

Benin Art and Casting Technologies

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Benin's art reflects one of the great kingdoms of West Africa, a rain forest empire that spanned a millennium. Trade with European merchants found a visual analog in cast brass plaques, portrait heads and standing figures, carved ivory tusks, masks, and bracelets, agate and coral bead regalia, iron swords and war staffs – testimony to contact and expansion. But in 1897 the British invaded the kingdom, sacked the palace, confiscated its art, hanged some chiefs, and exiled the king. Loot from the palace arrived in London. Benin's art dispersed into museums and private collections offset expedition costs, the largest caches going to the British Museums and the German collections.

Chronologies of these objects convey the impression that because the King was central to the scheme of things everything of value had been carted

off, the technology eviscerated and inspiration anesthetized. Pre-20th century Benin art became iconic. Like the Pyramids of Egypt and Great Zimbabwe, Benin art represents Black Africa, one of that continent's highest but defunct cultural achievements. To get a handle on the imperial gaze and the social construction of knowledge in the age of empire read Annie Coombs' chapter on Benin art in her over-determined *Reinventing Africa*.¹ Then, fast forward to the present without much loss of meaning.

The technical virtuosity and aesthetic excellence of Benin art astonished and then puzzled European curators. Arguments over sources – European technical diffusion or indigenous African production – gave way to documenting objects and developing a time line. Initially framed in the cultural degeneracy theory of the time, Benin's art soon came to be recognized as an African accomplishment comparable to the best casting traditions of Europe, a metallurgical tour de force that rivaled Renaissance cast art and, in the use of horror vacui, embellishments worthy of the Baroque if not that tradition's playful exuberance. Degeneration theory didn't disappear but got transposed on to 20th century Benin "*curios*".² The output of post-1897 objects is cited as proof of a downward spiral and certifies the nostalgic application of the theory to the present.

Reception of Benin Artefacts in Europe after the British Expedition

Benin art evoked immediate excitement and sensation shortly after it was officially presented for the first time³ at auctions and exhibitions in Europe,

¹ A. E. COOMBES, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, New Haven and London 1994.

² N. LEVELL, *Oriental Visions: Exhibitions, Travel, and Collecting in the Victorian Age*, London 2000.

³ Benin artefacts got to Europe in consequence of trade between Benin and Europeans. E.g. the British businessman John H. Swainson received in 1892 from the Benin King a bronze sculpture of a horse as a present (see P. KARPINSKI, *A Benin Bronze Horseman at the Merseyside County Museum*, in: *African Arts*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1984, pp. 60–61). However, Benin artworks that got to Europe were at the beginning mistaken for works of Indian, Turkish, Mexican or even Siberian origin or they were thought to have been made during the Romanesque or Gothic period (see F. von LUSCHAN, *Bruchstück einer Beninplatte*, in:

first in the United Kingdom and later in Germany. The British Expeditionary Force, which looted the city of Benin in 1897, brought from Benin over 2,400⁴ bronze, ivory and wooden artefacts. This unique war booty was sold out at auctions and today is the pride of many European and US art collections. Stolen Benin artefacts, exhibited in Western museums, ethnological collections and art galleries, played an important role in how Europeans gradually changed their attitude to the perception, evaluation and interpretation of native African art⁵. Benin artefacts were originally considered war booty rather than valuable artworks, mysterious precious treasures or African court art. Their perception changed radically after these works became a reputable part of world collections. Some Benin bronzes dating back to the 16th century were – with regard to their artistic and technological elaboration – appreciated even more than their analogous contemporary European bronzes. In the second half of the 20th century, major world museums housing Benin artefacts started presenting these works more and more often by means of exhibitions, catalogues, expert studies or articles in popular magazines intended for general public consumption.

Despite racist or ethnocentric prejudice, Benin bronzes and other artworks soon gained a firm position in the market as well as artistic field. *“The arrival of the Benin artifacts on the international market of material culture began with a whisper, grew quickly into a roar, and then after a time, died down to a murmur.”*⁶ After the artefacts were transported to Europe, they soon started

Globus, Vol. 78, No. 19, 1900, pp. 306–307).

⁴ The exact number of Benin artefacts is not known until present. Felix von Luschan (*Die Altertümer von Benin I–III.*, Berlin, Leipzig 1919, pp. 8–10) stated the number was 2,400, whereas Philip Dark (*Benin Bronze Heads: Styles and Chronology*, in: D. F. MCCALL – E. G. BAY (eds.), *African Images: Essays in African Iconology*, New York 1975, pp. 32) estimated there should be around 6,500 pieces. Such a big difference between these numbers is due to the fact that Dark included in his calculations also artefacts that became a part of museum and private collections during the 20th century. Luschan only counted those artefacts that were imported to Europe as war booty after the British conquest of Benin.

⁵ LUSCHAN, *Die Altertümer von Benin I–III.*

⁶ G. PENNY, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*, Chapel Hill 2002, p. 71.

changing hands and went from soldiers to dealers, trading houses and free market. Many stolen Benin artefacts were sold or exchanged while soldiers were on the African coast.⁷ Official auctions started taking place towards the end of 1897. The value of Benin artefacts in the market started rose soon after. In 1901 almost all objects that had been taken from Benin during the British conquest were sold. During 1897 the price for a bronze artefact grew first from 13 to 14 guineas and later from 16 to 28 guineas. At one of the auctions in 1899 the German anthropologist Arthur Baessler (1857–1907) noted that “*at such prices our current Benin collection would bring well over a Million*”!⁸ Benin art became more expensive than any other “primitive” or Oriental art. In 1900 an engraved elephant trunk was valued 100 guineas and the price for a bronze artefact always went above 40 guineas.⁹ Subsequently, the growth in market price for Benin artworks resulted in British museum directors being less interested in purchasing them. This improvident attitude was aptly commented on by one of the most prominent British dealers and collectors William Downing Webster¹⁰ (1868–1913): “*I [...] am sorry you think the prices too high for you to buy – but I am convinced that they will go still higher and*

⁷ H. L. ROTH, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors*, Halifax 1903.

⁸ PENNY, p. 78.

⁹ E. BARKAN, *Aesthetics and Evolution: Benin Art in Europe*, in: *African Arts*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1997, pp. 36–93.

¹⁰ Webster bought and sold many Benin artefacts to private collections as well as many European museums such as Pitt Rivers Museum, Museum für Völkerkunde Vienna, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden or Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin. Webster offered Benin artefacts for sale in illustrated sale catalogues, see W. D. WEBSTER, *Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnographical Specimens, in Bronze, Wrought Iron, Ivory and Wood from Benin City, West Africa, Taken at the Fall of the City in February, 1897, by the British Punitive Expedition under the Command of Admiral Rawson* 21, Bicester 1899; W. D. WEBSTER, *Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnographical Specimens, in Bronze, Wrought Iron, Ivory and Wood from Benin City, West Africa, Taken at the Fall of the City in February, 1897, by the British Punitive Expedition under the Command of Admiral Rawson* 24, Bicester 1900; W. D. WEBSTER, *Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnographical Specimens, in Bronze, Wrought Iron, Ivory and Wood from Benin City, West Africa, Taken at the Fall of the City in February, 1897, by the British Punitive Expedition under the Command of Admiral Rawson* 29, Streatham Hill 1901. In a catalogue from 1901 Webster offered 562 Benin artefacts, some of them were purchased by private collectors such as Hans Meyer and the German businessman Karl Knorr (1843–1921).

that you are making a great mistake in missing anything you have not got.”¹¹ The inability or rather unwillingness of British museums to invest into buying Benin artefacts surprised also German scientists and collectors who specialised in African art. For instance, the German geographer and collector Hans Meyer (1858–1929) wrote to Felix von Luschan: “*It is a actually riddle to me, that English let such things go. Either they have too many of them already or they have no idea, what these things mean for ethnology, cultural history and art history.*”¹² It was during this period when a large amount of Benin artefacts became a part of German collections. The German doctor, anthropologist and Director of Oceanic and African Art Department of the Ethnologic Museum in Berlin Felix von Luschan (1854–1924) noticed that the British went literally “hunting” for Benin artefacts at auctions. Although he was aware of their high artistic value, he was still surprised by the prices that suddenly started rising very high, sometimes even trebling.¹³ Luschan¹⁴ and Meyer collected Benin artefacts for many years as they were aware of their artistic potential and aesthetic qualities.¹⁵ Luschan had no doubts about African origin of the Benin bronzes and refused the then popular opinion that the manufacturing technology and their aesthetic qualities refer to their Oriental or Egyptian origin.¹⁶ He was quite unambiguous when giving his opinion on the origin of

¹¹ PENNY, p. 78.

