

# AFRICAN MASTERPIECES - THE STORY OF THE KINGDOM OF IFE

*This is the first exhibition to focus on art from Ife in West Africa. As the Middle Ages passed over into the Renaissance in Europe, the artists of Ife were creating sculptures that would grant Ife a place in the Art History of the world.*

***"This is an exceptional exhibition... artwork that ranks with China's Terracotta Army, the Parthenon or the mask of Tutankhamun."***

The Guardian, when the exhibition was on display at the British museum in 2010.

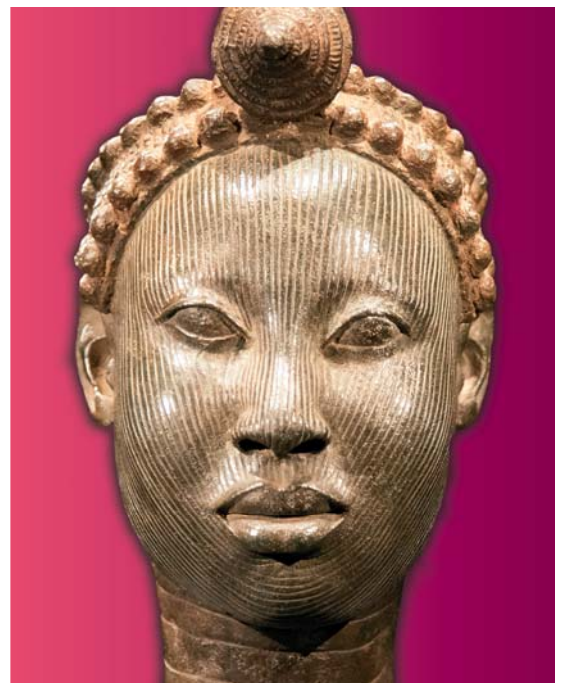
***... "once-in-a-lifetime, revolutionary event".***

The Times, 2010

This international touring exhibition is on display from 12 April until 30 November at The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg. The exhibition was produced by the Museum for African Art, New York, and Fundación Botín, Santander, Spain, in cooperation with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria.

The more than 100 objects in the exhibition bear witness to an early, cosmopolitan power centre in West Africa. A society that was one of the most advanced of its time. The exhibition includes sculptures of metal, stone and terracotta. With it, the National Museums of World Culture would like to contribute to new perspectives on the history of Africa.

This exhibition has previously been shown at the Fundación Botín in Santander, Spain (2009) and at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid (2009) before this critically acclaimed exhibition came to the British Museum in London (2010). The American tour of the exhibition (2010-2012) included the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Indianapolis Museum of Art. At the Museum of World Culture, the National Museums of World Culture will present this exhibition in a new and unique way.



Head with crown. Wunmonije Compound, Ife. 14th-early 15th century C.E. Copper alloy.

**Tours for groups can be  
booked via telephone  
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# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION



*The exhibition tells the story of the Ife world view, rituals and religion, and creates a picture of a society ahead of its time.*

*The exhibition is divided into seven themes and describes an urban and cosmopolitan culture.*

## **Wealth and trade in Ife**

The historical Ife was a walled-in market place surrounded by a system of roads and rivers connecting Ife with other West African trade centres. The trade across the Sahara with salt, metals, pearls, slaves, textiles, ivory and various crops characterised West Africa for a long time. Glass pearls were produced locally in Ife as early as in the 9th and 10th centuries, and constituted an important commodity. The copper used to manufacture the world famous bronze sculptures was imported.

At the end of the 15th century, the West African trade was gradually shifted southwards as the Europeans began to build fortresses along the coast. At this time, the trade also began to focus more on the large-scale export of slaves and the import of products from Europe.

## **The social life of Ife in terracotta**

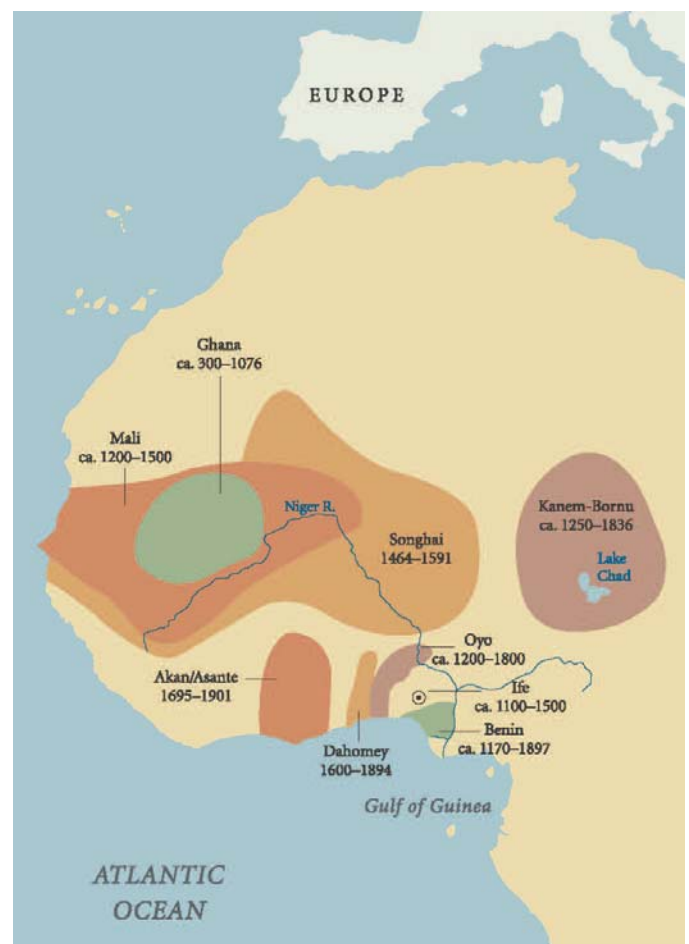
The artists of Ife created sculptures and containers from terracotta. The terracotta heads are representations of a social elite, where various emblems and scar-tattoos signified ethnicity or origin and shows the cosmopolitan culture of Ife. The refinement of the objects and their various styles point to a highly specialised tradition that may have begun as early as the 800s, blossoming in the following centuries.

