Case 6-Afr-Benin-trophy head-bronze-19th c



Fig. 1. Benin-trophy head-bronze-19th c

**Case no.: 6**

**Accession Number:**

**Formal Label:** Benin-trophy head-bronze-19th c

**Display Description:**

A stunning Benin bronze trophy head, this has been made using the traditional lost wax method and very well done. On the inside of the head there is visible corrosion. The high neck collar represents coral beads, and the coral cap worn by Oba’s is present in fine detail.

As in many African traditions of representation, Benin images always show a person in the prime of young adulthood, regardless of their true age and appearance. Contemporary informants in Benin City regard this as a “trophy” head of a foreign ruler, rather than a representation of an Oba. They recount that defeated recalcitrant foes would be decapitated and their heads cast in bronze to be placed on the shrine of the ancestors of the Benin Nation. Certainly it could never have carried a heavy tusk like the larger Oba heads. There is no doubt that the interpretation of these heads has been greatly confused by the publications of pictures taken of Benin in 1897, after the altars had been disturbed.

**LC Classification:** **N7397**

**Date or Time Horizon:** 19th century

**Geographical Area:** Benin

**Cultural Affiliation:** Fon

**Map:** showing Fon and the four Gbe language groups.

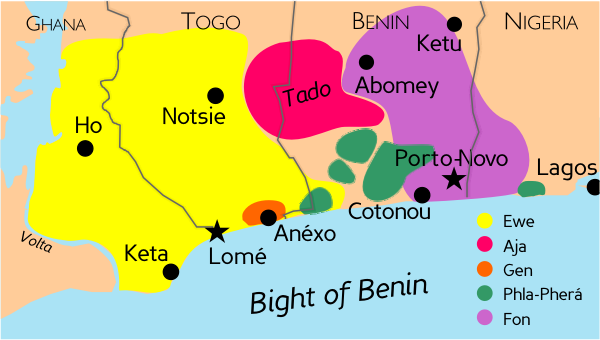


Fig. 5. From: [Mark Dingemanse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Mark_Dingemanse), https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/03/Gbe\_languages.png

**Medium:** Bronze

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

**Weight:** 4.2 kg

**Condition: original**

**Provenance:** This piece was part of a very large old collection of African art from a deceased collector from Antwerp, Belgium

**Discussion:**

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 five bands of overlapping beadwork in the rear, and three bands at the front. The apex of the head is missing, to allow the introduction of a tusk. The forehead is prominent, acting as a shelf over the eyes, and decorated with a central double scar indentation and four “pellets” arranged in two groups of two. 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.

**References:**

**Appendix:**

Ref. Number: 0351

£1250.00

From http://exquisiteafricanart.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Benin-Altar-of-Oba-Ovouramwen1-300x191.jpg

