

Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria

Family Guide

Feb 12–May 22, 2011



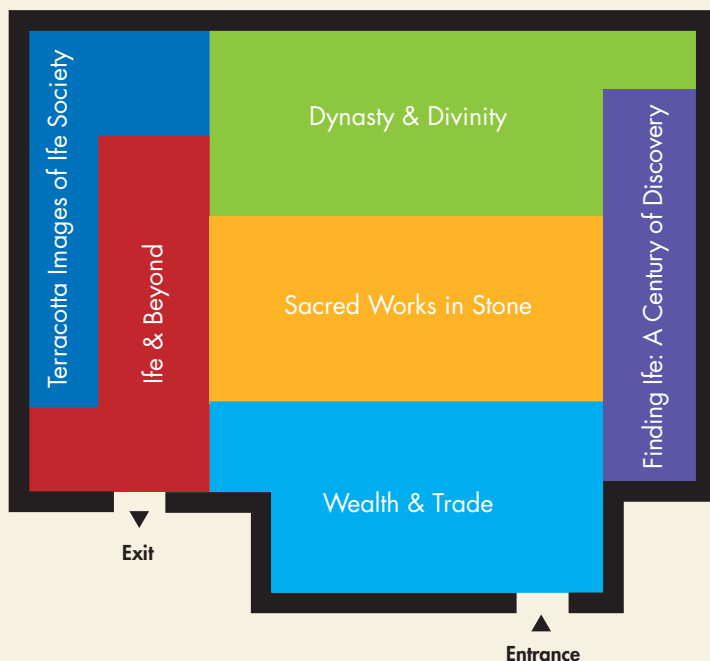
Welcome!

In this exhibition you will see things made by the the Yoruba (say: Yoroo-BUH) people of Ife (say: EE-fay) in ancient Africa, from the nation we now call Nigeria. You will learn about the Yoruba through their royal portraits; their works in copper, stone, and clay; their royal jewelry; their sacred traditions; and their beliefs about life and death, heaven and earth.

The name of this exhibition is "Dynasty and Divinity." **Dynasty** refers to a series of kings (and queens) who pass down their power from one generation to the next. **Divinity** relates to religion, gods, and goddesses.

The city (or kingdom) of Ife is very special to the Yoruba people. Of course, many Yoruba still live in Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, but others have moved to countries around the world. They all trace their roots to Ife.

In this guide we invite you on a journey to the ancient kingdom of Ife, in six different areas on the gallery map below:



Cover: **Figure of a King**, early to mid-16th century, copper alloy. Excavated at Wunmonije Compound, Ife. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 79.R.9

Wealth & Trade

Money!

How did the rulers of Ife become so rich? By selling or trading the foods they harvested or the objects their artists made. In Ife, farmers grew yams, cassava (or yucca, for making tapioca), corn, pumpkins, and kola nuts. They also traded salt, gold, and cotton, and harvested palm oil. Their artists made glass beads and created masks and statues from copper, stone, and clay—all natural resources. They shipped their goods by boat on the Niger River, north of Ife. Through sales and trade, Ife rulers could afford elaborate jewelry and royal robes.

After you explore the objects in this section, see if you can answer these 3 questions:

1. What is the name of the sea goddess and patroness of bead making?
2. What is the name of the container that Ife glassworkers used to produce glass?
3. What do elaborate clothes and jewelry say about a person?

(Answers at bottom of page)

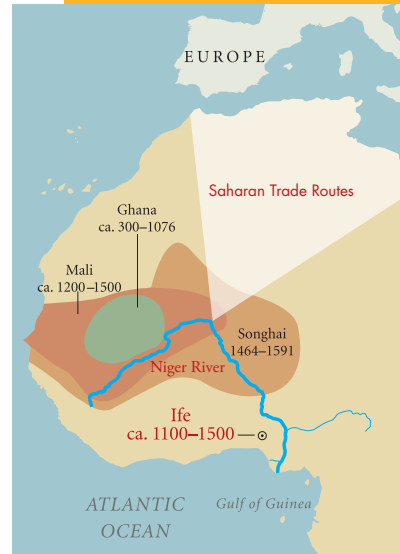


Beaded Royal Boots, 19th century, Yoruba culture (Nigeria, Republic of Benin), glass beads, cloth, leather. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Kathleen Boone Samuels Memorial Fund, 92.148.1-2. Photo by Travis Fullerton.

To see more Yoruba royal robes, staffs, and other regalia, please visit our African Gallery.