The sculptures show both the vitality and fragility of humanity. It was thought that people who were born with unusual appearances had been touched by the creative hand of Obatala. Obatala was the divine sculptor who modelled humans out of clay.

Then, like now, art is an important part of worshipping the Orisas (deities) and the forefathers. The terracotta objects are made using a coiled clay technique that is now used all over Africa.

## **Sacred stonework**

Forest groves and temples in the city were the main ritual sites in Ife. The stone sculptures depicted kings, warriors, queens, healers, hunters, priests and royal servants who had been made into divinities. Ore is a sacred grove, where many statues have been found.





## Creation

In one of the many versions of the Yoruba creation myth, Ife is said to originally have been a wet marsh. One of the divinities, an Orisa, climbed down on an iron chain with a snail's shell filled with soil, a chameleon and a five-toed bird. The Orisa poured the soil from the shell, the bird spread the soil with its feet, and the chameleon tested whether the ground was firm. Later, more Orisas came and founded other kingdoms, which trace their origins to Ife. Ife is thus the place where the world was created. The King of Ife is called Ooni. Today, Ife is ruled by the 50th Ooni.

## Bronze heads

The Golden Age of Ife art was in the 14th century. At that time, the most important works - the copper alloy heads - were created. Objects made from copper, "the red gold", were considered to be extremely valuable and were reserved for the royals. In turbulent times, or maybe as part of a ritual, art treasures were buried, to be discovered later on in archaeological digs. There are a total of 19 known heads in the world, and you can see ten of them in this exhibition. These ten are from the Wunmonijie excavations of 1938-39. They are some of the absolute most famous objects ever found in West Africa.

The heads may have been used in connection with coronations and funeral ceremonies, or as part of the annual rebirth and purification rites. Some of them bear traces of red and white paint, colours that were associated with initiation rites.

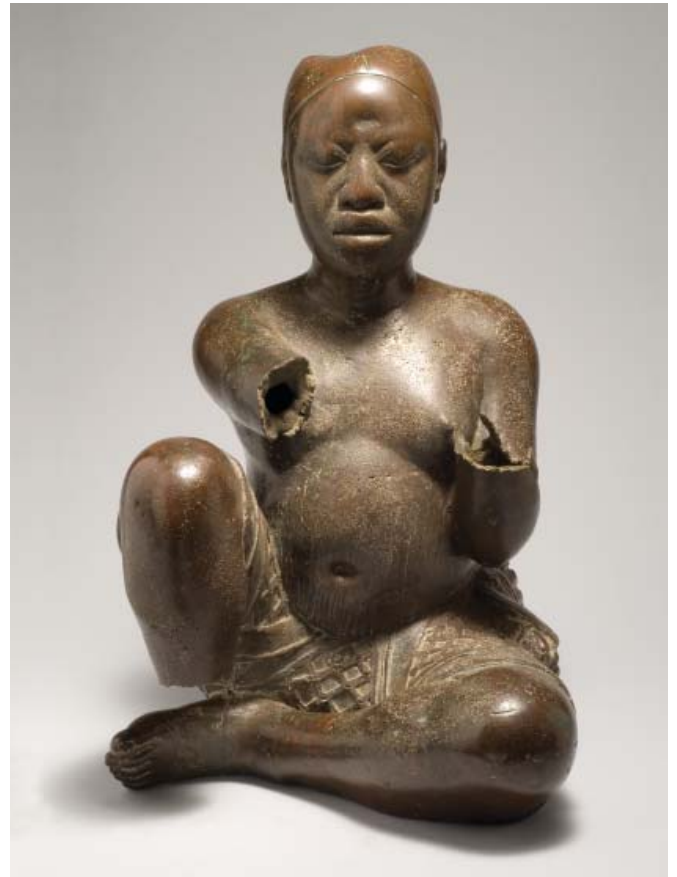
## Beyond Ife

All of West Africa has a long history of craftsmanship using terracotta and bronze, some pieces being as old as 3,000 years. Certain shapes that we see in the Ife art can also be found in other cultures in ancient Nigeria, such as the Nok, Igbo-Ukwu and Benin cultures. The sculptures from the 15th century with a cross around their neck show the diplomatic ties between Ife and Benin, as the cross was a gift from Ooni, the king of Ife, to Oba, the king of Benin. The artwork in this section helps us place the Ife art in a historic context and demonstrates how it has been influenced by other places in the area.

## Ife and the Yoruba today

The city of Ife in modern-day Nigeria is the cradle of the Yoruba civilisation. The 35 million Yoruba constitute one of the larger ethnic groups of Nigeria today, but many descendants of the Yoruba also live in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, USA and other places around the world.

The religious system of the Yoruba has been spread across the world, and its variations are said to have around 100 million followers. The system was formerly spread as a consequence of the slave trade and nowadays through migration and an increased popularity for African religions. A few examples of its variations are Santería, Candomblé, Trinidad Orisha, Anago and Oyotunji, and it can be seen in certain aspects of Umbanda, Winti, Obeah, Vodou and other religious belief systems.



This statue of a sitting person, found in Tada, moulded from copper sometime in the 13th-14th century, is proof of a knowledge and understanding of the human body that would only have a European equivalence one hundred years later through the works of Donatello and Ghiberti.



Bowman. Jebba Island. Ca. 14th-15th century C.E.  
Copper alloy.