

Article

Decolonizing the Gaze: A Visual Analysis of the Repatriated Benin Bronzes

Chukwuemeka Nwigwe¹, Nkechinyere Jennifer Anyaoha²

¹Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, chukwuemeka.nwigwe@unn.edu.ng

²Department of Industrial Design, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, anyaohan@unimaid.edu.ng

Correspondence: anyaohan@unimaid.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive visual analysis of ten repatriated Benin Bronzes, following their return from Germany to Nigeria in December 2022. The study employs compositional interpretation and visual methodology to examine the forms and contents of these iconic artifacts, which were looted in 1897 and have since been scattered across European museums. Through a decolonial lens, this research aims to recontextualize these artworks within their original cultural framework, challenging the long-standing Eurocentric interpretations that have dominated their narrative. The analysis reveals the intricate craftsmanship, symbolic significance, and historical importance of the Benin Bronzes, highlighting their role in preserving Benin's cultural memory and artistic traditions. By focusing on readily available images of the returned works, including ceremonial heads, ivory carvings, and decorated plaques, this study offers insights into the aesthetic and cultural values embedded in these artifacts. Furthermore, the paper addresses the understudied nature of Benin Bronzes within their home context, attributing this gap to their prolonged absence and limited visual art education in the region. The research contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding the repatriation of cultural artifacts and advocates for a shift in perspective that centers on African voices and knowledge systems. By decolonizing the gaze through which these artifacts are viewed and interpreted, this study not only enriches our understanding of the Benin Bronzes but also underscores the importance of cultural restitution in fostering a more inclusive and equitable global art history.

Keywords: Benin bronzes, repatriation, decolonization, visual analysis, art history, cultural memory, cultural restitution

Introduction

In December 2022, twenty-one Benin bronzes were repatriated from Germany to Nigeria (Olterrmann, 2022a). The collection, reported as 20 or 22 by different media outlets, includes ceremonial heads, ivory carvings, decorated plaques, and various other art forms. The event received extensive media coverage, serving as a reminder to scholars who have extensively studied the Benin bronzes from various perspectives over a significant period. In 1966, Boris de Rachewiltz published a book on African Art that recognized the Kingdom of Benin as one of the prominent African empires and civilizations with surviving artistic pieces. The book provides insights into the early history of Benin art and identifies different stylistic periods, ranging from the earliest times to 1360, categorized as 1360 to 1500, 1575 to 1648, 1646 to 1691, and 1691 to 1819 (p. 66).

Benin craftsmen arguably produced a wide range of works spanning prehistoric times. Early ethnographic accounts vividly describe the Benin King's court as a square compound consisting of numerous palaces, each housing courtesans. The bronze plaques, later seized by British officials during punitive expeditions, depicted detailed images of battles and war exploits of the Benin people, suggesting a highly organized and structured society. The introduction of exotic goods such as coral from the Mediterranean, cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean, cloth from the



Far East, and brass manilas brought by the Portuguese further endeared the people to foreign traders.

This study focuses on ten images out of all the repatriated Benin art, analyzed through a compositional interpretation. Our inability to physically examine these objects appears limiting and informs the choice of the analytical approach, the compositional interpretation. The analysis employs description, analysis, and interpretation. Benin bronzes, like other African artworks, possess layers of meaning, some inherent and others acquired over time. The repatriated Benin Bronzes appear understudied locally due to their prolonged absence from their indigenous setting. This paper aims to introduce a fresh perspective by directing attention to those valuable objects returned rather than news about the repatriation.

To commence the discourse on the looted bronzes, it is essential to present a historical overview of how Benin bronzes were looted by British forces. The Dutch arrived in the region of Benin around 1470, initiating their indirect trading activities shortly thereafter. English officials arrived later, seeking a direct agreement with the Benin people and their king. Despite their attempts to engage the Oba in dialogue to exploit the region's resources, the Oba adamantly refused to engage in direct dealings with the British, posing a significant challenge to the Europeans. However, the violent resistance against British emissaries culminated in a retaliatory attack in 1897, resulting in the looting of Benin's artistic treasures.

