



SPECIAL EXHIBITION:

**The Lost Treasures of
Ancient Benin**

National Museum, Onikan, Lagos.

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**THE LOST TREASURES OF
ANCIENT BENIN**

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AND

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INTRODUCTION

Michael A. Nkanta

Benin art is essentially a court art, not an art of the people because the Oba had the monopoly of the works. He maintained specialist guilds of bronze-smiths, wood and ivory carvers and bead workers. The bronze-smiths, in particular were forbidden under pain of death, to work for anyone outside the court where everything was concentrated. The origin of Benin tradition which was during the reign of Oba Oguala in the fourth reign of Oba of Benin of the present dynasty dating to AD.1400 was that the Oba requested a bronze-smith to be sent from Ile-Ife, his ancestral home to teach the craft in Benin. Furthermore, another tradition maintained that the heads of the deceased Oba of Benin were normally returned to Ile-Ife for burial at the site of Orun Oba Ado and in return, the bronze memorial heads of the deceased Oba were sent to Benin to be kept there and this has given rise to one speculation that Benin court art was derived from Ile-Ife.

The royal palace itself was considered the centre of the Benin world and it is evident from travellers' reports how extensive and impressive the structures were. At the focal point of the court is the Oba, the sacred and divine king whose power lies in the traditional mystical values attached to the sacred institution of Kingship. He is also credited with comprehensive supernatural powers and the strength of these, for the good of the Kingdom, was maintained at all times by appropriate rituals.

Hence the art was first and foremost the prerogative of the Oba and it was in bronze that the art manifested itself in the court style.

It was due to this policy of complete confinement of Benin works in the Oba's palace that made it possible for over two thousand bronze objects to have found their way to Europe and America as part of the

booty resulting from the British punitive expedition of Benin in 1897. The majority of these bronzes were treated as resources of members by the British Governor which deposited many in the British Museum to serve as reminder to the public. Others were taken away as trophies by members of the expeditionary force. Oba Ovonranwen was tried and sentenced and deported to Calabar Prison. So failed the Kingdom of Benin and dynasty that had ruled over it for half a millennium.

THE PUNITIVE EXPEDITION: 1897

Emmanuel Nnakenyi Arinze

The year 1897 marked the end of an era in Benin History; it also started a chain of events which later had a profound political and socio-cultural effects on the history of Nigeria. Benin had been a Kingdom from time immemorial and when the Portuguese first visited there in about the fourteenth century, they found a highly developed and well organised society. From the Arts of Benin, it would be seen that the Portuguese participated in the military activities of the Benin Army and most probably in other court activities.

In exchange for ivory and other items, the Portuguese brought in Coral beads for the Oba and enough raw materials for Bronze casting. Their presence therefore marked a phase in the development of Benin Art, as, with the availability of adequate raw materials, the Bronze Casters were able to produce heavy objects like Wall plaques and heavier heads to carry the elephant tusks that were kept in the shrines. Portuguese representations in Benin Art showed Portuguese influence on the Art of Benin and the ingenuity with which Benin Artists were able to capture and record the presence of foreigners in their midst.

The British started to make serious moves to reach Benin and the then Gold Coast (Ghana) when on August 12th 1553 one Captain Thomas Wyndham set out with three ships, the Lion, the Primrose, and the Moon in his attempt to reach the Benin River and the Gold Coast (Ghana).

When Wyndham arrived off the Benin River, he became the first Englishman to command a voyage into the Bight of Benin. This visit opened up trade between the people of Benin and the English.

The interest in trade continued to develop until 1588 when the African Company of English Merchants was founded with a charter from Queen Elizabeth I of England and later in the same year, Captain James Welsh led an Expedition which was given a friendly welcome in Benin.

In the 17th - 18th centuries, English ships continued to sail increasingly along the Guinea Coast and made several incursions into the domain of the Oba of Benin.

Sir Richard Burton, an important English explorer and scholar arrived at the Court of Oba Adolo in 1862 where again he was accorded a friendly welcome.

It would appear therefore that by the last decade of the 19th century the hospitable spirit between the Court and the Europeans had disappeared, for in 1892, Oba Ovonramwen, who had succeeded Oba Adolo had banned any further trade with the Europeans.

Early in 1892 Captain H. L. Gallwey became the last European to be allowed to enter Benin freely. He managed to negotiate a treaty on behalf of the Queen of England placing Benin Kingdom under British Protection and allowing reciprocal trade which was then a monopoly of the Oba.

Later in the periods 1895 and 1896 several Englishmen tried to visit Oba Ovonramwen but they were always turned back by the Benin Warriors.

