



Leopard head hip mask

Not on display

Title/Description: Leopard head hip mask

Born: 1750 - 1850

Measurements: h. 145 x w. 75 x d. 24 mm

Accession Number: 233

Historic Period: 18th Century - Late, 19th century - Early

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Benin bronze heads, figures and masks, human or animal, may be divided into those which were made before or after about 1775, the criterion being the presence in the later ones of hatched eye borders, as here; deviation from this 'rule' is extremely rare till after the British invasion of Benin in 1897. The date of this piece is therefore probably c. 1800, plus or minus twenty-five years.

These masks, mostly human or leopard, are presented by the Oba to chiefs upon installation, and are tied on over the crossing of the skirt on the left hip; the Oba on the ivory sceptre (no. 115, UEA 231) is shown wearing one. Chiefs of all ranks wear a bronze pendant-mask (*uhunmwunekhue*) on the left hip when in full ceremonial regalia. In form they are related to the bronze pendant-masks sent to vassal rulers (cf. Willett, 1971: figs. 96-7), and the ivory pendant-mask worn by the Oba.

Tradition relates that when Oba Ewuare (about mid fifteenth century) was in exile he slept under a tree, and in the morning found a leopard on a branch over him. Ewuare took the leopard as a sign of future good fortune, and vowed that, if he became king, he would sacrifice a leopard every year to his head, the locus of his luck and power. Leopards have a special place in Benin symbolism (Ben-Amos, 1980 : 64, 88), where the sacrifice of the leopard stands for triumph over the bush; the Oba as king of the settled land has shown that he has power over the leopard, who is king of the wild country. There was a guild for capturing wild leopards, and a leopard face on cloth was intended to strike fear into enemies' hearts. When making a 'burn-in' repair, behind the ears.

There are two suspension loops inside the mask in the casting flow. The surface of the leopard's face covered with small rosettes made of impressed dots; the feline whiskers are shown as a pair of 'tridents' on either side of the nose. The rings bordering the lower edge may have been for pendant rings or bells.

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) p. 157.

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 (1900 catalogue).

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from John Hewett in 1972.

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