

THE ART OF AFRICA (III) WEST AFRICAN BRONZES

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THE best known bronzes of West Africa originate from Ife and Benin in southern Nigeria. The art of casting bronze, however, is known by other West African peoples, from Liberia to the Cameroons. In this context the term bronze is used to cover casting made with copper as a base but combined with varying amounts of other metals. Imported metals were generally used and for several centuries these took the form of manillas, rings of a standard size, which were exchanged for slaves.

The technique of casting employed is the well known *cire perdue*, or lost wax. In West Africa, in almost all cases, beeswax is used, though the Tiv of Nigeria sometimes use latex. The modelling of the object to be cast is in wax and, if small, is without a clay core; larger objects are usually based on a clay core. Among the Bamum of the French Cameroons the wax is not poured off before the metal is poured but is absorbed by the outer encasement, which is a mixture of clay and cow-dung. Surface decoration is generally produced in the wax, but in Dahomey and in the work of the Bron of Ghana it is obtained by metal punches.

Work in bronze is found among a number of tribes in Liberia, the Ivory Coast and Haute Volta but it is not a major art form. In Liberia, the Dan-Ngere tribes make armlets, bracelets, anklets and figures. The Dan and Kran tribes cast figures holding dance wands.

The Senufo, who inhabit the northern parts of the Ivory Coast, produce bronze masks, figures, bracelets, and pendants and pipe bowls with small human figures but their principal art is carving. The art of the more southerly Senufo is related to that of the Baoulé among whom bronze casting is likewise not a major art form. The Baoulé inhabit the central and eastern central regions of the Ivory Coast and, like the Senufo, cast masks, figures, pendant plaques and personal ornaments. They also make small brass weights, an art form which derives from their connections with the Ashanti. These weights are often more finished than those of the Ashanti.

In Haute Volta, bronze work is found among the Lobi, Bobo and Mossi. The Lobi live to the west and south of the Volta

river, the Bobo to the north and the Mossi to the east of the Bobo. The objects produced are much the same in each tribe: personal ornaments and small figures reproducing scenes of daily life. To the south of the Mossi, in central Ghana, a few bronze lamps and masks have been found which are attributed to the Bron. The surface decoration of the Bron pieces shows a relationship with the art of the Ashanti, who also inhabit central Ghana.

The best known art form of the Ashanti are the small bronze weights, *mrammuo*, used for measuring gold dust and referred to as gold weights. There used to be a plentiful supply of gold dust and nuggets in Ghana which was used as a form of currency in various transactions. The art of making *mrammuo* was restricted to certain families organized as a guild. Weights were graduated in a range from about $\frac{1}{16}$ ounce to more than one pound. The average height of an *abrammuo* was about 2 in. to $2\frac{1}{4}$ in., though some are as large as $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. Each *abrammuo* was named and although the same weights were supposed to be of the same standard there were often differences; those of a chief were expected to weigh more than those of a commoner.

Virtually every phase of daily life is depicted by these small gold weights: people, scenes, objects of daily use, animals, plants, proverbs, rituals, etc. In appearance the Ashanti *abrammuo* often seem a bit rough and impressionistic; human figures have a rather elongated look; but the artist's expression of forms is always vigorous. The bronze weights are undoubtedly a vital form of genre art. It is thought that the representational forms may have been introduced from the north within the past 200 years and that the earliest weights were geometric. The geometric weights, which include a wide variety of shapes, constitute the other category of *abrammuo*.

The other main type of bronze work produced by the Ashanti is the *kuduo*, a small bronze urn formerly used in purification rites and which was buried with the head of a family. These vessels either have three legs or are legless. The body of a *kuduo* has chased designs on it together with a few forms, generally animals, in relief. It has a hinged lid on top of which are animals or human figures in the round.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Fon people of Dahomey established a powerful kingdom with its capital at Abomey. Bronze casting, which is still carried on at Abomey, is traditionally a court art and the work of a family guild. The

principal forms made are much like those of the Ashanti weights but larger in scale: scenes of daily life and animals, fantastic as well as naturalistic. A similar but more accentuated elongatedness than the Ashanti *mrammuo* characterizes the Dahomean bronzes and there is more attention to finish.