In early 1897, James Phillips who was the Acting Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, decided to pay a visit to Oba Ovonramwen. Accordingly, he sent a message to the Oba informing him of his proposed visit.

As Consul Phillips was too anxious to get to Benin, he could not wait for a reply from the Oba before he left Sapele for Gwato on his way to Benin. In his reply which later reached Consul — Phillips through his messengers, the Oba made it clear that because he was performing the ague ceremony for his late father, tradition forbade him to receive visitors in his Kingdom, but that he would be happy to receive Consul Phillips later after the ceremonies. His answer was firm and polite.

In his reply to the Oba, Consul Phillips said that since his mission was of importance he could not be delayed until the Oba's ceremonies were over. He also stated that he was already on his way to see the Oba in the company of eight other white-men and some 'native' porters.

At this point, the stage was set for a showdown between Oba Ovonramwen and Consul Phillips.

Consul Phillips prepared his men to enter Benin, much against the wish of the Oba and on the way, he and his men ran into an ambush of Benin soldiers who were armed with guns and matchets. In the fight that followed, all but two of the members of Consul Phillips' team were killed. The two survivors were Captain Alan Boisrangan and Mr. R. F. Locke.

This event took place on January 4th 1897 and its impact on the British Government was profound.

Angered by the death of her citizens in the hands of the Benin soldiers, a major Punitive Expedition was planned that was to destroy the Kingdom of Benin and have a distabilising effect on Benin history and the Court Art of Benin.

On January 16th 1897, the Admiralty in England sent a telegram to Rear Admiral Harry H. Rawson, C.B., Commander-in-Chief on the Cape of Good Hope and West Coast of Africa Station, instructing him that the "Expedition against Benin City will be organised as a Naval

Expedition" under his order. Thus by February 1897, the Punitive Expedition had marched on Benin City. The city was captured, most parts burnt down and all the unique bronzes and ivories found in the Oba's Palace looted and removed to Britain.

At the end of the Expedition, Oba Ovonranwen was captured and sent into exile in Calabar where he later died. By the end of the onslaught, the Royal Art of Benin had been destroyed which by and large, meant that the Imperial Army had destroyed the once great Kingdom of Benin City with all its Art treasures.

THE PUNITIVE EXPEDITION AND BENIN ART

Members of the Expedition were surprised at the Oba's collections of Bronze, Wood and Ivory sculptures they found when they captured the palace. In his Intelligence Report on the Expedition, Commander Reginald H. Bacon reported that in each mud altar were "unique bronze heads, each head supporting a carved ivory tusk". He also spoke of a "huge bronze snake with a large head" running down the roof of the king's house and a "bronze crocodile head" at the centre of the court.

The Punitive Expedition had several far reaching consequences on Benin Art.

Firstly, it destroyed the exclusiveness of Benin Art as the Oba's sole authority over the Craftsmen was removed.

Secondly, it resulted in the dispersal of Benin works of Art to Europe and other parts of the world.

Thirdly, it led to the total dispersal of the Oba's expert Bronze casters, wood and Ivory Carvers and Bead-workers as they fled from the city when it fell and the Oba captured.

After the Expedition, Benin Art suddenly burst into Europe and the effect was astonishing. Never before had Europe seen any Art work of such class and beauty from Africa South of the Sahara and this led to prolonged interest in the acquisition and study of Benin Art.

Furthermore, after the fall of the Kingdom, almost all existing works of Arts that were not destroyed in the fire that burnt the Palace and the City, were carefully removed to England by members of the Expedition, thus robbing Benin and Nigeria of her Art treasures. Over the years these works of Art spread to almost all important Museums and Private collections in Europe and America.

EFFORTS AT RESTITUTION:

Through the years, Nigeria with the co-operation of other African countries have been trying without any appreciable success to see that their works of art illegally removed from their countries are returned to them. In 1956, when the National Museum Lagos was being built, it was discovered that there were no original works of any value of the Benin tradition that was available for exhibition in the Benin Gallery. Consequently, the then Colonial Administration provided some funds to enable the Museum purchase some Benin works from England. All the works of Art that were purchased in 1956 are today on Exhibition in the Benin Gallery of the National Museum, Lagos.

When a few years ago it was decided by the then Federal Military Government to hold the 2nd World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture (FESTAC) in Nigeria, a Benin Ivory pendant was chosen as the emblem of the Festival. Unfortunately, the emblem chosen was among the Art treasures removed from Benin City during the 1897 Expedition.