¹² Ibidem, p. 75.

¹³ I. MALGORZATA, *From Spree to Harlem German 19th Century Anti-Racist Ethnology and the Cultural Revival of American Blacks*, Berlin 1990.

¹⁴ In August 1897 Luschan visited London twice in order to buy artefacts at House & Son auctions (see K. KRIEGER, *Hundert Jahre Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin: Abteilung Afrika*, in: Baessler-Archiv N. F., Vol. 21, 1973, pp. 101–140). Shortly after he requested the German Consulate in Lagos to buy all Benin artefacts available regardless of their high market price. Luschan’s request was accommodated and Germany thus got 263 Benin artefacts. Thanks to Luschan Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin now has a collection of 580 Benin artefacts. Between 1899 and 1911 this museum held the primacy in purchasing and acquiring objects that came to Germany from countries of the Protectorate.

¹⁵ F. von LUSCHAN, *Die Karl Knorrsche Sammlung von Benin-Altertümern: im Museum für Länder- und Völkerkunde in Stuttgart*, Stuttgart 1901; P. GÖBEL – F. KÖHLER – Ch. SEIGE, *Kunst aus Benin: Sammlung Hans Meyer*, Leipzig 2002.

¹⁶ S. EISENHOFER, *Indianisch, Türkisch oder Japanisch? – Überlegungen zur Herkunft der sogenannten „afro-portugiesischen“ Elfenbeinschnitzereien*, in: S. EISENHOFER (ed.), *Kulte*,

Benin art: “*The style of these bronzes is purely African: wholly, exclusively, solely African.*”¹⁷ The Scottish natural scientist Henry O. Forbes (1851–1932), who was – similarly to Luschan – enchanted by the high artistic quality and technical precision of Benin artefacts, shared the same view. He did not understand how these works could have been hidden from Europeans for such a long time and did not doubt they were a product of old and traditional Benin culture. Forbes wanted to know who the manufacturers of the Bronze artefacts were and how they acquired the knowledge necessary for making them. Therefore, he opened questions that became for many years the subject of research and many discussions and polemics.¹⁸

Benin artefacts were presented in April 1897 in the Forest Hill Museum (today known as Horniman Museum) in London. The founder of the museum, Frederick Horniman (1835–1906), bought “*a considerable amount of Benin material from established commercial sources and private collections*”.¹⁹ Richard Quick (1860–1939), a curator from the Forest Hill Museum, was one of the first European art historians to positively appreciate Benin culture and he spoke of Benin art as of “*valuable art-works*”.²⁰ He considered e.g. Benin carvings to be works made by extraordinarily “*skilful craftsmen*”.²¹ He was clearly convinced that the creators of Benin artefacts were African people and he criticised the period when these works were refused for being hideous idols or fetishes of an inferior rank of the African peoples, culture and religion. Quick’s effort to present Benin culture without prejudice was in line with the effort of the Forest Hill Museum aimed at “*developing new, equitable and respectful relationships not only with the peoples of Africa, but with the rest of the world*”.²²

Künstler, Könige in Afrika: Tradition und Moderne in Südnigeria, Linz 1997, pp. 27–34.

¹⁷ LUSCHAN, *Die Karl Knorr’sche Sammlung*, p. 9.

¹⁸ H. O. FORBES, *On a Collection of Cast-Metal Work of High Artistic Value, from Benin, Lately Acquired for the Mayer Museum*, in: *Bulletin of the Liverpool Museum*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1898, pp. 49–70.

¹⁹ COOMBES, *Reinventing Africa*, p. 150.

²⁰ R. QUICK, *Notes on Benin Carving*, in: *The Reliquary and Illustrated Archaeologist*, 5, 1899, p. 248.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 251.

²² A. A. SHELTON, *Preface*, in: K. ARNAUT (ed.), *Re-Visions: New Perspectives on the African Collections of the Horniman Museum*, London 2000, p. 12.

Among those who adopted a very positive attitude to Benin art were German ethnologists, historians and scholars of fine art. In August 1897, the German historian and director of the Kunst- und Gewerbemuseum in Hamburg Justus Brinckmann (1843–1915) introduced first Benin artefact at the meeting of the German Anthropological Association²³ in Lübeck. It was a commemorative head of the Oba ruler that he considered to be a high form of art. Brinckmann gave the decisive impulse to Benin art collecting in German speaking countries. Brinckmann believed that Benin bronzes were affected by Egyptian influence. German scientists were surprised by the fact that Benin bronzes were cast using a sophisticated technique of lost wax, but they still believed these artefacts were made by indigenous African artists.²⁴

Fortunes of Artefacts after the British Conquest: Dealers and Experts as Promoters of Benin Art

The artefacts that were brought to the United Kingdom as a part of war booty were sold one after another and exhibited at the same time. In September 1897 the British Museum in London exhibited over 300²⁵ bronze plaques lent by the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The desks were displayed in the Assyrian Art Hall.²⁶ The curator of the exhibition was the British archaeologist Charles Hercules Read (1857–1929) who was also the intermediary of their

²³ Brinckmann actually bought a Benin artefact before Luschan, who bought a fragment of a Benin bronze desk from the 16th century from a London antique dealer several months after Brinckmann's presentation. The antique dealer acquired the desk in 1879, see LUSCHAN, *Bruchstück einer Beninplatte*, 1900.

²⁴ F. HEGER, *Merkwürdige Altertümer aus Benin in West-Afrika*, in: Mittheilungen der Geographischen Gesellschaft in Wien, Vol. 64, 1921, pp. 104–119; J. ZWERNEMANN, *Die Benin-Bronzen des Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe*, in: Jahrbuch des Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, Vol. 9–10, 1993, pp. 7–26.

²⁵ During the invasion over 900 desks were found in one of the palace inner courts “buried in the dirt of ages”. (R. H. BACON, *Benin: The City of Blood*, London 1897, p. 91). The desks had been stored there from the beginning of the 19th century when the palace was reconstructed after fire that broke out during Oba Osemwende's rule.