In Western Nigeria bronze working is found among a number of the Yoruba peoples, such as the Egba, Ekiti, Oyo, Ijebu, Owo. Human figures, masks, staff heads, rattles, bells, figures, ceremonial staffs and armlets are used in cult houses and chiefs use bronze work as personal ornamentation of symbolic significance on various ceremonial occasions. But the fame of the Yoruba region derives from the remarkable bronzes which have been excavated at Ile-Ife.

In 1910, Frobenius discovered at Ife a bronze head, the Olokun head, together with a number of terra cotta ones, which bore witness to a remarkable naturalistic form of art. In 1938, eighteen further bronze heads and a figure were found. These bronzes are large pieces and very thinly cast, manifesting perfect technical control. Their realistic appearance suggests that they were portraits. In November 1957, a further seven bronzes were discovered, bringing the total to 27. These last seven consisted of a human figure, a human couple, a bowl on a stool with a figure encircling the bowl, two egg-shaped objects with human heads and two short staffs each ending in a human head.

The tendency has been to think of the Ife bronze art as unique and apart from other African Negro styles and, in consequence, to seek its origins in a non-African art tradition. It is undoubtedly unique as a style and in its perfection of modelling and technique but it does not follow that such a style could not develop in the locale where examples of it have been found. The hair of the bronze heads is not cast; there are holes left on the head, lip and chin which are presumably for the addition of hair. This characteristic is African. The most recent finds would seem to confirm that the Ife bronze tradition is African, for they manifest a disproportionate emphasis given to the size of the head compared with the rest of the figure.

The art of Benin, as that of Ife, is world-famous. The story of the discovery of hundreds of bronze castings at Benin in 1897 by a British expedition sent to punish the king for murdering the British Vice Consul and his trading party is well known. The technical excellence of these works of art was quickly appreciated.

Appreciation was further enhanced for the European observer by the representational quality of the objects; most of them quickly found their way into the leading European museums and the hands of a few prominent private collectors. Members of the expedition retained important small collections, which, for the most part, later became dispersed.

Benin art was almost entirely a court art and, until recently, bronze casting was done solely for the king. There were few objects that the Bini brass workers did not at one time or another cast: large bronze heads to hold carved ivory tusks, bells, groups of figures on stands and other objects for the shrine of the Oba's (king) ancestors; staffs for the Oba's messengers; bronze cocks; vessels in various forms for offerings and for use in rituals; swords for execution and for use in war, and various trappings; ornamental masks; many kinds of personal ornaments, such as wristlets, armbands, anklets, bells, rings, and hair ornaments; figures in the round in ceremonial regalia; horseman on stands; items of furniture and many other objects. But perhaps the most outstanding objects found at Benin were a series of bronze plaques, which at some distant time had decorated the Oba's palace. These plaques show Obas in ceremonial attire with their attendants, chiefs and their retinues, warriors and their soldiers and sword bearers, musicians, drummers, horn-blowers, and many other functionaries. There are plaques depicting Portuguese with their weapons, plaques of animals and inanimate objects. The bronze plaques form a unique series of historical documents about past kings, their retainers, court activities and events.

Bronze casting still continues at Benin but is a poor reflection of the work of former times. Virtually nothing is known today about the identity of the earlier people portrayed in bronze or the symbolism of the elaborately chased designs which decorate the surfaces of many different forms. The modern bronze caster has lost all connection with the earlier great tradition in terms of its meaning and technical virtuosity.

Various theories as to the origins of Benin bronze art have been advanced, but the Bini tradition that they learned the art of casting bronze from Ife is generally accepted and, further, that this occurred before the advent of the Portuguese. Attempts to chronicle the development of Benin art have either been at a very general and impressionistic level or rested on an examination of only certain types of objects and of certain of their formal



An Ashanti kudoku or cast bronze vessel, traditionally used to contain gold dust or grease for anointing the body, or placed in graves with food and valuables. It is about 14 in. high, with a hinged lid.

Acknowledgments to the British Museum



A woman with baby, pounding corn, illustrating the Haute Volta preoccupation with scenes of daily life.



