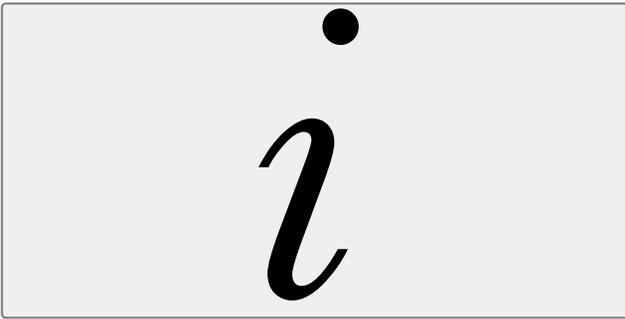




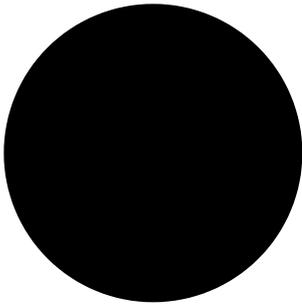
## Benin Bronzes



The Benin Bronze plaques in the Africa gallery.

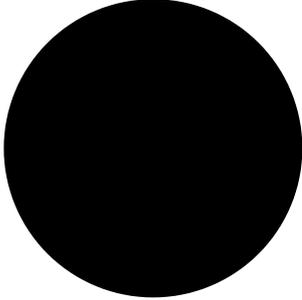
[The Benin Bronze plaques on Collection online.](#)

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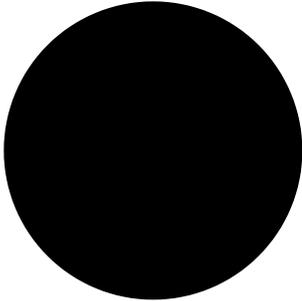
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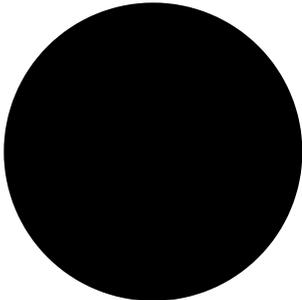
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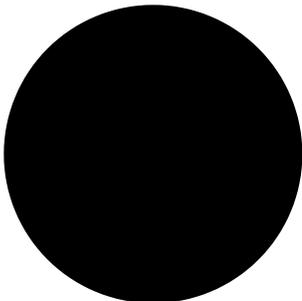
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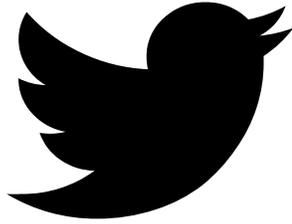
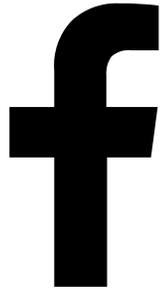
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[Benin Bronzes](#)

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## What are they?

The 'Benin Bronzes' (made of brass and bronze) are a group of sculptures which include elaborately decorated cast plaques, commemorative heads, animal and human figures, items of royal regalia, and personal ornaments. They were created from at least the 16th century onwards in the West African Kingdom of Benin, by specialist guilds working for the royal court of the Oba (king) in Benin City. The Kingdom also supported guilds working in other materials such as ivory, leather, coral and wood, and the term 'Benin Bronzes' is sometimes used to refer to historic objects produced using these other materials.

Many pieces were commissioned specifically for the ancestral altars of past Obas and Queen Mothers. They were also used in other rituals to honour the ancestors and to validate the accession of a new Oba. Among the most well-known of the Benin Bronzes are the cast brass plaques which once decorated the Benin royal palace and which provide an important historical record of the Kingdom of Benin. This includes dynastic history, as well as social history, and insights into its relationships with neighbouring kingdoms, states and societies. The Benin Bronzes are preceded by earlier West African cast brass traditions, dating back into the medieval period.

One element of the history of the Kingdom of Benin represented on the brass plaques and sculptures is the kingdom's early contacts with Europeans. Trade and diplomatic contacts between Benin and Portugal developed on the West African coast from the 15th century. These early connections included Portuguese and Benin emissaries voyaging between the capitals and courts of Benin and Portugal as these two powers negotiated their new relationship.