²⁶ J. GREENFIELD, *The Return of Cultural Treasures*, New York 2007.

subsequent sale. The British Museum was very interested in what would happen with the stolen Benin artefacts from the very beginning. Immediately after the UK occupied Benin it filed an official request with the aim of protecting bronze artefacts from their immediate sale on the African coast. However, it was not possible to provide such complex protection and a part of Benin artefacts was sold in Lagos, Nigeria. The British Museum in London first received 203 bronze desks as a present. In summer 1898 it was given another eleven plaques by the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which kept another eight desks. The rest of the artefacts seized in Benin were sold to other museums, collectors and dealers.²⁷

In spring 1897 the first stolen Benin works appeared in the London market. The first Benin artefact²⁸ was bought in 1897 by the famous British collector Augustus Pitt Rivers (1827–1900). His collection of Benin art items²⁹ grew to over 300 artefacts which were exhibited in his private museum in Farnham.³⁰ Pitt Rivers bought artefacts from many dealers, especially from William Webster and his wife as well as business partner Eva Cutter. Benin bronzes and ivory from the British conquest was also sold by J. C. Stevens in Great Booms in King Street between 1899 and 1902.³¹ Besides the official booty of the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs and artefacts owned by expedition members there was another trade route from the Niger Coast Protectorate directly to Hamburg. It was run by salesmen from German trading companies such as Bey & Zimmer with branches in Lagos, Sapelea and Warri. This trade route was used mainly by museums in Hamburg.³² Therefore, it cannot be considered a mere coincidence that the first Benin artefacts were presented

²⁷ Ch. H. READ – O. M. DALTON, *Antiquities from the City of Benin and from Other Parts of West Africa in the British Museum*, London 1899; K. EZRA, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection*, New York 1992.

²⁸ It was bought from the dealer Henry Stevens (1843–1925).

²⁹ Pitt Rivers collection was sold in the 1960s and 1970s by his grandson George Pitt Rivers (1890–1966) dispersing it to many U.S. museums.

³⁰ M. BOWDEN, *The Life and Archaeological Work of Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers*, Cambridge 1991.

³¹ *The Times*, Vol. 13, September, 1899; *The Times*, Vol. 17, May, 1902.

³² P. J. C. DARK, *An Illustrated Catalogue of Benin Art*, Boston 1982.

in Germany by the director of the Kunst- und Gewerbemuseum in Hamburg Justus Brinckmann.

A significant collection of Benin bronzes appeared in the London market in 1930.³³ It was a collection owned by one of the participants of the Benin expedition.³⁴ In 1953 another important private collection of Benin art was bought at a Sotheby's auction.³⁵ It was a collection of Benin artefacts gathered by the general surgeon of the British invasion Robert Allman who stayed in the Niger coast Protectorate after the conquest of Benin as the chief medical officer until 1905.³⁶ Allman was an admirer of Benin art and he once said: "*Some bronzes were manufactured and cast in a stupendous way and ivory and wood carvings are usually perfectly thought-out and made.*"³⁷ In the 2nd half of the 20th century some major world museums were enriched by Benin artefacts from private collections. For instance in 1961 the Field Museum in Chicago received as a present 191 Benin artefacts from the private collection of the British anthropologist A. W. F. Fuller (1882–1961). The collection of Benin art owned by the Metropolitan Museum in New York was established in a similar way: at its very core are two significant private collections. The first of them was given to the museum by the American industrialist and politician Nelson A. Rockefeller (1908–1979) in 1978, the second by the German collector and art dealer Klaus G. Perls (1912–2008) and his wife Amelia B. Perls (1913–2002) in 1991.³⁸

The British anthropologist Phillip Dark stated in the 1970s that over 6,500 Benin artefacts were outside the territory of Nigeria in 77 museums and collections.³⁹ Quite logically, Nigeria's initiative aimed at having Benin artefacts back is quite strong, as the contemporary Bini people consider it a part of their

³³ The financial crisis on the turn of the 1920s/1930s caused some British families sold their art collections. Those who were most interested in buying them were French art dealers.

³⁴ *The Times*, Vol. 30, November, 1929.

³⁵ *The Times*, Vol. 8, December, 1953.

³⁶ DARK, *An Illustrated Catalogue of Benin Art*.

³⁷ R. ALLMAN, *With the Punitive Expedition in Benin City*, in: *The Lancet*, Vol. 2, 1898, p. 44.

³⁸ EZRA, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection*.

³⁹ DARK, *Benin Bronze Heads: Styles and Chronology*.

cultural heritage. This effort intensified in 1973 when the National Museum in Benin was officially opened.⁴⁰ In the initial phase, the museum only housed photographs and replicas of Benin artefacts that were actually to be found in museums, collections and exhibition halls in Europe and the USA.⁴¹ The Benin Museum had also displayed objects from Lagos. However, as an institution that should be presenting Benin art, this museum was “empty”. Nevertheless, the photographs displayed did document the beauty of Benin art and they, to a certain extent, contributed “to filling the gaps but the desired effect was unachievable”.⁴² Nigerian requests and pleas to have some of the Benin artefacts returned have not fallen silent until the present day.⁴³ However, Benin cultural heritage remains the pride of many Western museums and will never be gathered as a whole again. Many unique Benin artefacts were destroyed in Europe during World War II, some others disappeared irretrievably in private collections. How difficult it is, in terms of finances, for Nigeria to get back at least some small fragments of their cultural history is documented by the fact that at a 1980 auction in London Nigeria paid GBP 800,000 for four artefacts and a Yoruba mask.⁴⁴

Benin artefacts have remained tradable in auction houses until today. Their market value started rising again in the middle of the 1960s.⁴⁵ For instance in 1968 a Benin bronze head was sold at a Christie’s auction for USD 13,700.⁴⁶ However, three years later in 1971 the price for another bronze head

⁴⁰ However, the museum was founded as early as in 1946. Its first curator was the Nigerian historian and author of many important publications on Benin art Jacob U. Egharevba (1893–1980).

⁴¹ E. EYO, *Repatriation of Cultural Heritage: The African Experience*, in: F. E. S. KAPLAN (ed.), *Museums and the Making of “Ourselves”*, London, New York 1994, pp. 330–350.

⁴² E. EYO, *Nigeria: Return and Restitution of Cultural Property*, in: *Museum*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1979, p. 21.

⁴³ B. PLANKENSTEINER, *Kings and Rituals: Court Art from Benin*, in: *Tribal Art*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2007, pp. 104–107.

⁴⁴ M. K. ASANTE, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony*, New York 2012.

⁴⁵ However, in 1930 a pair of leopards was sold at an auction in London for 700 guineas; in 1953 a head of the queen mother was sold at Sotheby’s for 5,500 pounds (see J. MACCLANCY, *A Natural Curiosity: The British Market in Primitive Art*, in: J. MACCLANCY (ed.), *Contesting Art: Art, Politics, and Identity in the Modern World*, Oxford 1997, pp. 27–62. COOMBES, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*.

⁴⁶ MACCLANCY, *A Natural Curiosity: The British Market in Primitive Art*.

climbed at a Sotheby's auction to USD 69,600. Another Benin bronze head was sold at Sotheby's in 1985 for GBP 320,000, which was at that time the highest price ever paid for "*primitive art*".⁴⁷ In the light of this it is even more interesting that just a year later, in 1986, another Benin bronze head was sold for USD 720,000.⁴⁸ The private collectors' and primitive-scientific institutions' willingness to invest into purchasing old Benin bronzes high amounts kept increasing. In 1989, a bronze head (cast before 1550) was sold at Christie's for GBP 1,320,000.⁴⁹ In 2007 the Sotheby's auction hall offered a head of Benin ruler estimated to date back to 1575–1650. This unique artefact was bought by the French art dealer Bernard Dulon for incredible USD 4,744,000,⁵⁰ although the original estimated price was 1–1.5 million USD.⁵¹ The value of Benin bronze heads and other artefacts is hugely affected by their age. Therefore, the most valuable bronze artefacts are those made in the 16th and 17th century. However, the value of each artefact is subject to many "variables" including its quality, patina or – by contrast – shiny surface indicating its use or smooth surface,⁵² aesthetics and the importance the artefact is believed to have. Not only is Benin art available in foreign artefact markets, but it has also started appearing in the Czech market, although in a rather limited number.⁵³ These are, however, mainly contemporary bronze artefacts and only unique artefacts from private collections appear only seldom.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ B. BURNHAM, *The Art Crisis*, New York 1975.

