A000-Afr-Benin-Nigeria-Trophy Head-Bronze-18th c



**Case No.: 6**

**Accession No.**

**Formal Label:** Benin bronze trophy head

**Display Description:**

The vast majority of Benin’s artworks are designed to honor the achievements and/or memory of the Obas, the divine rulers of the Benin polities. Until the late 19th century, the Benin centers were a ruling power in Nigeria, dominating trade routes and amassing enormous wealth as the military and economic leaders of their ancient empire. This changed with the appearance of the British forces, which coveted the wealth of the royal palaces and found a series of excuses to mount a punitive expedition against the Oba’s forces in 1897. It was only at this point, the moment of its destruction, that the true achievements of the Benin polities became apparent to western scholars.

Stylistically, the Benin heads follow certain conventions through time, but as metal does not lend itself to radiometric testing it is hard to be sure as to precise dates. The typology currently in acceptance is likely to be overturned as others have been. The piece in question is a magnificently formed and executed casting of a youthful, well-nourished male. The hair is in fact a beaded crown that is cut to the temples across the forehead, then dips once to the level of the ears. It is comprised of bands of overlapping beadwork in the rear, and bands at the front. The apex of the head is missing, to allow the introduction of an elephant tusk. The forehead is prominent, acting as a shelf over the eyes, and decorated with a central double scar indentation and four scarifications over each eye. The eyes are unobscured, large pointed ovals distinct peripheral rims and distinct irises that were originally inlaid with iron. At the lateral apex of each they have a trefoil linear design picked out in relief. The nose is long and elegant, with a broad trilobate end. The lips are fine, yet full and well-formed with a naturalistic fovea above the top lip. The rounded chin hints at the prosperity that the dead Oba doubtless enjoyed through his life. The ears are portrayed as delicate swirls in a faintly molluscan format, and the entire head sits upon a series of twenty one fine, sectorial neck rings that do not extend up onto the face.

The head summons up the traditional issue of the relationship between the Benin and Yoruba polities, for the elongated triple “whiskers” joining the lateral aspects of the mouth to the ears are not often found on Benin pieces. While the Oba has traditionally been associated with the leopard, this was more likely to be expressed as zoomorphic designs and artefacts rather than feline lycanthropy such as this. The Yoruba, however, did use this motif. This is therefore a fascinating object from historical, social and artistic perspectives. The importance of the Benin polity to the development of African and even world art cannot be overestimated.

**Accession Number:**

**LC Classification:** N7399

**Date or Time Horizon:** 18th century

**Geographical Area:** Djougou, Benin

**Map:**



Fig. 2. Map of Benin. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/CIA\_Maps/Benin\_19841.gif



Fig. 3. Map of Djougou. Benin. After http://latitude.to/map/ng/nigeria/cities/benin-city

**GPS coordinates:** 6º29º42'34.67" N 1º40'4.42" E

**Cultural Affiliation:** Benin

**Media:** bronze

**Dimensions:** cm: 31 tall x 19 wide x 24 depth

**Weight:** 4.2kg

**Condition: original**

**Provenance:** This piece was part of a very large old collection of African art from a sadly now deceased collector from Antwerp, Belgium. Ref. Number: 0351. This piece was part of a very large old collection of African art from a sadly now deceased collector from Antwerp in Belgium. £1250.00

**Discussion:**

In 1897, most of the plaques and other objects were removed by the British during a punitive expedition to the area as imperial control was being consolidated in Southern Nigeria.[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin_Bronzes#cite_note-British-4) Two hundred of the pieces were taken to the British Museum, London, while the rest were purchased by other European museums.[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin_Bronzes#cite_note-FOOTNOTEGreenfield2007124-5) Today, a large number are held by the British Museum.[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin_Bronzes#cite_note-British-4) Other notable collections are in Germany and the United States.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin_Bronzes#cite_note-USA23-6)

The Benin Bronzes led to a greater appreciation in Europe of African culture and [art](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_art). Initially and naively, it appeared incredible to the discoverers that people "supposedly so primitive and savage" were responsible for such highly developed objects.[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin_Bronzes#cite_note-Meyerowitz-7) Some even concluded that Benin knowledge of metallurgy came from the Portuguese traders who were in contact with Benin in the early modern period.[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin_Bronzes#cite_note-Meyerowitz-7) Today, it is clear that the bronzes were made in Benin from an indigenous culture. Many of these dramatic sculptures date to the thirteenth century, centuries before contact with Portuguese traders, and a large part of the collection dates to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. (Wikipedia)

**References:**

Dark, Philip J. 1973. *An introduction to Benin art and technology*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Ezra, Kate. 1992. *Royal art of Benin: the Perls collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Distributed by H.N. Abrams.

**Appendix:**

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