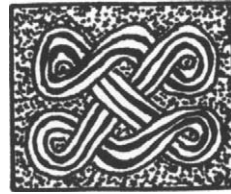


# BENIN ALTARS





# HEADS OF KINGS



Representations of the head are a major feature of Benin art, just as the head itself is a central focus of Benin ritual. According to oral traditions, even in the age of the Ogiso kings, before the founding of the present dynasty, wooden heads were made to commemorate ancestors, both royal and nonroyal. Benin traditions state that cast brass heads were introduced for royal ancestors during the reign of Oba Oguola, the fifth Oba, or king, in the current dynasty, who probably reigned in the late fourteenth century (Dark 1975:55). At least to the Edo today, the red color and shiny surface of brass make it both beautiful and frightening, properties fitting for images of a divine monarch (Ben-Amos 1980:15, 64).

Before 1897 cast brass heads were placed on altars dedicated to each of the past Obas of Benin, while heads in terracotta and wood were placed on the ancestral shrines of brasscasters and chiefs respectively (see cat. nos. 9–11; fig. 6). One of a new Oba's first ritual responsibilities was to establish an altar commemorating his father and to commission brasscasters and ivory carvers to create objects to decorate it. Such an altar is a tribute to the achievements of the deceased father, and a point of contact with his spirit. An early-nineteenth-century visitor to Benin estimated there were twenty-five to thirty such royal altars in the palace, and in 1897 seventeen of them were noted by a member of the British Punitive Expedition (Allman 1897:44; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 38; see also Blackmun 1991:90, n. 11). Since there had been thirty-five Obas up to that time, the altars for some kings had apparently either fallen into disuse or were not seen by foreign visitors. The objects on these altars were removed by the Punitive Expedition, but when Oba Eweka II was enthroned in 1914 he began the process of reestablishing the royal ancestral altars (fig. 16). Today in Benin there exist individual altars dedicated to Obas Adolo, Ovonramwen, and Eweka II, and a communal altar dedicated to all the previous kings. The current Oba, Erediauwa, who was crowned in 1979, has commissioned objects intended for an altar for his late father, Oba Akenzua II.

**1. Head of an Oba (view 1)**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th century

Fig. 16. Royal ancestor altar, dedicated to Oba Ovonramwen (r. 1888–97). Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1970. National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Archives, Smithsonian Institution



The royal altars are semicircular mud platforms, their surfaces packed hard and rubbed smooth, located in an open courtyard of the palace. On each altar are placed a number of brass heads, each supporting a carved ivory tusk. David van Nyendael, a Dutch merchant who visited Benin in 1699 and 1702, saw an altar with “eleven men’s heads cast in copper . . . and upon every one of them is an elephant’s tooth” (Roth 1968:162). Eight ancestor heads supporting tusks are pictured in Giovanni Belzoni’s 1823 drawing of an altar (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 38). Judging from photographs taken in the 1890s (Roth 1968:79), and from contemporary practice, the heads, always in pairs, are arranged symmetrically on the altars, with a cast brass altar tableau (*aseberia*) depicting the Oba and attendants in the center, along with other freestanding brass figures. Leaning against the wall at the back of the altar are rattle-staffs (*ukhurhe*), which are shaken to call the spirits; placed at the front are pyramidal brass bells, also rung in order to alert the ancestor’s spirits. Neolithic stone celts, believed to be “thunder stones,” are also found on the altars. The celts are “instruments of supernatural intervention” (Nevadomsky 1989:67), and a reminder of the sudden destructive power of Ogiuwu, the god of death (Ben-Amos 1980:64). In addition, ceremonial swords, *ada* and *eben*, are placed on the altar or on the wall behind it.

The royal ancestral altars are the settings for one of the two most important rites of divine kingship in Benin, Ugie Erha Oba, when the Oba honors the spirit of his late father and performs sacrifices to the royal ancestors and to the earth in which they are buried. Acknowledging his role as his father’s successor, the chiefs pay homage to the king and greet him in order of seniority. The rite expresses the continuity of divine kingship, and the altar before which it takes place provides the means by which the connection between the living king and his predecessors is made.



In honoring the deceased kings, the cast brass heads refer to the special role of the head in directing not only the body but also a person's success in life. According to British anthropologist R. E. Bradbury, "the Head (*Uhumwu*) symbolizes life and behaviour in this world, the capacity to organize one's actions in such a way as to survive and prosper. It is one's Head that 'leads one through life.' . . . On a man's Head depends not only his own wellbeing but that of his wives and children. . . . At the state level, the welfare of the people as a whole depends on the Oba's Head which is the object of worship at the main event of the state ritual year" (Bradbury 1961:134). Igwe, the annual state ceremony to which Bradbury refers, includes sacrifices to the Oba's head, in order to strengthen his power and that of the kingdom. It is in the same section of the palace where the Oba celebrates Igwe that his commemorative altar will be erected by his successor (Blackmun 1984a:235). The placement of brass heads on this altar is a vivid reminder of the role of the Oba's head in successfully guiding the kingdom throughout the Oba's reign.

