
Title of Object

Tusk

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Country: Nigeria

Date of Object: 1775-1777

File Created: 6/16/2016

Accession Number: 56.33

Author of File: Richard Lemanczykafka and Julie Holland

Material/Medium: Ivory

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Art of Africa

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Culture: Edo (Benin Kingdom)

Tour Topics

Group 1 tour, Animals/Birds, Cultural Encounters/Exchanges, Funerary/Afterlife, Leaders, Power, Ritual/Ceremony, Spirituality/Sacred, Stories/Storytelling, Symbolism

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

From Richard:

1. Can you find an animal on this carved, ivory, tusk?
2. What do you think that the purposes of these animals were?
3. If you were to have 3 animals carved on something for you, what material would you use and what 3 animals would they be?

From Julie:

- 1) Can anyone think of a current example of an animal whose behavior is admired and whose animal image is used to reflect human behavior?

2) Which behaviors of the elephant might the Oba admire?

3) Over the centuries, what have been some of the commercial uses for ivory?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

In the Kingdom of Benin (subsumed by modern day Nigeria), the Oba reigned as an absolute monarch. He was also known to possess divine ancestry. The elephant is a symbol of the Oba's royal authority. Ivory is an ideal medium to express authority, wealth and power. Almost unbreakable, ivory recalls the wisdom, strength and long life of the elephant. The tusk is richly carved in low relief. The images include past Obas, palace priests, warriors, foreigners and symbols of royalty and power. The images reflect episodes of historical significance and scenes from the lives of the Obas. Rather than illustrate every detail, the symbols evoke the story. The abstract images were readily interpreted by the citizens of the Kingdom, also known as the Edo people.

Materials: Benin art was made by guildsmen, primarily utilizing; wood, ivory, coral, cowrie shells, and brass. The wood and Ivory were carved, the coral and cowrie shells mainly crafted for usage as beads and other body ornamentation, while the brass was formed using the lost wax casting technique.

Subject Matter: Carved ivory tusks were a main component of royal ancestral altars. Only the Oba's, and other nobles, specifically identified by him, could contain these. The carvings on them included a number of images that were symbolic motifs to the Benin, and the tusk itself was mounted in the opening at the top of a brass cast, commemorative head. Ivory tusks were an especially important and exclusive material for a number of reasons. As one of the rarer commodities, which Oba's had complete control over, it reflected his control and power over the kingdom. And being white, like the sacred kaolin clay that was used extensively in Benin ritual ceremonies, it too was considered sacred & evoked spiritual harmony for the Edo people. Additionally, because of its durability and permanence, it made it an especially suitable material for the recording of royal history.

The scenes on this carved Ivory Tusk portray Benin history & memorialize dead royalty. So on one hand they are historical documents, and on the other, the imagery represents the continuity and longevity of the Benin nation.

The tusks are carved and read from bottom to top. There are a variety of images and motifs that continue to show up on carved tusks, represented in a variety of ways and configurations, which recount episodes from Benin history and the lives of their kings (obas).

Some of the more common images are:

- The Oba Ohen, (Mudfish legged Oba)
- Oba standing on an animal; Elephant or Leopard
- Oba in his Regalia, (especially the diamond-shaped bead in the center of his chest), sometimes being flanked by chiefs or military commanders & sometimes being supported by them.
- Royal family members
- Military commanders
- Warriors/Guards
- Priests
- Attendants

- Foreigners, usually Portuguese, represented as traders or soldiers, usually with long straight hair and beards, and dressed in 16th century European clothing.
- And Animals; Leopards, Elephants, crocodiles, serpents, and of course mudfish in various poses/arrangements

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Social Structure:

The Kingdom of Benin, (1440-1897), of the Edo peoples, had a stratified society. At the very top was the King, (Oba), and his royal family. Below this was the nobility; consisting of tribal Chiefs, military commanders, council members, and specially appointed officers. Next came the commoners; made up of the guards, warriors, craftsmen/guildsmen, attendants, and ordinary citizens. And at the very bottom were the slaves.