The military campaign was instigated by the surprise attack and aggression on a British envoy by the powerful Oba of Benin, resulting in the demise of all but two members of the delegation. Enraged by this event, the British government dispatched a military expedition led by Sir Henry Rawson to carry out a retaliatory strike, apprehend the Oba, and destroy Edo, the capital city. Throughout the punitive expedition, British officers and their accomplices plundered numerous bronze artworks and subsequently dispersed them among various museums in Europe. These pilfered pieces mainly comprised royal art crafted to pay homage to the monarch. The Benin artisans aimed to showcase the Oba's magnificence and grandeur, along with his royal status, to the external world, ensuring that foreign merchants, diplomats, and dignitaries would be impressed by his authority.

Over time, conversations regarding the looted bronzes have gained traction, and recently, endeavors toward repatriation have started to yield results. On July 1, 2022, Germany and Nigeria signed an agreement for the return of 20 Benin bronze sculptures from Germany to Nigeria (Olterrmann, 2022b). The signing ceremony took place in Berlin with officials and artists from both countries present, as part of efforts to address Germany's colonial past. The ceremonial return of the sculptures occurred in November of the same year. Subsequently, on October 11, 2022, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art announced that it would officially return 29 Benin bronzes looted by British soldiers during the 1897 British expedition in Benin City to Nigeria on December 20, 2022, following the Smithsonian's new ethical returns policy.

Consequently, Lai Mohammed, then Nigeria's Minister of Information and Culture, expressed Nigeria's gratitude for the decision and expressed interest in future collaborations with the institution. The return of the artifacts was met with joy and

celebration, as depicted in various photographs marking the occasion. Signing the agreement and handing over the bronzes to some Nigerian representatives were significant. They serve as milestones in the repatriation of Benin artifacts held in Germany for over a century. Among the 1,100 Benin artifacts in Germany, 20 bronzes or so were returned in December 2022, following the initial return of two bronzes in July 2022, as per the agreement. Rogers et al. (2022) discussed Germany's decision to return the Benin bronzes to Nigeria, highlighting the German official, Annalena Baerbock's, remarks during a ceremony in Abuja: "It was wrong to take the bronzes, and it was wrong to keep them for 120 years." This acknowledgment of wrongdoing indicates a sense of guilt, leading to the appropriate response of repatriation, demonstrating repentance.

The news was widely covered by both print and online media, but unfortunately, none of them provided a detailed description of the artworks. As Germany's culture commissioner observed (Oltermann 2022a), the return marks the beginning of a process, not the end. This development allows us to critically examine the visual images of the objects. Relevant stakeholders have offered comments on the importance of the return, highlighting its significance.



Figure 1: Germany and Nigerian representatives at the signing of the accord for the return of looted Benin Bronzes. Source: Aljazeera, 2022

The remarks effectively communicated the government's happiness over the return of the artifacts, which is significant considering the ongoing debate about the necessity of repatriation. While some argue against repatriation (Jenkins, 2016), others present compelling reasons for Nigeria to reclaim its stolen artifacts (Alagbe, 2022). These remarks also underscore the potential for collaboration between the rightful owners of the bronzes and the custodians, considering their national and institutional affiliations. Furthermore, they imply the research and educational value associated with such developments.

Then Nigeria's foreign affairs minister, Geoffrey Onyeama, expressed gratitude to Germany for their gesture, emphasizing the immense aesthetic and spiritual

significance these artifacts hold for Nigerians (Aljazeera, 2022). He further highlighted that beyond their aesthetic value, these artifacts possess profound cultural and spiritual importance to the Nigerian people. The presence of ceremonial heads, ivory carvings, brass plaques, and other repatriated Benin bronzes in Nigeria serves as a powerful reminder of the extensive looting that took place in 1897. These valuable art objects were taken by British troops from Benin, now located in Edo State, Nigeria. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, these artifacts hold immense historical and cultural significance.

By placing them on display, they allow art enthusiasts and stakeholders in African-Nigeria-Benin to appreciate the true value of Benin bronzes, a value that extends far beyond the lives of their creators and their descendants. It is worth noting that the current Oba of Benin is the great-great-grandson of the Oba whose artistic treasures were plundered by the British. The present palace stands on the same site as the former palace, which was demolished during the invasion (BBC News Africa, 2023). The bronzes demand critical attention as they embody rich histories and traditions associated with their production, form, and function. While we cannot provide a comprehensive interpretation of these art forms due to spatial limitations and the blurry nature of some images, we can draw insights from various sources that depict these remarkable pieces to make up for some deficiencies.