The brass heads upon the royal ancestral altars are not portraits of particular kings but rather generalized portrayals emphasizing the trappings of kingship, especially the king's coral-bead regalia. Their facial features are not individualized, and it has not been possible to reconstruct which heads in museum collections commemorated which kings. However, the heads can be divided into several types, based upon the form of the coral-bead crown and collar, the relative naturalism or stylization of the facial features, and the overall size, thickness, and weight of the head. William Fagg, former keeper of the African collection at the British Museum, used these distinctions as the basis for dividing Benin art into early, middle, and late periods, progressing from the simplest regalia and most naturalistic features to more elaborate regalia and the most stylized features (Fagg 1963). Philip Dark, a British anthropologist concerned with the material culture of Benin, refined this typology while retaining the developmental sequence (Dark 1975).

According to Dark's typology of the brass heads, heads of types 1 and 2 are both relatively naturalistic, small, and thin-walled. Type 1 is distinguished by a tight-fitting bead collar that hugs the neck but does not cover the chin, and by the lack of a beaded crown (see fig. 17). Type 2 heads have a rolled collar that is worn low on the neck and a latticework bead crown with hanging bead strands (see fig. 18). Type 3 heads, such as cat. no. 1, are larger and heavier castings. They are distinguished by the bead collar that extends up to the mouth, giving the head a wide cylindrical shape, by the addition of bead clusters to the crown, and by the more stylized features of the face, particularly the swelling of the cheeks and enlarging of the eyes. In type 4 a flange is added around the base of the head. This flange is retained in type 5 heads, such as cat. nos. 2–4, which are further identified by the still greater exaggeration of the facial features and by the addition of

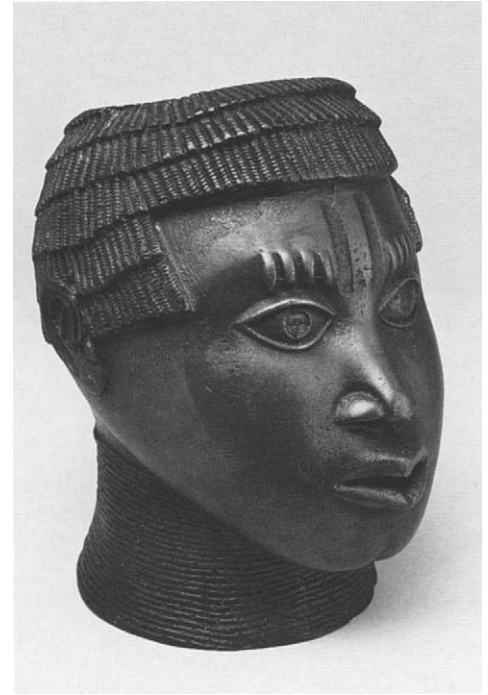


Fig. 17. Head of a man (type 1). Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, late 14th–15th century. Brass, iron; h. 8¾ in. (22.2 cm). National Museum of African Art, purchased with funds provided by the Smithsonian Institution Collection Acquisition Program, 1982. 82-5-2. Photograph by Bruce Fleischer, National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Archives, Smithsonian Institution

winglike beaded projections on the sides of the crown and arcs of beads extending in front of the eyes.

Fagg and Dark based their chronology of Benin art on several premises, including an oral tradition according to which brasscasting technology in general and the practice of making brass commemorative heads in particular were introduced to Benin during the reign of Oba Oguola (r. ca. late fourteenth century). Both of these innovations came from Ife, the ancient Yoruba city where highly naturalistic brass sculptures were made at least by the fourteenth century (Willett and Fleming 1976:142–43). The most naturalistic Benin heads were thus considered to be the earliest (roughly early fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century). These heads, being thin castings, also require the least metal, reflecting the scarcity of copper and its alloys before trade with Europeans was in full swing. Another oral tradition states that the winged crown seen in type 5 heads was introduced by Oba Osemwende (r. 1815–50), and thus Fagg and Dark propose that heads with this feature can be no older than his reign. The high bead collars seen on heads of type 3 are also depicted on Benin brass plaques, which are believed to have been made from the sixteenth to the late seventeenth century (see cat. nos. 35–37). The production of type 3 heads is thus thought to have begun during this period and continued into the eighteenth, when those of type 4 were also made. Heads of types 4 and 5, and some of type 3, are extremely large and heavy, reflecting the increase in the supply of brass that occurred when the stability of the kingdom was reestablished in the eighteenth century and trade with Europe flourished.

