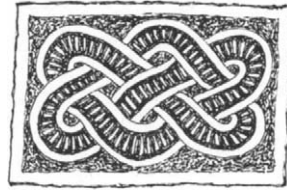


# PALACE PLAQUES







# PALACE PLAQUES



The Oba's palace in Benin, the setting for the royal ancestral altars, was also the backdrop for an elaborate court ceremonial life in which the Oba, his warriors, chiefs and titleholders, priests, members of the palace societies and their constituent guilds, foreign merchants and mercenaries, and numerous attendants and retainers all took part. An engraving published in 1668 by Olfert Dapper shows some of the palace's high-turreted buildings and a lively procession of the king and his courtiers (fig. 5). Dapper reported, "The King shows himself only once a year to his people, going out of his court on horseback, beautifully attired with all sorts of royal ornaments, and accompanied by three or four hundred noblemen on horseback and on foot, and a great number of musicians before and behind him, playing merry tunes on all sorts of musical instruments, as is shown in the preceding picture of Benin City. Then he does not ride far from the court, but soon returns thither after a little tour. Then the king causes some tame leopards that he keeps for his pleasure to be led about in chains; he also shows many dwarfs and deaf people, whom he likes to keep at court" (quoted in Roth 1968:74).

The palace, a vast sprawling agglomeration of buildings and courtyards, was also the setting for one of the most fascinating art forms created in Benin, rectangular brass plaques whose relief images portray the persons and events that animated the court. The only contemporary reference to the plaques occurs in an eyewitness description of the palace complex written in the early seventeenth century and recorded by Dapper: "It is divided into many magnificent palaces, houses, and apartments of the courtiers, and comprises beautiful and long square galleries, about as large as the exchange at Amsterdam, but one larger than another, resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered with cast copper, on which are engraved the pictures of their war exploits and battles, and kept very clean" (quoted in Roth 1968:160).

About nine hundred of these plaques survive today; contrary to Dapper's account, their figures were not engraved but were cast in

**36. Plaque: Warrior Chief, Warriors, and Attendants**  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

relief with details incised in the wax model. They were hung on the pillars of the palace by nails punched directly through them. When the palace was seized by the British Punitive Expedition, the plaques were no longer on display, but according to Reginald Hugh Bacon, an eyewitness, were found “buried in the dirt of ages, in one house” (cited in Freyer 1987:40). This is an apparent exaggeration: they were not literally buried, but rather stored, probably in the part of the palace belonging to Iwebo, the palace society that includes the keepers of the regalia and the guilds of craftsmen who create it (Blackmun 1984a:204). One elderly chief who was a palace attendant prior to 1897 recalled that the plaques “were kept like a card index up to the time of the Punitive Expedition, and referred to when there was a dispute about courtly etiquette” (Willett 1971:105).

The rectangular plaques exist in two formats. In one, the long vertical sides are turned back, creating an edge about ½ inch deep, usually decorated with an incised guilloche pattern (e.g., cat. nos. 35, 36, 44). In the other format, which is much narrower, the turned-back edges are missing and the design of the plaque background ends abruptly, as if cut off (see cat. nos. 37, 39, 40). These variations probably reflect in some way the size and shape of the pillars and the arrangement of the plaques on them.

The plaques are generally about ⅛ inch thick. Their backs feature roughly shaped hollows where the figures are located, so that the metal is of uniform thickness throughout. Marks in a variety of patterns, such as the raised linear design near the bottom in fig. 39, are found on quite a few of the plaques, but their significance is not known.

The backgrounds on the front of most of the plaques are incised with foliate patterns with one to four leaves, which Dark identified as *ebe-ame*, or the “river-leaf” design (1973:73). According to Ben-Amos, these leaves are used in healing rites by priestesses of Olokun, the god of the sea (1980:28). A few of the plaques have as their background design a circled cross (Fagg 1963: pl. 20), which Ben-Amos also associates with Olokun, along with the relief designs in the corners of some of the plaques (e.g., cat. nos. 35, 38, 41, 43, 44). These include rosettes, signifying the sun that falls into the sea each day, crocodiles, fish, and the heads or torsos of Portuguese.

Although some of the plaques represent “war exploits and battles” as Dapper reported (see, for example, Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 27), the vast majority of them depict the ceremonial life of the court. Most of the plaques portray static figures singly, in pairs, or in small groups hieratically arranged around a central figure as seen in fig. 40. The subject of this plaque may well be one of the royal processions described by Dapper. The king on horseback is attended by warriors who shield him and pages who support his arms. The figures’ heads are generally large in relation to the rest of the body, and the scale of the figures reflects their importance within the composition. This use of

“hierarchical proportions” is one of the key features of Benin art. While it disregards the actual size of figures and objects and ignores perspective, it allows the Benin brasscasters to emphasize what is important to them: the relationship of one figure to another in the Benin court hierarchy. Costumes, ornaments, hairstyles, weapons, musical instruments, and other objects used in the palace are portrayed in meticulous detail that clarifies the role, status, and specific action of the figures. The identity of these figures can sometimes be determined by comparing their costumes and regalia to those seen at Benin palace ceremonies today. However, as Joseph Nevadomsky has pointed out, this must be done cautiously, since much of contemporary ceremonial costume in Benin has been reintroduced and based upon styles of dress visible in the pre-1897 art forms, including the plaques (Nevadomsky 1986:46).

