Red Gold for Royalty and Orisas: Copper-Alloy Sculptures and Technology in Ife

Richard B. Woodward

The long history of metal working technologies in West Africa are exemplified in portrait sculptures on display in the currently traveling exhibition, *Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria.*

The Museum for African Art (New York), the Fundacion Botin (Santander, Spain) and the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments collaborated to create *Dynasty and Divinity*, the first exhibition focusing on the extraordinary art of Ife, cradle of Yoruba civilization. With venues in Santander, Madrid, London, Houston, Richmond (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Feb 12 – May 22, 2011), Indianapolis, and New York, this exhibition presents a unique opportunity for an international audience to view the zenith of Ife civilization through magnificent works of art created there roughly from the 12th to the 16th centuries. The exhibition includes some of the world's greatest portrait sculptures cast in copper and alloys of copper, the "red gold" for royalty and orisas.

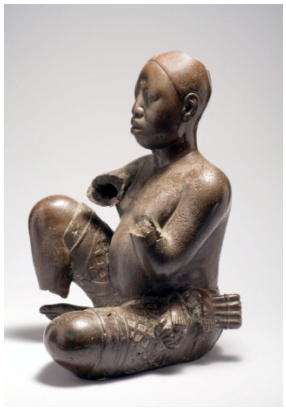
According to Yoruba genesis stories, land was formed from primordial marsh at Ife, in the southwestern region of today's Nigeria. There, the orisas (deities) Obatala and Oduduwa created mankind and established Yoruba civilization. When Obatala made human forms from clay, Ogun, the god associated with iron tools sharpened the details, and the supreme being, Oludomare, filled them with his divine breath. Thus, in Yoruba thought, the human body is a sculpture animated by a soul, and Obatala is the patron of Yoruba artists. The concept of the body as a work of art resonates in the Yoruba prayer for an expectant mother that asks the orisa (Obatala) to fashion a good work of art. Oduduwa became the first king of Ife, and all successive kings claim descent from this divine ruler. Today, Ife remains a key spiritual center of the Yoruba civilization that has flourished for more than a millennium. It is also considered the place where artistic creativity and technology developed.

In Yoruba sculpture, emphasis is usually given to the head, the source of the individual's essential being. The head consists of inner *(ori inu)* and outer *(ori ode)* aspects, and inner qualities of mind – such as calm, self-control, and patience – should govern a person's outward being. Goodness,

dignity, and nobleness in thought and act are desired traits. The sculptors of Ife gave form to these characteristics through life-like portraits that avow the importance and uniqueness of the person.

Head from the Wunonije Compound, Ife, Nigeria, late 14th-early 16th century, copper, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 38.1.4 (Photo by Karin L. Willis)

The magnificent head from the Wunmonije compound, handsome in form and regal in bearing, illustrates the Yoruba ideal of the external person *(ori ode)* as a work of art, while the face conveys a calm, thoughtful demeanor of the inner self *(ori inu)*. In this work, the sculptor's keen power of observation and smooth control in rendering form, so expertly matched by masterful casting, has yielded portrait that emanates a living presence, not just a likeness. The metal has the look of warm and supple flesh. Indeed, it is so magnetic for our eye, so perfect, that we can easily be oblivious to the process of its creation. But great metalsmithing talent and highly developed technology underlie a work of such extraordinary subtlety and sophistication.



Head and Torso of a King, Wunmonije Compound, Ife, Nigeria, early-mid-16th century, copper alloy, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 79.R.9 (Photo by Karin L. Willis)

Seated Figure, Tada, Nigeria, late 13th-14th century, copper (with traces of arsenic, lead, and tin), National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 79.R.18 (Photo by Karin L. Willis)

The portrait head, and other magnificent works in the exhibition, such as the Head and Torso of a King and the Seated Figure, are among the most outstanding achievements of a long history of copper technology and its application in art in Africa. This background starts in the early 4th millennium BC in Egypt and the early 3rd millennium BC in the Sahara region, where the earliest known site is near Agades, in today's Niger. In sub-Saharan Africa copper became the metal most highly valued, whereas gold and silver have held ultimate position in other parts of the world. This unique appreciation for copper might owe to its rarity on the continent or its properties of strength, malleability, and especially its red coloration.

Copper appears in both pure form and as ore deposits in the earth. The earliest applications involved the lithic use of the mineral when found in its pure form. Smelting copper ores was a later development, requiring forced-draft furnaces capable of attaining nearly 2000 degrees fahrenheit. Obalufon II, an early Ooni (king) of Ife, is credited with encouraging development of art and technology, and coppersmithing in particular. A coronet in copper alloy from the 19th or early 20th century that is inscribed *"Ade Obalufon"* (Crown of Obalufon) on the top panels clearly denotes esteem for this Ooni over the centuries.

Coronet of an Obalufon Devotee, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, 19th or 20th century, copper alloy, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 74.1.1387 (Photo by Karin L. Willis)

Ife was also noted for its terracotta production, manufacture of glass beads, and ironworking. Excavations have yielded crucibles for glass melting in several areas of the city. The temperature required to melt glass is higher than the melting point of copper and close to that for iron. This factor suggests possible close association in the technology of furnaces capable of producing the necessary heat to create glass beads, copper alloy sculptures, and iron tools, as well as to fire superb works in terracotta.

Mask called "Obalufon", Ife, Nigeria, 14th-early 15th century, copper, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 38.1.2 (Photo by Karin L. Willis)

Molten copper is notoriously difficult to cast in a pure form because it oxidizes upon contact with the air, forming a skin that inhibits flow into a mold. To enhance fluidity, copper is alloyed with other metals – with tin to make bronze or with zinc to make brass. The addition of lead further enhances the workability of the metal. At Ife, copper was usually combined with zinc and lead, hence the works are brass. However, a number of sculptures, including the mask of Obalufon and the large seated figure are virtually pure copper. Given the difficulty of casting the metal in a pure state, the near flawless perfection of these works makes them stunning technical as well as artistic achievements.

To obtain copper supplies, Ife depended on trade with distant sources. Deposits in Niger, to the north, are one source, and Islamic accounts note extensive trade via trans-Saharan caravans. The rarity of the metal in West Africa no doubt enhanced its value there and contributed to its restriction in art for royalty in Ife. Most of the historic artworks from Ife have only been discovered during the past century, and they have forced re-evaluation of African art history and technology. The stunning masterworks in the exhibition stand as key markers of Ife's profound artistic and technological accomplishments while they also provide rich perspectives concerning its economic, social, and political organization.

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