

Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa on display in the British Museum

By: Karen Dabrowska



Heads, heads and more heads. That is the feeling after emerging from the British Museum's Kingdom of Ife Sculptures from West Africa exhibition. There are brass heads, copper heads, stone heads, terracotta heads and sculptures magnificently displayed in the first show ever devoted to the sculpture of Ife anywhere in the world.

A typical Ife head is life-size. The expression is beautifully serene, the surface smooth, cheek bones often quite prominent, lips full, neck long. The face is likely to have vertical striations. The head may be adorned with a tiered head-dress or a delicate pillbox hat, built up in concentric rings, simulating woven basketry. The abdomen is likely to be adorned with swags of beads. If a king is being represented, there are

rosettes, a beaded crown.

The Kingdom of Ife was a powerful, cosmopolitan and wealthy city-state in West Africa (in what is now modern south-west Nigeria). According to the Yoruba people, Ife is where the founding deities Oduduwa and Obatala began the creation of the world, as directed by the paramount deity Olodumare. Obatalá created the first humans out of clay, while Odùduwà became the first divine king of the Yoruba.

King Ita Yemoo, a copper alloy sculpture



Copper head



The Oòni (King) of Ife claims direct descent from the god Oduduwa, and is counted first among Yoruba kings. To this day many of the surviving traditional religious groups of the city celebrate the creation of the world during the Itapa festival. According to anthropologist, its habitation can be traced as far back as 350 BCE

Between 700 and 900 A.D., Ife began to develop as a major artistic center. Important people were often depicted with large heads because they thought the Ase, the inner power and energy of a person, was held in the head. The city was a settlement of substantial size between the 9th and 12th centuries, with houses

featuring potsherd pavement. Ife is known worldwide for its ancient and naturalistic bronze, stone and terracotta sculptures, which reached their peak of artistic expression between 1200 and 1400 A.D. After this period, production declined as political and economic power shifted to the nearby kingdom of Benin which, like the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, developed into a major empire. The British Museum's exhibition

features superb pieces of Ife sculpture, full length statues, portrait heads, ritual objects and vessels drawn almost entirely from the magnificent collections of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria.

First excavated by a German archaeologist, Leo Frobenius, in 1910, the bronze, copper and terracotta sculptures of Ife shook Western thinking about Africa to the core.





Writing in the Independent on 14th March, Charles Darwent pointed out that this was not because they were, like the sculptures of Benin, so obviously different from European art – stylised, schematised, abstracted. Rather the opposite: what disturbed about the Ife works was that they were naturalistic, which is to say European-looking. This in turn suggested that Africans might themselves, like Europeans, be sophisticated and civilised people, a piece of sedition that raised inconvenient questions about the

right of the West to treat Africa as a colonial grab-bag.

Frobenius himself was horrified by the implications of Ife. Looking at modern-day Nigerians, he confessed to being «moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of the degenerate and feeble-minded should be the rightful guardians of so much loveliness». The only rational answer, he said, packing his spoils for shipment to Berlin, was that the sculptures of Ife had not been made by Africans at all. In excavating the Yoruba kingdom,

he had stumbled across the lost city of Atlantis.

There is much more to see than heads: The exhibition also features a gorgeous stone representation of a mud fish, and the scaly crocodile; there are intimidatingly indomitable monoliths from sacred groves; there are extraordinary terracotta sculptures of bodies disfigured by ricketts and elephantiasis.

Writing in the Guardian Jonathan Jones commented: «What we see here is an African classical art – by which I mean an art with a strong concept of order that gives it a special authority, whether it comes from Athens, China or Ife. Like that of ancient Egypt, the art of Ife is perfect, remote, godlike and yet – as with Egypt – when you look again it is highly observational, rooted in the real life of this lost civilisation.



**British Museum's
promotional video**