Dating the palace plaques is one of the key questions in the history of Benin art and has yet to be fully and satisfactorily resolved. According to an oral tradition collected by Lieutenant E. P. S. Rouppell, one of the British colonial officers who occupied Benin after the Punitive Expedition, the plaques were first produced during the reign of Oba Esigie in the early sixteenth century. In this account (quoted in Roth 1968:229–30), a “white man” named Ahammangiwa (a name of uncertain origin) came to Benin with others in the reign of Esigie and “made brasswork and plaques for the king. . . . The king gave him plenty of boys to teach.” The next Oba, Esigie’s son Orhogbua, waged war against the Igbo, and when he returned with his captured enemies, “Osogbua [*sic*] called Ahammangiwa and his boys, and asked them if they could put them in brass; they said ‘We can try,’ so they did and those are they—then the king nailed them to the wall of his house.” Paula Ben-Amos points out that while it is not clear whether this tradition refers to the origin of the plaques or the origin of brasscasting in general, it nevertheless places the origin of the plaques in the period of Portuguese contact with Benin and shows the conscious relationship between the plaques and historical events (Ben-Amos 1980:28; Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:13).

William Fagg proposed that the plaques were made from the middle of the sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century. He used the period of plaque production to define the middle period in his tripartite chronology of Benin art (see cat. nos. 1–5; Fagg 1963:33). He used the oral tradition recorded by Rouppell to establish the mid-sixteenth century as the *terminus post quem* for the creation of the plaques and proposed the end of the seventeenth century as the *terminus ante quem* because of the absence of any references to the plaques in European descriptions of the palace after that date. David van Nyendaël, for example, a Dutch trader who visited Benin in 1699 and 1702, described in some detail the palace architecture and the wood and brass sculptures within it, but he made no mention of the plaques (Bosman 1967:463–64).



Fig. 39. Rear view of plaque, cat. no. 39

Subsequent scholars have attempted to refine the dating of the plaques. Ben-Amos, in discussing the numerous references in the background and corners of the plaques to Olokun and the Portuguese who came to Benin from across his realm beginning in 1485, seems to suggest a strong connection between plaque production, Portuguese presence in Benin, and the reign of Esigie, a time when “the powers of the sea worked behind the Oba to strengthen and expand the kingdom” (Ben-Amos 1980:29). Such a connection implies that the making of the plaques began before the middle of the sixteenth century, a belief shared by Philip Dark, who further suggested that the plaques ceased to be made about 1640, when oral traditions say that Oba Ahenzae dissipated the royal treasury, depleting its reserves of brass and the means with which to make the plaques (Dark 1975:58). Irwin Tunis, an American scholar of Benin art, also suggests that plaque production ended early in the seventeenth century (Tunis 1983:52). Until further information or analysis is available, however, it seems safest to assume that the plaques were made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Attempts have also been made to arrange the plaques into a developmental sequence. Fagg isolated a few plaques that stand out from the others because of their active compositions, incorporation of motion and space, and imaginative use of the rectangular format. He attributed these to a few individual brasscasters (e.g., Master of the Circled Cross, Master of the Leopard Hunt, Master of the Cow Sacrifices), who he assumes flourished during the early years of plaque-making, before the “vertically regimented and thoroughly static mode came to be actively preferred” (Fagg 1963:33–35). Dark divided the plaques into three groups based upon the depth of relief, and proposed that those with the lowest relief are the earliest, those with the highest relief the latest (Dark 1975:58–59; Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960:21–22). These two views are based upon an underlying assumption regarding Benin art in general: that it developed from relative naturalism to relative exaggeration of the human form, from simple to complex, from “classic” to “baroque” forms, and from thin to thick and heavy castings. At this point in Benin studies, however, we need to know more about the style, iconography, placement, and technique of the plaques before a meaningful chronological sequence can be proposed. Paul Craddock, archaeometallurgist at the British Museum, has shown that analysis of the metal content of the plaques is not a useful criterion for dating them (Craddock and Picton 1986:11).

The origin of the plaque form itself has also been a topic of interest to scholars. Fagg and Dark have suggested that their rectangular format and relief technique reflect European influence (Fagg 1963:33; Dark 1973:4). Dark lists a number of items that the Portuguese may have carried in their ships and that may have inspired the plaque format, including European illuminated books, small ivory caskets with carved lids from India, and Indian miniature paintings. The quatrefoil “river leaves” incised on the background of the plaques

and the relief rosettes cast in the corners may also have their origin in European or Islamic art (Sieber, cited in Ben-Amos 1980:28). In contrast, Babatunde Lawal, a Nigerian art historian, feels that the plaques are indigenous to Benin or elsewhere in southern Nigeria. He cites examples of relief carving in southern Nigerian art, including carved wooden doors, drums, and boxes, which might have suggested the idea for relief decoration on the pillars (Lawal 1977:199). A local Benin source for the concept of relief figures within a rectangular format can possibly be identified in figurative panels held up on poles as part of *ekasa*, a dance performed after the death of an Oba or Iyoba (Nevadomsky 1984:49, 51). The *ekasa* panels contain relief figures made of cloth and are decorated with mirrors and brass cutouts. The figures are arranged in the stiff, symmetrical, usually tripartite compositions that are also frequently seen on the brass plaques. Like the plaques, *ekasa* is said to have originated during the reign of Esigie. Further study of *ekasa* may illuminate questions pertinent to the plaques.

