

Ife Portrait Sculptures

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about Ife portrait sculptures from the southwest coast of Nigeria, produced by the Yoruba people to likely represent some of the kings of Ife. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Cultural Background of Ife Portrait Sculptures](#)
2. [Techniques of Production and Style](#)

1. Cultural Background of Ife Portrait Sculptures

Ife, also known as Ile-Ife, is a city located on the southwest coast of Nigeria that is also the founding place and center of the spiritual universe of the Yoruba people. It was founded in 500 CE but flourished as a political power from 1100 to 1500 CE. According to Yoruba religion, Olodumare created the world from Ife, and all Yoruba kings, or Ooni, are descended from him.

The present-day Ooni was crowned in 2015. The Ooni is considered both a spiritual and a political leader as well as the 401st orisha, or spirit. The orishas are deities that are celebrated every day of the year. The Yoruba believe that a person's spirit, or Ase, is located in their head, so many sculptures from this period feature disproportionately large heads, or just a head or mask by itself.

Ife was at the height of its power from the 12th to the 14th centuries. The Yoruba traded glass beads, which functioned as currency at this time, and even participated in the Silk Road trade network. This was at the same time that the Yoruba produced beautiful sculpture heads that we think are portraits of some of the kings of Ife. For instance, one sculpture is a life-size mask portrait of Obalufon II, who has been deified as the patron orisha of metal casting and weaving. Many of the portrait heads in existence today are thought to have been produced during his reign.

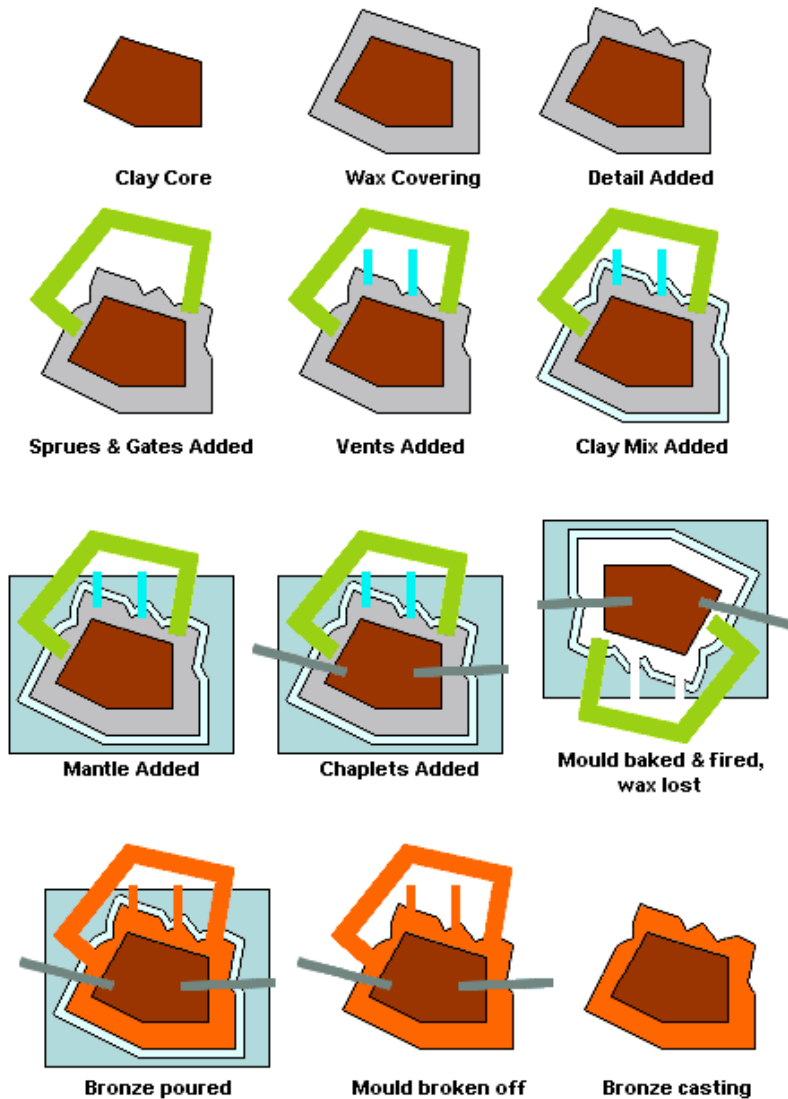


Yoruba mask for King Obalufon II
Circa 1300 CE

2. Techniques of Production and Style

In 1938, the Ife portrait heads were found buried in the ground in the process of digging a foundation for a house. Seventeen heads and one partial figure were found at this location. All of the heads were made using the **lost wax technique**, in which the sculptor uses a wax model to create a mold for the sculpture. When the mold is baked and fired, the wax melts and is lost. The empty space left behind is then filled with molten bronze or other metal.