Previous research conducted on Benin bronzes has provided valuable insights into their formal qualities and other art forms. Some studies have focused on the issue of acquisition and ownership, exploring how these bronzes came to be housed in foreign museums and discussing the appropriate course of action regarding their restitution and other related matters (Jefferys, 1951; Cuno, 2010; Kiwara-Wilson, 2012; Jenkins, 2016; Hicks, 2020). Other scholars have delved into the origins and dating of the bronzes (Jeffreys, 1951; Nevadomsky, 2004), examined the role of museums in preserving Benin bronzes and ivories within a historical context, and explored the connections between German brass, Benin bronzes, and early Atlantic trade (Skowronek et al., 2023).

The treatment of Benin Bronzes in the National Museum of African Art, the involvement of the British Museum in trading these bronzes, and the composition and style of Benin bronze heads and plaques have all been subjects of consideration by various authors at different points in time (Schrenk, 1990; Willett et al., 1994; Bailey, 2002). Several scholarly works have delved into the origins of Benin bronzes, with a particular focus on their provenance. For instance, Nevadomsky (2004) conducted a study that explored the relationship between art and science, using Benin bronzes as a prime example.

In this study, the authors emphasized three different dating methods: Thermoluminescence (TL) testing, metal analysis, and the stylistic approach. Additionally, Nevadomsky hinted at the forthcoming publication of a co-authored text titled "Elementary Guide to Dating Benin Bronzes." However, the issue of dating is not the primary concern of the present paper, as it is a common challenge faced when examining traditional African art.

Interestingly, a recent provenance evaluation conducted in 2021 shed light on the date of 29 confiscated works that were seized by British agents during the 1897 raid.

Nevertheless, there are still six additional bronzes that require further study to establish their provenance (Smithsonian, October 11, 2022). These findings may build upon previous research, which may have influenced the decision made by the former President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. Just a few days before handing over power to his successor, Bola Tinubu, in May 2023, President Buhari announced that the Oba of Benin would be entrusted with the custody of the returned bronzes, rather than the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, whose officials played a pivotal role in facilitating the repatriation of these cultural artifacts (BBC News Africa, 2023).

Most of the bronzes found in Benin are historical artworks that convey significant narratives. One notable example is the Benin Copper alloy plaque displayed at the Horniman Museum and Garden in South London. This particular artwork depicts a meeting between Portuguese traders and Chief Uwangue of the Benin kingdom, who served as the representative of the Oba and established trade connections with the Portuguese (Alagbe, 2022). In the portrayal, Chief Uwangue is shown extending his right hand as a gesture of friendship. Court art held great importance in the traditional Benin kingdom, encompassing various aspects such as religion, economy, tradition, and politics. These objects held immense power within religious contexts, where rituals were performed, and were therefore considered magical art. People believed that by understanding the vastness of their cosmos through these artworks, they could navigate and thrive in a mysterious world.

Methodological Approach

For the current investigation, the analytical approach of compositional interpretation was selected to examine the returned Benin bronzes. This approach is fitting for this paper, which is to enlighten readers about the formal quality of the selected returned works. Typically, art historians have analyzed paintings using compositional interpretation. We have adapted this method here because the sculptures in reference are available to us in their visual forms. We are therefore constrained to focus on their visual and narrative qualities. What is needed is a discerning eye (Rose, 2001). Compositional interpretation is appropriate for engaging visual images for their unique effects. This method of visual analysis also relies on the viewer's contextual understanding of the artworks in question. Our focus is on describing the visual aspects of the returned Benin bronzes. As Nigerian authors and artists with expertise in art history and visual arts, we are equipped to address some of the criticisms against compositional interpretation. One such critique is that it overlooks the social practices involved in the production and interpretation of images, as visual images are not created in isolation (Rose, 2001). Additionally, it fails to reflect on its methodologies (Rose, 2001). Nevertheless, compositional interpretation remains essential for examining the form and content of visual images. Given our cultural and educational background, we can navigate some of the limitations associated with this approach. The ceremonial unveiling of the returned Benin bronzes has resulted in images that demand scrutiny for a more enriching and fulfilling visual encounter.