We may never know precisely how the plaques were arranged on the pillars in the Oba's palace, but we do know that they were not viewed as separate entities. Their interpretation depends to a large extent on their relationships to each other (Tunis 1981:31). Barbara Blackmun has suggested that the plaques were arranged to illustrate concepts or events, along the lines of the arrangement of individual figures on the carved altar tusks (Blackmun, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:84). This could have been done, for example, by arranging the single-figure plaques so that the most important ones were in the center, flanked by subordinates. Furthermore, as Blackmun points out, since an individual may wear a variety of different regalia on different occasions, the context in which he is shown, expressed through the arrangement of the plaques, is all the more important in interpreting the figures on them. Blackmun's comprehensive analysis of the figures on the tusks, as well as her cogent remarks about the interpretation of a plaque in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, point the way toward future studies of Benin plaques (Blackmun 1984a; Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:84–86).

Cat. no. 35 is an example of the importance of context in interpreting the figures on the plaques. It depicts a figure wearing a coral-bead covered cap with a feather on one side, a high beaded collar or *odigba*, and long strands of beads on his chest. He also wears spiral bracelets and beaded anklets, and at least two wrapped skirts of richly patterned and textured cloth tied with a sash. While most of these elements are worn by many high-ranking chiefs, the swag or belt of beads at the figure's right hip is found on few figures depicted in Benin art. It was noted as part of the king's regalia by the English sea captain James Fawcner, who visited Benin in 1825 (Roth 1968:26). Identically garbed figures, complete with the bead belt, are seen on other plaques. He may appear, as here, as a single figure, but more fre-

Fig. 40. Plaque: Mounted King and Attendants. Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin, 16th–17th century. Brass; h. 19½ in. (49.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965. 1978.412.309



quently he appears as the central figure flanked by attendants, as in fig. 40 (see also von Luschan 1919: figs. 221, 222, pl. 24; Dark 1973: pls. 11, 49). His appearance on such multifigure plaques further suggests that the figure on cat. no. 35 represents a person of great importance. Barbara Blackmun has found similar figures on carved altar tusks, where he is often accompanied by foreign figures, which led her informants to identify the figure as Oba Esigie, who reigned in the early sixteenth century when Portuguese presence in Benin was at its peak (Blackmun 1984a:351–52). She cautions that identical figures on the plaques and on the tusks may have different meanings. Knowing what plaques were placed next to this one on the pillars might help to confirm whether the figure depicts Esigie, as it does on the tusks.

The figure holds a slender rod in his right hand. It represents a peeled branch known as *unwenrhiontan*, or “squirrel’s whip,” “a



medicinally fortified wand, which functions as a pilot or guide and deflects danger on the path” (Nevadomsky 1989:66). These wands are found on many other plaques, in the hands of a variety of figures (see cat. nos. 39, 45). They were noted as early as the 1590s by Dutch chronicler D. R. and are part of the paraphernalia of many types of worship in Benin (Blackmun 1984a:266, 269; Roth 1968:108–9, fig. 75). Although it is impossible to provide a definitive interpretation of the figure without knowing the placement of this plaque and the plaques arranged around it, he probably depicts an Oba engaged in a ritual requiring the use of the “squirrel’s whip.”

In cat. no. 36, the idea of hierarchical relationships between figures is incorporated directly into the composition, as it was in fig. 40. The plaque depicts a warrior chief in the center, larger and in higher relief than the other figures. His identity as a warrior is indicated by the leopard-tooth necklace he wears, and his status as a high-ranking chief is shown by his coral-studded cap with a feather inserted in one side, his coral-bead collar, his lavishly woven wrap, and the brass ornament at his left hip. He raises a ceremonial sword in his right hand, a gesture of honor and loyalty offered by chiefs to the Oba, and grasps a spear in his left hand. On either side of him, slightly smaller and in lower relief, are two warriors. In addition to their leopard-tooth necklaces, they wear other paraphernalia of Benin warriors, including a shield, a quadrangular bell, and a tunic decorated with a stylized leopard’s face. Such tunics were worn by Benin warriors to frighten their enemies (Ben-Amos 1980: figs. 97, 99).

Between the warrior chief and two warriors are four other attendants whose diminutive scale indicates their low status. Of the top two, one attendant carries a fan used to fan the warrior chief and the other a side-blown trumpet that announces the chief’s presence (figs. 41, 53). One of the attendants below carries a box in the form of an antelope or cow head (fig. 42), usually for bringing gifts of kola nuts to the Oba, while the other bears a sheathed sword and an unidentified clapper-like object (fig. 43). Both lower figures are naked, their bodies covered with painted patterns. They probably represent palace pages or swordbearers, *emada*, who were naked until granted clothes by the Oba (Roth 1968:94). This plaque, which is a virtual catalogue of Benin regalia and court objects, seems a visual counterpart of D. R.’s late-sixteenth-century description of Benin military leaders: “This Captaine hath some soldiers under him, and goes always in the middle of them, and they goe round about him, singing and leaping, and making great noise, and joy. Those captaines are very proud of their office, and are very stately, and goe exceedingly proudly about in the streets” (quoted in Hodgkin 1975:158).

The warrior chiefs were selected from the Uzama, the Palace and Town Chiefs, and the Ekaiwe, an association composed mainly of descendants of the Oba’s daughters. Each warrior chief had warriors under his direct command and drew larger pools of warriors as needed



Fig. 41. Attendant holding a fan. Detail of plaque, cat. no. 36

(Bradbury 1957:44). It is not possible to say which of the warrior chiefs is depicted here, although since there are similar plaques that clearly represent the Iyase with his distinctive hat (fig. 4), perhaps cat. no. 36 depicts the Iyase's rival, the Ezomo.