There are several criticisms of this proposed chronology for Benin art. Scholars have questioned the assumptions underlying the beginning and end of the sequence, namely Benin's artistic dependence upon Ife and the introduction of the winged crown by Osemwende, since both are based on oral traditions for which other, conflicting versions exist. These questions also throw into doubt the assumption that Benin art represents a progressive degeneration from idealized naturalism to exaggerated stylization (Ryder 1965; Rubin 1970; Lawal 1977). Paula Ben-Amos, the American anthropologist and Benin art scholar, has suggested that the type 1 heads may not be royal ancestral images at all, but rather trophy heads depicting conquered enemies. If this is the case, they need not occupy a particular point in the chronological development of royal heads, but instead could have been made at any time throughout Benin's history (Ben-Amos 1973:71; *idem* 1980: fig. 16). Frank Willett, the British archaeologist, illustrates two examples in the Benin Museum collection that support this view (Willett 1973: 16). According to American anthropologist Joseph Nevadomsky, brass heads representing the most prominent slain enemies of Benin were hung on the hooks of a large iron Osun staff, an emblem of the god of medicine, and placed at the shrine of war as part of traditional preparations for war (Nevadomsky 1986:42–43). A late-

nineteenth-century photograph illustrates such an iron staff with type 1 heads hanging from it (von Luschan 1919:348; Freyer 1987:19). These criticisms point out the need to reconsider and revise the chronologies proposed by Fagg and Dark. However, no one has yet developed a replacement, and their proposals must still be considered the best working hypothesis available.

Heads in the Perls collection representing Dark's types 3 and 5 (cat. nos. 1–4) share certain stylistic features that define these types. In all of them the lower part of the face, as it emerges from the collar, swells to resemble a section of a sphere. At the level of the eyes it abruptly joins the upper part of the face, itself curved like part of a smaller sphere. The eyes are large pointed ovals outlined by heavy rims, which in the case of cat. nos. 2, 3, and 4 are decorated with short hatch marks. These last three heads, all type 5, also have lightly incised eyebrows, a feature not found on earlier Benin heads. Two of the heads (cat. nos. 2, 4) also have a chevron of small circles below each eye. Above each eye are three raised oval scarification marks. These are called *ikharo*, “tribal mark of eye” (Nevadomsky 1986:42). They are believed to indicate gender, with three marks above each eye denoting Edo males and four denoting Edo females and foreigners, although this is not always the case (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 16). All of these heads, except for cat. no. 3, have inlaid iron irises in their eyes. According to Nevadomsky this creates the menacing glare appropriate for a man of power, particularly a divine king (1986: 42).

One of the heads (cat. no. 1) wears a simple caplike beaded crown decorated with clusters of beads and hanging beaded and braided strands. The beads of the crown are not set down individually at right angles to form a lattice pattern, as they are in cat. nos. 2, 3, and 4. Rather, the artist used long crisscrossing strands of wax with a raised dot marking the intersections. This feature is unique to type 3 heads, being found on more than three-quarters of them (Dark 1975: table 3). The crown depicted on cat. no. 2, with winglike projections at the sides, was introduced by Oba Osemwende, according to one oral tradition, and by Ewuare (r. mid-fifteenth century) or by Obanosa (r. early nineteenth century), according to others (Ben-Amos, cited in Tunis 1981:86). This type of crown has been worn by Obas in the twentieth century (see figs. 2, 11, 14, 47). The projections are said to suggest the barbels, or “whiskers,” of the mudfish, one of the primary symbols of Benin kingship (Blackmun 1984a:294), or to represent the ceremonial sword, *ada*, which is restricted to the king and highest-ranking chiefs.<sup>1</sup> This type of crown also features curving arcs of beads strung on a wire in front of the eyes. According to Akitola Akpata, a Benin chief, these are known as “spectacles” (Akpata 1937:9). On the back of the crown on cat. no. 2 is a tubular bead with a small square panel with incised designs below it. Cat. nos. 3 and 4 also depict the winged crown; in cat. no. 3 the wings and arcs are cast separately and riveted to the head, and on cat. no. 4 they are cast much closer to the



