



Head for chief's ancestor altar

Not on display

Title/Description: Head for chief's ancestor altar

Born: 1800 - 1899

Measurements: h. 280 x w. 120 x d. 120 mm

Accession Number: 236

Historic Period: 19th century

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

There is a well-attested tradition in Benin, (confirmed by the late R. E. Bradbury in a personal communication in 1958) which relates how the chiefs of the royal lineage petitioned the Oba to allow them to decorate their fathers' altars (*aru erha*) with wooden human heads (comparable to the bronze heads on the Oba's own altars), instead of ram and antelope heads as heretofore; and the Oba was graciously pleased to assent.

The traditional starting date for the use of wooden commemorative heads (*uhumwelao*) on chief's paternal ancestral altars is placed in the reign of Oba Osemwede (c. 1816). They were certainly in use by 1862, when Sir Richard Burton visited Benin city. He wrote, 'The domestic altar is "rigged up" . . . [with] men's heads coarsely imitated in wood and metal...' (Burton, 1863; quoted in Ben-Amos, 1980:42). Earlier accounts such as those given by the Capuchins in 1651-2 and by Landolphe and his party in 1787 make no mention of heads on the chiefs' altars. A chief's paternal ancestral altar has rattle staffs, bells and swords, as well as a wooden head, which is thought to be primarily decorative, and not spiritually powerful. The normal size of the wooden heads is about two feet (see Pitt Rivers, 1900: pl. xxxvi, figs. 277-8), whereas this head is half that height, which is very much rarer.

This head is coated with sacrificial material, probably blood and eggs, and is partly blackened. Termite damage has removed some of the wood at the back; there is a vertical hole down the centre of the head, lined with black encrustation, which would have held a ceremonial rattle. Flat-headed iron nails are used to indicate the eye pupils; there is no sign that the head was embellished with strips of sheet bronze as is the case with many of the larger wooden ones. Coral bead ornament is shown by carved rings at the base of the headgear and round the neck, though (as is appropriate to a mere chief) in lesser quantity than on an Oba's head. The upper projection represents a feather, possibly of the red parrot, which was worn to ensure success in war (if on a helmet) and could here be a sign of achievement.

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. 159.

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.

Provenance between 1897 and 1959 is incomplete.

Bought by Ohley at auction in 1957, Sotheby's 'Important African Sculpture' sale, December 1957.

Formerly owned by Sydney Burney.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1959.

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