A pair of royal figures, probably depicting the ritual struggle of a king with another chief at his installation, found in 1957 at Ita Yemov, near Ife. The 'African' proportion of the heads distinguishes them from the earlier naturalistic heads from Ife.

Photograph: the British Museum.



Bronze wall plaque, typical of those which form a unique series about historical events.

characteristics. The cultural context of the art has hardly been given any attention as no study of any depth of Bini culture has been made till very recently. Current research into the history of Benin art and culture should provide data for a detailed study of the development of Benin art.*

The work of von Luschan and Struck in the first quarter of this century led to the advancement of a chronological sequence of development which has found wide acceptance as fact. This is unfortunate for the sequence is very largely hypothetical and would appear often to be erroneous. Attempts to date Benin bronzes have generally carried the under-lying assumption that the more naturalistic, less stylized and most finely cast ones. This assumption arises from the fact that because Benin bronze casting was learned from Ife, where, as has been mentioned, a tradition of casting bronzes showing outstanding naturalism and skill was present, the earliest Bini forms would approximate to those found at Ife. It is, of course, not known when the Ife bronzes were made. They may have been made after the Bini learned the art from Ife, in which case it is necessary to assume that they represent a point in a style sequence which changed little at Ife from the time at which the Bini acquired the technique, if the underlying assumption as to the course of development of Benin art is to be tenable.

Tradition credits Oguola, the sixth Oba of the second period, with the introduction of bronze casting to Benin. Egharevba, the Bini historian, considers that Oguola ruled at the end of the 13th century. At that time he is said to have sent to the king of Ile-Ife to send someone to teach his people how to cast in bronze. An artist called Igue-ighae came to Benin. When Igue-ighae died he was deified and is worshipped today by the smiths at Idunmwu Igun Eromwo, the quarter of the royal brass founders. Assuming that, of the Bini bronzes which survive to us, the earliest examples made after the introduction of the art are those which are most naturalistic in appearance and are particularly finely cast, then it would seem that the Bini artist was unable to solve the formal problems involved in individual portraiture, as did the artist of the Ife heads. Early Benin bronze heads show that the Bini artist was able to model a type where attention to form and plasticity, though often mani-

* I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. R. E. Bradbury, for certain items of information included here. A five-year programme of research into the history of Benin art and culture is being conducted by the Department of History, University College, Ibadan.

festing a high degree of sensibility, is in terms of a set formula applicable to all formal problems of the same kind. The Bini artist certainly learned well from Igwe-ighae the technical processes of bronze casting but, it would seem, failed to grasp the conceptual approach of the Ife artist. This is perhaps understandable if bronze casting was introduced into a culture which already had an art tradition in another medium.

The carving of wooden heads has been credited to the time of Ere, the second king of the first period, who was the eighteenth ruler before Oguola. The wood and ivory carvings which have survived to us show a high degree of conceptual representation; formal details are expressed according to formulae: mouths, noses, eyes, and other features are not individualistic but follow generalized concepts for such features.

In designing, the same formulae are applied to the solution of similar problems. If the carver's traditional approach was much the same in very early times as represented on objects surviving today then it would seem that the later bronze style has approached closer to the traditional style of the carver. The mastery of the technique of casting in bronze learned from Igwe-ighae would be insufficient in itself to maintain a style approximating that of the Ife artist. Without a similar mastery of the Ife approach to form, the Bini artist would tend to veer towards his own traditional style. There is a heaviness, a stumpiness about Bini human heads and figures in wood and ivory and the same feeling occurs in the more recent and very stylized bronzes. A number of ivories belie the generalization made about the carver's art, but these may well have been the result of the influence of early bronze work on the traditional carving style.

There is a simplicity about those forms closest in appearance to the Ife bronzes and which are assumed to be examples of early Bini bronze casting. Later forms become more elaborate; there is a fussiness in the attention given to detail, a horror of empty spaces and a compulsion to fill them, usually by some chased decoration. This is evident if a series of plaques are examined: some are almost three dimensional in their approach to form, as though the figures were conceived in the round and pressed on a flat surface; the same approach is evident in the simple treatment of decorative details. Other plaques fall half way between the three dimensional approach to form and low relief proper; the approach to decoration is partly three dimensional and partly engraved. Still other plaques suggest that forms

were conceived as growing out of a flat surface; decoration is profuse and entirely engraved.

