaques survive.

Plaques are individually molded and cast with molten copper-based metal. Close inspection of the plaques reveals a high level of technical expertise and a wealth of historical detail that provides a glimpse into Benin court life centuries ago.

Commemorative trophy head

Late 15th to early 16th century

Copper alloy, iron inlay

21.9 x 16.2 x 19.4 cm (8 5/8 x 6 3/8 x 7 5/8 in.)

2-2022-1

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Repeller of enemies

| This thin, carefully cast head likely represents the trophy head of a powerful defeated enemy. His identification as a foreigner is supported by the four raised scars depicted over each eye (most depictions of Edo men show three) and the assertion by a chief of the Benin casters' guild, who stated that his guild cast trophy heads of the most stubborn defeated enemies. The depiction of a worthy, yet beaten, enemy strengthened the awesome magical and military powers of the *oba.* He triumphs where ordinary beings would fail.

back of pendant

Figure of a musketeer

19th century

Copper alloy, iron

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

2-2022-3

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Oba of Benin

Benin Punitive Expedition, 1897

Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, Farnham, United Kingdom, before 1900

Pitt-Rivers estate, United Kingdom, 1900–65

Sotheby's auction, London, November 15, 1965

Joseph H. Hirshhorn, Greenwich, Conn. 1965–66

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1966–85

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1985–2023

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

Hip pendant

Mid-16th to mid-17th century

Copper alloy

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

2-2022-4

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Oba of Benin

Benin Punitive Expedition, 1897

Kamer Gallery, New York, 1967–68

Joseph H. Hirshhorn, Greenwich, Conn., 1968–79

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1979–85

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1985–2023

Servants | Two attendants often support the king during court ceremonies. As can be seen on these figures, pendants were worn on the hips of certain court costumes. The design of the ceremonial sword on the back of this pendant may identify a particular artist or a special group of pendants.

Rooster

18th century

Copper alloy

54.6 x 19.1 x 45.7 cm (21 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 18 in.)

2-2022-7

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Oba of Benin

Benin Punitive Expedition, 1897

Paul and Ruth Tishman, New York, by 1966–84

Walt Disney World, a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company, 1984–2005

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 2005–23

Proud Mother

The rooster in folklore, household, and court life can be a champion, the leader of the barnyard, or a spy. Its name is given to the king's senior wife, the one in charge of the women of the palace. This quality of dominance is important—in proverbs and rituals, the rooster must be mature enough to have developed spurs. It is possible rooster figures were once used on shrines dedicated to queen mothers or those queen mothers who were once senior wives.

Gong

18th century

Copper alloy, iron

32.7 x 10.2 x 7.8 cm (12 7/8 x 4 x 3 1/16 in.)

2-2022-8

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Oba of Benin

Benin Punitive Expedition, 1897

W.D. Webster, Bicester, United Kingdom, after 1897–99

General Augustus Henry Lane-Fox, Pitt-Rivers, Farnham, United Kingdom, 1899–1900

Pitt-Rivers estate, United Kingdom, 1900–66

Olga Hirshhorn, 1966–2015

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 2016–23

Victor

The cast copper alloy gong of a bird with a long beak and outstretched wings recalls a mid-16th-century event in which a bird crying of doom flew over the Benin army during an advance. The war chiefs wanted to turn back at this bad omen, but Oba Esigie ordered the bird killed and his army onward. Benin won the war, and Esigie then had gongs cast in the form of a bird to remind his chiefs that a divine king succeeds where others fail. Similar gongs are used in today's court.

top

Tusk

c. 1850

Ivory

189.2 x 12.1 cm (74 1/2 x 4 3/4 in.)

2-2022-5

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Oba of Benin

Benin Punitive Expedition, 1897

Private collection, New York

Pace Gallery, New York, before 1996

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1996–2023

Witness | Towering elephant tusks have been carved for centuries to adorn altars dedicated to deceased *obas* in the palace of Benin. This is a 19th-century tusk that was likely once part of an altar to Oba Adolo and features not only mudfish, but portraits of his predecessor, Oba Ohen, with mudfish for legs. Legend has it that Ohen was disabled. He claimed his legs were mudfish to further his association with the cosmic powers residing in the underground and with Olokun, the deity of waters, wealth, and well-being.

Historically, one of the privileges the *oba* of Benin received as the divine king was one tusk from every elephant killed in his kingdom. Ivory represented wealth and the power of the dangerous elephant, a royal animal. The king's ivory could be made into items of royal regalia or left whole to adorn the altars of his predecessors.

bottom

Tusk

18th century

Ivory

158.4 x 38.3 x 13.2 cm (62 3/8 x 15 1/16 x 5 3/16 in.)

2-2022-9

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Oba of Benin

Benin Punitive Expedition, 1897

Paul and Ruth Tishman, New York, by 1966–84

Walt Disney World, a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company, 1984–2005

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 2005–23

Historian | This tusk is one of an early 19th-century set of at least six tusks commissioned by Oba Obanosa for the altar dedicated to the queen mother. Like most altar tusks, it has discrete rows of figures and isolated symbols, including the common central motif of the king in full coral regalia supported by attendants. Through such complex sets of images, Benin's artists recalled and reinterpreted the kingdom's past.

Ivory was, and is, a valued resource across Africa controlled by those in power and used for status and prestige. Increased international demand for ivory in subsequent centuries has endangered elephant populations however, giving rise to current international bans on its export and use.

Female figure

Early 19th century

Ivory

37 x 9.4 x 10.3 cm (14 9/16 x 3 11/16 x 4 1/16 in.)

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Oba of Benin

Benin Punitive Expedition, 1897

Paul and Ruth Tishman, New York, 1959–84

Walt Disney World, a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company, 1984–2005

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 2005–23

Ancestral shrine

Royal Palace, Benin City, Nigeria

Photograph by Cyril Punch, 1891

Cabinet card, albumen print

20.4 x 25.4 x.25 cm (8 1/8 x 10 x 1/4 in.)

National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, EEPA 1993-0014

Royal attendant

This ivory figure is one of the first two African artworks acquired by the Tishmans. A court artist carved this young woman with the distinctive coral bead jewelry and crest hairstyle of an attendant to the queen mother. A queen mother would have had her own palace with a separate court and attendants. Upon her death, the king would commission an altar in her memory. This figure was probably intended for such an altar.

This cabinet card is considered the earliest known photograph of a Benin altar and the only one known to exist prior to the British invasion of Benin in 1897. It shows the configuration of carved ivory tusks, commemorative heads, bells, a king figure with an *eben* (sword), and smaller bronze figures. Cyril Punch, a British merchant who often traded between Lagos and Benin, took this photograph in 1891.

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