

**FOR EDUCATORS:**

**THE EDO OF NIGERIA'S BENIN KINGDOM AT THE PENN MUSEUM**

**Background:** Within the West African nation of Nigeria is an ancient state—the Benin (pronounced Beh-noon) Kingdom. An older continuous monarchy than Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, Denmark, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia, it exists within a modern country. And that country—Nigeria—has the largest population in Africa. One out of every four Africans is from Nigeria.



The Ẹdo (pronounced Eh-dough) people of Benin are one of many Nigerian ethnic groups. They number about one million; additional related groups to the north (Ishan/Esan, Etsako) and south (Urhobo, Isoko) speak Ẹdo dialects and were once part of the kingdom. Its monarch—the Ọba—no longer rules independently as his ancestors did, but still exercises a great deal of authority and influence. The current ruler, Ọba Erediauwa, attended Britain's University of Cambridge, achieving his law degree and working as a high-level civil servant before inheriting the throne. His eldest son, the heir apparent, went to Rutgers University and is the current Nigerian ambassador to Italy. The Ọba is the 38<sup>th</sup> monarch of his dynasty, which dates back to the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. An earlier dynasty ruled from the 11<sup>th</sup> century on, and regional occupation dates back as early as 3000 B.C.E.

Benin is located in the forest belt, and at its height from the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries stretched along the coast and to a significant extent inland. This was a considerable achievement, since the forest is difficult to traverse and tsetse flies meant that horses—so useful for patrolling an empire—were never a significant mode of transportation. Canoes, however, transported goods and armies along the Niger River and the many rivers and creeks of its delta, penetrating the entire coastal belt. In exchange for livestock and agricultural products such as yams, Benin obtained fish, salt, and hand-woven cloth. Kola nuts—a stimulant which staves off thirst, hunger, and sleep—were traded northward for goods such as metal that crossed the Sahara from North Africa.

In 1486, the Portuguese became the first Europeans to reach Benin City, the kingdom's capital. They brought in increasingly large amounts of copper and its alloys, as well as textiles from Asia and Europe, Mediterranean coral beads, mirrors, and a variety of luxury goods. They were eager to obtain locally-grown black pepper, ivory, blue beads, cloth, and slaves. Though Benin did sell off war captives to the Portuguese and later European merchants, it never became a major participant in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, palm oil became Benin's biggest export, for Europeans used it in baked goods and made soap with it. Pianos and billiard balls required ivory, and rubber was of increasing commercial interest. European trading and missionary interests were on the upswing, and the invention of the repeating rifle—with greater accuracy, penetration, and reloading speed than previous European weapons—for the first time gave foreigners the ability to impose their will on Benin and other African states. European nations, interested in Africa's vast mineral resources, argued for control of their spheres of influence. In 1884-85 in Berlin, they divided the continent into what would become colonies in the near future.

The Benin Kingdom fell in a British sector. The British had tried for some time to persuade Benin to trade exclusively with them, but Benin's Edo people were used to centuries of commerce with anyone they pleased. They resisted such restrictions. In 1897, a British government official decided to travel to Benin City and meet with the Oba. The Oba, well aware of British takeovers of neighboring kingdoms, asked the official to postpone his visit while he celebrated a festival in his father's honor. Disdaining this request, the official proceeded toward Benin with eight other foreigners and about 200 Africans. They were ambushed by indignant Edo generals, and most died. When this news was telegraphed to London, the royal Navy quickly mobilized. Within weeks they landed, invading Benin and taking over the government.

The monarch, Oba Ovoranmwẹn, was put on trial and exiled to the southeastern city of Calabar. British officials expanded their sphere of influence and surrounding ethnic groups were "subdued," until by 1914 the colony of Nigeria had roughly the same boundaries it has today. That same year the Oba joined his ancestors, and the British allowed his eldest son to take the throne as Oba Eweka II. Even after Nigerian independence in 1960, the kings never regained their autonomy or the ability to collect their own taxes, enact their own laws, or inflict capital punishment as their ancestors had in the past. They are still relevant, however, and have political, ritual, and social influence in their city, state, and the nation as a whole.

**Court Life—Continuity and Change:** The Oba's palace is at the heart of the city, and located near Federal and State governmental structures, the city's main market, and the downtown shops, banks, Internet cafés, and hotels. The king meets daily with many of his more than 300 chiefs, far more than ever existed in centuries past. Today, in addition to some of the traditional duties outlined below, they often have other professions. Benin chiefs include former military officers, university professors, lawyers, medical doctors, architects, pharmacists, civil servants, judges, businessmen, contractors, The chiefs—with one exception—are all male, and fall into numerous divisions.

