

National Museum of African Art Displays Nine Benin Bronzes on Loan From the Government of Nigeria

Special Exhibition To Mark the Museum's 60th Anniversary

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About



Edo artist, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, Plaque, Mid-16th to 17th century, Copper alloy.

[Ar Back To Top](#)

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The Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art will display nine works from the royal court of Benin in a special exhibition opening Monday, June 3. These artworks were some of the 29 pieces that were legally transferred to their country of origin, Nigeria, in fall 2022.

The so-called "bronzes," which were in the museum's collection for many years, were stolen from Nigeria during the 1897 British raid on Benin City. Benin bronzes has become the catch-all term for works that are actually made of cast-copper alloy and ivory.

The Smithsonian's Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns Policy calls for the legal transfer of ownership of any artifacts that were acquired by stealing, looting or other questionable means. The transfer of ownership was formalized in a ceremony at the National Museum of African Art two years ago, and the artifacts were shipped to Nigeria a few months later.

The original collection of the National Museum of African Art included 39 artworks from Nigeria attributed as being in the style of works associated with the court of the Benin Kingdom; 29 were determined to have been stolen during the 1897 raid. The majority of these artworks are dated, based on their style, from the late 15th or early 16th century through the late 19th century. The Benin bronzes had entered the museum's collection through purchase, transfer, donation and bequest over the years.

A legal agreement transferred ownership from the Smithsonian to representatives of Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments; it was signed in October 2022. Also at that time, a museum loan agreement was finalized that allowed these nine art works by Edo artists from Benin City to remain in the National Museum of African Art. Although the works are in the museum in Washington, D.C., Smithsonian staff consulted with Nigerian museum professionals on the text in the exhibition.

The credit line for each artifact states that it originated from the "collection of the Oba of Benin, British raid of Benin 1897" and includes object details and descriptions that come from the community of origin.

The eight works in the exhibition include a very rare late-15th-century copper alloy trophy head, likely of a defeated enemy—one of the earliest known examples of this genre of figurate cast sculpture from the kingdom—as well as a major architectural plaque depicting a group of warriors, and possibly an oba (ruler or king) himself. Also included are a range of larger-scale copper alloy figural sculptures and smaller, personal items, as well as two large incised ivory tusks that were originally part of ancestral altars in the palace. An additional, ninth figure—depicting a female attendant to a queen mother—remains on view in the museum's primary collection galleries (Visionary: Viewpoints on Africa'Ar Back To Top depicted in the new exhibition.

“Sixty years ago the U.S. Civil Rights Movement inspired the founding of the National Museum of African Art by diplomat and collector Warren Robbins who believed that an understanding of the African continent and its cultural heritage would benefit all Americans,” said John K. Lapiana, interim director of the museum. “Now, six decades later, it is entirely fitting that we are presenting this exhibition in collaboration with our museum colleagues in Nigeria as the first exhibition of our anniversary year.”

About the Benin Bronzes

The Kingdom of Benin, home of the Edo peoples, is located in the southwest tropical forest and mangroves region of present-day Nigeria. The Kingdom of Benin is renowned for the exceptional quality and diversity of its royal arts fashioned in copper alloy, ivory, terracotta, wood, iron and coral beads. In 1897 during a British raid on Benin, the royal palace was burned and looted, and the oba was exiled. The British confiscated all royal treasures, giving some to individual officers and taking most to auction in London. The estimated 3,000 objects eventually made their way into museums and private collections around the world.

About the National Museum of African Art

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art is the only museum in the world dedicated solely to the collection, conservation, study and exhibition of Africa’s arts across time and media. The museum’s collection of over 13,000 artworks spans more than 1,000 years of African history and includes a variety of media from across the continent. For more information, call 202-633-4600 or visit the museum’s [website](#). For general Smithsonian information, the public can call 202-633-1000. Follow the museum on [X](#), [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).

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[Ar Back To Top](#)