In the time of Eresonye, the 13th king of the second period, who was reputed to have reigned in the first half of the 18th century, it is said that there was a great deal of brass available. To this period are assigned elaborate brass stools and bronze masks, known as Odudua. It seems probable that a wide range of objects were cast at this time and subsequently, such as heavy dishes with covers, large heavy figures in the round with big loops coming out of their heads, and ornamental masks. Large bronze heads with flanged bases, used as tusk holders, may originate from this period; those with winged headdresses are said to have been introduced at the beginning of the 19th century at the time of Oba Ogbabo. Decoration of these objects is elaborate. Compared with earlier bronzes they have a heaviness in execution and are much more stylized. The general impression of Benin art is one of strong stylization with, in human figures, an emphasis on the head, which is disproportionately large. Benin art is elaborately descriptive of reality and is strongly pictorial within its particular stylized manner of expression.

A number of bronze castings known to originate from sites in central southern Nigeria other than Benin and Ife clearly derive from the Benin or Ife styles. The sites are Udo, a town about 20 miles east north-east of Benin, Owo, a town about 60 miles due north of Benin, Idah, a town on the east bank of the Niger, just north of 7°N. , and Jebba-Tada, on the southern bank of the Niger, just north of 9°N. , and just west of 5°E. The distinguishing feature of what W. Fagg has called the Udo style is a longish rectangular cavity found at the back of the object. The style is represented by a number of heads and figures. The relationship of Benin art and that of Owo awaits further clarification. Owo is a Yoruba town and wood and ivory carving appears to be Yoruba in general style. However, a number of Owo features are found in Benin art and bronze work is often very close in appearance to Bini work. A very fine and apparently old bronze mask, belonging to the Atah of Idah, which is worn suspended from the waist, though more elongated than similar Benin pieces, is clearly Benin work. At Tada and Jebba are seven almost life size bronzes of some antiquity. One large seated figure is in the Ife style; the other figures would seem to derive from Benin.

Also emanating from central southern Nigeria are a number of bronzes which, though sometimes having characteristics of Yoruba or Bini art, appear to be local styles of local development. Some of these bronzes were found at Benin but are clearly not Bini work. One group of bronzes was found on the Forcados river; bells with the upper part in the form of a human face are particularly characteristic of the style. A hoard found at Apapa, Lagos, appears to be related to the Forcados style. Another hoard, found in the Andoni creeks—in the eastern part of the Niger delta—which includes a fine small bronze figure, has features common to the Forcados style and to what has been called by W. Fagg the Huntsman style, after a magnificent bronze of a huntsman with a deer on his shoulders, found at Benin and now in the possession of the British Museum. The Huntsman style is characterized by a narrow band with bars across it, like a ladder, which is used sparingly to decorate parts of an object, such as the eyelids. A head, bell and one or two other objects of this style have been identified. The treatment of the huntsman piece is outstanding for its plasticity and recalls the work of Rodin. The Andoni Creeks bronzes have certain features in common with the Huntsman style and with the Forcados river bells. Yet another style is represented by a collection of bells the distinguishing feature of which is a head with horns forming the top part of a bell.

Bronze casting is also found among the Tiv, who live along the southern bank of the Benue river. In the Cameroon grasslands, the Bamum, with their capital at Fumban in French territory, cast a variety of bronze objects, such as anklets and bracelets, tobacco pipes, bells, masks, bowls, finials for horns, sword handles and small figures. From Fumban, the centre, bronze casting has spread to peoples of the British Cameroons, such as the Bali.

From this brief survey of bronze casting in West Africa it can be seen that the major bronze styles seem to lie at the centre of the area. The achievement of naturalism of Ife is outstanding. Next to this one is struck by the dynamic expression of nature of the Ashanti artist in the small scale gold weights. A similar expression of interest in natural forms is to be seen among the larger scale Dahomean work but in a more stylized manner. In the still larger scale art of Benin, representation is static and stylized; these two qualities appear further to the east and in the western part of the area of bronze casting in West Africa.