

Kim Woods - Benin plaque showing the façade of the Royal palace

KIM WOODS: I'm Kim Woods, and I'm a senior lecturer in Art History at The Open University. I specialise in art from northern Europe and Spain in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. And I'm particularly interested in sculpture. That's how I come to be talking about this sculpture from the ancient African kingdom of Benin, which is within what is now Nigeria. It probably dates from the 16th century.

This is a high relief. That is a kind of sculptured picture made in one piece, where the statues or the figures stand out in three dimensions from the background. It shows warriors and attendants to either side of a doorway of a building. This is cast using an alloy of copper, brass. It's hard and cold to the touch, and very durable so it can be displayed and used out of doors. It's partly the beautiful colour that is the attraction of brass, but also its lustrous and shiny surface.

In Benin, brass was a very high prestige material, associated with the very highest echelons of society, the ruler, or Oba, as he was known. Brass is easily confused with bronze. And, in fact, these Benin sculptures have often been referred to as the Benin bronzes. But this is actually wrong. They're made of brass. Now bronze is a mixture of copper and tin, whereas brass is a mixture of copper and zinc. Both serve to strengthen what is otherwise rather a soft material, copper on its own isn't nearly so easy to work with in terms of sculpture.

Why does this matter? Well, in Western society, bronze tends to have a higher status. Athletes win a bronze medal, not a brass one, whereas a door knocker is likely to be made out of brass. In fact, when you look more closely at the materials that have really been used, there can be some surprises. Some very famous Renaissance sculpture actually turns out to be made of brass, not bronze, whatever the captions in the books say.

This brass sculpture is cast. This is a highly technical and sophisticated process. First of all, you have to make a clay core, which is roughly the size and shape of the sculpture that you want to make. This is then covered in wax, and the detailed sculpture is made in this wax. Your sculpture in wax is then covered with a clay coating, with spaces used to keep this clay coating at the right distance from the core.

The wax is then melted out and molten metal is poured in through vents. So this molten metal in effect takes the place of the lost wax. And for this reason, it's called the lost-wax process. The sculpture can then be cooled and the outer clay coating knocked off to reveal the sculpture. And then the vent marks and the spaces are taken away, and the surface can be refined, if you want to, and you have your finished brass sculpture.

This Benin relief is about half a metre high. It shows a palace doorway with pillars to either side. These pillars support a roof made of simulated wooden shingles, and on top of it, a snake. This is probably a python, the king of snakes. Both the background and the door are heavily decorated with floral or leaf designs. These are typical of Benin sculpture. To either side of the doorway are armed guards holding a shield and a staff or spear. And beside them are two naked pages

holding fans. The heavily outlined features and scarification marks above the eyes are characteristic of Benin.

There were several attributes of kingship here. All four figures wear simulated bead headdresses. This is probably meant to evoke coral, which is a material that is associated with royalty in Benin, like brass. Secondly, there are leopards at the foot of the doorway. Leopards are also attributes of kingship in Benin society.

The plaque contains clues within itself, regarding how it was originally used. If you look very closely, you'll see that on the pillars supporting the roof of this building, there are little figures. These look very much like carved plaques, like the one that you're looking at, only rather simpler, with just a few figures rather than a whole scene. This suggests that these brass plaques were originally used to decorate the pillars of the royal palace in Benin City. Look at the top right-hand corner. You can see a nail still in the plaque where it was attached to something, probably a pillar. And the left-hand side corner has been ripped away, perhaps when the plaque was taken from its original setting.

So where did Benin get the materials for its sculpture? Zinc was not a problem. It was available relatively locally in West Africa, but copper was not. We know that copper was brought in by Portuguese traders from the 16th century, in the form of manilas, or bracelets, that could then be melted down and reused. But the casting tradition in Benin goes much earlier than that, and we're not sure where they got their copper before the Portuguese arrived.

The Portuguese focused on the coast, on the island of Sao Tome and on the trading city of Gwato. They very rarely went to the interior. Brass sculpture was produced in Benin City, largely for the Oba, or the ruler, of Benin. Europeans may only have been dimly aware of this tradition of highly crafted sculptures.

There was trade of items in ivory from Benin, salt cellars, spoons, and horns known as oliphants were produced specifically for the Portuguese market and exported to Western Europe. But as far as we know, there was no such export trade in the brasses, which were much more closely identified with the Benin culture and ruler. The Kingdom of Benin survived until the 19th century, when it was savagely defeated by the British, in what has come to be known as the 'Punitive Expedition'.

In 1897, Benin City was sacked. It was during this devastation that quantities of Benin brasses were discovered and taken back to England. That's how so many come to be in the British Museum, like the one that we're looking at now. Ever since they arrived in Europe, the Benin brasses have been controversial.

First of all, they challenged ideas of what African art should look like. This was a time when European artists were turning to African art as a way of rejuvenating what they thought of as the sterile traditions of Western Europe. But the kind of art that they were looking at was considered primitive art. And the sophisticated and highly crafted Benin brasses didn't fit into the stereotype at all. Secondly, because they were so sophisticated, they didn't fit in to the stereotypes of racial inferiority, which was one of the ways of justifying British imperialism and invasion.

The brasses continue to pose questions today. First of all, how should they be displayed? In Western Europe, we have a tradition of the exhibition of art. But art is a Western European concept that has no counterpart in Africa. So then should the brasses be displayed alongside everyday ethnic artefacts? That doesn't seem to do justice to their artistic and technical sophistication either. What do we do with that conundrum?

The second question is where the brasses belong. They were acquired violently and in very dubious circumstances, and Nigeria would like them back, just as the Greek government would like the Parthenon Marbles back. So should they be returned? Or should they continue to be displayed in the British Museum, because the British Museum has a greater cultural reach? I'll leave you to think about that one.