Fig. 18. Head of an Oba (type 2). Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th century. Brass, iron; h. 9¼ in. (23.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979. 1979.206.86

head than on other examples, perhaps owing to a weakness in the wax model. All three type 5 heads (cat. nos. 2–4) have a flange projecting around the base of the head, decorated with a guilloche pattern on top of which many motifs that denote the king's physical and mystical powers are depicted in relief. At the front is a stone celt, and at the back is the head of a cow, an animal often sacrificed to the royal ancestors. Arranged symmetrically around the flange are elephant trunks ending in hands holding leaves (emblems of the king's power, wealth, and occult abilities), leopards (symbols of the king's speed and ferocity), and more cow heads. These relief motifs appear often on objects attributed to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The fifth head in the Perls collection (cat. no. 5) is unusual in many respects. It resembles heads of Dark's type 1 in that it has a tight-fitting bead collar under the chin and no beaded crown, yet its face lacks the strong, firm contours, sensitive modeling, and smooth surface of most type 1 heads. Its patina is not original but has been created with various pigments, waxes, and clay materials. The thin walls and alloy of the head (97.3 percent copper, 2.3 percent zinc, 0.3 percent tin) are compatible with other type 1 heads (Craddock and Picton 1986:8–10, 23), yet other features are startlingly different from them. Although the coiffure of layered rows of ringlets is typical of type 1 heads, here each ringlet was impressed into the wax model with a length of cord, rather than created by adding a textured piece of wax. In addition, the ears are inverted from their usual shape. These two features are found on only one other Benin head, in the collection of the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, the Netherlands. William Fagg considers them both works of the early period and offers several possible reasons for their atypical features (London, South Kensington, Christie's, 1990a: lot 53). However, with no information concerning the provenance of this head or the one in Berg en Dal, such explanations are merely speculative and we must await further evidence for their dating and attribution.

1. Paula Ben-Amos 1991: personal communication.

### 1. Head of an Oba (view 2)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th century

Brass, iron; h. 13 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (33.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.2

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster

*References:* Webster 1895–1901: cat. 18,  
no. 57; London, Sotheby and Co., 1974:  
lot 83; Dark 1982: Z2/65.

*Exhibitions:* Greenvale, N.Y., C. W. Post Art  
Gallery, 1980: no. 77









## 2. Head of an Oba

Nigeria, Edo: Court of Benin

19th century

Brass, iron; h. 18 in. (45.7 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