Several plaques depict similarly dressed and arranged figures (von Luschan 1919: pl. 19; Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 19A). Still others depict the warrior chief wearing military gear, including the leopard-face tunic and bell (Dark 1973: pl. 45; von Luschan 1919: pl. 11; Freyer 1987: nos. 17, 18; Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 22, no. 131). The difference in costume may differentiate the various warrior chiefs or may represent the same chief on a different occasion. Cat. no. 36 may depict the warrior chief at Otue, the greeting ceremony, which is performed during Ugie Erha Oba and Igue, the two most important palace ceremonies. In Otue, the chiefs greet the Oba in order of seniority and receive gifts of kola nuts and wine from him, thereby paying him homage and accepting their place within the court hierarchy (Ben-Amos 1980:82, 85, fig. 84). The plaques depicting the warrior chief dressed in his war costume may show him participating in another palace ceremony, Isiokhuo, a ritual that honors Ogun, the god of iron and war, in which warriors in military attire march in procession through the capital (Bradbury 1957:58; Ben-Amos 1980:93, fig. 97).

Cat. no. 37 depicts a warrior chief, probably participating in Isiokhuo, wearing military garb, and raising an *eben* sword. His costume is distinguished by the basketry cap with a feather inserted on one side and the elaboration of his leopard's-face tunic. Attached to the tunic are numerous tied bundles, which may be protective charms, and across his chest is a broad band, also hung with bundles. This band, *ukugba olila*, is filled with medicines that ward off hunger and thirst, important for a warrior (Blackmun 1984a:324). He carries a sword beneath his left arm, perpendicular to his body and the plaque surface, so that only the pommel is visible; a human-face hip ornament and a conical bell adorn his left hip.

The basketry cap may help to identify this warrior chief as a junior Town Chief known as Edogun, since hats woven of *itoto* fiber, believed to have come with Oranmiyan from Ife, are restricted to the Oba, the seven Uzama, the high priests Osa and Osuan, and Edogun. The junior Town Chiefs had military or ceremonial functions and were appointed to their titles from Ekaiwe, the association composed mainly of descendants of the Oba's daughters. The Edogun, whose title is hereditary, led the junior Town Chiefs in war and was second in command to the Iyase (Bradbury 1973:56, 69, 71). He is depicted on the carved altar tusks (Blackmun 1984a:340) as well as on other plaques (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 15, no. 1; Freyer 1987: no. 15; von Luschan 1919: pl. 17A). However, one plaque depicts two identically dressed figures (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 23, no. 3), thus raising the possibility that chiefs other than the Edogun may have had identical regalia.

Another warrior is represented in cat. no. 38. This one carries a shield and spear, and wears the leopard-tooth necklace and quadrangular bell associated with warriors. From his tunic, which does not have the usual leopard face, hang several bands terminating in small cup-shaped bells. Although he lacks the *odigba*, or coral-bead collar, and the beaded anklets worn by title-holders, his tall conical hat is one usually worn by the highest-ranking Town Chiefs (see figs. 3, 12). The hat is plain in front but has overlapping layers of red flannel, *ododo*, at the sides, resembling the scales of the pangolin, or scaly anteater, an animal that signifies invulnerability because it curls into a protective ball when in danger (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 77). Other plaques depict warriors with similar hats, both with the coral regalia of chiefs (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 22, no. 2; pl. 29, no. 6; von Luschan 1919: figs. 249–51), and without (von Luschan 1919: pls. 7, 8, fig. 248). Like cat. no. 37, this plaque probably depicts the warrior during *Isiokhuo*, the war ceremony, although his identity as a title-holder is ambiguous.

The figure in cat. no. 39 wears a long gown, with a prominent bulge at the chest. He has a distinctive hairstyle with a tall projection from the top and carries a peeled wand, *unwenrhiontan*, or “squirrel’s whip.” This figure has been identified as an Ooton, a type of palace priest (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 85; Blackmun 1984a:268–70). Ooton priests are descended from past Obas, and they must be present at all palace ceremonies in which sacrifices are made to the Oba’s head or to his ancestors, including Igue and Ugie Erha Oba. The plaque probably depicts an Ooton at such a ceremony.

Oootons wear the jawbones of deceased Town Chiefs beneath their robes, creating a bulging chest as in cat. no. 39. Since these chiefs are often in opposition to the Oba, when they die the Oba collects their jawbones, representing their organ of speech, to show his dominance over all opponents (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 85). Ooton is depicted on other plaques (von Luschan 1919: pl. 41; Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 22, no. 6) as well as on carved altar tusks (see fig. 28).

Cat. nos. 40 and 41 depict Benin titleholders, identified by their coral-bead collars, caps, and other regalia, playing a musical instrument known as *ukuse*. This instrument, which was noted by the Dutch chronicler D. R. in the 1590s, consists of a calabash covered with a beaded net, which rattles when shaken (Roth 1968:108, fig. 103). Often the *ukuse* player will insert the middle finger into a hole in the top of the rattle, as is shown in these plaques. The *ukuse* is played at many palace celebrations, often by women (see fig. 12). In 1978 *ukuse* were played by newly appointed titleholders as part of the rites honoring the accession of Erediauwa to the title of Edaiken, or crown prince (Nevadomsky and Inneh 1983:53). Since it is played with the hands, it was the only instrument permitted for them to play in a dance known as “thanksgiving to the hand,” which celebrated their good fortune. Cat. nos. 40 and 41 may represent such an occasion, serving as a permanent record of the new titleholders’ gratitude to the king. A number of similar plaques exist (von Luschan 1919: pl. 39).