Towards a Visual Analysis

The repatriated Benin Bronzes have garnered significant media attention, prompting a focus on the formal qualities of these artifacts. This focus naturally leads to an examination of the materials used in creating them. However, the technique of production falls outside the scope of this paper and will not be thoroughly examined. Moreover, we will only analyze ten of the twenty-two returned items, which include:

- A Ceremonial Stool (Figure 2)
- Assorted Bronze objects (Figure 3)
- Plaques depicting high-relief sculptures of the Oba and his attendants (Figure 4)
- Ceremonial heads of Benin (Figure 5)
- A brass key (Figure 6)
- A Benin plaque illustrating a relief sculpture of the Oba and his attendants (Figure 7)
- A bronze head of the Oba of Benin (Figure 8)
- An image of a Queen Mother in ivory (Figure 9)
- A compositional picture showcasing a collection of carved tusks, a snakehead, the king's head, and a miniature figural statue (Figure 10)

A Ceremonial Stool (Figure 2)



Figure 2a: Brass ceremonial stool. (still image) Source: Nigerian Television Authority



Figure 2b: Throne stool of Oba Eresoyen, 1735-50, Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, brass, 40 x 40.5 cm Source: Smarthistory, <https://smarthistory.org/benin-art-patrons/>

The ceremonial stool (Figure 2a) appears blurred, likely due to its source being a video. The still image reveals some enigmatic motifs. It is believed to be a replica of the throne stool (Figure 2b) attributed to Oba Eresoyen, dating back to 1735-1750 (Gunsch, n.d.). This artifact was housed in the Ethnological Museum of the National Museum in Berlin. The structure of the upper section suggests that it may not be a typical stool, as it lacks a flat surface without any relief designs that could cause discomfort to a person sitting on it, unlike a traditional stool. The cup-shaped top,

resembling a head-load, is supported by a twisted snake form with visible scale patterns. The top is intricately patterned both inside the hollow part and on the exterior. Noteworthy are the two circular bands of dots in the raised section, connected by tiny lines, and surrounded by stylized human head motifs, along with rhythmic diagonal lines and dots that mimic a woven design. The central area contains a variety of objects, including local utensils, within the inner circle. At the center stands an elliptical shape with a smooth, flat surface, resembling the foundation of a captivating miniature structure with a dark hue. The lower section of the presumed stool mirrors the top, sharing similarities in terms of size, shape, and decorative motifs, including a high-relief frog and a stylized, simplified human head. Despite these shared characteristics, the base appears as an inverted version of the top, creating a visual illusion. The ceremonial stool gives the impression of a human figure carrying the top base on their head, while the bottom base resembles a seashore with reptiles emerging from the sea. This study suggests that Benin artisans drew inspiration from historical events, stories, and nature when creating their works.

Assorted Bronze objects (Figure 3)



Figure 3: Assorted Bronze objects (still image): Source: Nigerian Television Authority

The image showcases a captivating representation of various bronze objects, displaying a complex array of forms on a single plane. This particular piece is a bronze relief sculpture, with certain forms crafted separately before being integrated into the plaque. It serves as a prime example of the narrative artistry of the Benin empire. The arrangement of forms symbolizes the significance of Benin war tools, warriors, and communication devices like the gong. The intricate adornments of the oba and queens depicted on the plaque are noteworthy, reflecting the pride of the Benin empire. Additionally, a closer examination reveals a bowl of seedlings, symbolizing agricultural abundance and indicating the farming practices of the Benin people for sustenance.

A Relief Sculpture of a King and his Attendants (Figure 4)



Figure 4: High relief sculptural Images of the Oba and his attendants: Photograph: Olamikan Gbemiga/AP, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/20/germany-returns-21-benin-bronzes-to-nigeria-amid-frustration-at-britain>

The visual representation portrayed in Figure 4 showcases an intriguing image where three individuals seem to be sinking into the ground. Notably, all three individuals are depicted as being barefoot. The large central figure appears to be the king, while the other two positioned by his side resemble his attendants. The artistic style is that of sculptural relief on a flat surface. Additionally, the plaque features decorative floral motifs, enhancing the overall aesthetic appeal of the artwork.