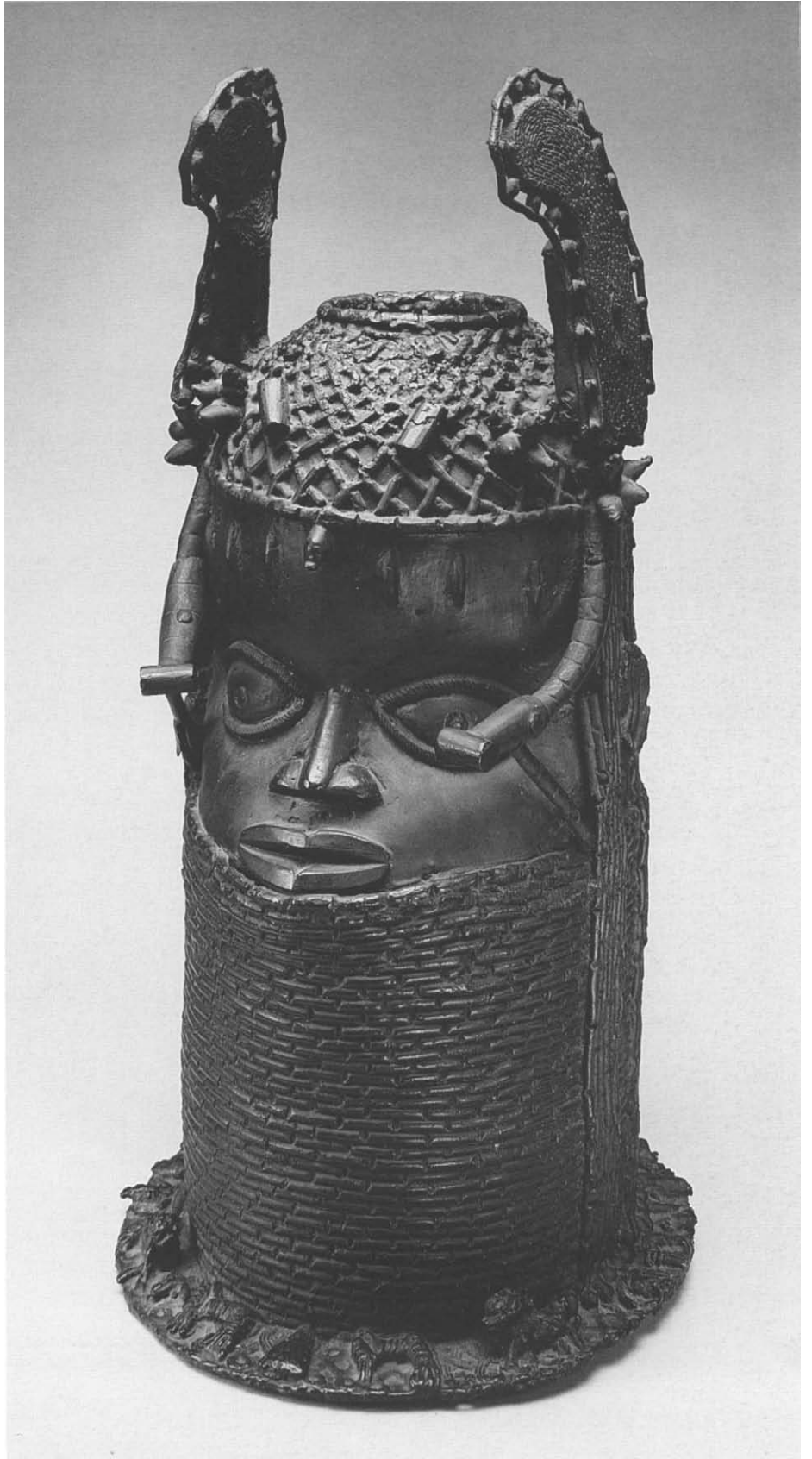
1991.17.3

*Ex Collection:* Dr. Ernst Augustin

*References:* London, Sotheby and Co., 1971:

lot 240; London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet and

Co., 1979b: lot 172; Dark 1982: Z1/55



## 3. Head of an Oba

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Brass; h. 23 in. (58.4 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.1

*Exhibition:* Greenvale, N. Y.,

C. W. Post Art Gallery, 1980: no. 79



#### 4. Head of an Oba

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

19th century

Brass, iron; h. 13¾ in. (34.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.6

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus

Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 16,

figs. 96–97; London, Sotheby and Co.,

1975: lot 183; Dark 1982: O/47.

*Exhibition:* Bloomington, Indiana

University Art Museum, 1980

#### 5. Head of a Man

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

15th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 9½ in. (24.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.9

*References:* London, South Kensington,

Christie's, 1990a: lot 53









# QUEEN MOTHER HEADS



Altars dedicated to past Iyobas, or queen mothers, like those of past Obas, are furnished with cast brass commemorative heads. These altars are found in the Iyoba's palace at Uselu and in the Oba's own palace. Like the altars to the king, the queen mother's altars also contain bells, rattle-staffs, and other types of sculpture, such as altar tableaus and cast brass roosters (see cat. nos. 23–25). The title of queen mother was introduced by the early-sixteenth-century Oba Esigie to honor his mother, Idia, for her help in averting two serious threats to his rule and the integrity of the kingdom (Ben-Amos 1980:24; Nevadomsky 1986:44). Like Idia, the queen mothers are known for their ability to bring their own supernatural powers to the aid of their sons.

Queen mother heads are distinguished by a special type of coral-bead crown with a high, forward-pointing peak, an elongated version of an elaborate coiffure known as “chicken's beak,” worn by high-ranking Edo women (fig. 19; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 25). The projection on the queen mother's crown is called *ede Iyoba*, likening it to the spiritually potent *ede* projection on top of the Oba's crown (Blackmun 1991:60). The right to wear a coral-bead crown is limited to the Oba, the queen mother, and the Ezomo, the Oba's principal war chief, and thus conveys the queen mother's importance in the Benin political hierarchy. An Oba has many wives, and the first one who gives birth to a son, who will succeed his father, will eventually become the Iyoba. She is granted the title several years after her son is crowned. Oba Erediauwa has recently named his mother, Aghahowa N'Ovbi Erua, as queen mother; she is the first to hold the title since 1897. The Iyoba advises the Oba and is the only woman considered one of the senior Town Chiefs. Like them she is responsible for administering a portion of the kingdom for the Oba. In her case, this is the former village of Uselu, which is now part of Benin City.