Fig. 42. Attendant holding a box in the form of a cow or antelope head. Detail of plaque, cat. no. 36



Fig. 43. Attendant wearing a sword and holding an unidentified clapperlike object. Detail of plaque, cat. no. 36

The figure in cat. no. 42 holds a square object aloft in his right hand while resting his left hand on his hip. He wears a rounded pot-shaped helmet from which a braid descends on either side, a type worn by a variety of other figures on the plaques, including musicians, warriors, and bowmen (von Luschan 1919: pls. 26, 31; figs. 289, 290, 309–11, 314, 316). An *odigba* covers his neck, and multiple rows of beads adorn his ankles. His bare chest is incised with five lines, probably representing scarification marks or tattoos. Around his waist is a cloth wrapper with a relatively plain outer layer and an exposed inner layer decorated with tassels, braid, and fringe.

There are numerous examples of plaques with figures holding square objects such as this, always depicted in similar dress (von Luschan 1919: pl. 36, figs. 309–11). Female attendants accompanying the queen mother also hold this square object; they are depicted on brass waist pendants (Hooton 1917: pl. 5), freestanding brass figures (von Luschan 1919: pl. 106); and ivory tusks (von Luschan 1919: fig. 769). It has been suggested that the square object they hold represents a protective charm made out of woven basketry or wood and incorporating a mirror (Blackmun 1984a:306–11; idem 1990:65). Today in Benin a female titleholder, *Ekpate*, bears such a charm at palace ceremonies, but in the past this role was also performed by men, as seen on the plaques. In Benin thought, mirrors have a mystical importance and are associated with the worship of the sea god *Olokun*. A mirror's reflective surface “enables its spiritually gifted owner not only to see danger approaching before its presence is discerned by others, but also . . . ‘to scatter evil away’” (Blackmun 1984a:310). The charm-bearing titleholder depicted on cat. no. 42 was probably meant to accompany in a protective way a figure of much greater rank, depicted on an adjacent plaque.

Many of the plaques, such as cat. nos. 43 to 46, depict the numerous lesser-ranked participants in palace activities, who lack the high coral-bead collar and beaded anklets that are conferred upon important titleholders. Cat. no. 43 depicts a man whose bare chest is deformed, protruding in a point at the center. His hair is coiffed in a distinctive style of long thick locks combed over the forehead, with every other lock terminating in a bead. He wears a single strand of beads at his neck, bracelets on each wrist, anklets that resemble metal rattles, and an unusually short, wrapped skirt tied with an *ovibiovu*, a leather belt with two leaf-shaped ends. In his left hand he holds what appears to be a staff with a cylindrical shaft and a narrow, flat blade.

The figure is probably a junior-ranking court official. His hairstyle and garments can be seen on a number of other plaques, worn by figures bearing *ekpoki* (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 91); by traders with manillas, the brass rings obtained in trade with Europeans (Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960: pl. 5); and by shield-bearing warriors accompanying the *Oba* or senior chiefs (fig. 40). All of these figures are in subordinate positions. According to Bradbury, the two lowest of

the three untitled grades in the Benin palace associations wore a hairstyle different from all other titleholders (Bradbury 1957:38). One can only speculate that the hairstyle depicted on cat. no. 43 was such an indication of junior status.

Other features, including the staff he holds and his deformed chest, suggest that he may be a member of Ibiwe, one of the three palace associations. His staff resembles an *asan errie*, a type that identifies various representatives of the Oba while on official business, particularly members of Ibiwe association (see cat. no. 86). The figure's deformed chest suggests that he might be one of the cripples<sup>1</sup> said to have guarded the section of the palace that housed the Oba's wives, who numbered several hundred (Bradbury 1957:41). Since Ibiwe is the palace association responsible for the Oba's wives, perhaps this plaque represents an untitled, junior-ranking member of Ibiwe.

The figure in cat. no. 44 wears the same hairstyle as that in cat. no. 43, and his relatively simple dress suggests that he too is an untitled junior member of a palace association. He holds a sword, whose sheath is worn under his left arm slung on a strap across his chest. Other plaques depict similarly coiffed figures bearing swords (Hooton 1917: pl. 2, fig. 5), including some who also carry bundles of fruit on their heads (von Luschan 1919: figs. 187, 188). The similarity of cat. no. 44 to these fruit-bearers and to the participants in a cow sacrifice depicted on another plaque (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 75) suggests that he too is a member of Ibiwe, since it is this palace association that is responsible for provisioning the palace, obtaining materials for sacrifice, and bringing them to state ceremonies (Bradbury 1957:37; idem 1973:61, 65).

Cat. no. 45 depicts a figure dressed in a simple, sparsely decorated wrapper, with a double strand of coral beads at the neck and a single strand on each ankle. His hair is arranged in overlapping rows of short locks, a style that distinguishes him from the figures portrayed in cat. nos. 43 and 44. He wears a feather in his hair, inserted over his left ear, a feature seen also in cat. nos. 35–37. This is a white tail feather of the fish-eagle, *oghohon*, worn by chiefs at ceremonial occasions to symbolize their high status, achievement, maturity, and purity (Nevadomsky 1988:75). Like the figures in cat. nos. 35 and 39, this chief holds an *unwenrhiontan*, and his role at a palace ceremony may have been to deflect evil from a person of higher rank. Similar figures are depicted on other plaques (von Luschan 1919: figs. 351, 352; Chicago, Natural History Museum, 1962: no. 263; Hagen 1918: pl. 2, fig. 2).

