

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

## Student handout

**Presenter: Dr Kim Woods**

### **Benin plaque showing the façade of the Royal palace 1550-1650**

<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 discusses this sculpture is an example of African court art made around 450 years ago. This object is 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 punitive expedition against Benin in 1897 and brought back to England.

#### *Before watching the film*

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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*

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1. How do you think this work relates to the culture of the court where it was displayed?
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.
3. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?
4. How has this film helped you think about how and where African art should be displayed?

## 5. What is its relevance for today?

### *Online Activity*

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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*

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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](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*

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Fill out the table below, considering the following elements: date, subject matter, material, location, function, formal qualities. Use the empty boxes to comment on any other formal qualities or aspects of the works you would like to note.

Works of art	Sacrifice of Isaac by Lorenzo Ghiberti	Benin plaque
date		
What is it?		
material		
Size/scale		
Subject matter		
Original location		
Current location		
Composition		
Condition		
Function		