Seven chiefs form the hereditary Uzama group, some of whose positions date back to the first dynasty. Once significantly powerful, they were defanged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but still are in charge of particular city neighborhoods. Some control local markets, and all have privileges of dress specific to their class.

Over twenty chiefs form the Eghaevbo n'Ore group. They are influential, wealthy men who understand business and politics, and serve as the Oba's chief advisors, particularly as issues intersect with state and national matters. In past eras, they served as generals, raising their own armies to fight for the monarch. A few positions are now

hereditary, but traditionally these chiefs were self-made men whose charisma drew followers—and whose ambitions created rivalries.

The bulk of the chiefs form the Eghaevbo n'Ogbe group. They are involved more specifically with day-to-day matters relating to the palace, and are further subdivided into three divisions: the Iwebo, who manage the king's regalia, trade, and many aspects of ritual life; the Iweguae, who included the king's personal physicians, diviners, and ritual specialists; and the Ibiwe, who looked after the harem and children. Many Eghaevbo n'Ogbe chiefs led hereditary guilds, groups whose professions were connected to the palace. These included artists in separate carving and metal-casting guilds, musicians and dancers, leather workers, blacksmiths, leopard hunters, astronomers, and numerous other specialties.

The one female chief is the king's mother, known as the Iyoba. She receives this formal title a few years after her son takes the throne, and has her own palace, chiefs, and many privileges that mirror her son's. After becoming Iyoba, however, she is not allowed to see the Oba again. Although technically a member of the Eghaevbo n'Ore, she does not actually attend their meetings or take part in their decision-making.

**Art and Life:** Half a millennium's worth of Benin art exists. This is by far the longest case of uninterrupted artistic continuity in sub-Saharan Africa. This is, in part, because most Benin court art was made from permanent materials, rather than the termite-enticing wood popular everywhere. The kingdom's successful resistance to invasion helped keep the pieces from scattering. While archaeology usually affords many insights to the past, little has been done in the city.

A flowering of sculpture took place in the reign of 16<sup>th</sup> century Oba Esigie. His father ruled when the Portuguese first reached the capital. Like most African art, Benin objects have humanity at their core. Most either represent specific individuals and events, or symbolically depict persons through animal symbolism.

Court works stress copper alloys—bronzes or brasses—or ivory. Both are materials the Oba controlled. Because Esigie lived in a period of metal influx, he had his casters produce a large number of metal plaques that decorated palace pillars, as well as heads for ancestral altars, and jewelry for his chiefs and himself. He supplemented this with ivory jewelry and ritual objects for his own use. Subsequent rulers created new forms or introduced variations.

## Seeing Meaning in Style

**Hieratic Scale**—the largest person is the most important.

**Frontality and stillness**—the figures neither turn nor bend; their heads align with their spine. Artists avoid showing movement in favor of permanence and dignity.

**Symmetry**— equivalent forms flank the central figure, providing a feeling of stability.

**Entourages**—as in life, followers enhance the central figure's status.

**Generic faces, distinctive dress**—the figures all have standardized, interchangeable facial features, but their dress is personalized according to rank.



**No context**—like most African art, this work emphasizes humanity. There are no references to landscape or buildings, or even a ground line.

**Comparative naturalism**—although exaggerated in size, the eyes, noses and mouths plainly follow natural forms. While bone structure and musculature not stressed, figures are neither highly abstract nor geometric.

**Self-containedness**—Figures show no emotion, but gaze at the viewer directly, veiling their mood.

**Ideal age**—No wrinkles or sagging distinguish the elderly; they have eternal vitality.

Likewise nudity indicates childhood, not size or proportion—the children in the seven-figure plaque are taller than the adult musicians at its top, suggesting they are of higher birth.

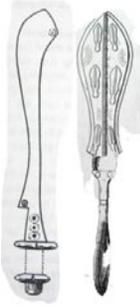
**Clarity**—the figures do not overlap to show depth, and artists indicate all limbs and digits to demonstrate their completeness.



**Head to body proportions**—the head is about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the body's height, honored because it is the seat of a person's destiny.

**Pattern conscious**—few surfaces remain without a pattern, creating complex textures of designs and stippled dots.

## Common Motifs in Benin Art



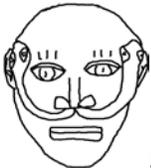
**Ada & eben**—The state ceremonial swords symbolize royal authority.



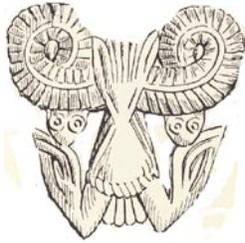
**Triad**—The Oba flanked by two supporting chiefs shows the interdependence of the monarch and his people



**The fish-legged figure**—This can depict Olokun, god of the sea, whose legs are electric mudfish. Sometimes it more generally represents the divine aspect of every king, or particularly refers to Oba Oghen, who became paralyzed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.