The figure depicted in cat. no. 46 also wears his hair in short tiered locks, but with long braided strands hanging at the sides. His wrapped skirt consists of two layers of patterned and textured cloth. At his waist is a belt with many hanging bells or tassels, and a long strap ending in a bell crosses his chest and hangs at his side. Figures



with the same hairstyle and related costumes are portrayed in other plaques, either simply standing, as in cat. no. 46 (von Luschan 1919: pls. 25B, 33A and B, figs. 199–201), holding *ekpoki* (Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960: pl. 21; Paris, Musée Dapper, 1990:51), or accompanying the Oba from battle (Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 21). In this example his precise role cannot be determined.

In portraying the people who had roles to play at the court of Benin, the plaques are not limited to Edo subjects, but also include the Portuguese seamen, traders, and soldiers who were active there beginning in 1485. The Portuguese dominated European trade with Benin until the mid-sixteenth century, when they were overshadowed by the English and Dutch. Even after they ceased to be a major presence in Benin, their image, in sixteenth-century dress, continued to be used to depict all foreigners and the wealth and power the Oba derived from them. The Portuguese had an important impact on Benin court life, in terms of the imported European goods they brought, especially coral and glass beads, cloth, hats, and, most important, metal. The copper and brass manillas that the Portuguese used as a form of currency increased the availability of metal for brasscasting, perhaps even making possible the scheme to decorate the pillars of the palace with hundreds of brass plaques.

Cat. no. 47 depicts two Portuguese men clasping hands, their foreign origin conveyed by their long, straight hair, aquiline noses, and clothing. Though similar in appearance, the two figures are differentiated by both size and gesture. The larger figure on the left places his right hand on his chest, grasping the end of his long, broad beard. The other figure, smaller and beardless, clutches a small satchel with his left hand. Their dress has been carefully observed and rendered by the Edo brasscaster: a tight-fitting upper garment fastened with buttons, sleeves with stippled diagonal stripes, a pleated skirt whose folds are alternately decorated with an incised crosshatched pattern, a simple, knotted belt at the waist, and notched breeches. Both wear rounded helmets with small brims; the larger figure's helmet is further embellished with three raised circles. Their toes are not delineated, as are toes in portrayals of the Edo, so it is likely that the figures wear shoes.

In a similar plaque in the Field Museum of Chicago, both figures have beards (von Luschan 1919: fig. 52). Another plaque depicts two small, beardless Portuguese figures holding the hands of a larger, bearded central figure who is more elaborately dressed (von Luschan 1919: pl. 6D). The size and dress of the figures denotes their relative status, just as on the plaques depicting Edo chiefs and their subordinates (cat. no. 36, fig. 40). On cat. no. 47, the smaller, beardless figure is of lesser status than his companion and may also be younger.

The Portuguese are usually portrayed in Benin art either with military accoutrements or as merchants, accurately reflecting the roles they played in Edo society. Although the figures in this plaque do not carry weapons, their costume suggests their military roles, and

similarly dressed Portuguese figures with weapons appear on some plaques (von Luschan 1919: pls. 2, 3). Both figures wear a doublet, a neck-to-waist garment that is attached to the hose, and a base, a short skirt set with rounded folds. Both the doublet and base were common military wear in Spain and Portugal during the 1500s (Anderson 1979:45, 53, 55, figs. 64, 65). Furthermore, multilayered sleeves with slashes in the outer layer, while fashionable, also permitted soldiers to use heavy weapons without putting a strain on the seams (Reade 1951:195). Even the hairstyles of the two Portuguese are characteristic of Hispanic fashion during the period. Hair was grown long, and warm wax applied to the beard so that it spread out flat and broad (Anderson 1979:33–35, figs. 24, 25), as it appears in the larger figure.

Two bearded Portuguese figures are shown in cat. no. 48, almost overshadowed by the two rows of outsized C-shaped manillas that fill most of the plaque. They are dressed more elaborately than those on cat. no. 47. Their triangular hats are edged with trim, embellished with three raised circles, and topped with jaunty plumes set at an angle. This type of hat most resembles the button cap, which was popular in the sixteenth century among scholars, merchants, and even peasants throughout Europe (Harrison 1960:84; Anderson 1979:35, 43). The button cap had a roughly triangular shape with an upturned brim fastened by aglets, round metal tags, or jewels. Over their doublets, the Portuguese in cat. no. 48 also wear sleeveless jerkins. Unlike the doublet, which features prominent buttons or other fastenings down the front, the jerkin typically exhibits no such opening, fitting rather like a vest (Anderson 1979: fig. 66). The cap, sleeveless jerkin, and tight-fitting patterned sleeves are all representative of early-sixteenth-century dress.

The manillas that dominate the plaque were made of copper or brass and were used as a form of currency in southern Nigeria from the late fifteenth to the mid-twentieth century (Grey 1951:52; see cat. no. 148). Although it is unclear whether manillas are of African or Portuguese origin, it is known that by 1505 they were produced in quantity by the Portuguese, who had access to large amounts of copper and brass, for use in trade with Benin (Grey 1951:54–55). It has been suggested that the influx of manillas owing to Portuguese trade, along with the switch in their composition from copper to brass, resulted in the increase and improvement of Benin brasscasting in the early sixteenth century (Ryder 1969:40).

