

Benin



Ivory armlet for the Oba of Benin
Benin, West Africa
15th-16th century AD

Visit resource for teachers

Key Stage 2

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Before your visit

Background information

The Kingdom of Benin was situated around the modern area of Benin city in the south-west of Nigeria. Benin was founded about 1000 years ago and grew in power within West Africa during 15th and 16th centuries AD.

The Kingdom of Benin was a thickly forested area crossed and bounded by rivers, including the river Niger. Although the people called themselves, their kingdom and their capital Edo, we now know this as Benin.

Benin was ruled by a king called the oba who acted as secular, religious and ritual leader. The kings lived in a palace in Benin city where they had special rooms, storehouses, work areas for craftsmen, and residences for royal wives and children.

Chiefs and other officers helped the king to rule the kingdom. There were Uzama chiefs who inherited their positions, and palace chiefs and town chiefs. Among other things, they ran the palace, took care of royal regalia, collected tribute and led the army.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Benin. They came between 1470 and 1490. They were aware of the gold trade and travelled to West Africa to try to find a direct route to the markets of West Africa and cut out the middlemen.

In 1897 British forces captured Benin city and sent the king into exile. The kingship was restored in 1914 and since then kings have continued to maintain local power in this area which is now in Edo State in modern Nigeria.

Evidence of life in the old kingdom of Benin in 16th and 17th centuries AD comes particularly through the brass plaques, heads and figures that were made for the oba and palace. The brass-casters depicted scenes of ritual, ceremony, warfare, performance etc and also reflect the natural world.

Resources

Books

Burt, B. *Africa in the World*, British Museum Press, 2005.

Ben-Amos, P. *The Art of Benin*, British Museum Press, 1995.

Chambers, C. *West African States before Colonialism*, Evans Brothers, 1999.

Jewell, R. *African Designs*, British Museum Press, 1994.

Mack, J. (ed.) *Africa: Arts and Cultures*, British Museum Press, 2000.

Gallery information

The Sainsbury African Galleries (Room 25) focus on the cultural life of Africa, past and present. They include artefacts drawn from the entire continent and many historical periods. They also feature important works by some of Africa's foremost contemporary artists, as well as films demonstrating the dynamism and continuity of cultural traditions as they are enacted in Africa today.

Objects from the kingdom of Benin are displayed in cases 4-7 at the far right end (or west side) of Room 25. They include objects relating to the city of Benin, the king and leadership, religion, cultural interaction and animals. On the wall there are some of the famous brass plaques from Benin that used to adorn the palace in Benin city. A short film showing the successive stages of modern brass-casting can also be seen in this part of the African Galleries.

What is it like to visit the galleries?

The African Galleries are divided into five main sections with both wall and island display cases. Some objects are wall-mounted and others in cases are at a high level. The objects from Benin are situated at the far right end (or west side). Room 25 is accessed via stairs from the Living and Dying Gallery (Rm 24) or via lift from the Great Court. The gallery is not a through route but can be noisy when busy and because it has a hard wooden floor.

Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

Preliminary activities

General introductory activities

- Locate modern Benin city, Nigeria and West Africa in an atlas and discuss with your students.
- Compare key dates in the history of Benin with those of other kingdoms in Africa and across the world.
- Use the Explore function on the British Museum website to search for and look at objects from the old kingdom of Benin.

Activities to support gallery activities

- Search the internet for images of West African forests, rivers and wildlife, and discuss these with your class.
- Discuss the concept of monarchy and leadership. It might help to start this focus with a discussion about Queen Elizabeth II.
- Using a picture of Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle, talk about the type of places where kings and queens live. What do they look like? How are they decorated? What are they built from?
- Think about the things that people wear that show their importance or the job that they do. Talk about the regalia that kings and queens wear or carry.
- Discuss the concept of trade and exchange. What sort of commodities do we trade today across the world? How are they transported? Compare this with trade in the past.

During your visit

Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Room 25. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers

Natural Benin

- Benin artists took their inspiration from the natural world around them. Oil palms and water plants can be seen on the brass plaques as well as leopards, pythons, crocodiles and fish, among other wild land and water creatures.
- This activity helps students to become aware of the natural environment of the kingdom of Benin through studying a range of objects.

The King of Benin

- The kings of Benin were depicted in different ways using brass and ivory in particular. They are shown in processions wearing a crown and tunic of coral beads and being supported by servants. Sometimes kings are seen with mudfish legs and swinging leopards by their tails which may represent their power over water and land or the sacrificing of leopards.
- This activity helps students to appreciate the importance and power of kings in Benin by studying their portraits and identifying their key characteristics.

Visitors to Benin

- Portuguese visitors had an important impact on the kingdom of Benin. The objects with images of Portuguese people and use of brass show this.
- This activity encourages students to see how Edo artists depicted European visitors and appreciate the importance of brass in the trading relationship.

Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers

The King's palace

- The kings of Benin lived in the city in a palace. Evidence indicates that the building had towers which were topped with sculptures of birds. Huge brass pythons were fixed to the roof to protect the palace and scare intruders.
- This activity encourages students to investigate the design of the palace in Benin city by looking very closely at an object.