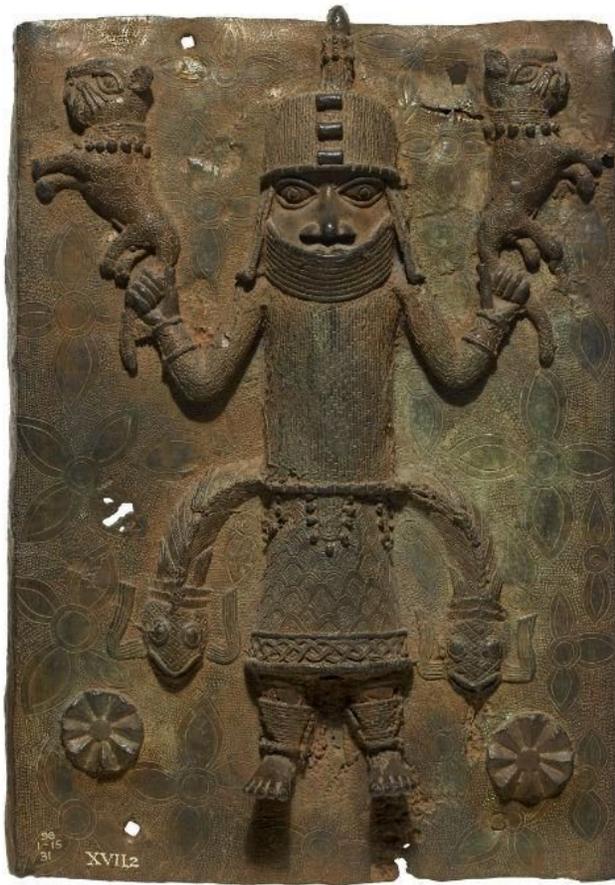
There are over 900 objects from the historic Kingdom of Benin in the British Museum's collection. Over 100 can be seen in a permanent changing display within the Museum's galleries. Objects from Benin are also lent regularly around the world. The British Museum's collections additionally include a range of archival documentation and photographic collections relating to the objects from the Kingdom of Benin and their collection histories.

## Where are they from?

The Benin Bronzes come from Benin City, the historic capital of the Kingdom of Benin, a major city state in West Africa from the medieval period. Benin City became part of the British Empire from 1897 to 1960

and is now located within the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The modern city of Benin (in Edo State) is the home of the current ruler of the Kingdom of Benin, His Royal Majesty Oba Ewuare II. Many of the rituals and ceremonies associated with the historic Kingdom of Benin continue to be performed today.



'Benin Bronze' plaque showing the king (Oba) in regalia and with symbols of royal power (c.16th–17th century).

## How did the objects come to the British Museum?

By the end of the 19th century, the Nigerian coast and its trade were largely dominated by the British. It is in the context of this aggressive expansion of colonial power that the Benin Bronzes came to the British Museum.

During the second half of the 19th century, the balance of power between West African kingdoms like Benin and the European nations they traded with shifted towards European control. In the late 19th century, industrialised European nations accompanied by new military technologies began to exert greater power across the African continent. This political and commercial movement developed into the territorial land-grab known as the 'Scramble for Africa'.

This period of West African history was also significantly affected by the transatlantic slave trade. This vast traffic in humans supplied labour to the colonies and plantations in the Americas, including those of Britain. While by the late 19th century this trade had been largely abolished, its increasing scale and barbarity in the preceding centuries had a massive impact on West African societies.

The desire to further extend British power and influence in the region ultimately led to a clash with the Kingdom of Benin. The gradual expansion by the British into territory neighbouring the kingdom and an

increasing reluctance to accept Benin's trading conditions created an atmosphere of distrust and animosity. In January 1897 an allegedly peaceful but clearly provocative British trade mission was attacked on its way to Benin City, leading to the deaths of seven British delegates and 230 of the mission's African carriers. This incident triggered the launch of a large-scale retaliatory military expedition by the British against the Kingdom of Benin. In February 1897 Benin City was captured by British forces.

Benin suffered a bloody and devastating occupation. No exact figure can be given for the number of Benin's population who were killed in the conquest of the city. However, it is clear that there were many casualties during the sustained fighting. The occupation of Benin City saw widespread destruction and pillage by British forces. Along with other monuments and palaces, the Benin Royal Palace was burned and partly destroyed. Its shrines and associated compounds were looted by British forces, and thousands of objects of ceremonial and ritual value were taken to the UK as official 'spoils of war' or distributed among members of the expedition according to their rank. This included objects removed from royal ancestral shrines, among which were ceremonial brass heads of former Obas and their associated ivory tusks. The looted objects also included more than 900 brass plaques, dating largely to the 16–17th century, found in a storage room within the palace. Having previously decorated the palace walls, these plaques were key historic records for the Benin Court and kingdom, enabling illustration of historic practices and traditions. Following the occupation, the Oba was later captured and sent into exile, while a number of Benin chiefs were executed. Justified as legitimate military action against a 'barbarous' kingdom, this brutal, violent colonial episode effectively marked the end of the independent Kingdom of Benin.

In the autumn of 1897, the British Museum displayed 304 Benin plaques on loan from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and subsequently petitioned successfully to receive 203 of these as a donation. The majority of the remaining plaques were sold to UK and German museums and to private dealers, while a few were retained by the Foreign Office. Other early collections were purchased or donated by members of the Benin expedition.

