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Teaching Support Sheet

Presenter: Dr Kim Woods

Benin plaque showing the façade of the Royal palace 1550-1650, British Museum

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-benin-plaque-showing-fa%C3%A7ade-royal-palace-1550%E2%80%931650-british-museum>

In this film Dr Kim Woods looks at a brass relief sculpture from the historic kingdom of Benin in West Africa. It shows four attendants of the Oba or ruler of Benin, standing to either side of one of the doorways of the Royal Palace. It was made in the 16th or perhaps 17th century to decorate one of the many columns supporting that same palace. Now in the British Museum, it was one of the artworks looted by the British in the so-called punitive expedition against Benin in 1897 and brought back to England.

Before watching the film

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here that you can use to show to your class:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=20717001&objectId=610470&partId=1

Questions to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do you know about the materials bronze and brass?
2. What do you think this work depicts or represents? Describe what you see on the screen. Can you identify any recognisable architectural forms?
3. How are the figures presented in the work?
4. What function do you think this work might have served?

After watching the film

Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

1. How do you think this work relates to the culture of the court where it was displayed?

The plaque would have been accessible only to those with admittance to the Royal Palace compound. On one level it shows a scene from palace life: armed guards and pages on duty. This is not a realistic scene though, but one that celebrates the Oba by visualising the court ceremonial surrounding him. The brass of the relief itself is a royal material, and so is the coral represented within the scene. In fact, both are traded materials brought from outside the kingdom and hence rare, expensive and sought-after - attributes that made them particularly appropriate for the highest in the social hierarchy.

2. Has the film helped you define some of the formal elements of the work? Consider scale, medium, and the treatment of the human figures.

The composition is symmetrical. The scale may not be entirely true to life, unless the palace was indeed a very low building (I think we assume the leopards are brass sculptures not real animals). While the set of the heads and the gestures holding weapons or fans are lifelike, the very short legs, and heavily-traced facial features are stylised. The artist has evoked a courtly scene without simply copying from life.

3. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?

The film talks about the plaques giving internal clues to its own use – to decorate architectural elements of the palace in a way that enhanced the reputation, wealth, power and connections of the ruler. The plaque Neil McGregor explores in his *History of the World in 100 objects* includes Portuguese figures, which makes the point more forcefully (see link below). We cannot be sure for how many centuries the plaques were displayed in this way, just that many were discovered in a storehouse on the sack of the city in 1897.

4. How has this film helped you think about how and where African art should be displayed?

There is no right or wrong answer here, and this is something you might like to discuss. A selection of the brass plaques and sculptures were displayed in a big travelling exhibition entitled *Benin: Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria* in 2007, but the way they were displayed changed from venue to venue, often as ethnological objects but separated out as works of art at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.

5. What is its relevance for today?

Repatriation, illegal appropriation and the political connotations of art are still relevant issues today. The film refers to the Parthenon Marbles and students might have a view on the repatriation issue. A brass sculpture of a cockerel from Benin was until recently displayed in the Hall of Jesus College Cambridge as a symbol and play on the name of the founder of the College, Bishop Alcock of Ely. In 2016 Cambridge students demanded that it be taken down and argued for its repatriation.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/mar/08/benin-bronze-row-cambridge-college-removes-cockerel>

Comparative analysis

I suggest comparing this with Ghiberti's competition piece for the Florence Baptistery Doors dating from 1401 now in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. This is also a brass relief (though often described as bronze), its size is similar and it also served the purpose of adorning a public building. Its mode of representation is very different though in the classicizing ideal body of Isaac and in its dramatic narrative. It is a well-known work, easy to find out about on the web. For example, here:

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/early-renaissance1/sculpture-architecture-florence/v/brunelleschi-ghiberti-sacrifice-of-isaac-competition-panels-1401-2>

Online Activity

You have a choice here, depending on how much time you have and what your interests are.

If you would like to follow up issues of displaying Benin art as ethnic artefacts or as art object, then watch the film and listen to the podcasts at OpenLearn:

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/the-arts-past-and-present-the-benin-bronze>

If you would like to find out more about Benin plaques and their historical contexts then go to *The History of the World in 100 Objects* originally broadcast by Neil Macgregor, and the accompanying information.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/rmAT6B7zTZCGACd7i7l6Wg>

Bibliography

Barbara Plankensteiner (ed.), *Benin: kings and rituals: court arts from Nigeria*, Ghent: Snoeck, 2007 (this is the big exhibition catalogue from the 2007 Benin exhibition, which may be available in some libraries).

Paula Girschick Ben-Amos, *The art of Benin*, Rev. ed., London: British Museum Press 1995.

Suzanne Preston Blier, *The royal arts of Africa: the majesty of form*, London: Lawrence King 1998

Resources online

There is a short essay on Benin that tells you a little more about the African Kingdom of Benin and its trade with the Portuguese.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/british_museum_benin_art.pdf

You might also like to try browsing Benin in the Heilbrunn timeline under chronology, works of art and essays.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/>

There are sculptures from Benin outside London, so take a look at the website of your local museum or gallery.

Comparative Analysis Table

Works of art	Sacrifice of Isaac by Lorenzo Ghiberti	Benin plaque
date	1401	1550-1650
What is it?	Sculpted relief	Sculpted relief
material	Brass	Brass
Size/scale	45 x 38cm	55 x 39cm
Subject matter	Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac (The Bible, Old Testament, Book of Genesis chapter 22). This is a narrative – it tells a story.	Palace guards and pages by a doorway of the palace at Benin. This is not a narrative – there is no story here and no specific moment depicted, instead it represents court ceremonial.
Original location	A competition piece to win (successfully) the commission for a set of bronze doors of the Baptistery in Florence, Italy, but not actually part of those doors in the end.	Decorating the architecture of the royal palace at Benin.

Current location	Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello	London, British Museum
Composition	Balanced but not symmetrical. Set within the natural world – the diagonal rock suggests a mountain. Designed to fill the two-dimensional space of the quatrefoil-shaped plaque.	Symmetrical. Organized around an architectural element – the palace doorway. Designed to fill the two-dimensional space of the rectangular plaque.
Condition	Very good – this was evidently a celebrated piece to be so carefully preserved.	Damaged, perhaps through violent removal from its original location?
Function	As a competition for a set of bronze doors decorating a public building, the subject chosen was an Old Testament scene relevant to the function of that building. The baptism that was conducted in this building was a key Christian sacrament or rite of passage signifying salvation through the death of Christ. This scene was supposed to prefigure (look forward to and symbolize) the death of Christ.	Decorating a high status building with scenes relevant to that building: figures and architecture reflecting the court culture focused on the power and status of the Oba or ruler.