⁴⁸ J. STANLEY, *The Arts of Africa: An Annotated Bibliography*, Atlanta 1989; MACCLANCY, *A Natural Curiosity: The British Market in Primitive Art*.

⁴⁹ N. POWELL, *Christie's*, Paris 1999.

⁵⁰ The highest price paid so far for an African artefact is EUR 5,900,000 for a Fang mask (Gabon) bought in 2006 in Paris.

⁵¹ C. GARCIA – W. QUIRK, *Tribal Triumphs*, in: *Art + Auction*, Vol. 33, No. 10, 2010, p. 104.

⁵² A smooth and shiny surface evokes associations of permanence, as in the expression "*brass never rusts; lead never rots*". S. U. EBEIGBE, *Gone but Not Forgotten: The Commemorative Arts of Benin*, in: *An International Journal of Arts and Humanities Bahir Dar, Ethiopia*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2012, pp. 246–257.

⁵³ The most frequent buyers are middle class people who – when buying artefacts – consider their prices and aesthetic appearance. Very sought-after are particularly bronze desks, commemorative heads and sculptures (leopards or roosters).

⁵⁴ This is documented by the activity of several independent vendors who offer African art

The British expedition to Benin that enabled the conquerors to seize unique native artefacts and transport them to Europe caused that originally African works started to be perceived in the context of European art. Benin bronzes or ivory artefacts were taken out of its original context and very quickly became admired exhibits of famous world museums, galleries and private collections. Diffusion and presentation of Benin artefacts beyond the boundaries of the country of their origin significantly contributed to the fact they are today classified as art.

The Dating Game

The catalog of imposing scholars is about as long as Benin's king lists: from Felix von Luschan's compendium of Teutonic comprehensiveness⁵⁵ to William Fagg's intuitions about individual craftsmen.⁵⁶ A host of curators, collectors, and art historians parade in between. Leon Underwood⁵⁷ and Philip Dark⁵⁸ refined the chronologies by relating oral traditions and written records to iconography. Irwin Tunis⁵⁹ matched scientific testing methods to history.

Spectrographic and metals analyses by Frank Willett and Stuart Fleming⁶⁰, Otto Werner,⁶¹ Paul Craddock⁶² and William Sayre⁶³ add scientific precision. Victor Bordolov of Daybreak Laboratory, a TL (Thermoluminescence)

including Benin artefacts (e.g. Michal Koudelka), auction companies (e.g. Zezula and Antikvity Art Aukce Auction Hall) or antique shops (e.g. ART Interier Teichmann in Olomouc).

⁵⁵ F. von LUSCHAN, *Die Altertümer von Benin I–III.*, Berlin, Leipzig 1919.

⁵⁶ W. B. FAGG, *Nigerian Tribal Art*, London 1968; W. B. FAGG, *Divine Kingship in Africa*, London 1970.

⁵⁷ L. UNDERWOOD, *Bronzes of West Africa*, London 1949.

⁵⁸ DARK, *Benin Bronze Heads*, pp. 25–103.

⁵⁹ A. TUNIS, *Ein Kopfputz aus dem Orient in Benin. Der Ukpe-Okhue als historisches Indiz*, in: A. TUNIS (ed.), *Faszination der Kulturen*, Berlin 2001, pp. 323–337.

⁶⁰ F. WILLET–S. FLEMING, *Nigerian Copper Alloy Castings Dated by Thermoluminescence*, in: *Archaeometry*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1976, pp. 135–146.

⁶¹ O. WERNER, *Metallurgische Untersuchungen der Benin-Messinge des Museums für Völkerkunde, Berlin. Teil 2: Beitrag zur Frage der Datierung und der Herkunft des Rohmaterials*, in: *Baessler Archiv N. F.*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1978, pp. 333–439.

⁶² P. T. CRADDOCK, *Medieval Copper Alloy Production and West African Bronze Analyses, Part I*, in: *Archaeometry*, Vol. 27, 1985, pp. 17–41.

⁶³ F. WILLET – E. V. SAYRE, *The Elemental Composition of Benin Memorial Heads*, in: *Archaeometry*, Vol. 42, 2000, pp. 159–188.

expert and equipment manufacturer, and Mark Wypinski, conservator and metals expert of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the caretaker of the Perls' collection judiciously catalogued by Kate Ezra 1992) are among a large group of experts who have weighed in with dubious TL dating, one of many possible dating procedures.⁶⁴ European labs and galleries in Switzerland have been especially aggressive using this method in pushing the dating game as means for legitimating “authentic” Benin brasses. However, TL dating remains problematic. TL dating uses clay core material from castings but the results are variable with a margin of error that gives several probable comparison dates, and with a plus or minus margin

On the west coast, David Scott, the Getty's expert on Chinese bronzes, edited a symposium proceedings on conservation of ancient metals that includes Janet Schrenk's illuminating article⁶⁵. Peter Junge's overview essay, in the Plankensteiner compendium and especially the illuminating mug-like photos of objects, brings revealing insights into sorting out the various articles focused on scientific texting of brass heads, and provides an exciting overview of possibilities.⁶⁶

Willett, Ben Torsney, and Mark Ritchie show that brass has a particular metal composition if it dates before the Punitive Expedition and a different composition if of recent manufacture.⁶⁷ An ongoing project by Christian Goedicke, Rathgen Laboratory, Berlin, tests a sample of turn of the century brasses for trace elements variations, a promising approach.⁶⁸ The simple explanation is that 20th

⁶⁴ J. NEVADOMSKY, *Art and Science in Benin Bronzes*, in: African Arts, Vol. 37, No. 1, 1994, pp. 1–96.

⁶⁵ J. L. SCHRENK, *The Royal Art of Benin: Surfaces, Past and Present*, in: J. L. SCHRENK – J. PODANY – B. B. CONSIDINE (eds.), *Ancient and Historic Metals: Conservation and Scientific Research*, Malibu 1994, pp. 51–62.

⁶⁶ P. JUNGE, *Age Determination of Commemorative Heads: The Example of the Berlin Collection*, in: B. PLANKENSTEINER (ed.), *Benin: Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria*, Gent 2007, pp. 185–198.

⁶⁷ F. WILLETT – B. TORSNEY – M. RITCHIE, *Comparison and style. An Examination of the Benin 'Bronze' Heads*, in: African Arts, Vol. 27, No. 3, 1994, pp. 60–67, 102.