The then Federal Military Government, and the then Federal Department of Antiquities in conjunction with the entire Black Race appealed to the conscience of the British Government and the Authorities of the British Museum to return the ivory pendant to Nigeria as it was the 'soul' of FESTAC. All appeals for its return failed and so the Nigerian Government had to commission a replica of the pendant to be carved in ivory which was then used for FESTAC '77 instead of the original which today is still being kept in a secret place in the British Museum in London. The replica that was produced and used for FESTAC is now on exhibition in the Benin - Gallery of the National Museum, Lagos.

RECENT ACQUISITION

Recently, the Authorities of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments were informed that certain Nigerian works of Art were to be sold on auction by Southeby Parke Berner & Co. London on Monday, 16th June, 1980 at 2.30 p.m. precisely.

In pursuance of its policy of ensuring that Nigerian rare Art treasures removed illegally from the country are returned to our Museums, the Federal Government of Nigeria decided to buy some of the works of Art to be auctioned.

Consequently, Nigeria as a matter of National honour and interest purchased the following works of Art during the auction at a total cost of £800,000 (eight hundred thousand pound, sterling):

1. An early Benin Bronze Head of an Oba, 14th Century;
2. A Benin Bronze Head of an Oba, 19th Century;
3. A Benin Plaque of a Warrior Chief with Retainers, Circa 1600;
4. A Benin Ivory Double Bell, 16th Century;
5. A Yoruba Gelede Mask.

The country stands to gain positively if the main corpus of its Cultural Properties that were removed illegally through looting, exportation and naked stealing are returned to our Museums where they rightly belong and where they can be preserved for posterity, thus creating an opportunity for them to be studied, appreciated and enjoyed by all.

All the Benin Art works purchased in Southerby during the 16th June 1980 Auction form the main body of this Exhibition.

It is hoped that through this Exhibition, Nigerians will appreciate the importance of ensuring that our Art treasures do not leave the country for any reason as by losing one, we might have destroyed and lost forever, one vital evidence of our history as a Nation. It will be a

matter of national disgrace and shame if for any reason we have to travel to other countries to read and learn about ourselves and our history for the reason that we no longer have in our possession the concrete evidences of our cultural property.

The greatness and pride of a Nation are tied to the wealth of its Cultural Heritage and Nigeria because of its Cultural wealth has been described by William Fagg as the "Cultural fulcrum" of the West Coast of Africa and her antiquities as "almost a cultural microcosm of the continent"; and as a result "it is to Nigeria that all African Nations must look as the principal trustee of the more durable fruits of the Negro artistic genius".

We also hope that through this exhibition we will reach the conscience of those countries that still have refused to return our Art treasures. Since these Art works mean more to us than to them, and since these Art works are functional to us as they relate to our daily lives, we hope that all countries concerned will take the path of honour and wisdom and return our Art treasures to us. We make this appeal through this Exhibition knowing very well that knowledge is universal and that our Cultural Heritage like all others, is for all Mankind to study and enjoy; nonetheless, we believe that we must not be denied the right to own that which belongs to us.

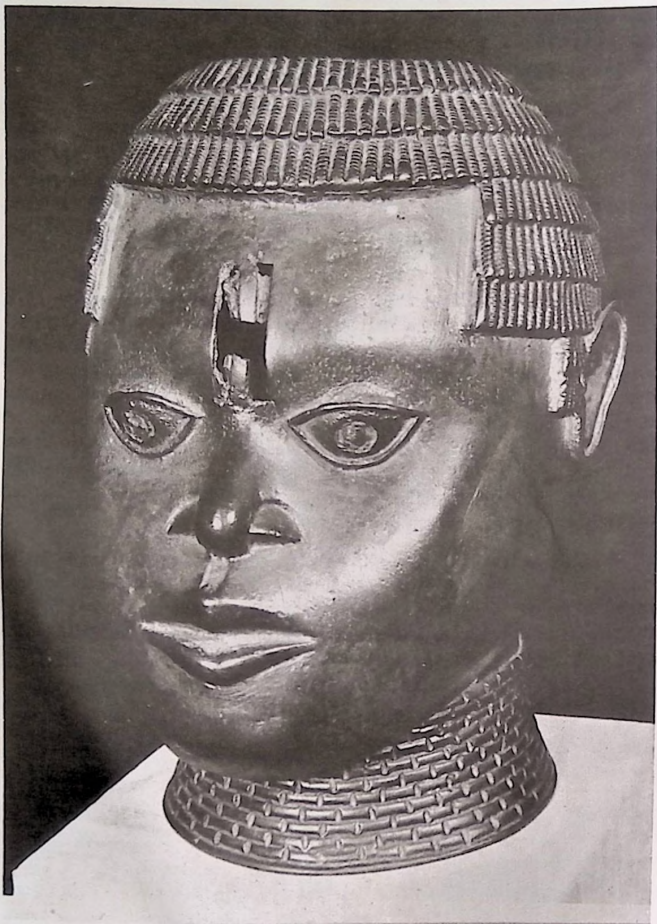
We also believe that it is our right to demand that all our Art treasures illegally removed must be returned to Nigeria, for to keep holding them in foreign Museums and private collections is to keep telling us that we as a people have no history and no right to own the great works created by our forebears.