Head called "Olokun," probably early 20th-century copy of the original from 14th to early 15th century, copper alloy. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 38.1.2



West African states, ca. 300 to 1600, showing Saharan trade routes to and from the Niger River.

Sacred Works in Stone

Special Places



All of the objects in this section were found in sacred groves, parts of the forest near life where people go to pray or leave offerings to their gods, their ancestors, or those who are sick or dying.

Most of these stone objects are carved in the shape of humans or animals. They once stood on or near altars, holy places where people can contact spirits from the other world. The Yoruba people honor certain animals for their beauty, strength, or special powers.

**How many animals can you find in this section?
What makes each one special?**

(Answers below)

Grove Site, 1958. Photo by Frank Willet



The African Mudfish and the Nile Crocodile

See grove site photo above, with stone objects carved like a mudfish and a crocodile.



Answers: mudfish – can live out of water; crocodile – warrior in the water; ram – animal offered in sacrifice to the gods.

Crocodile photo: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:NileCrocodile.jpg>
Mudfish photo: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Protopterus.jpg>

Finding Ife: A Century of Discovery

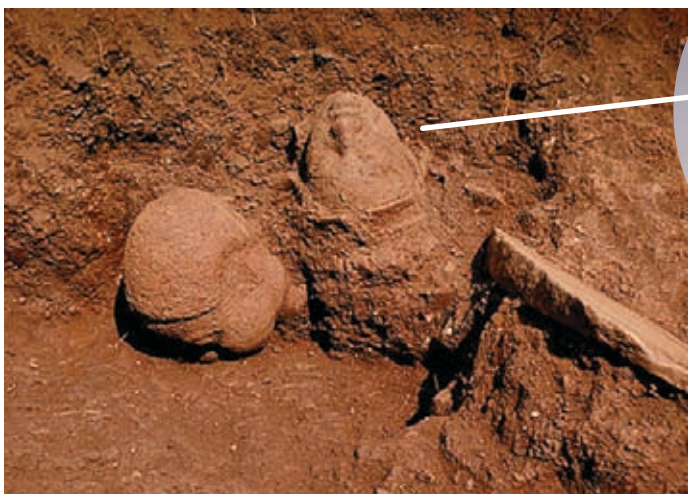
Dig It Up!

Many objects you see here were found buried in the ground. In 1938, when workers were digging foundations for new buildings in Ife, they hit hard objects in the soil that turned out to be very old and very valuable works of art. The government of Nigeria sent archaeologists (people who study objects from the past) to bring them to a museum for safekeeping.

Since then, others have found more treasures in the ground. Later in the exhibition, be sure to look for this terracotta head (at right) and read about the twin brothers who found it!

Many of these objects are damaged. Some are broken because they are so old. Others were accidentally hit by shovels or axes when they were first dug up. Imagine you are an archaeologist. Look carefully at the fragments (pieces of objects) in this section. Picture in your mind what they would look like if they were put back together.

For a fun sketching activity, go to www.VMFA.museum and click on "Learn" and "Educators."



Ita Yemoo Grove Site, showing objects partially uncovered.
Photo by Frank Willet, 1958.



Head, 12th to 15th century, terracotta. Discovered in 1967 (by young twin boys) at Odo Ogbe Street, Ife. National Commission of Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 73.2.71 (i)



Head, 12th to 15th century, terracotta. Found during archaeological excavations at Ita Yemoo, Ife, in 1958. National Commission of Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 79.R.7

Dynasty and Divinity

Face It!

Dive head-first into this section to find some of the most amazing works of art in the world! Meet ten powerful rulers from the past. Ife's kings (called Ooni) were both spiritual leaders and government officials. To learn how their royal portraits were made in metal, read the large wall panel with drawings. As you look at the portrait heads, think about this:

- These Ife heads are made of copper, also called "red gold." If these heads could talk, what do you think they would say?
- U.S. pennies are also made of copper. If you have an old, used penny and a new, shiny one, see how different they look. The new one has a bright, shiny finish. The old one looks dull and brown.
- No one knows exactly why these heads were made or how they were used. Many think the holes around the face were used to attach beaded crowns or veils. Look closely at each head, their markings, and bits of color.



One of the heads in this section was actually used as a mask. Can you find which one?

(See answer below.)