⁶⁸ Ch. GOEDICKE, *Echtheitsprüfung an Tanagrafiguren nach der Thermolumineszenzmethode (Authenticity of Tanagra figurines based on thermoluminescence methode)*, in: I. KRISELEIT

century refinements in smelting removed impurities in copper, steel and other metals for commercial production, and therefore trace elements of iron, cadmium, etc. that likely show up in pre-20th century base metals are not evident in post-20th century castings. Natalie Lawson and Joseph Nevadomsky employ LA-ICP-MS (laser ablation-inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometry) to sample brass objects of known modern manufacture that adds to compositional analysis of Benin brass castings and modern alloy production in Benin City.⁶⁹

Metallurgical composition remains a reasonably definite means of dating Benin brasses as applied to objects containing over 33% zinc. The importation of leaded brass from Europe lead to a testable content of zinc in casting, but still there is an unacceptable range of variability especially in support of a chronology or stylistic development as Craddock and Picton have argued. And, if artefacts were melted down over time and the metals reused in recasting, the certainly of lab analyses is curtailed.⁷⁰

Scientific tests on Benin brasses are gross predictors of authenticity, however. A scientific measurement may be precise but not accurate, and vice versa. A lot of metals' analyses have been carried out, but so far for Benin art most don't put much faith in it because of variations in metals content, nor is there much confidence in TL when it comes to Benin pieces. Willett and Sayre's statistical analysis is based on arithmetic possibilities, but not certainties.⁷¹ Familiarity with the objects, knowledge of Benin history, the authority of fieldwork, and attention to stylistic comparison remain the most valuable methods as R. Bradbury's brilliant historical analysis of the Ezomo's *Ikegobo* (Altar to the Hand) illustrates.⁷² One must add Blackmun's meticulous

– G. ZIMMER – J. C. EULE (eds.), *Bürgerwelten: Hellenistische Tonfiguren und Nachschöpfungen im 19. Jahrhundert*, Mainz 1994, pp. 77–81.

⁶⁹ N. LAWSON – J. NEVADOMSKY, *A Dummy's Guide to TL Dating*. Conference Paper. 74rd Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Anthropology Association (SWAA), San Diego, California 2002.

⁷⁰ P. T. CRADDOCK – J. PICTON, *Medieval Copper Alloy Production and West African Bronze Analysis, Part II*, in: *Archaeometry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1986, pp. 3–32.

⁷¹ WILLET – SAYRE, *The Elemental Composition of Benin Memorial Heads*.

⁷² R. E. BRADBURY, *Benin Studies*, London 1973.

iconography of ivory tusks published in numerous articles⁷³, and Paula Ben-Amos Girshick's Sherlock Holmes-like sleuthing in her essay *Who is the Man in the Bowler Hat?*⁷⁴

Scientific testing may be the Dr Jekyll of authentication in the Benin art world these days, but faking Benin bronzes is its Mr Hyde. In the journal *African Arts* and elsewhere scholars have commented on African art fakes, and the information on recently manufactured Benin pieces is cautionary. Herbert Cole⁷⁵ and Barbara Blackmun⁷⁶ purport that scientifically certified dates from European labs are offered as objective indicators to authenticate Benin bronzes that are not authentic. The manufacture of artificially altered Benin objects with scientific documentation is an international cottage industry, an addendum to faking them in the first places by industrious if unsuspecting casters and middlemen accomplices. The collusion of Benin's brass casters with European dealers is a grainy issue, no doubt, with Benin's casters' incidental participants. The trail leads to Hausa middlemen, who purchase raw castings and transform them into "antiquities," their long distance entrails impervious to national borders and continents. Curiously quaint reproductions from South Africa, Cameroon, and Ghana are also produced for the market.

For the moment: the occasional genuine object that pops up offsets blanket, if earnest, condemnations of casters' infidelities and agents' duplicities. Objects of historical value and museum quality show up from time to time, mostly in outskirt areas, under or outside the radar of fieldwork in Benin City. The altar to the hand studied by Bradbury is an excellent example since it is incontrovertible. Once owned by the Ezomo, stolen by one of his sons (of one of his many wives) in the mid 1980s, buried in a nearby backyard,

⁷³ See e.g. B. W. BLACKMUN, *From Trader to Priest in Two Hundred Years: The Transformation of a Foreign Figure on Benin Ivories*, in: *Art Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 1988, pp. 128–138.

⁷⁴ P. BEN-AMOS, *Who is the Man in the Bowler Hat? Emblems of Identity in Benin Royal Art*, in: *Baessler-Archiv N. F.*, Vol. 31, 1983, pp. 161–183.

⁷⁵ H. COLE, *A Crisis in Connoisseurship?*, in: *African Arts*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2003, pp. 1–8, 86.

⁷⁶ B. W. BLACKMUN, *A Note on Benin's Recent Antiquities*, in: *African Arts*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2003, p. 86.

recovered by the police, returned to the Ezomo's shrine, removed again right after the Ezomo died, procured by a prominent dealer in New Orleans, USA, and offered for sale at an undisclosed sum to the Metropolitan where it now resides.⁷⁷ A 16th chip mask photographed by Fagg is presently in a Benin City bank vault. However, the days of incidental major finds or unknown pieces of great merit is gone.⁷⁸

Technology, Change and the 20th Century

For those who see a gray sky in the grim saga of the market in fakes and sweat over whether a casting is authentically real, authentically fake, authentically reproduced, or crudely faked n' baked, brass casters see a silver lining in the continuing interest in their craft. Although there is more production in Benin City today than ever before, it is not documented. This is a sad but not unexpected commentary on the horse blinders worn by 20th century scholars who ignored the output, proficiency, and occasional excellence of 20th century casters having been mesmerized by the castings of earlier centuries.

Changes in brass casting technology and styles are the subject of this report. Paula Ben-Amos tells us that during the punitive expedition of 1897 the chief medical officer Dr. R. Allman, in 1897 happened upon the workplace of the royal brass casters.⁷⁹ His is the earliest European description of the lost wax process in Benin. In 1932 Eckart von Sydow wrote a short essay.⁸⁰ Later reports by William Fagg,⁸¹ Philip Dark,⁸² Timothy Garrard,⁸³ and Denis Williams⁸⁴ are

⁷⁷ BRADBURY, *Benin Studies*.

⁷⁸ W. FAGG – M. PLASS, *African Sculpture*, London 1966.

⁷⁹ P. BEN-AMOS, *The Art of Benin*, London 1980.

⁸⁰ E. von SYDOW, *Zur Chronologie der Benin-Platten. Ein kunstgeschichtlicher Versuch*, in: Jahresbericht des Württembergischen Vereins für Handelsgeographie und Förderung Deutscher Interessen im Auslande, Vol. 50, 1932, pp. 121–128.

⁸¹ FAGG, *Nigerian Tribal Art*.

⁸² DARK, *Benin Bronze Heads: Styles and Chronology*.

⁸³ T. GARRARD, *Benin Metal-Casting Technology*, in: P. BEN-AMOS – A. RUBIN (eds.), *The Art of Power / The Power of Art: Studies in Benin Iconography*, Los Angeles 1983, pp. 17–23.

⁸⁴ D. WILLIAMS, *Icon and Image*, New York 1974.

signal contributions. Dark's *An Introduction to Benin Technology* is the most authoritative because it describes casting techniques, but his commentary has a lingering bias for earlier pieces.⁸⁵ In a recent special issue of *African Arts* on the Benin Centenary, Charles Gore focused on one brass-casting family, linking lineages, historical associations, and casting ideology.⁸⁶

But the story is also about the evolution of casting technologies and an emerging commodity market. The 20th century has little to offer the scholar interested in contemporary Benin art since only the castings of the pre-colonial era bear the imprimatur of authenticity and legitimacy according to present art historical standards. There seems to be no way around regimes of knowledge, a hegemonic conceit that collectors, curators, and art historians reaffirm and shield. In the meantime, a century of artistic production has taken place, snubbed as tourist or kitsch art, and touted as inept, gross, and imitative. The judgment of a cut-off point sidelines artifacts that by other standards are not debased crude reproductions. Warped into an art historical imagination totalizing in its framing there is no time or style line for 20th century objects that would arrange that period of skilled and semi-skilled production into a satisfactory survey, meaningful placement and stylistic sequence. One peers back into a hundred years of vacuum.

