

this is one of a
series of resources
looking at different
vessels in the
Sainsbury Centre's
Collections

VESSELS

Head
of an
Oba



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INVESTIGATE:

LOOKING

Start by taking a good look at this vessel. Try to think about it before you read the information about it.

What do you see?



Maybe use these questions to guide you:

THINKING

- Who do you think this head represents?
- What do you think the vessel is made of?
- How do you think it would have been made?
- Why do you think the head is hollow?
- Do you think it used to contain something?
- How do you think it was damaged?
- How else might the head have changed over time?
- How heavy do you think it is?
- How do you think it would feel to touch?



Perhaps answer these questions (above) or ask your own. Do this individually, in pairs or groups.

How did you find this?

DISCUSSING

Do you agree with other people?

What are you most interested in?

What else do you need or want to know?



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IMAGINE :

- What is this person thinking and feeling?
- Who are they looking at? Is it you, or someone else? What could they be saying? Are they having a conversation? What is it about?



- Can you imagine what they are wearing? Could you draw the rest of their outfit?
- Look at the hair and the jewellery - what colours do you think these would be?



Another object with elaborate hair and jewellery



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- Do you think the head used to contain something?
- What might have been kept inside?
- Could it be the thoughts and dreams of the person?

- Where might this head have been used or displayed originally?



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INFORMATION:

Each object in the gallery has a label with some Facts and Figures. They highlight what we know, and what we do not.

Head of an Oba - this is the Title or Description of the object.

Africa, Nigeria, Benin City - The Production Place is where the object was made, in as much detail as possible.

1500-1550 - this is the date the object was made.

Brass, Iron - the Material the object was made from, perhaps suggesting how it was made too.

Acquired 1966 - the date that this vessel was given to, or bought by, the UEA.

UEA 232 - all of the objects in the Sainsbury Centre's collections have an **Accession Number**.

This allows us to keep records about each of them, and helps you to find out more about them online:

<https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/art-and-objects/>

Each of the objects in this resource have their Accession Number near them



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ILLUMINATE :

The Facts and Figures may have some of the answers, but there is so much more to know, to think about, and to understand.

This vessel comes from the kingdom of Benin, in what is now Nigeria, on the west coast of Africa.



Benin was a powerful and important trading hub between Europe and Africa until the late 1800s.

The head was originally part of an ancestral altar to honour a deceased male Oba (king), probably Ozolua who died in 1504, or perhaps his son Esigie who died in 1547.

This realistic-looking portrait head is a highly stylised depiction of the Oba represented in his prime. The sculpture is an example of the high level of skill and sophistication which the top craftsmen in Benin achieved.

The hollow head is very thin, and was made from cast brass, using a lost wax process.

The cavity in the Head of an Oba would have contained a carved elephant tusk.

In February 1897 the city of Benin was attacked and destroyed by the British military. The Oba was exiled, and the royal palace was looted.

Over 1000 years ago, West Africans smelted copper and zinc to make brass



More than 2500 important religious and memorial sculptures were shipped to the UK, and are now in museum collections across Europe and the USA.

The Sainsbury Centre acknowledges that ownership of this object is contested - due to the circumstances of its removal from the Royal Court of Benin.

Does this extra information change the way you see the Head of an Oba?

Is there now even more you would like to explore..?



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FIND OUT MORE

Here are a few suggestions for further exploration:



Photo p3
Essence magazine
Object Photos:
Pete Huggins

Sainsbury Centre online catalogue:

<https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/art-and-objects/232-head-of-an-oba/>

Sainsbury Centre podcast:

<https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/new-perspectives/>

VADS:

<https://vads.ac.uk/digital/collection/ARTWORLD/id/54/rec/1>

Hooper, S. and Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (1997)

Catalogue to the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection.
New Haven: Yale University Press in association with UEA.

Mack, John (ed.) (2005) Africa, Arts and Cultures.

London. The British Museum

https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Benin_art_Nov2015.pdf

Words that may be new to you:

- Alloy** - a new metal made by mixing two or more metals, to make it stronger or last longer.
- Smelting** - the extraction of metal from its ore by a process involving heating and melting.
- Casting** - an object made by pouring molten metal or other material into a mould.