The queen mother heads can be divided stylistically into two types (Dark 1975). One group resembles the early types of commemorative heads for kings: they have a tight-fitting bead collar under the

## 7. Head of a Queen Mother (view 2)

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century



Fig. 19. Wives of the Oba wearing “chicken’s beak” hairstyle with coral-bead ornaments. Photograph by Joseph Nevadomsky



chin; the facial features are sensitive and relatively naturalistic; and they are extremely thin-walled, delicate castings (fig. 20; von Luschan 1919: pl. 52). A second group of queen mother heads is closer in style to later Oba heads, Dark’s types 4 and 5. As seen in cat. nos. 6, 7, and 8, these heads are large, thick-walled, heavy castings. They have a high cylindrical bead collar that comes up to the mouth. They also have a semicircular opening at the top to enable them to support an ivory tusk, probably on a wooden peg placed inside the head. In addition to the collar and the pointed bead crown with bead clusters on each side, the queen mother is shown wearing a beaded headband, which wraps around her forehead and is tied with a bow in the back, a type worn usually by male chiefs in Benin (see fig. 48). As on the heads of Obas, the lower part of the face balloons outward, and the eyes, inlaid with iron irises, are enlarged in an exaggerated, heavily outlined stare. In cat. nos. 6 and 7 the rims around the eyes are carefully incised with regular, narrowly spaced striations. Above each eye are four raised *ikharo*, or gender marks. The flanges around the bases of these heads are less ornate than those on the kings’ heads. They are decorated with the looped strap motif, and cat. nos. 7 and 8 also have a single elephant-trunk/hand-with-leaves motif at the front. Like the heads of kings, the queen mother heads are dominated by the sheer quantity and extent of their coral-bead regalia, which frames the face at top, bottom, and sides, alters its natural contours, and gives its human elements an extraordinary aspect.

On the basis of their similarity to Dark’s type 4 and 5 kings’ heads, these queen mother heads are dated to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This seems to have been a period when altars to the queen mothers became more elaborate, as indicated by the quantity of these heads (Dark 1975:88–89) and by the creation of other forms of sculpture, such as altar tableaus and roosters, to be placed on the altars. Surprisingly, no objects dedicated to the queen mothers have been attributed to the middle period of Benin art, from the mid-sixteenth through the seventeenth century, although several women held the title during that time.



Fig. 20. Head of a queen mother. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th century. Brass; h. 20 in. (50.8 cm). Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. III C 12507

**6. Head of a Queen Mother**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–19th century  
Brass, iron; h. 20½ in. (52.0 cm)  
Lent by Katherine Perls









**7. Head of a Queen Mother  
(view 1)**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 21 in. (53.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.146

*Ex Collection:* Lee Ault



**8. Head of a Queen Mother**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

18th–19th century

Brass, iron; h. 21 in. (53.3 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.4

*Ex Collection:* Dr. Eisenbeiss

*Reference:* London, Sotheby and Co.,  
1972b: lot 168



# TERRACOTTA HEADS



The brasscasters of Benin traditionally make heads of terracotta as well as brass. Today in Benin these are placed on the ancestral altars of members of the brasscasters' guild (Willett 1973:17; Ben-Amos 1980:15). They distinguish the brasscasters' altars from those of kings, where heads of cast brass are used to honor royal ancestors, and from those of chiefs, whose commemorative heads are made of wood, sometimes decorated with brass sheets. The use of terracotta seems particularly appropriate for the brasscasters' commemorative heads, because the process of modeling clay for the terracotta heads is virtually the same as that of modeling wax for cast brass heads.

The senior titleholder of the brasscasters' guild, Ineh n'Igun Eronmwon, is the direct descendant of Igueghae, the brasscaster who according to tradition came from Ife during the reign of Oba Oguola (ca. late fourteenth century) to teach his skills to Benin craftsmen. Terracotta heads now in the collection of the Benin Museum are said to have been brought to Benin by Igueghae himself to use as models in teaching (Willett 1973:17; Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960:15). The actual Ife origin of these heads is dubious, as Babatunde Lawal has pointed out, because their style is clearly related to the art of Benin and not to that of Ife (Lawal 1977:198).

Terracotta heads were once used more widely than they are today. According to oral traditions they were placed on the paternal ancestral altars of the first kings of Benin, the Ogiso dynasty, who probably ruled before 1300 (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 12). In the past terracotta heads were also placed on altars in the quarter of Benin known as Idunmwun Ivbioto, "the sons of the soil," which was built during the Ogiso period, and in Idunmwun Ogiefo, the ward guild responsible for purifying the earth after taboos had been violated (Ben-Amos 1980:15). Their meaning in Benin ritual today may also be more varied than previously supposed. Joseph Nevadomsky observed that at the climax of the coronation of Oba Erediauwa in 1979, the coral-bead crown placed on his head had been kept on a terracotta head from which a brass head would later be cast (Nevadomsky 1984:52).