Is a 20th century chronology now possible? The nearest to us in time, contemporary Benin art is farthest away in art historical research. There is no repository of 20th century Benin art. Evidence is dispersed among individuals around the world. Ferreting out fakes is more important than exhibitions on contemporary Benin brass. For curators and collectors, condemnation of contemporary pieces is more rewarding than constructing a genealogy of contemporary casters and casting families. Scholarly interest ranges from disinterest to disdain. The exhibition organized by Stefan Eisenhofer and his edited catalog *Kulte, Künstler, Könige in Afrika: Tradition und Moderne*

⁸⁵ P. J. C. DARK, *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology*, Oxford 1973.

⁸⁶ Ch. GORE, *Casting Identities in Contemporary Benin City*, in: *African Arts*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1997, pp. 54–61, 93.

in Sudnigeria is a rare attempt to incorporate modern castings from private collections.⁸⁷ Useful and exhaustive, too, is Barbara Plankensteiner's exhibition catalogue on *Benin Kings and Rituals*.⁸⁸

In fact, objects made after 1897 fit into a time of great changes in Benin history. The British restored the monarchy in 1914 under Lord Lugard's policy of Indirect Rule. Oba Eweka II rebuilt the palace on a diminished scale and reactivated court rituals including the practice of iwu tattoos, those mandatory marks of palace initiation. In 1927 he established the Benin Divisional Council School of Art, next to the water tower in front of the rebuilt palace. Casters and carvers now depended on commercial patronage, the output destined for a clientele of merchants, colonial officials and visitors. The Benin Divisional Council later morphed into a government arts council. These days sponsored dancing troupes perform at galas, fund-raisers and political events.⁸⁹

Ancestral altars also had to be refurbished. Domestic and chiefly shrines fallen into desuetude were re-primed with newly cast objects. Art historians call these replacement pieces (a term that also applies to objects where the dates of manufacture are suspect or unknown). The casting technology and motifs of the 1920s to 1950s hardly differs from that of the late 19th century in motifs and weight. A ponderous style and generous use of metal of the Late Period castings carried over into the next century.

In the early 30s Oba Akenzua II ascended the throne, and celebrated by killing an elephant. A brass plaque commemorates this event. Queen Elizabeth visited in 1953 with Prince Philip and this too is documented in brass.⁹⁰ Akenzua II's reign of 44 years saw the emergence of new social groups, with class interests opposed to the political traditionalism of the palace. In

⁸⁷ S. EISENHOFER (ed.), *Kulte, Künstler, Könige in Afrika: Tradition und Moderne in Südnigeria*, Linz 1997.

⁸⁸ B. PLANKENSTEINER (ed.), *Benin: Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria*, Gent 2007.

⁸⁹ J. NEVADOMSKY, *Casting in Contemporary Benin Art*, in: *African Arts*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2005, pp. 66–77, 95–96.

⁹⁰ B. PŮTOVÁ, *Vizuální reprezentace království Benin a jeho vládců: od období britské koloniální vlády až po současnost*, in: *Národopisná revue*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2014, pp. 32–45.

the late 1940s this erupted into urban street fighting in Benin City, and the *osun nigigio*, or war staffs, were resurrected as insignia of political rivalry, signifiers of secret cult practices in the political class struggles through much of the 1950s with the Alexander Commission unable to resolve the latent warfare between Ogboni and Owegbe (Otu Edo). The typical patrimonial vs. gerontocratic cleavage between palace and town analyzed by Bradbury added another dimension to the endemic factionalism that had racked Benin in other guises for centuries.⁹¹

After World War II Lebanese traders moved into southern Nigeria including Benin City, fulfilling the middleman import-export role. In the 60s the Peace Corps came to town, the idealism of volunteers an infectious surplus for schools and LGAs. Both the Lebanese and the Peace Corps had an impact on Benin arts and crafts. Castings became realistic and robust, black and tiger ebony was popular for chess sets, and carved ivory found a market niche. The Lebanese bought shiny castings to decorate their ornate and overstuffed homes while Peace Corps volunteers packed their embassy secured trunks with brass and ebony keepsakes for the folks back home. A lot was bric-a-brac, but the force of market demands modified traditional styles and added naturalism to brass and ebony work. The worst examples bore laughably lopsided ears and crooked eyes. Still, casters and carvers transformed folklore narratives into wood or metal; the combination of indigenous ingenuity and entrepreneurship added new stock to the corpus of plaques and statues.⁹²

Benin City looks like a conglomeration of villages with a hub of government offices and breweries at the periphery. By the time Oba Erediauwa ascended the throne in 1978, Benin City boasted a teaching hospital, a national university, and a burgeoning middle class that found modern residences in the suburb-like GRA more in tune with their lifestyle than traditional city

⁹¹ BRADBURY, *Benin Studies*.

⁹² J. NEVADOMSKY – A. OSEMWERI, *Benin Art in the Twentieth Century*, in: B. PLANKENSTEINER (ed.), *Benin: Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria*, Gent 2007, pp. 255–261.

homes. The GRA is now chockablock with schools, churches, kiosks, and mansions that oddly emulate Miami Beach's extravagant architecture, their compounds cluttered with decorated gates and biblical statuary visually kin to L.A.'s Forest Lawn cemetery. To the outsider, Benin City's GRA offers a fantastic postmodernist resolution of religious piety wedded to an African prestige-motivated consumerism, the Nigerian denouement of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.⁹³

The first king with a university degree (law, Cambridge University) and public administrative experience (Permanent Secretary), Oba Erediauwa parleyed change into a progressive conservatism, protecting the aura of kingship against a looming obsolescence, a near impossible task. These days kingship rituals vie in tenuous coexistence with modern government bureaucracies, commercial trade, and consumerism.⁹⁴

Shrines blip off the screen shot down by evangelical fervor. Economic malaise and political malfeasance lead to pessimism and fatalism; proselytizing movements provide solace and escape. So family shrines are denuded as children of princes, chiefs, priests, village headmen and elders, slough off ancient beliefs and sell or burn a heritage they relinquish and abhor.

As fundamentalism subverts local cosmologies, castigating traditional practices as satanic and believers as rustics (it is an incredible insult to call someone a "bushman"), little need arises for replacement shrine objects. No one wants "the work of the devil" as house décor or to be labeled as "bush," so few people buy an *Osun* head, altar to the hand, or ancestral staff. Promotion or retirement gifts in traditional motifs are not appreciated either. An astute Oba Erediauwa gives visiting bishops a brass casting of world-wide kitsch praying hands with ebony base.⁹⁵

⁹³ M. WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York 2008.

⁹⁴ J. NEVADOMSKY, *The Benin Kingdom: Rituals of Kingship and their Social Meanings*, in: African Study Monographs, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1993, pp. 65–77.

⁹⁵ NEVADOMSKY – OSEMWERI, *Benin Art in the Twentieth Century*.

