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competition and conflict with that of ancient Egypt.

The Nubians and Egyptians alternately dominated each other over time. We see evidence of this in Egyptian art of the period, which often depicts the Nubian rulers who intermittently ruled in the north. Nubian figures can be distinguished by specific and distinct symbols of kingship, as well as recognizable clothing, jewelry, and short, curly hairstyles. While the Egyptians depicted themselves with red-brown skin (for males) or yellow (for females), Nubian individuals were shown with very dark brown or black skin in Egyptian art.

Nubian culture can also be distinguished from the culture of ancient Egypt through its distinctive architectural forms, funerary rituals, and pantheon of gods. Today, the descendants of ancient Nubians continue to inhabit portions of their original homeland. Many were relocated with the construction of the Aswan High Dam (1960–71) along the Nile. As the region was subsequently flooded, many of those living on ancient Nubian lands were moved into northern Egypt. Though greatly transformed, this ethnic group continues to express its culture through storytelling, music, and literature.

### **Lyre (Kissar): Analysis**

This lyre, or *kissar*, is from Nubia in northern Sudan and dates from the late nineteenth century.

According to the British Museum, which holds the object, it was owned by a singer and spiritual healer. The lyre would have been the lead instrument in a small musical ensemble that included other instruments such as tambourines and drums. Musical ensembles primarily performed at weddings and other life-cycle ceremonies, harvest festivals, and most importantly, ceremonies associated with the *zār* cult.

While the musicians themselves would have been male, the audience and beneficiaries of the *zār* ceremonies would have been largely female. *Zār* ceremonies were intended as healing rituals for women in Nubian culture:

*During the zār ceremony, women become entranced by the mesmeric rhythms of the musicians. They seek to communicate with and to placate whatever zār spirits have taken possession of their bodies in order to regain an equilibrium, which has somehow been disturbed. Zār ceremonies enable women to behave in ways, and to address issues, which would not normally be allowed in society.*

Such ceremonies continue to be performed in this region today, often with electric and amplified lyres.

The lyre measures approximately 16 inches deep, 45½ inches wide, and 47¾ inches high. Its main body is constructed of a hemispherical wooden form with a skin sound board stretched across its surface. Two holes are cut into the sound board, to the left and right sides of its surface. Two wooden arms extend from the top of the body of the instrument, forming an approximately forty-five-degree angle. These are connected approximately a third of the way up their length by an arm strap made of braided red cotton thread and by two cross bars at their upper extremes.

Strings made of twisted gut are strung from the lower of the cross bars. They are stretched tight down across a wooden bridge and tied to an iron ring placed between the two holes cut into the sound board surface. The arms and cross bars are highly decorated, with wrapped cloth, wound strands of colored glass beads, and an abundance of suspended elements.

Specific details of these suspended elements have



Sub-Saharan West Africa, 1200–1700. The Ife settlement, a city of the Yoruba people located in southwestern Nigeria, was most active between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, as one of the most prosperous trade centers in the region.

Image Credit: Sayre, 2013.

generally covered, as the Yoruba believed that it was dangerous for the king to open his mouth in public. The Yoruba understood the head to be the repository of the king's *Ase*—his inner power—and so his face needed to be covered by a veil of beads or woven hair hanging down from his crown or he had to hold a fly whisk up to his mouth. Full figure images of the king typically show him holding such a whisk, and the face of the king is often shown with linear elements that can be identified as the veil. Such

characteristics are clearly seen in our example here.

### **Brass Head: Analysis**

The brass head with a beaded crown and plume is typical of the highly naturalistic bronze sculpture for which Ife is best known.<sup>89</sup> These works were first analyzed and described by Frank Willett, an officer of the Nigerian Department of Antiquities. (Willett is to Ife what Fagg was to Nok and Shaw to Igbo.) The first group of brass heads was found

in 1938 when a crew was digging foundation trenches for a construction project in the center of Ife. This example is one of the seventeen heads discovered at the Wunmonije Compound.

The heads were a great shock to the West. As Willett noted, “those who could see no beauty in the abstract mode of much African sculpture had no difficulty in appreciating the beauty of these heads.”<sup>90</sup> Terracotta heads had been found before 1910 by the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius, but the brass heads were of a different character entirely. The bronzes of Benin, which we will discuss shortly, were well known by this time, but the Ife heads predated even those masterpieces of African metalwork.

This head was created using the lost wax casting technique described previously. It is slightly under life size and depicts the *Oni* in his regalia. The elaborate, decorative crown has a narrow brim that frames the forehead of the figure. From this brim rises the main body of the crown, a relatively short, drum-shaped element covered in vertical rectangle shapes meant to indicate beads. Projecting outward from above the forehead, and upward from the crown of the head, two conical crests rise, adding greater dimension to the headpiece. Below the earlobes we can see the projecting edges of the neck panel that hangs down from the back of the crown. Traces of red and black paint are visible across its surface.