Direct 'Lost Wax' Casting

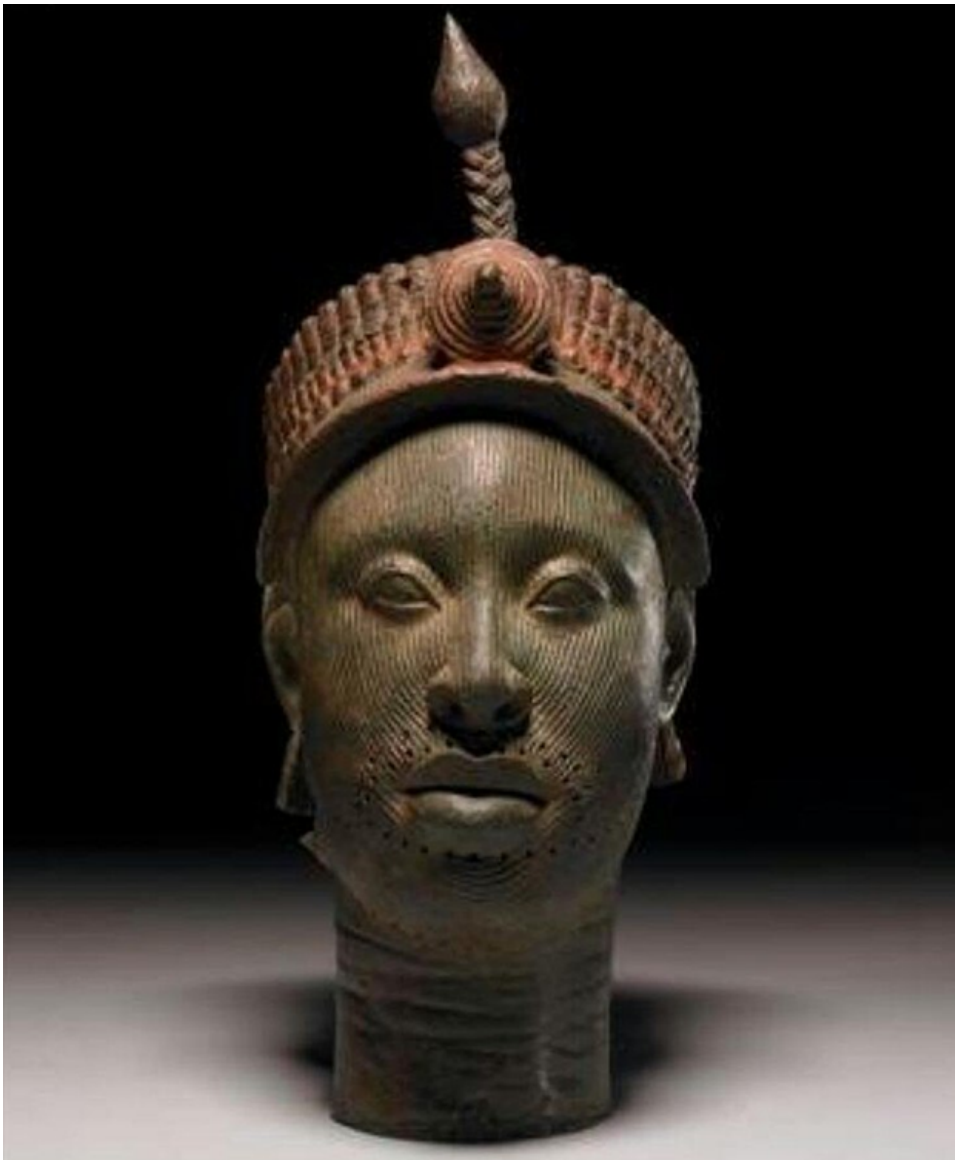


The lost wax method of casting bronze

All of the sculpture heads found reveal a high degree of skill in their production as well as stylistic similarities, suggesting that they may have been produced by the same workshop, or even a single artist.

In comparing the Ife sculpture heads to the Nok heads, one can see the contrast in their approaches to the human figure. The Nok heads are highly abstracted and stylized, and while the Ife heads are much more naturalistic, they are no less stylized. Features such as proportionately small, almond-shaped eyes, striations, or line-shaped markings, on the face, bilateral symmetry, and perfectly serene facial expressions are hallmarks of this style.

At other sites, other portrait heads made of terracotta have been found. They have the same basic style as the metal sculptures. Archaeologists refer to the metal sculptures as copper alloy instead of brass or bronze because it more accurately describes the mixture of metals used to make these sculptures.



Portrait of an unidentified Ooni
14th–15th century CE
Copper alloy

DID YOU KNOW

Yoruba religion has profoundly influenced the practice of African-influenced religions in the Americas, including Afro-Cuban religions, Haitian Vodou, and Brazilian candomblé.

TERM TO KNOW

Lost Wax Technique

A technique for casting sculptures in bronze in which a model is first made in wax, which melts away and is “lost” when the mold is fired.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about Ife portrait heads from a city located on the southwest coast of Nigeria that is also the founding place and center of the spiritual universe of the Yoruba people. You began by exploring the **cultural background of Ife portrait sculptures**, learning that these beautiful sculpture heads are thought to be portraits of some of the kings of Ife, or Ooni. You also learned about the **techniques of production** used to make the sculptures, notably the lost wax technique, as well as their **style**, comparing and contrasting their stylistic elements with the Nok heads, and noting the high degree of skill in their production.



TERMS TO KNOW

Lost Wax Technique

A technique for casting sculptures in bronze in which a model is first made in wax, which melts away and is “lost” when the mold is fired.