Head, 14th to early 15th century, copper alloy. Excavated at Wunmonije Compound. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, Ife 6

Head, 14th to early 15th century, copper alloy. Excavated at Wunmonije Compound. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, Ife 11

Terracotta Images of Ife Society

The People

The objects you see here, made of baked clay or terracotta, show us the different types of people who lived in Ife. In addition to royalty, the poor and the sick were also part of the kingdom.

Some of the terracotta heads have special marks on their faces, which might mean the person was from another part of Africa: as the city of Ife grew, people from other geographical areas went to live there.

Ife also had its share of criminals, shown with ropes over their mouths to keep them from placing curses on the people who captured them. Words are powerful, and the people of Ife knew it!

Ife & Beyond

Who's Next Door?

Ife was not the only area in West Africa with skilled metal-smiths. Scientists have found clues that tell us other African people have worked in metal for more than a thousand years! They are the people of Igbo-Ukwu, east of Ife, on the other side of the Niger River.

Can you find two small metal heads from Igbo-Ukwu in this section?

Thank you for visiting *Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria*. We hope you enjoyed learning about the art of historic Ife. Be sure to visit the African Gallery to see more amazing art from all over the continent.



Top: **Head**, 12th to 15th century, terracotta. Excavated from Obalara's land, Ife. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 1999.2.5
Photo by Juan Jesús Blázquez.

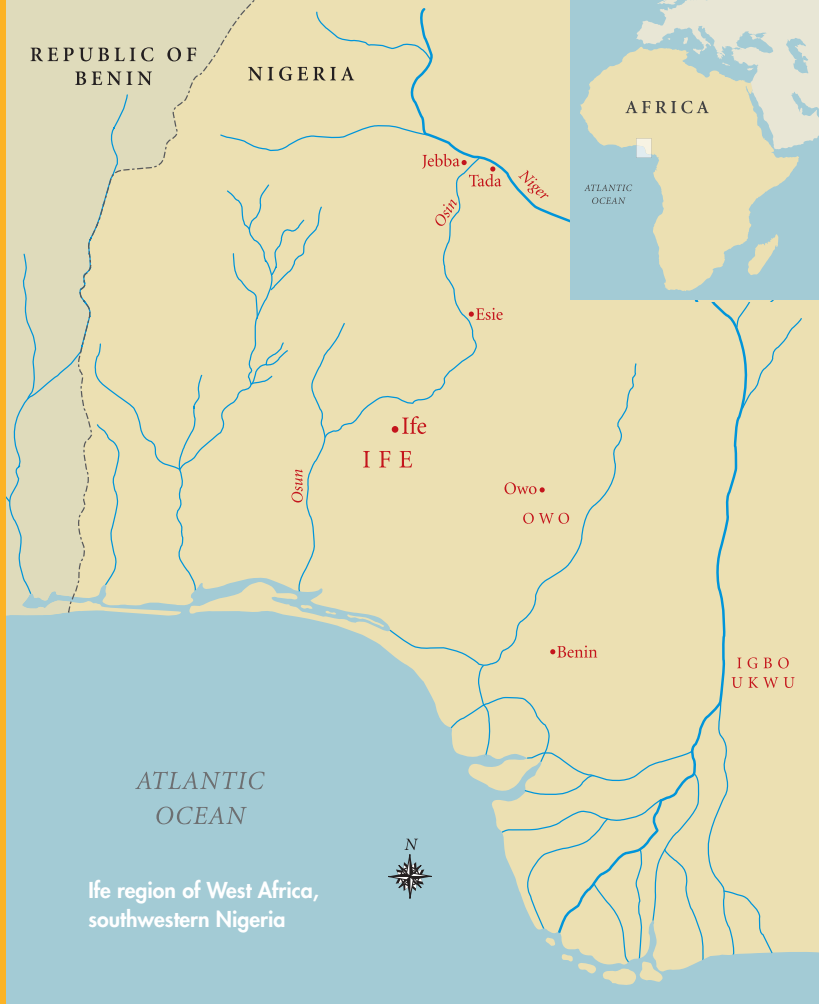
Above: **Gagged head**, 12th to 15th century, terracotta. Excavated at Osangangan Obamakin, Ife. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 49.1.20

This family guide was prepared to accompany *Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria*, on view at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, February 12–May 22, 2011.

All of the objects in this exhibition are on loan from the Nigerian National Commission of Museums and Monuments. The exhibition was curated by Enid Schildkrout, chief curator and director of exhibitions and publications, Museum for African Art, New York.

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Ife region of West Africa,
southwestern Nigeria



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