The pairing of the Portuguese with manillas occurs frequently in Benin art, although the composition found in cat. no. 48 is unique. Oversized manillas, such as those seen here, are occasionally found in relief on the background of plaques depicting single figures or heads of Portuguese (Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 13; von Luschan 1919: figs. 45, 46). Other plaques feature a Portuguese figure holding one or more naturalistically scaled manillas (von Luschan 1919: figs. 55–58, pl. 5c, d). All of them, including cat. no. 48, emphasize the importance

of the Portuguese as merchants, a role that largely defined the relationship between the Edo and Europeans for four centuries.

Many of the Benin palace plaques depict animals, fish, or objects rather than human beings. Judging from the arrangement of similar images on altar tusks, these plaques probably did not have a central location on the pillars of the palace. They may have represented sacrifices made at the various palace ceremonies or creatures and objects whose symbolic qualities express the powers of the Oba. The mudfish depicted in cat. nos. 49 to 51 served both purposes. One of the most frequent motifs in Benin art, mudfish are identified by their catfishlike barbels, which are found on several varieties of fish in the environs of Benin. They are among the most popular sacrifices in Benin. According to Ben-Amos, "the mudfish is the freshest, most robust, and most delicious of all fish and is considered very attractive and desirable. It represents prosperity, peace, well-being and fertility through its association with the water, the realm of the sea god, Olokun" (Ben-Amos 1976b:245). Jacki Gallagher, an American art historian, points out that some species of mudfish have special qualities that give them additional layers of meaning as royal symbols in Benin. The fish known as *orrirri* (*Malapterurus electricus*), for example, can deliver a powerful electric shock (Gallagher, in Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983:93). Such a creature corresponds to the Oba's terrifying aspect, which is graphically portrayed in images of the Oba with legs that terminate in mudfish (see cat. no. 53). Other mudfish genera, *Synodontus* and *Clarias*, are capable of surviving out of water for long periods of time, thus embodying the Oba's dual nature as lord of the land and of the sea.

According to Gallagher, Benin artists do not distinguish between the various species of mudfish (Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1983: figs. 67, 68). Some representations have trilobed tails, others forked tails; some have dorsal fins, others do not; some, like cat. no. 50, which is shown in profile, even lack the identifying barbels. Cat. no. 49 depicts two mudfish, covered from head to tail with incised patterns in typical Benin fashion. Cat. no. 50 is a fragment of a plaque that likewise depicted two mudfish. Cat. no. 51 is unusual. It is the central portion of a plaque whose top, including the mudfish head, has been broken off. The present head, which is cast in the round and includes an open mouth, projects beyond the edge of the plaque; it is a recent addition.

Cat. no. 52 depicts two fluted oval gourds. According to Ben-Amos, this type of gourd is characteristically offered to the creator god Osanobua in place of a cow, which is the most important domestic sacrifice (Bradbury 1957:52; Ben-Amos 1980: fig. 45). This plaque, and others like it, record the gourd's role in palace rituals (Hagen 1918: pl. 8, fig. 6; von Luschan 1919: fig. 422). It also appears on other objects used at court (see cat. no. 110).

Cat. no. 53 is a different type of plaque and was probably not part of the palace pillar decoration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is roughly semicircular or U-shaped (although plaques of this type are often called D-shaped in the literature of Benin art). It depicts an Oba with mudfish legs in the center, flanked on either side by kneeling supporters who hold up his arms. The space behind the figures is left open. The figures are almost identically dressed, wearing beaded hats with tall projections, high beaded collars, long-sleeved shirts covered with beads, and patterned wrappers. Two horizontal bands decorated with raised bosses and twisted rope patterns run behind the figures, at the level of their heads and waists. Six frogs are depicted along the U-shaped outer edge of the plaque, along with short sections of a guilloche, twisted and knotted rope patterns, river leaves, and bosses, all raised in relief.

This plaque, and others like it,<sup>2</sup> combine two of the most powerful images of divine kingship in Benin art—the mudfish-legged king and the linked supporting triad. Both have many layers of meaning, referring to the king's role both in this world and the supernatural one (Blackmun 1984a:248–52, 273–76). The mudfish-legged king refers specifically to Oba Ohen (r. early fifteenth century), whose legs became paralyzed. Although he attempted to hide this infirmity from his people, it was revealed by the Iyase. Ohen had the Iyase killed, but when this was known, he was stoned to death for his deception. On this level the motif is a warning to the Oba not to overstep his authority and abuse his royal prerogatives. The motif also refers to Ohen's divine nature; he is the son of Olokun and the grandson of Osanobua, the creator god. In addition, it embodies the idea that the king is the earthly counterpart of Olokun, as powerful as the sea god himself. The mudfish legs express his terrifying powers, since they suggest *orrirri*, the fish that can give a jolting electric shock. While the mudfish-legged king expresses the most awesome powers of the Oba, it is also a reminder of the limits of royal power. The same is true of the linked supporting triad. The king's *enobore*, or supporters, express the balance between the Oba's overwhelming religious and political power with his need for the support of his people. It is simultaneously a statement of dominance and dependence.

Unfortunately nothing is known about the use of plaques such as cat. no. 53, either their placement within an architectural setting or their role in a particular ceremonial context. Prominent on all of them are motifs such as the elephant trunk terminating in a hand holding leaves and the looped strap and twisted rope patterns. These motifs have been associated with the revival of brasscasting that occurred during the mid-eighteenth century (Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960:19). When compared to the others of its type, cat. no. 53 is unusual. It is the only one lacking the trunk/hand motif; the figures do not wear waist pendants; its background motifs are poorly articulated and

asymmetrical; and it lacks any means of suspension, either holes or loops. This may indicate that cat. no. 53 is a later version of an important eighteenth-century art form.