## 9. Head

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Terracotta, sacrificial materials;

h. 6½ in. (16.5 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.7

*Ex Collection:* Morton Lipkin

*Reference:* New York, Sotheby's,  
1988: lot 112

*Exhibition:* New York, Grey Art Gallery,  
1981: no. 9

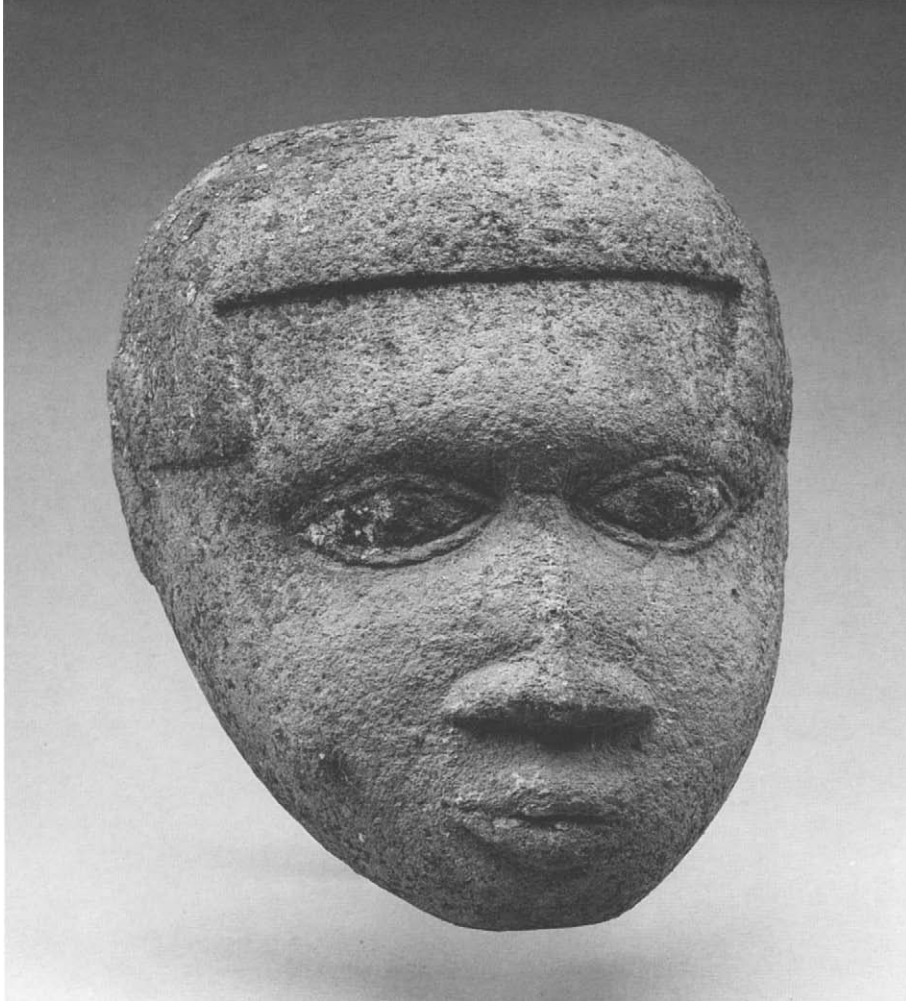


Most of the terracotta heads display the low, tight-fitting bead collar and coiffure of overlapping rows of ringlets that characterize brass heads of Dark's type 1 (see fig. 17). Many of the terracotta heads also resemble the type 1 brass heads in the sensitive modeling of their facial features, as can be seen in cat. no. 9. The cheeks are rounded but not swollen, and the fullness is most evident at the sides rather than the front of the face. The eyes are pointed ovals whose outlines, though usually thicker than those on the type 1 brass heads, often retain the deeper top lid that is seen on them. The hair is usually somewhat less delicately and meticulously executed on the terracotta heads than on the brass ones. In such heads as cat. no. 9, the separate layers and individual ringlets are distinguished by short, deep incisions. In others, shallower incisions create an overall grid pattern of perpendicular lines. Although mostly eroded in the case of cat. no. 10, this feature, as well as the small eyes, delicate mouth, and relatively flat, wide face, links cat. no. 10 to a similar example in the Benin Museum (Willett 1973: fig. 10).

Cat. no. 9 resembles the faces of figures on Benin plaques (see cat. nos. 35–46) and on figures believed to be of the same period as the plaques, the sixteenth to seventeenth century (see cat. no. 15). Cat. no. 10 has been tested by thermoluminescence and found to have been made sometime between the sixteenth and eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The terracotta heads seem to have been made over a longer period of time than Dark postulated for the brass heads that share the same features (early fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century), and therefore support the view that the brass type 1 heads may not be the earliest brass royal commemorative heads, but rather heads made for other purposes at other periods of Benin's art history.