The National Museum in Benin City might have served as a magnet to attract important pieces in local private hands and an acquisitions policy to purchase contemporary items to complement its collection. Except for the elephant plaque that commemorates Akenzua's coronation in 1933, nothing happened. The museum can't even serve as a repository for its own collection. Beak dusty cases and scribbled labels testify to objects on loan, but no one knows where. One can't even be sure that the objects on display are the real McCoys.⁹⁶

Security for the collection lies with a bored mostly non-native curatorial staff that harbors a grudge for Benin's historical hegemony or insouciance for the past. In 2001 the Ohenukoni of Ikhuen, a very old man, generously offered his 100 plus shrine objects to the museum at fire sale prices – scuttlebutt has it to prevent his senior son, a callous man no longer in Benin City, from inheriting them. Shortly after the museum's acquisition, the objects entered the market to end up in private hands. Under the usual time-will-tell-or-forget investigation, this in-one-and-out-the-other-door raised little dust, and is not much different from what happens in the rest of the museum system.⁹⁷

To wit: to thank Britain for support during the Biafran War, Head of State General Yakuba Gowon gave Queen Elizabeth a Benin brass during his 1973 state visit to UK. But dissatisfied with reproductions, he had contacted Dr. Ekpo Eyo, then Director-General of the National Commission on Museums and Monuments. Under duress Ekpo-Eyo turned over a queen mother head to Gowon. The queen's curator thought the head was a contemporary knock-off. In 2002 when the queen de-acquisitioned her backlog of state gifts Nigel Barley and John Picton authenticated the casting as dating from the early 17th century. As reported in the English press, the QM head, originally taken from Benin in 1897, had been returned to Nigeria in the 1950s to help set up the National Museum. Gowon's gift now appears as an odd kind of cultural property repatriation and a sharp setback for the British repatriation movement.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ EREDIAUWA, *I Remain, Sir, Your Obedient Servant*, Ibadan 2004.

⁹⁷ NEVADOMSKY, *Art and Science in Benin Bronzes*.

⁹⁸ F. WILLETT, *Benin*, in: H.-J. KOLOß (ed.), *Afrika: Kunst- und Kultur*, Berlin 1999, pp. 41–65.

Location, Style and Production Changes

Igun Street is the heart of brass casting in Benin City. The street is home to Chiefs Inneh and Ihama, their 14th and 15th century titles date to the introduction of brass casting and the organization of the brass-casters guild. The local government recently surfaced the road with interlocking brick pavers and built an entrance arch designed by Sir Victor Uwaifo, musician turned sculptor, to call attention to the guild. Over a dozen brass-casting families live on the Street and a few crossroads. Residence on Igun Street, the craft of brass-casting, and a central origin story bind the street's inhabitants together, although the origin myth is embellished by each family, and the craft of brass-casting has exploded into a cornucopia of styles. Nor is Igun Street a residentially encapsulated guild. Family offshoots live and operate workshops elsewhere in town, but maintain ties to the guild.⁹⁹

Chief Inneh's admonition to the brass-casters was simple: stick to traditional motifs and methods. Inneh wanted to keep the area thriving with the sale of reproductions, a strong forte. Prior to 1897 Igun Street butted the southeastern corner of the palace. An exit from the palace led straight into the guild quarters. The Oba's patronage was exclusive and his commission required Igun's casters to manufacture objects within the palace walls to ensure secrecy. Casters were rewarded with food, land, and maybe even wives plus the metal for casting.¹⁰⁰

The rebuilt palace is a hop-and-skip 200 yards from Igun Street and casters have goals that go beyond Chief Inneh's conservative injunction. No longer under royal mandate, their castings reflect a variety of styles from elongated, stringy Hausa herdsman reminiscent of Giacommetti to brass relief figures on red velvet backgrounds that look like mimics of a popular Tijuana tourist item; and an assortment of Western mythical and historical figures, including "Pappy" and "Mammy" Wata, spin offs of the Roman god Neptune, with companion mermaid. Rows of leopards are lined up on shop verandahs. One caster had the

⁹⁹ NEVADOMSKY, *Casting in Contemporary Benin Art*.

¹⁰⁰ BRADBURY, *Benin Studies*.

bright idea to make an American bald eagle complete with arrows and olive branches – K-Mart prototypic if it were a lamp base with shade.¹⁰¹

Typical of contemporary styles are queen mother heads, half (and sometimes full) body castings of Queens Iden and Idia as appealing for their regal hairstyles as they are for a naturalism of face and bust that transcends the convention of stylized form. In fact, they resemble well-coiffed young women who are dance troupe members. Contemporary styles are reminiscent of the early QM castings. A few years ago figures of a kneeling pregnant woman holding kola nuts in one hand and a cock in the other became popular, copied and recopied from the point of initial inspiration. This represents the mother of Aruaran, the giant of Udo, a neighboring village that once upon a time posed a threat to Benin. She is said to have been pregnant with Aruaran for three years before giving birth after an oracle ordered that she make sacrifices to Ogun, god of metal.

Few brass casters have formal training. One worked as a technician in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Benin, but the job description did not include casting brass. Another worked in a foundry in Ibadan run by Europeans. He cast machine parts and later translated that experience into brass casting. Unlike wood carvers, none of the casters sketch, nor are any draftsmen. A decade ago casters relied on the picture texts of Fagg and Dark; this has given way to commissions based on photographs supplied by the rich and famous (some seek immortality in brass or bronze for their parents and relatives – a new form of ancestor worship, or to commemorate a wealthy donor). Casters worth their salt keep a photo album of civic and religious commissions they show prospective clients. GS cell phones link casters to clients worldwide, and international orders are expedited through Panalpina, a shipping agency in Warri, or air-freighted from Murtala Mohammed airport in Lagos. Export licenses are easy to obtain.¹⁰²

The lost wax process (*cire perdue*) remains the tried and true method. In a nutshell: beeswax is modeled over a clay core, covered by an outer

¹⁰¹ Ch. GORE, *Casting Identities in Contemporary Benin City*, in: *African Arts*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1997, pp. 54–61, 93.

¹⁰² M. LAWN, *Major Companies of Nigeria*, London 1979.

Joseph Nevadomsky, Barbora Půtová, Václav Soukup

Benin Art and Casting Technologies

layer of clay, banded and dried, with muddy clay washes that fill cracks and cover the bands. The wax is melted and replaced by molten metal. Cooled, the outer clay is chipped away and the carbonized core reamed out, with the casting filed and chased. The last bellows driven furnace, with pieces of car inner tubes attached to poles pumped by human sweat, was abandoned about 1998. Air-conditioner motors mounted on original frames but without covers or casings supply compressed air to melt metal. One family, the Omodamwen group, located in another area of the city, has a modern gas foundry that handles large crucibles of metal and therefore very large orders. It also has more modern production line techniques. The major problem that casters on Igun Street face is lack of a modern foundry. The typical crucible holds 8–12 pounds of molten metal. Because castings are much larger now they require a lot more metal. Changes had to be made either in the molds or in casting procedures.¹⁰³

Technological differences between earlier castings and those of the 20th century include thickness, filing, grinding, chasing, and welding. Some recent casting jobs come close to mass production, a cottage industry that family and guild members support with their labor. Others cast commemorative or memorial busts and figures specially ordered by clients, or sometimes designed by the client. The filers/chasers are either family or contract labor, grinding is done with an electric hand-sander, an absolute must for the enterprising caster to cut down on time and effort.¹⁰⁴

Compounds on Igun Street are large and late rite clay can be dug from the backyard, but these days the clay is trucked in from Ikpoba River. Charcoal is brought in bags from villages, and resold at a stall midway down the street. The woman selling charcoal also buys brass and copper – usually old faucets, valves, and pipes, for resale. Wood is trucked in for heating the molds, to remove the wax for reuse, and for reheating them to prevent the molten metal exploding the mold as it is poured into it.

¹⁰³ NEVADOMSKY – OSEMWERI, *Benin Art in the Twentieth Century*.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

These figures are more naturalistic than the stylized objects of the past and, in the case of remembrance statuary, busts or full figures, modeled after posed or archival photographs. A recently cast bust is of a governor made for his 50th birthday. Modeled by a 17 year old boy it reminds one of a commemorate bust in Caesar's Rome or Renaissance Europe. Similar castings have a manufactured pedestal to add more grandeur to the commission.

