



Armlet

On display

Title/Description: Armlet

Object Type: Ornament

Materials: Gilt bronze


Measurements: h. 84 x w. 133 x d. 85 mm

Accession Number: 652

Historic Period: 18th century - Mid

Production Place: Africa, Benin City, Nigeria

Cultural Group: Edo

This is one of the finest examples of perhaps some fifty surviving gilt-bronze objects, all of which appear to have been made within a fairly short time, and, moreover, by a small number of highly perfectionist artists. Research on this subject has languished for many years, but has recently been stimulated by the appearance of a beautiful bronze bowl (Christie's, 1984: 44-5), which is by far the largest object to be so treated. It allows us to suggest with much more confidence the period in which the process - that of mercury gilding, which would have been introduced to Benin in the eighteenth century, perhaps by a naval armourer or other expatriate craftsman - was probably carried out. This was the time remembered in Benin history as the Eresonyen revival of bronze-casting (Ben-Amos, 1980: 34-8), following the collapse of the industry at the end of the Middle Period about 1650. Oba Eresonyen came  to the throne in 1735 and died in 1750; in his short reign he succeeded in establishing, and sometimes in re-establishing, many important traditions — of which excellence in craftsmanship is the principal feature.

This armband is in an artistic sense a more developed production than the gilt-bronze bowl, the decoration on which is incised (in the wax original), since here the Portuguese heads in particular are modelled (also in the wax) in extremely fine relief. The mudfish alternating with Portuguese heads refer to Olokun, ruler of the seas, and to the wealth which the Portuguese brought with them in the form of trade goods which the Bini of Benin regarded as luxuries, notably bronze manillas, coral beads and cloth.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 155.

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.

Following invasion and looting of Benin City in 1897 in the collection of Lieutenant (later Admiral) E. R. Pears.

Later in the collection of James Hooper, no. 1820.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury at Christies sale of African Art from the James Hooper Collection in July 1976.

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 1994.