Ceremonial Heads (Figure 5)



Figure 5: Benin ceremonial heads. Source: Photograph: Olamikan Gbemiga/AP, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/20/germany-returns-21-benin-bronzes-to-nigeria-amid-frustration-at-britain>

The two ceremonial heads in Figure 5 possess a distinctive upper section. The smaller one features an aperture that resembles that of a pot, with the head cleverly concealing the circular opening at its peak. On the other hand, the larger head belongs to the king, known as Oba. The upper part of this head exhibits a captivating utilization of motifs and patterns, resulting in an extravagant protrusion of designs. Through this study, it has been observed that every male who carves Benin bronze replicates the traditional marks on it. However, there are differences between the two bronze heads. The Oba's forehead bears six identical raised markings positioned vertically, with an additional mark at the center of the head, dividing the six markings into two. Conversely, the other head behind it only has six marks. This distinction serves as an indication that the Oba, along with every scarification on his face and body, symbolizes authority and power.

Geometrical abstraction is a prominent feature in Benin art, which can also be observed in the cubism movement of the 20th century pioneered by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963) in Paris between 1907 and 1914. The design from the jaw to the entire neck and shoulder area employs the coiling technique to depict the large rings worn around the Oba's neck, symbolizing strength in executing commands. These rings shape the neck and control the movement of the king's head, further signifying authority.

A Large Brass Key (Figure 6)



Figure 6: A brass key (still image). Source: Nigerian Television Authority

Figure 6 is a metal key that stands out among the significant artifacts repatriated from Germany due to its distinct visual and artistic qualities. Its purpose and function have sparked curiosity, prompting questions regarding its role in the creation of other works or its involvement in larger machinery. Furthermore, the irregular shape of this instrument raises inquiries about its symbolic significance. This particular instrument can be interpreted as a symbolic key, representing the means to unlock an important door leading to a room dedicated to rituals or a box safeguarding precious ornaments and artifacts. The design showcases the craftsmanship employed in such a way that it cannot be replicated or used for any other purpose. Its unique shape, with horizontal and vertical elements, ensures a strong and balanced grip when operating the door. Upon close examination, one notices the presence of a hole, indicating its function as an object used for entry or access. The object itself is crafted from a thick metal, suggesting that whatever lies behind the door or within the box it opens is substantial, requiring a sturdy and formidable barrier. According to Oltermann (2022a), "the large brass key, decorated with leopard figures, had made its way to Cologne via Britain, Ireland, and France at the end of the 19th century."

Benin Bronze Plaque (Figure 7)



Figure 7: A Benin bronze plaque showing a relief sculpture of the Oba, his attendants, and the Portuguese soldiers. Source: Aljazeera, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPqp70c4r9g>

Figure 7 is a plaque with five figures in relief, with the imposing image of the king, Oba, at the center. It is likely one of the high-relief images from the 16th century that commemorate the military experts of the Benin kingdom. The king is positioned in the center, flanked by two attendants who appear attired similarly to him, each holding an object that resembles a kerosene-powered lantern. The position of the handheld object makes it look like a shield. Notably, the king appears significantly larger than the two Portuguese soldiers standing on either side. Interestingly, his legs seem to be invisible, and he holds a ceremonial axe in his hand. The plaque also reveals the abundance of jewelry adorning the king's neck, consisting of multiple rows. This artwork symbolizes a declaration of war, following extensive deliberations involving the Oba, his attendants, and the Portuguese.

A Bronze Head of the Oba of Benin (Figure 8)



Figure 8: A bronze head of the Oba of Benin. Source: Aljazeera, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPqp70c4r9g>

The bronze figure (Figure 8) represents an idealized depiction of an oba head, showcasing the regalia worn by a Benin king (Oba of Benin). This intricately crafted sculpture serves as a symbolic seat of wisdom and authority, embodying the knowledge and decision-making capabilities of the ruler. Typically, such sculptural images would portray the previous ruler and be prominently displayed at a shrine dedicated to their honor, serving as potent symbols of kingship and lineage. Additionally, this object serves as a testament to the exceptional metal-casting technique employed by the kingdom, showcasing the virtuosity of their

craftsmanship. The use of various forms, such as triangles, dots, and lines, intricately embedded within the sculpture, further accentuates the uniqueness and artistry of these idealistic crafts.