The king’s face is presented in a realistic, though idealized way. The eyes are stylized and almond shaped. They are slightly too small for the overall dimensions of the head. The eyebrow ridge is clearly defined, though the eyebrows themselves are not distinctly illustrated. They may have originally been painted on—in addition to the black and red paint traces on the crown, there are elements of red and white paint across the face as well. The nostrils are slightly flared, and the lips are full. The mouth is slightly open, and we can see the hollow center of the work through the parted lips. There are a series of grooves around the neck that very naturally suggest creases in the skin.

One of the most notable features of this face is the use of various linear effects and punched holes across its surface. The features here are covered with vertical incised markings, which likely reference the

facial covering element described earlier. Twelve of the seventeen Wunmonije Compound brass heads present this detail, and so it clearly carries significance. Additionally, there are a series of punctures visible around the lips of the figure. These holes may have been used to anchor a decorative beard or veil of some sort, probably made of small black glass beads. Several such beads were discovered in the head when it was originally cleaned.

The head has holes in the neck that are not visible in our illustration. These were likely used to attach the brass head to some other object, possibly a carved wooden body. It is possible that the head would have been used in procession for some sort of ritual, such as a funerary rite. Regardless of its intended function, this work can be greatly appreciated for its technical skill and artistic achievement. As yet another manifestation of imagery related to ideas of kingship, the work deepens our already rich understanding of authority and rule across the continent.



### SELECTED ARTWORK:

#### Plaque, Edo Peoples, Nigeria, Mid-Sixteenth–Seventeenth Centuries

#### *The Benin Kingdom in Southern Nigeria*

The Kingdom of Benin was one of the major West African powers up until the late nineteenth century.<sup>91</sup> Founded in approximately the eleventh century, the capital was situated at Edo (now Benin City). Founded by the Edo people, the region was known as Igodomigodo in the pre-colonial era. By the fifteenth century and the first arrival of the Portuguese, the empire was firmly established. The Kingdom’s power came through its military might—the king could offer protection to neighboring groups in exchange for tax dollars and access to local natural resources. During the era of the slave trade, the Kingdom maintained this level of authority through its control of commerce between European powers and the inland African peoples of the region. This monopoly would ultimately be challenged and de-

**SELECTED ARTWORK: BRASS HEAD, YORUBA, IFE, NIGERIA, C. TWELFTH–FOURTEENTH CENTURIES**

- ✧ Yoruba mythology describes Ife as the center of the creation of the world and of humanity. The city continues to be the spiritual center of Yoruba culture into the present day.
- ✧ The king in Yoruba culture, known as the *Oni*, gains his authority from the fact that he traces his descent to Oduduwa, the creator of Ife and humankind.
- ✧ The brass head with a beaded crown and plume is typical of the highly naturalistic bronze sculpture for which Ife is best known.
- ✧ The first group of brass heads was found in 1938 and was a great shock to Westerners, who found it difficult to believe that Africans could have created such majestic works.
- ✧ This head depicts the *Oni* in his regalia, and may have been used in ritual procession.

**SELECTED ARTWORK: PLAQUE, EDO PEOPLES, NIGERIA, MID-SIXTEENTH–SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES**

- ✧ The Kingdom of Benin was one of the major West African powers up until the late nineteenth century. It maintained its authority through the control of trade between Europeans and the inland African peoples of the region.

- ✧ The objects we refer to as the “Benin Bronzes” are a group of more than a thousand commemorative plaques and sculptures that originally decorated the royal palace of the Benin Kingdom.
- ✧ The bronzes were looted and removed to the British Museum during the British Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897.
- ✧ Works such as this plaque, presented in profusion throughout the palace, served as propaganda in support of the king’s rule.

**SELECTED ARTWORK: KENTE CLOTH, ASHANTI PEOPLE, GHANA, TWENTIETH CENTURY**

- ✧ A highly successful militaristic culture, the Asante were one of the few African groups who managed to ward off European colonial rule to any meaningful extent.
- ✧ Kente cloth is one of the most highly recognizable cultural products of Africa.
- ✧ In addition to its distinctive color palette, kente cloth is characterized by geometric patterning.
- ✧ Kente cloth is an important symbol of African kingship. While first worn only by the king and his chiefs, today it is seen throughout Ghana and the world.
- ✧ This cloth wrapper presents typical kente elements—repeated vertical and horizontal patterns in square and rectangular shapes, and colors including gold, orange, red, greens, blues, and black.