I am grateful to Kokunre Agbontaen, Christa Clarke, and Alisa LaGamma, who contributed significantly to this section.

1. The deformed chest on an almost identical figure led von Luschan to identify it as a dwarf (von Luschan 1919: pl. 41).

2. Eight similar plaques attributed to Benin are known (von Luschan 1919:285, pl. 43B, figs. 424–26; Dark, Forman, and Forman 1960: pl. 34; Ogbemudia 1969:n.p.; Talbot 1926: fig. 69). Three other closely related U-shaped plaques, with stylistic and iconographic affinities to the art of Benin, Ife, and the “Tsoede bronze” tradition, are also known (see fig. 46; Willett 1973: figs. 17, 19, 20).





**35. Plaque: Oba or Chief**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 19½ in. (49.5 cm)

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

1991.17.16







36. Plaque: Warrior Chief, Warriors, and Attendants (detail)

**36. Plaque: Warrior Chief,  
Warriors, and Attendants**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

Brass; h. 18 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (47.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1990  
1990.332

*Ex Collection:* Paul Rose; Robert Owen  
Lehman

*Reference:* London, Sotheby and Co., 1964:  
lot 114

*Exhibition:* New York, Center for  
African Art, 1988: fig. 188





**37. Plaque: Warrior Chief**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 16½ in. (41.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.11

*Ex Collection:* British Museum, London

*Reference:* Read and Dalton 1899: pl. 27,  
no. 3

*Exhibitions:* Bloomington, Indiana University Art Museum, 1980; South Hadley, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 1984: no. 12

**38. Plaque: Warrior**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 17 in. (43.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.12

*Reference:* London, Sotheby Parke-Bernet and Co., 1977a: lot 199

*Exhibition:* Bloomington, Indiana University Art Museum, 1980

An arrow is slightly raised in relief on the lower back of the plaque.









**39. Plaque: Palace Priest (Ooton)**  
 Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 16th–17th century  
 Brass; h. 18½ in. (47.0 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.25  
 A bulb-shaped line is lightly raised in relief on the lower back of the plaque.

**40. Plaque: Titleholder with Calabash Rattle**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
 16th–17th century  
 Brass; h. 17¾ in. (45.1 cm)  
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
 1991.17.17  
 Reference: London, Sotheby and Co., 1971:  
 lot 238







**41. Plaque: Titleholder with  
Calabash Rattle**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 17 in. (43.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.10

*Ex Collection:* Museum für Völkerkunde,  
Berlin

*Reference:* von Luschan 1919: pl. 39A

*Exhibition:* Bloomington, Indiana Univer-  
sity Art Museum, 1980

**42. Plaque: Court Official with Protective Charm**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
16th–17th century

Brass; h. 17 in. (43.2 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.20

*Ex Collection:* Museum für Völkerkunde,  
Berlin; E. Hentze

*References:* von Luschan 1919: pl. 36B;  
London, Sotheby & Co., 1971: lot 238A;  
Robbins and Nooter 1989: fig. 560



**43. Plaque: Junior Court Official**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 14½ in. (36.8 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.21

*Reference:* New York, Sotheby's, 1985: lot  
136



**44. Plaque: Junior Court Official  
with Sword**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 19<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (49.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.23



**45. Plaque: Court Official with  
Magic Staff**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 18¼ in. (46.4 cm)

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

1991.17.22



**46. Plaque: Court Official**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 15¼ in. (38.7 cm)

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

1991.17.26



**47. Plaque: Two Portuguese**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 20½ in. (52.1 cm)

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

1991.17.18

*References:* Paris, Drouot Rive Gauche, 1976:

lot 173; London, Christie's, 1979b: lot 255

*Exhibition:* New York, Center for African  
Art, 1988: fig. 216

An X is lightly raised in relief on the lower  
back of the plaque.











48. Plaque: Two Portuguese with Manillas (detail)

**48. Plaque: Two Portuguese with  
Manillas**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 18 in. (45.7 cm)

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

1991.17.13





**49. Plaque: Two Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 9 in. (22.9 cm)

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

1991.17.24

*Ex Collection:* H. Ling Roth; University  
Museum, Philadelphia

*References:* Roth 1968: fig. 270; Hall 1922:  
fig. 49

**50. Plaque Fragment: Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 13¼ in. (33.7 cm)

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

1991.17.27

*Ex Collection:* Karl Knorr; Linden-Museum,  
Stuttgart; Benno Mattel

*References:* von Luschan 1901: fig. 44; idem  
1919: fig. 413







**51. Plaque: Mudfish**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 13 3/8 in. (34.0 cm)

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

1991.17.15

*Ex Collection:* W. D. Webster; Hans Meyer

*References:* Hermann 1953: 115; New York, Sotheby Parke-Bernet and Co., 1977b:

lot 566; New York, Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1983: lot 35

*Exhibition:* New York, Grey Art Gallery, 1981: no. 15



**52. Plaque: Two Fluted Gourds**

Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin

16th–17th century

Brass; h. 13 in. (33.0 cm)

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

1991.17.14

*Ex Collection:* Lt.-General Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers

*References:* Pitt-Rivers 1900: pl. 38, fig. 290; von Luschan 1919: fig. 423; London, Sotheby and Co., 1972b: lot 244



53. U-Shaped Plaque: Mudfish-  
Legged King and Supporters  
Nigeria, Edo; Court of Benin  
18th–20th century  
Brass; h. 16 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (42.2 cm)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991  
1991.17.28



