

## IYARE! Splendor & Tension in Benin's Palace Theatre

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University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

### Brief Guide to Connoisseurship for Collectors

The market in Benin pieces includes many fakes and modern works purporting to be old. The latter are often artificially patinated, often by traders rather than the original contemporary makers. Many buyers are reluctant to believe their works do not date from the pre-1897 period, being convinced that older is always better. This is part of the same Western value system that finds worth in the fragment. If you want to adhere to this system, *caveat emptor*; there are many unscrupulous and unaware dealers eager to interact with you.



These high-end forgeries of Benin works were extremely well-made and convincing; their origin is uncertain. 1990s.

Here are ten general guidelines collectors and would-be collectors need to remember.

1. *Buy what you love, and be willing to love it at its price even if it turns out to have been made a month ago.* No one wants to be cheated, but it's only a cheat if you feel you've paid too much for an object claiming to be something other than it is.
2. *If it's unlike any known piece, it was probably made just to fascinate YOU.* Although innovations occurred in Benin court art, they were uncommon and came gradually. They were usually subtle stylistic shifts. The piece with highly unusual iconography or drastically unusual appearance is unlikely to be an older guild piece. The guilds

were conservative, new subjects being introduced slowly and consistent with the belief systems of the area. Fakers know Westerners love the thought of the unique piece or one with a dramatic theme.

3. *Familiarize yourself with details.* Often costume details—remarkably consistent in genuine guild works—are wrong on fakes. Constant examination of works with unimpeachable provenance will sensitize viewers to these details, as well as general aspects such as body and facial proportions. Looking at museums' early collections as well as catalogues made early will increase your connoisseurship, especially if you look slowly and carefully at areas that draw the eye less: ears, feet, fingers, the backs of works. Fakers often have access only to published photographs and these rarely show all angles of a sculpture.
4. *If you can afford it, and you didn't spend six figures or more for a significant work, it probably was made in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century.* Prices for pre-1897 Benin works are very high and have risen steadily. A 17<sup>th</sup> century brass head sold in 2007 for \$4.74 million, with single-figure plaques that year going for \$120,000 and \$878,315. Smaller works sold in 2006 at the following prices: a fine cast altar bell for \$26,268, a Benin bird tapper for \$12,361. “Bargain” prices, even if they hover in the tens of thousands, should be a red flag.
5. *If you put your faith in scientific testing, rely more on metallurgy than thermoluminescence.* Thermoluminescent dating (or TL dating) can be performed only on those Benin metal objects that contain bits of their original clay core. This requires drilling into the core and doing lab testing. While useful to archaeologists who use multiple scientific dating methods to reinforce their findings, it is less reliable in checking an object that is isolated and not found in situ. Fakers have been known to incorporate potsherds from earlier periods into modern works, so a lab innocently produces an early but inaccurate date. Metallic content, however, is likely to yield readable, handy results. Published articles on known early pieces are excellent and consistent guides to shifts in available metals over time. Some alloy components were completely unknown before the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
6. *Investigate provenance.* Almost all early pieces came out of Nigeria with the British in 1897, and have a track record of their movement and sales since then. If your work lacks early documentation, this should be a red flag that it post-dates the invasion. The original Webster catalogues or those of Oldman may provide visual proof of early dates if written records are unavailable.
7. *If it really was hidden or temporarily buried in 1897, and the seller is telling you it belonged to a chief who now chooses to sell it, be suspicious.* Were some works hidden or subsequently discovered? Yes, some were. If they were royal objects, they

should have been returned to Oba Eweka II when he took the throne in 1914; some turned up later and were given to the Benin Museum. These are not numerous, nor are they usually intact. Any antiquities that turned up after 1970 and were exported are in this country in contravention of international law. The “hidden” story is a popular one amongst sellers, but is fairly unlikely—particularly for large objects that would have been in the palace. Chiefly jewelry or altar objects? More likely.

8. *Learn all you can.* Dealers often sell romance and exoticism. They may point to evidence of sacrificial materials on a work—chicken feathers are not, however, applied to Benin shrine objects! If a seller tells you a chief wore his great-grandfather’s pendant or bracelets until he recently (and sadly) had to part with them, they shouldn’t have an aged patina—chiefs make sure their jewelry is well-polished. There are many happy buyers who paid for brass Ododua masquerade headpieces, unwilling to believe that the seven examples made in the 18<sup>th</sup> century are all accounted for, as are the seven that replaced them for palace use in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
9. *Be cautious.* Fakers are increasingly skilled, and based in and out of Africa. Often sales techniques are elaborate and long in planning, since profits can be extremely high. Your purported “genuine old” Benin piece may have been made in Europe with a highly convincing patina and shopped around by Africans to give it a convincing backstory. It may have been published just to give it the beginnings of a pedigree and up its price. Buying it at auction is no guarantee, particularly at a smaller house—how developed is the expertise of the sellers?
10. *Rid yourself of prejudice.* Remember, 1897 is not a magic number, and recently-made objects become old! A lovely work of art does not need to have celebrated centuries of birthdays to be worth keeping. Benin pieces made from 1914 to 1950 are of increasing interest. Some modern plaques made for traditional clients during this period have their own charm and are quite rare. Buying objects that show shifts in cultural outlook and guild practices—like images of the queens or ensembles in new combinations—demonstrate a key moment in time and may prove particularly important someday. Museums are beginning to collect them, why shouldn’t you? You have the advantage of buying something affordable, supporting living artists, and documenting your own period. The priceless 16<sup>th</sup> century Afro-Portuguese ivories from Benin were once tourist/traveler’s art, and every early Benin artwork is not a masterpiece simply because of its age.