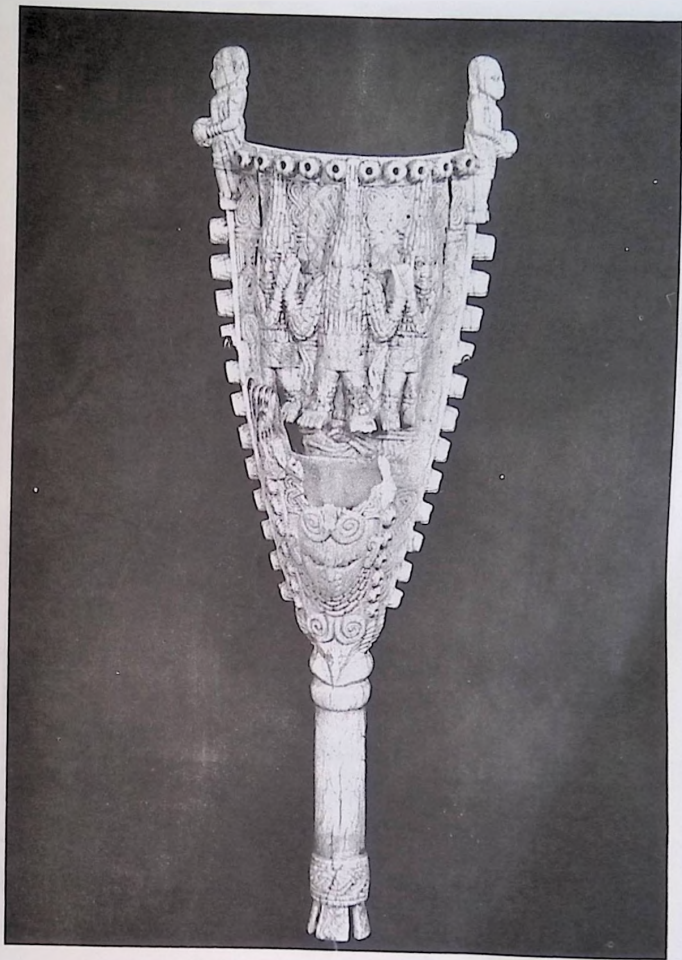
**AN EARLY BENIN BRONZE
MEMORIAL HEAD OF AN OBA**

The thinly cast head finely and sensitively modelled, the slightly protruding lips parted, the oval eyes with iron inset pupils, two pierced rectangular sections representing scarifications and originally inset with iron are in the centre of the forehead, the coiffure is arranged in six distinctive layers of spiral ringlets around the front part of the head and four layers at the back part of the head, wearing a collar representing eleven strands of small cylindrical coral beads, with a large circular hole in the top of the head and a fine dark patina.

8⁷/gin. (22.5cm.)

First half 14th Century





A BENIN IVORY DOUBLE BELL

Comprising two flattened conical chambers, a border of hollowed circular lugs extending around the edges, a standing attendant figure holding a ball to the front projecting from either side of the top, both sides carved in relief and with incised decoration.

*14¹/₈ in. (36cm.) long by 4⁷/₈ in.
(12.5cm.)*

First half 16th Century

A BENIN BRONZE PLAQUE OF
A WARRIOR CHIEF WITH
RETAINERS

Comprising a central figure of a warrior chief flanked by two soldiers and attended by two naked retainers, cast in high relief, the elaborate regalia and weaponry of the figures and the quatrefoil patterned background all finely cast and chased, the detail finely and crisply executed, pierced for attachment and with a rich almost black patina.

*19¼in (49cm. by 14¾in. (37.5cm.)
circa 1600*





**A BENIN BRONZE HEAD OF
AN OBA**

The well modelled face with iron inset pupils, incised cicatrizations below the eyes and six supra-orbital keloids, the reticulated headdress decorated with seven large cylindrical beads and four clusters, each comprising five large coral beads, a single bead in the centre of the forehead, with a hole in the top for the receipt of a tusk and with good dark patina.

15½in. (39.5cm)

Second half 19th Century