Find out more about brass at Wikipedia:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brass>



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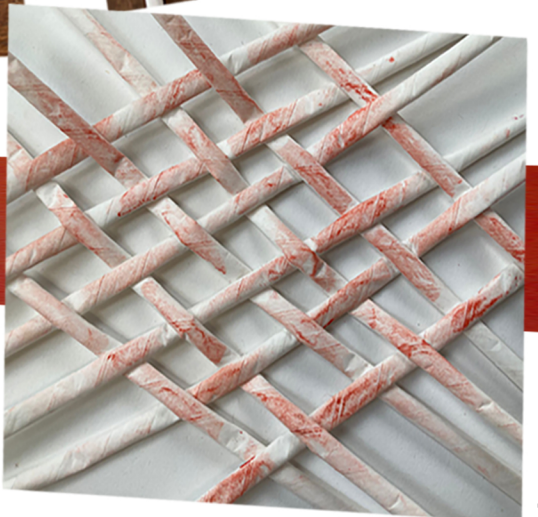
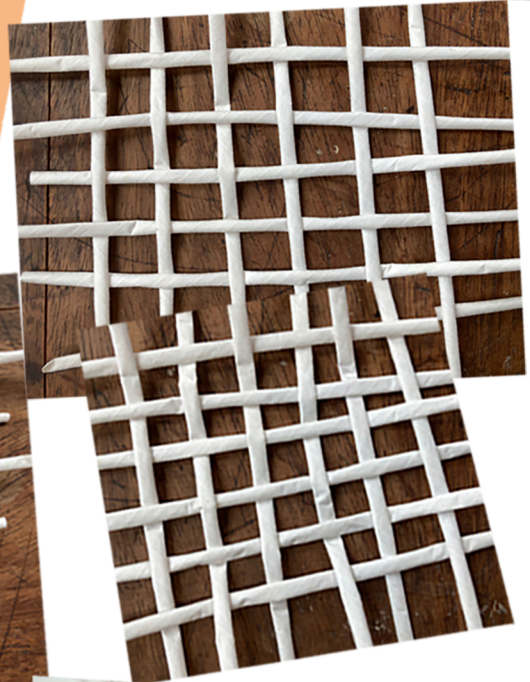
ACTIVITIES :

WEAVE :



Look at the headdress.
It's a woven pattern.
What material do you think
this could be representing?

Can you experiment with weaving?
You could roll or fold up strips
of tin foil, use paper straws,
or anything else you can find,
and weave or plait with them.



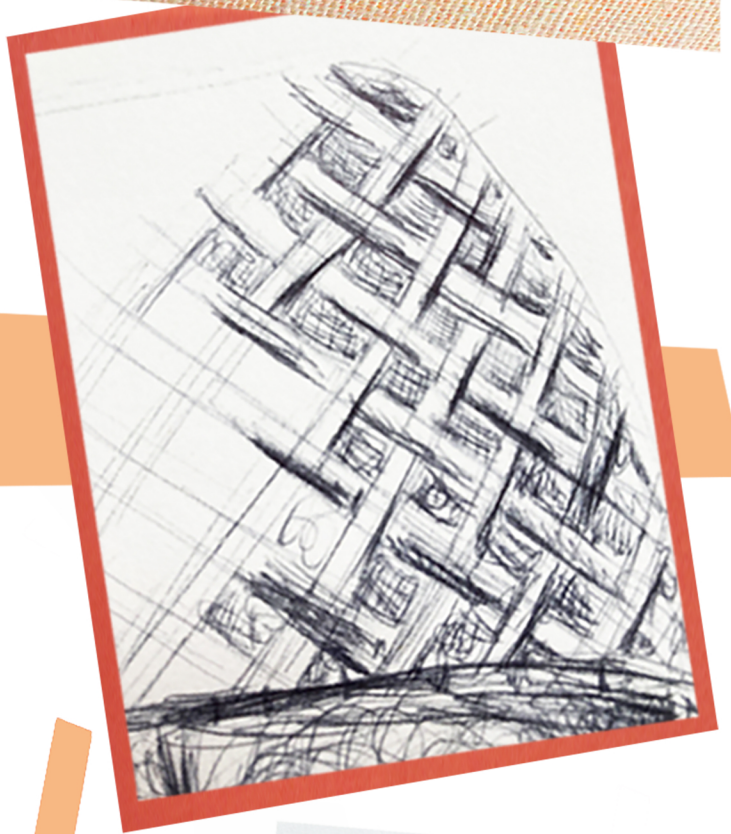
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ACTIVITIES :

DRAW



- Look really closely and make a drawing using biro or marker pen for the outlines and the patterns.
- Copy all the shapes and patterns that you see.



- Then add colour using watercolour, inks, and/or oil pastels.
- Your colour doesn't need to stay within the lines.

- Maybe do several drawings like this experimenting with different materials.
- Try not to leave any of your paper uncovered.