It is important to note that the Benin bronze head serves as an abstract representation of the Oba of Benin when they pass away and join their ancestors. The smoothness of the sculpture signifies that whoever holds the position of Oba of Benin is well taken care of, particularly in terms of their skincare. Furthermore, this intricate bronze head of the Oba of Benin demonstrates the significance of the head and neck region within the kingdom, as emphasized by the researcher. It is crucial to protect and preserve this area at all costs. The prominent metal pieces projecting from both sides of the crown symbolize that the Oba is not only a ruler but also a formidable warrior who issues the final command.

Queen Mother (Figure 9)

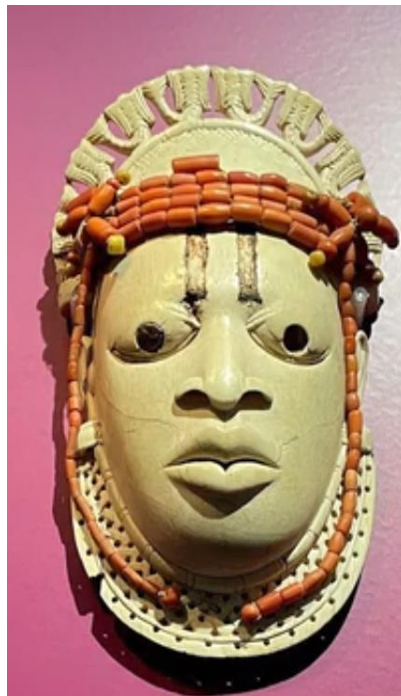


Figure 9: An image of a Queen Mother in ivory. Source: Aljazeera, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPqp70c4r9g>

This particular sculpture (Figure 9) implies that not all of the artworks that were brought back to their home country are made of bronze. The ivory mask, previously housed in the British Museum, portrays a stunning woman believed to be the mother of the queen. This intricately carved piece serves as a tribute to her diligent efforts in ensuring the continuation of her son's lineage by skillfully manipulating circumstances in his favor. The face is adorned with a coral pendant, commonly worn as a necklace, which helps define the facial features. The attention is drawn to the forehead, embellished with four rows of beads, and two yellow beads on either side. The eyes were likely adorned with inlaid gold, adding to the overall opulence of the mask. The combination of features from FESTAC 77 and Nok Terracotta is evident, with distinct characteristics like bulging, triangular-shaped eyes and vertical lines running from the forehead to the eyes. This facial expression is also

seen on the FESTAC 77 mask. The study emphasizes the significance of utilizing design elements, particularly positive space, prominently displayed in the eyes and nostrils, creating depth. The texture is also employed to enhance the aesthetic appeal, with rough pointillism texture on the neck bracelet and cross-hatching lines on the crown. The smooth texture of the face signifies the queen's flawless beauty.

Collection of carved tusks, Snakehead, Oba Head, and a miniature Figure (Figure 10)



Figure 10: Compositional picture showing a collection of scarified tusks, Oba's head, A bronze statue. A collection of Benin bronzes repatriated from Germany. Source: Aljazeera, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPqp70c4r9g>

Figure 10 showcases a collection consisting of four intricately carved tusk pieces in the background, typically kept in ancestral altars. In the foreground, there is an image of a snakehead sculpture made of copper alloy, with a portion cut off. The sculpture's mouth is open, revealing multiple teeth, and two stylized eyes are positioned towards the top. Behind the eye imagery, there are three evenly-spaced patterned circles. Previously, the snake head was part of the collection at Linden-Museum Stuttgart in Germany. The significance of the plastic snake head lies in its symbolism as a cult object, representing the king's connection to the upper world. In essence, it signifies that the king embodies both human (earthly) and divine (spiritual) qualities. Placing these objects at the altar was believed to enable the living king to communicate with their ancestors.

Positioned between the snake head and the diminutive figure is a freestanding bronze head of the Oba, characterized by its cylindrical shape and a headdress resembling a tusk. The neck and jaw are adorned with numerous coils and rows of necklaces, extending up to the mouth. The presence of the tusk and snakehead as materials suggests that many Benin artifacts are not solely made of bronze.

