



## Head of an Oba

---

On display

**Title/Description:** Head of an Oba

**Born:** 1500 - 1550

**Object Type:** Figure

**Materials:** Brass, Bronze, Iron

**Measurements:** h. 230 x w. 213 x d. 215 mm

**Accession Number:** 232

**Historic Period:** 16th century - Early, Early period

**Production Place:** Africa, Benin City, Nigeria

**Cultural Group:** Edo

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

---

The ceremonial sculpted head of a Benin king, also known as the “Great Head”, is a royal headship of the Benin Empire in modern-day south-southern Nigeria.

The head of the Oba is made of brass, depicted with a woven cap accessorised by coral beads. Coral strings hang down on either side of the ears. From the forehead to the nose ridge, one bead stretches from the head accessory to above the nasal curvature. With a robust round face, the sharp evidence of naturalism is conspicuous. Spun around the neck is a whirled collar, showcasing imagery consistent with Benin monarchs and the royal dynasty. We can also see a round opening at the top of the head which could accommodate a moulded elephant tusk.

Benin, the centre of royalty in Edo State, South-southern Nigeria, prides itself as the custodian of traditional artefacts and figures in Nigeria. This figure gives a clear picture of the honour, prestige, rich cultural heritage, and power that the Kingdom of Benin held, dating back to the early 16<sup>th</sup>-century era. The Benin monarchy goes as far back as the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Traditionally, when an *oba* (ruler) dies, the title goes to the first prince, usually the first son. The new ruler must fulfil some requirements subsequent to his enthronement. He must build a shrine in his predecessor's name. The shrine is meant to serve as the communication conduit between himself and his dead father. For the preservation of the dynasty's legacy, the new shrine must contain sculpted and cast figures such as the Oba head. The figure is a vessel that enabled the spiritual link between the dead father and the living son, whereby the late father would transfer his powers to his son.

Bolaji Owoseni, March 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

This magnificent sculpture once formed part of an ancestral altar made to honour the deceased Oba (king) of the historic Kingdom of Benin. There were two funerals in the first half of the sixteenth century for which this sculpture could have been commissioned: the first was for Ozolua (c. 1480–1504), performed by his son Esigie (c. 1504–1547); the second for Esigie himself, performed by his son, Orhogbua (c. 1547–1580).

The sculpture depicts the idealised likeness typical of royal portraiture. Commemorative portraiture of this type is highly stylised and portrays the deceased in his prime. A cavity in the head would have originally accommodated a carved elephant tusk.

The Sainsbury Centre acknowledges the ownership of this object is contested due to the circumstances of its removal from the Royal Court of Benin in 1897 by British colonial action. Please see our online catalogue for more information.

Calvin Winner, May 2021

---

## Further Reading

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Art of Oceania, Africa, and the Americas from the Museum of Primitive Art. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969, no. 368.

American Federation of Arts. Primitive Art Masterworks: an exhibition jointly organized by the Museum of Primitive Art and the American Federation of Arts, New York. New York: American Federation of Arts, 1974, no. 73.

Newton, Douglas. Masterpieces of Primitive Art: The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978, p. 54.

Vasina, J. (1984), Art History in Africa, An Introduction to method, New York: Longman.

Blier, S. P. (1998), Royal Arts of Africa, London: Calmann and King Ltd

---

## Provenance

Benin City was the principal settlement of the Edo Kingdom of Benin, situated in the south of Nigeria. In February 1897 the city was attacked by British military, ending the ruling indigenous administration, and the Oba (King) Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (reigned 1888–1897) was exiled. The city was destroyed along with its Royal Palaces. The royal regalia and important religious and memorial sculptures that survived the raid, were looted by the combined forces of British Royal marines and other colonial forces. The Oba's son, Aiguobasinwin Ovonramwen, Eweka II (reigned 1914–1933) returned to Benin City in 1914, restored the city and Palace complex and the Oba dynasty continues today as a regional and cultural administration in Edo state, Nigeria.

The number of artefacts taken in 1897 is believed to be around 2,500, which were shipped to the UK

by the British Admiralty. About 40% of the objects were accessioned to the British Museum (700 works) and other works were given to individual military personnel. The remainder were sold at auction by the Admiralty to pay for the expedition, for example, at Stevens Auction Rooms, 38 King Street, London, May 25, 1897, followed by several sales at William Downing Webster, Bicester, between 1898 and 1900. The artefacts are now dispersed across museum collections, notably in Europe and the USA.

Formerly in the Pitt Rivers museum, Dorset (illustrated in the catalogue of 1900). Items from the Pitt Rivers Museum were sold on the open art market throughout the 1960's and 1970's.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from John Hewett in 1966.

Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

---