Benin's brass casters have shifted to new markets. This means catering to Christian clients, businesses, and attracting overseas customers. Artisans fulfill orders for gate ornaments, testamentary statues, hotel foyer adornments, custom-made hallway niche busts, funerary and anniversary gifts, even out of stock car replacement parts. It is not unusual to see life size leopards at hotel portals, or cast effigies as memorial markers. The casters of Igun Street introduce design and production variations that suit the times. The procedures are as ancient in their complexity as they are now reinvented in technological ingenuity.¹⁰⁵

Artisans go beyond a mundane bow to tradition. Castings of crocodiles (some life size), fish eagles, and square necked giraffes are manufactured, as are seated lions (a stuffed seated lion, and now a taxidermist's rare and endangered snow leopard, finds a place during the annual Igue festival on the Ozolua shrine at the front of the palace). Since the Oba now owns two ostriches (a gift from a northern emir) running round the palace grounds, one expects these to find their way as models of cast art, too. There are commissioned castings that include: an eben (state ceremonial sword) decorated with the Nigerian coat of arms for the High Court (N40,000), a mace for the House of Assembly (N70,000), a hammered brass crown meant for a would be king (N20,000), a bas-relief plaque of Christ's resurrection destined for St Theresa's Catholic Church (N50,000), a nine foot Islamic brass calligram ordered by a local mosque (N90,000), and two half-size leopards bound for the entrance of the then newly opened Nikon Hilton Hotel in the new capital at Abuja

¹⁰⁵ S. M. VOGEL, *Introduction: Africa and the Renaissance*, in: E. BASSANI – W. B. FAGG (eds.), *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory*, New York City 1988, pp. 13–20.

(N250,000 for two). A large bust of Chief Awolowo completed a few years ago resides at the former University of Ife, now Awolowo University.

A popular source for the brass casters is folktales because they carry moral weight and tell a story in brass. The Greedy Hunter depicts a hunter with an elephant on his head but stops to kill an ant and add it to his day's hunting; an Oba in a Kola nut tree relates the story about the Oba and one of his powerful adversaries; the Oba is saved through the intervention of an ally. Traditional motifs in new configurations are increasingly popular such as large boxes made up of several cast panels welded together.¹⁰⁶

Ordinary job orders are for the very popular fleur de leis brass finials to top iron fences. Casters on Igun Street get around some of the intensive labor required for making finials by hand by first pouring hot, melted wax into molds; the resulting wax finials are encased in clay, heated to remove the wax and molten brass replaces the wax. This second mold is destroyed in the process, the finials are filed, and the initial molds are used over and over until the contract is finished. Casters making engine parts for automobiles use the broken part to serve as the imprinted pattern for casting the solid core.¹⁰⁷

Some artisans are not involved in the entire procedure, limiting themselves to the reproduction rather than the casting process. Lucky Oboh creates dramatic and bizarre wax over core figures, but has others cast them for him. A few years ago the casters of Igun Street considered purchasing a modern furnace and foundry so that everyone could cast their pieces at one location, but for logistical and other reasons this fell apart. Only the Omodamwen family operates a modern foundry. Because they operate like a large family enterprise and one of the members had prior foundry experience working for a European based company in Ibadan, a collective setup works for them.¹⁰⁸ The casters on Igun Street found another way. Lacking the equipment that could handle large crucibles for melting metal, and the

¹⁰⁶ B. PŮTOVÁ, *Vizuální reprezentace království Benin a jeho vládců: od období britské koloniální vlády až po současnost*.

¹⁰⁷ NEVADOMSKY – OSEMWERI, *Benin Art in the Twentieth Century*.

¹⁰⁸ GORE, *Casting Identities in Contemporary Benin City*.

tools necessary to cart large encrusted clay and wax cores without damage, they section the wax/core models into head, arms, back and front.¹⁰⁹

So far as there were only two academically trained brass casters in Benin City. The late Ben Osawe, an artist of international renown is a former student of Camberwale Art Institute in England. His work ranges from busts to monumental castings commissioned by civic, church, or corporate clients. Most of his work is found outside Benin City, in Lagos and Abuja. The pieces are “Roman-jointed,” cast in sections and “coupled” by welding. Osawe was a multi-media artist, as familiar with concrete statuary as he was with brass castings (a method now taken up by Igun Street and Oloton Lane brasscasters to allow for extremely large life-size castings and busts. Princess Elizabeth Olowu, trained at the University of Benin’s Faculty of Arts, models design but formerly could not cast her designs because women were circumscribed from casting in a patrilineal society (to keep the methods all in the family, and to enforce Benin’s all-purpose secrecy clause not to let outsiders and women know anything). That injunction drifted, and she has the largest foundry in Benin City designed by a British expatriate who taught in the University of Benin’s Faculty of Arts.¹¹⁰

Dark complained that brass-casters had the necessary technical skills but their creative world is confused by the march of events. Seeking inspiration from a residue of traditional themes sifted and altered through the years of change. Dark contends that the caster is conservative, and that the years since 1897 have not been conducive to artistic expression, the casters satisfying a naïve competence with stultifying regularity. This is an unfair assessment. Benin’s casters face a Catch-22. The more they emulate traditional pieces, the more they are accused of fraud. The more they explore outside the box, the greater the accusations of ineptitude for not matching the paradigm. Casters are aware of but not cowed by judgments of the western art academy,

¹⁰⁹ NEVADOMSKY – OSEMWERI, *Benin Art in the Twentieth Century*.

¹¹⁰ J. NEVADOMSKY, *Iconoclash or Iconoconstrain: Truth and Consequence in Contemporary Benin B®and Brass Castings*, in: *African Arts*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2012, pp. 14–27.

museums, and commercial galleries. Scholarship by contrast is caught in lockjaw allegiance to the past: the rigor mortis of an iconography that fails to position modern creations as a continuing narrative of Benin's art history. Instead of providing a platform for exploring contemporary brass castings, it exalted the classic brass and ivory production of the 15th–19th centuries. The castings of 20th century Benin only now are under study, at last receiving the attention the art closest to us in time deserves.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Despite the ongoing modernization of production technology, the current Benin bronzes may still be considered a form of restoration of traditional iron casting. Besides replicas of historic art forms, styles, motifs and techniques, technological innovations are becoming more and more often a part of the bronze artefact manufacture. Moreover, their manufacturing process is strongly influenced by the current economic international and local discourse. Although the influence the international art market has on final production of current Benin bronzes is undeniably innovative, we can say that the current Benin art is also still under the influence of the local art traditions and traditional iron casting techniques. Traditional Benin art became popular not only thanks to exhibitions of bronze artefacts, but also thanks to motifs that can be found in stamps, coins or posters issued on the occasion of various cultural events.

Abstract

The study is dedicated to reflections of Benin art after the 1897 British invasion. The analysis focuses especially on describing what happened with Benin artefacts that were part of the war booty taken by the British expedition that went on to sell them in auctions and exhibitions. The study emphasizes the role of traders and collectors who contributed to the formation of first private and later public museum collections of Benin art. The study also presents casting technologies

¹¹¹ DARK, *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology*.

and hypotheses dealing with the origin of Benin bronzes. The study aims to draw attention to the revitalization of traditional art of iron casting. Towards the end of the paper it is examined what influence the modern Western culture had on traditional iron cast production in the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords

Benin Empire; Benin Bronzes; Art; Artefact; Iron Casting