On the left side of the collection, there is a standing object in the round, depicting a diminutive-sized human figure in its entirety. The disproportional nature of the body parts is a characteristic feature of African figure sculpture. Traditionally,

African carvers often emphasize the head in their creations. Although it is uncertain if the image represented is indigenous, certain elements of the attire, such as the skirt, appear to have local origins.

Findings and Discussion

The ten Benin bronze and other works presented in this paper are visually satisfying. The Ceremonial Stool (Figure 2) has a spectacular form and displays tiny details that demand a high skill level of craftsmanship. Assorted Bronze objects (Figure 3) appear complex and vague, making them difficult to describe. Plaques depicting high-relief sculptures of the Oba of Benin and his attendants (Figure 4) look impressive, although their position limits full viewing. The display of ceremonial heads of important Benin leaders (Figure 5) serves as a memorial to past leaders. Upon close examination, the brass key (Figure 6) reveals a combination of function and aesthetics, art and craft. The Benin plaque illustrating the Oba and his attendants (Figure 7) standing still in a relief sculpture reveals why the king exerted so much power – he must be represented larger than anyone else. His head, with all the kingly emblems, would be sculpted in bronze (Figure 8). The next person to enjoy such privilege was his mother, as exemplified in the ivory image of a Queen Mother (Figure 9). The compositional picture showcasing a collection of carved tusks, a snakehead, the king's head, and a miniature figural statue (Figure 10), along with the returned Benin bronzes, reveals a wide range of information about the Benin king, kingdom, and Nigeria.

The bronze works are associated with the court arts of the Oba of Benin, suggesting that he was rich, powerful, and artistically inclined. He represented an important personage in the art history associated with black people in the pre-contact era. The looted bronze works must have caused a sensation in the West when they first landed in Europe due to their high technical and visual quality, changing some Europeans' perceptions of West African art.

It is necessary to note that the image of the Oba with his attendants appears recurrent in the oeuvre. Most works were made of bronze, hence the generic name, Benin bronzes. However, the prevalence of bronze does not obliterate the history of wood, terracotta, and other materials used by Benin artists and craftsmen. Brass was likely used in the later period of Benin civilization, perhaps with Portuguese influence from the 15th and 16th centuries. The use of bronze works in Benin predated European contact, as the kingdom had a guild of skilled bronze casters who created powerful vessels, including an ivory tusk used symbolically to transfer power from one Oba (king) to another.

These bronzes reflect various aspects of Benin's cultural and religious beliefs, technology, kingship, environment, and aesthetics during their creation. They serve as historical documents, capturing different facets of the people's history. For example, some artworks depict the influence of Western technology through trade. The Portuguese sought Western African pepper, ivory, and gold, which local middlemen traded, leading to the introduction of brass in Benin art.

The artistic craftsmanship of the Benin kingdom is exemplified in the returned bronzes, testifying to the cultural richness of the kingdom. Therefore, teaching fine

art should be given utmost importance in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, ensuring visual literacy and contributing to economic sustainability.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the visual qualities of the Benin Bronzes merit scholarly attention. The formal characteristics of the works have been examined, revealing an iconography that identifies the Benin people and their art, evoking dignity and a rich history. They provide glimpses into the traditions surrounding their creation, forms, and functions.

However, many Africans, including Nigerians, born and raised on the continent, lack knowledge of their history, particularly events within the past two centuries. For instance, many are unaware of the lost wax method's meaning and complexity, used to craft the intricate forms and motifs in the repatriated bronzes. To appreciate Benin bronze designs and artistry, one requires visual literacy and knowledge of Benin tradition.

Stakeholders, government entities, and private investors must collaborate with educational institutions to establish platforms that identify and nurture young artists through innovative competitions. This is crucial as many parents discourage their children from pursuing art due to the perception that artists are financially disadvantaged. The study suggests investing in various art fields, such as textiles, graphics, ceramics, sculptures, and glass technology, which can become lucrative industries and contribute to economic growth.

To achieve this, qualified fine art teachers should be employed in primary and secondary schools to provide comprehensive instruction in fine art, emphasizing that it encompasses more than just drawing. Fine art education is the foundation of learning, providing an opportunity to nurture artistic talent from a young age.

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