There are some terracotta heads that feature extremely puffed cheeks and/or a high beaded collar like Dark's type 3 and type 5 brass heads of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Willett 1973: fig. 11; Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: pl. iv). While it has neither of those distinctive features, cat. no. 11 has another characteristic of late-period Benin art, the lightly hatched eyebrows. This head is distinct from other Benin terracotta heads in its exceptionally wide, almost spherical shape and the roughness and irregularity of the features, especially the thick-lidded yet narrow and elongated eyes, the rather straight and unarticulated mouth, the C-shaped ears, and hastily incised hair. These features relate more closely to the unfired mud sculptures found in Olokun shrines in chiefs' houses in Benin City and certain Edo villages (Ben-Amos 1973; Beier 1963). The mud shrine sculptures are made not by members of the brasscasters' guild but by skilled amateur artists, men and women known as Omebo. Like the Olokun mud sculptures, cat. no. 11 has a spontaneity and individuality that are rare in Benin court art.

1. Daybreak Nuclear and Medical Systems, Guilford, CT; reference no. 201A60.

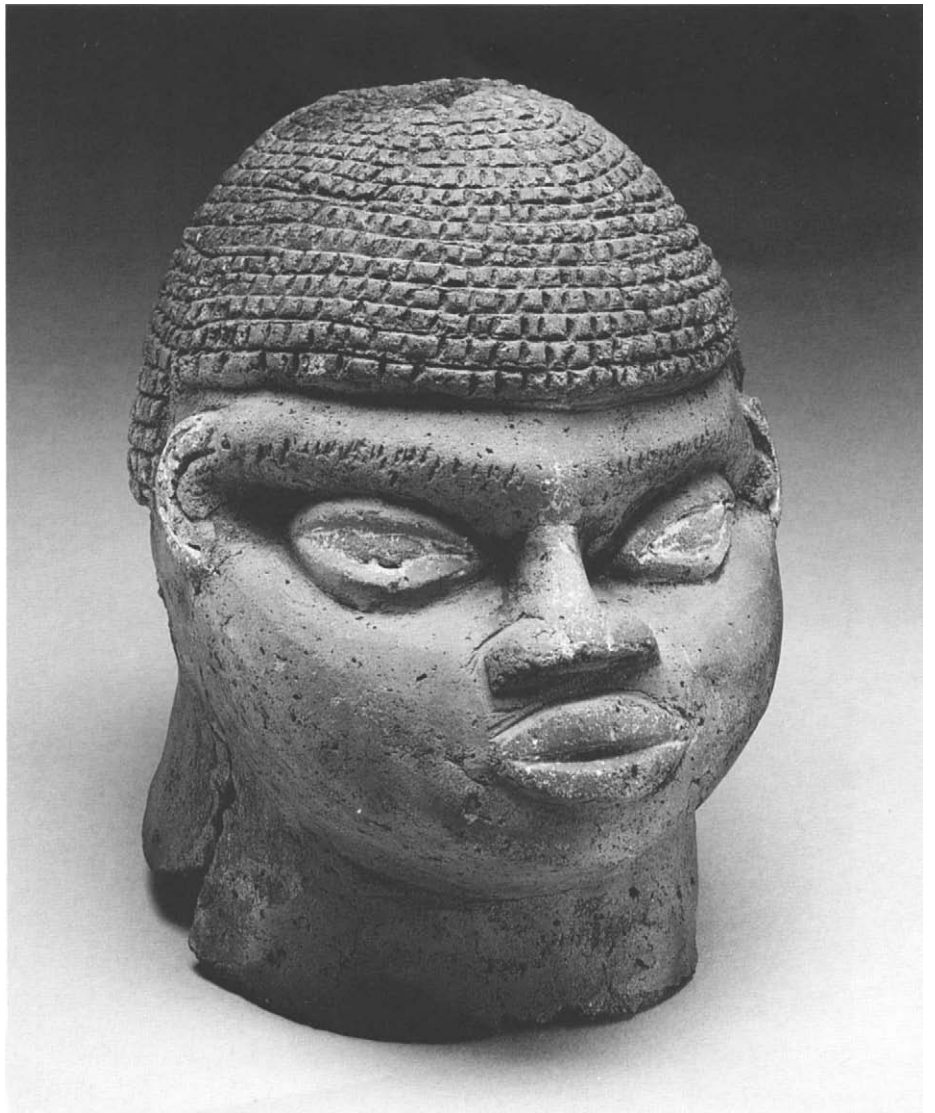


**10. Head**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–18th century

Terracotta, pigment; h. 7 in. (17.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.8



**11. Head**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
20th century

Terracotta, pigment; h. 9 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
(23.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.5