The British Museum collection only grew to its current size following the acquisition of major private collections, such as that of Harry Beasley in 1944, William Oldman in 1949 and Sir Henry Wellcome in 1954. In 1950 and 1951 the Museum de-accessioned some of the Benin plaques in the collection and these were subsequently sold, exchanged or donated to the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria (25 in number) and the government of the Gold Coast (1). These plaques were later accessioned into the collections of newly established West African museums. At the time these objects were seen as 'duplicates' of other objects retained in the collection, something which later research has shown to be incorrect. A further number of such plaques (12) were sold to or exchanged with private dealers and collectors between 1950 and 1972.

In addition to objects that directly relate to the 1897 expedition, the Museum cares for objects from or associated with Benin City that sit outside the context of the 1897 expedition, including brass castings, carved ivories, contemporary artworks, textiles, casts and replicas, and archaeological finds.

 British soldiers surrounded by looted objects

British soldiers with objects looted from the royal palace during the military expedition to Benin City in 1897.

## What has been requested?

In October 2021 the British Museum received a written request for the return of 'Nigerian antiquities' from the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, Nigeria.

In addition, representatives of the Benin Royal Palace have made various public statements asking for the Benin collections to be returned, most recently at the Benin Dialogue Group meeting hosted by the Museum in October 2021.

These requests are framed within the context of longstanding dialogues with the Museum, including during the visit of the Director of the British Museum to the Benin Royal Court in August 2018.

## Status of discussions

The Museum has positive relationships with the royal palace in Benin City and with the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM).

The Museum's Director, Hartwig Fischer, visited Nigeria in August 2018. He met with senior Museum colleagues in Lagos and Benin City and had an audience with His Royal Majesty Oba Ewuare II which included discussion of new opportunities for sharing and displaying objects from the Kingdom of Benin. During that visit His Royal Majesty Oba Ewuare II repeated his request for Benin collections to be returned. He also acknowledged, however, that the objects serve as 'cultural ambassadors' for Benin culture when displayed internationally.

The British Museum is also a member of the Benin Dialogue Group, a working group bringing together museum representatives from Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom with key representatives from Nigeria, including the Benin Royal Palace and NCMM.

A central objective for the Benin Dialogue Group is to work together to establish new museums in Benin City to facilitate permanent displays of objects from the Kingdom of Benin, including significant collections of works currently in UK and European museums, as well as historic and contemporary works from across West Africa.

 Ivory armlet with ornate carvings inlaid with brass

[Carved Benin ivory armlet inlaid with brass](#) - the object features depictions of Portuguese emissaries or traders, present in Benin from the 15th century.

## The British Museum's position

The British Museum has excellent long-term working relationships with Nigerian colleagues and institutions, particularly through the Africa Programme which has provided an important framework for colleagues to share skills and expertise. These enduring partnerships have enabled the Museum to engage in sustained and open dialogues concerning the Benin collections.

The Museum is committed to active engagement with Nigerian institutions concerning the Benin Bronzes, including pursuing and supporting new initiatives developed in collaboration with Nigerian partners and colleagues.

This includes full participation in the Benin Dialogue Group and working towards the aim of facilitating a new permanent display of Benin works of art in Benin City, to include works from the British Museum's collections. The Museum is also a fully committed partner within the [Digital Benin](#) initiative, focused on developing an online tool and database to digitally reunite as many as possible of the historical objects, documents, and photographs that illuminate the Benin Kingdom.

The Museum is also committed to thorough and open investigation of Benin collection histories, and engagement with wider contemporary dialogues within which these collections are positioned. This

includes fully acknowledging and understanding the colonial history which provided the key context for the development of the Museum's Benin collections.

## Where else can they be seen?

In Nigeria objects from the Kingdom of Benin are housed in the collections of the [National Commission for Museums and Monuments \(NCMM\)](#), and displayed in museums in Benin City and in Lagos. However, the most significant collections are held outside Nigeria.

Various other institutions holding Benin collections are found around the world, including in the USA where there are important collections in Chicago, Boston, New York, Denver and Philadelphia.

Along with the British Museum and the [Ethnologisches Museum](#), Berlin, the following European and UK Museums with collections from the Kingdom of Benin are also participants in the Benin Dialogue Group: [Weltmuseum](#), Vienna, Austria; [Museum am Rothenbaum](#), Hamburg, Germany; [Staatliche Kunstsammlungen](#), Dresden, Germany; [Museum für Völkerkunde](#), Dresden, Germany; [GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig](#), Leipzig, Germany; [Linden-Museum](#), Stuttgart, Germany; [Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen](#), Netherlands; [Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology](#), Cambridge, UK; [Pitt Rivers Museum](#), Oxford, UK; [National Museums Scotland](#), UK.

 Cast brass figure of a cockerel

[Cast brass figure of a cockerel](#) with punched feather decoration. The eyes are inlaid with coral.

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