Working for the King

- The chiefs helped the king rule the kingdom of Benin. They ran the palace, collected tribute and commanded soldiers, among other things. They wore red coral beads and hip-masks, and sometimes carried ceremonial swords.
- This activity helps the students to identify the symbols of power of the chiefs of Benin by looking for and matching pieces of evidence.

The King of Benin

The King or oba of Benin was very powerful. He ruled over land and water and controlled all the brass, leopards and red coral beads in the kingdom. The Edo people treated him like a god.

- In the gallery, find these three objects that show the oba. For each one, write a sentence to describe the oba: how he looks, what he is wearing, what he is doing:



The oba is...



The oba is...



The oba is ...

- If an artist was going to make a picture of you, how would you like to be seen? Discuss this with your group.

Visitors to Benin

Portuguese people were the first Europeans to arrive in Benin. The Portuguese travelled to Benin to trade with the Edo. They brought guns, cloth and brass. The Edo used the brass to make different things, like the plaques in the gallery.



- Find this brass plaque of a Portuguese man. It shows us how the Edo people saw Europeans at the time.
- Look for the differences between the Portuguese and the Edo people in the other plaques. Tick each feature in the box when you have found and thought about them.

hats	clothes	hair	beards	weapons	faces
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- Draw a picture of your favourite brass object from Benin.

My favourite brass object is

- The Portuguese took home special ivory salt-cellars as souvenirs of their trips. If you had travelled to Africa at this time, what would you have brought home? Discuss this in your group.

The King's Palace

The oba lived in a large palace in Benin city. From here, many people helped him run the kingdom. The palace was decorated with shiny brass rectangular plaques or plates.

- One plaque in the gallery shows what the palace looked like. Find the plaque and look at it closely. Draw arrows to show where each part is

tower

python

steps

armed officials



roof tiles

small leopards

servants

gateway

- If you were a king, how would you decorate your house? Discuss this with your group.

Working for the King

Special chiefs helped the king or oba rule the kingdom of Benin. Each chief wore and carried things (regalia) that showed other people that he was important. Once a year the oba rode out of his palace in a big procession with royal animals, chiefs, soldiers and musicians.

- This plaque with a chief and his servants is on the wall above you. In the glass cases, look for the three objects listed below that show his power and sketch them in the boxes.



Red coral beads

Leopard hip mask

Eben sword

- With your group, imagine you are part of the procession. Each person should have a role. Think about what you are wearing and carrying, what sounds you make as you move, how you feel.

After your visit

Follow-up activities: introduction

These activities aim to encourage students to reflect on the work undertaken in the African Gallery during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the students to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.
- You may also wish to look at some of the activities available on the Ancient Civilizations learning website (www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk) which relate to your visit.

Follow-up activity: Natural Benin

Curriculum links: history, geography

- Ask the students to look over and discuss the pictures and information that they collected in the African galleries. What wild creatures did they see? How did the artists show them? For example, were they looking through the trees, on all-fours, slithering or floating?
- Ask the students to do some further research using books and the internet on the West African rainforest and rivers, and collect images.
- Students could work in groups to contribute drawings and pictures, based on the British Museum objects, to a 2-D West African rainforest landscape in the classroom.

Follow-up activity: The King of Benin

Curriculum links: history, art & design

- Ask the students to look over and discuss the portraits of the kings of Benin that they studied in the African galleries. Using images from Explore as a prompt, ask them to describe the key features of the kings
- Compare portraits of kings of Benin with those of the Tudor monarchs.
- Using a variety of materials, the students create their own portraits as kings of Benin.

Follow-up activity: Visitors to Benin

Curriculum links: history, literacy

- Ask the students to look over and discuss the representations of the Portuguese visitors to Benin and the brass objects that they investigated in the African galleries.
- In pairs the students could discuss what it is like to visit somewhere special for the first time. How do they think that the Portuguese felt when they travelled to West Africa and to a place that Europeans knew very little about? How do you think that the Edo people felt about seeing the Portuguese, their ships, guns and clothes for the first time? Encourage the students to use and feedback any key descriptive words.
- Ask the students to imagine that they are a Portuguese visitor to Benin and to write a simple diary or letter home to describe their experiences. They should try to include why they travelled to Benin and the sort of commodities that they were exchanging.
- To extend their ideas, the students could use the Explore function to research other objects from Benin.

Follow-up activity: The King's palace

Curriculum links: history, art & design

- Ask the students to look over and discuss the evidence for the palace of Benin. Ask them to describe the features of the palace, including tower, roof, gateway, protective snake etc.
- In groups, ask the students to design their own palaces, using the decorative features in Benin. These could be 3-D models, plan views or a simple picture of the front of the building.

Follow-up activity: Working for the King

Curriculum links: history, literacy, drama

- Ask the students to look over and discuss the plaque of the chief they investigated in the African galleries. Ask them to describe the objects that chiefs wore or carried to show their importance in Benin society.
- Once a year the king rode out of his palace in a big procession with animals, chiefs, soldiers and musicians. Ask the students to imagine they are a chief participating in the event. They should describe what they are wearing and carrying, what they see, what sounds they hear and how they feel. Alternatively, this activity could form a dramatic presentation with everyone adopting a role.