



Royal sceptre

On display

Title/Description: Royal sceptre

Born: 1500 - 1799

Object Type: sceptre

Materials: Elephant ivory

Measurements: h. 392 x w. 84 x d. 118 mm

Accession Number: 231

Historic Period: 16th century, 18th century

Production Place: Africa, Benin City, Nigeria

Cultural Group: Edo

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Our certainty is that this is indeed a royal sceptre (or sceptre/fly-whisk) resides especially in the fact that it is so obviously, in the language of a artists and artisans, a 'one-off'. It is arguably the largest and most masterly in conception and in detail of all Benin ivory sceptre, depicting the Oba (king) as mounted warrior.

But if we ask to which Oba did it belong originally or, in other words, what is its approximate date, we are confronted by a very wide margin of error - perhaps as much as three centuries - and this once again by reason of the 'one-off' nature of the sculpture. The artist was clearly a past master of the well-known repertory of motifs of the Igbesamwan (or guild of ivory and wood carvers), which motifs remained virtually unchanged though those three centuries to which the sceptre is provisionally dated. Even the motifs surrounding the platform on which the horse stands - which might be interpreted as a degenerate guilloche, indicating a late date - is seen on two Bini-Portuguese oliphants probably dating from about 1550 (Fagg, 1963: pl. 54b). the circled cross motifs on the rider's skirt, and the absence of a choker necklet as worn by the rider on a somewhat similar sceptre (Pitt Rivers, 1900: pl. V, figs. 19-21), may suggest a date earlier rather than later within the three centuries adduced.

The aspects of the work which are clearly the artist's creation, such as the glowering visage of the Oba under his great domed headgear, his asymmetrical crouch, and the monstrous animal jaws at the base (probably of a python, such as those mounted above the palace gates), are all unique, and give us little clue to the epoch in which the carver lived. The piece has been given a misleading impression of modernity by merely sixty years' exposure - along with other Benin ivories - to the sun's bleaching rays under the skylight roof of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Dorset.

The Oba's costume well repays detailed study as a document of Benin regalia; his head-dress appears to be of coral beads with a back neck covering; a queue continues down his back, and he wears a variety of ornaments. The only horse furniture appears to be the bridle; the reins seem partly to represent braided leather and partly chain-link - yet there are hints of a martingale and crupper which suggest that a saddle was intended. A split across the horse's neck has been stabilised with an ivory peg, visible in its forehead.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 148-149.

Provenance

Benin City was the principal settlement of the Edo Kingdom of Benin, situated in the south of Nigeria. In February 1897 the city was attacked by British military, ending the ruling indigenous administration, and the Oba (King) Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (reigned 1888-1897) was exiled. The city was destroyed along with its Royal Palaces. The royal regalia and important religious and memorial sculptures that survived the raid, were looted by the combined forces of British Royal marines and other colonial forces. The Oba's son, Aiguobasinwin Ovonramwen, Eweka II (reigned 1914-1933) returned to Benin City in 1914, restored the city and Palace complex and the Oba dynasty continues today as a regional and cultural administration in Edo state, Nigeria.

The number of artefacts taken in 1897 is believed to be around 2,500, which were shipped to the UK by the British Admiralty. About 40% of the objects were accessioned to the British Museum (700 works) and other works were given to individual military personnel. The remainder were sold at auction by the Admiralty to pay for the expedition, for example, at Stevens Auction Rooms, 38 King Street, London, May 25, 1897, followed by several sales at William Downing Webster, Bicester, between 1898 and 1900. The artefacts are now dispersed across museum collections, notably in Europe and the USA.

Formerly in the Pitt Rivers museum, Dorset (illustrated in the catalogue of 1900) and bought from W.D.Webster, Bicester, Oxfordshire, 14 April 1898 for £25. Items from the Pitt Rivers museum were sold on the open art market throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1957.

Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