**Snakes or electric mudfish emanating from the nose**—These represent the mystical powers of ritual specialists, whose very breath can transform into forces that strike at their enemies. They call upon the powers of medicine, personified by the god Osun.



**Snake-winged bird**—These birds or bats are sometimes shown with breasts, and refer to witches who transform into birds at night to meet and attack their victims.



**Torsoless figure**—Heads with hands or feet issuing directly from them represent Ọfọe, the messenger of Ogiuwu, god of death. Limbs emerging from a container have the same significance.



**Portuguese**—Long-haired, bearded heads and figures refer to the Portuguese, whose luxury goods and ships made them a symbol of Olokun's world of sea and riches.



**Leopard**—The leopard usually represents the Ọba himself, though if collared it represents the tame animals he kept at court.



**Leopard attacking**—The leopard feeding on prey symbolizes Benin's triumphant attack on an enemy.



**Crocodile**—The crocodile is considered Olokun's policeman, embodying force and authority. Its head alone stands for a sacrifice to the right arm, to fortify personal accomplishment.



**Chameleon**—The curly-tailed chameleon's color shifting ability links it to the night people, whose ritual powers (whether sanctioned or unsanctioned) allow them to transform into animal forms.



**Mudfish**—Creatures of Olokun's world, these catfish family members can crawl short distances on land. Their meanings are multiple: they embody prosperity, signify those who cross from the human to the supernatural world, and characterize the control of dangerous forces. The electric mudfish (orhirhi) is a particular subspecies whose power to shock is associated with both Olokun and the king. Mudfish can be shown singly or intertwined.



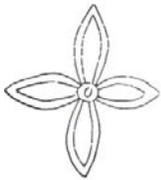
**Snake**—Artists did not make snakes species-specific. The python moves from land to water, and is Olokun's messenger. Vipers represent wealth, and poisonous serpents refer to ritual attacks.



**Frog**—Frogs are no longer a common motif, but seem to have been a further allusion to ritual medicine.



**Elephant head**—The elephant's trunk ends in a human hand that clutches leaves. It is both a symbol of gathering up riches and a reference to those who access potent materials from the wilderness to employ as ritual medicine ingredients.



**Rosette**—This four-leafed motif represents river leaves and is associated with Olokun's world of water and wealth.



**Interlace pattern**—Complex interlace forms of several varieties are royal patterns referred to as ropes.

**Resources:** As we grow closer to the exhibition's opening, please consult the associated website, [www.iyare.net](http://www.iyare.net), which will include teacher resources, video clips, proverbs, Edo names and their meanings, and photos of objects used in the exhibition and of palace life.

A series of five short films about Benin called *Benin: An African Kingdom* (DVD : 75 min.)(2004), suitable for elementary and middle school viewing, is available for purchase through Films for the Humanities and Sciences [http://ffh.films.com/id/7714/Benin\\_An\\_African\\_Kingdom.htm](http://ffh.films.com/id/7714/Benin_An_African_Kingdom.htm) and a rental may be available through Penn State here <http://www.medianet.libraries.psu.edu/display/175/wwk770?kw=benin>

Secondary students might enjoy *Artist unknown* [1995], filmed and distributed by BBC Worldwide Americas, Inc.

The exhibition will have an accompanying catalogue, and the Museum will be publishing a guide to the Benin collection in 2009.

A short reading list would include these highlights.

Ben-Amos, Paula 1976 "Men and Animals in Benin Art." *Man* N.S. 2 (2):243–52.

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Blackmun, Barbara 1990 "Obas' Portraits in Benin." *African Arts* 23 (3):61-69,102–104.

Curnow, Kathy 1997a "Prestige and the Gentleman." *Art Journal* 56(2):75-81.

Dark, Philip J. C. 1973 *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Egharevba, Jacob 1968. *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press.

Ezra, Kate 1992 *Royal Art of Benin*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fagg, William 1963 *Nigerian Images*. New York: Praeger.

Freyer, Bryna 1987 *Royal Benin Art in the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian.

Kaplan, Flora 1993 "Images of the Queen Mother in Benin Court Art." African Arts 26(3):54–63.

Pitt-Rivers, Augustus 1976 [1900] Antique Works of Art from Benin. New York: Dover.

Plankensteiner, Barbara, ed. 2007 Benin Kings and Rituals. Ghent: Snoeck, and Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum mit MVK und ÖTM.

Ryder, A. F. C. 1969 Benin and the Europeans. London: Longmans.

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