The title of Oba was passed exclusively from father to son. Although not a god, the Oba was considered divine. He possessed supernatural powers as an intermediary between the realm of his dead ancestors and the world of the living.

History of European trade and colonization:

Portuguese sailors were the first Europeans to sail to the Kingdom of Benin, arriving in 1485. They found a magnificent kingdom with splendors that rivaled the most famous courts of Europe and Asian. Commercial trade began between the Kingdom of Benin and Europe. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Obas had a monopoly on the ivory trade. The Oba was entitled to one tusk from every elephant slain in the Kingdom with an option to purchase the second tusk. In Europe the demand for ivory was fierce as it was used for piano keys, billiard balls and other decorative items. In 1630, records from the Dutch ship Olyphant reported a delivery of over 880,000 pounds of ivory to Rotterdam.

After having navigating successful trading relationships with Portuguese and Dutch sailors, along came the British. In 1897 the Oba and a British envoy struggled to negotiate a treaty. The struggle escalated and eight British diplomats were murdered. The British avenged the murders in a bloody conquest known as the Punitive Expedition. The Capital and palace were burned and looted of their treasures. Many of the Benin tusks and bronzes seen in museums today came out of that bloody conflict. The Oba died in exile, however his son was restored to the throne in 1914 and the royal lineage continues to this day.

Ancestral Altars:

Royalty, nobles, and paternal commoners all had ancestral altars. However, their makeups and decorations varied markedly! Sumptuary laws governed the shape and composition of all ancestral altars, requiring specific differences between, commoner, nobility, and royalty.

When a new Oba was installed on the throne, he commissioned a carved elephant tusk and cast bronze portrait head of his father and grandfather. Commissions supported dozens of artisans who worked exclusively for the Oba. The carved tusk was then fitted into the cranium of the portrait head and placed on an altar. Altar shrines lined the halls of the palace and were believed to ensure the security of the

Kingdom and enhance the prestige of the Oba. The symbolic meaning of many of the carved representations are unknown, but we do know Obas sometimes are depicted with the legs of mudfish.

This was a tusk commissioned by an ezomo, or palace chief. According to artsimia: In Benin, as elsewhere, it's good to be the king - most artworks in Benin pay homage to oba, or kings. But it's also good to be the ezomo, the highest-ranking palace chief and military commander. A few tusk carvings, like this one, were made for particularly powerful ezomo. Here, at the base of the tusk, an ezomo is depicted as a tough-looking official wielding a sword. Above the ezomo is an oba, or king, gripping an elephant trunk in each hand. If he can manage that, the image suggests, imagine how strong a leader he must be. Crouching above the oba's head is a leopard, a traditional sign of African royalty as it possesses such desirable traits: strength, agility, fierceness, and cunning. For centuries, if not longer, tusks were the scrolls of the jungle, recording historical stories. The story carved into this tusk reputedly happened around 1773 in the royal court of the Kingdom of Benin."

Symbolism of mudfish:

Instead of legs, this legendary figure has two mudfish. These mudfish are not the typical Benin mudfish that can also be portrayed on a tusk either individually, coiled, or as two entwined. The mudfish has many meanings in Benin, where it is regarded as a very desirable and beautiful fish, a succulent symbol of peace, prosperity, and the fecundity of Olokun (god of the sea). As a creature of the liminal zone of the river banks, the mudfish functions in Benin belief as a transitional figure between the land, realm of the Oba, and the water, realm of Olokun. However, in this portrayal, they are a longer and different variety of black fish. They possess an electrical charge capable of inflicting a shock. With this image the carvers are reinforcing an ancient belief that the Oba's feet are so highly charged with life force, that they never must touch the ground for fear of damaging the land. (1)

This extraordinary figure also has two crocodiles emerging from his capped head! In Benin belief, spirits come to this land world through the water, and stories are told of Ohen's spirit journey from his father, Olokun's realm of the sea to his earthly role as first Oba of the land. And in this way the two crocodiles, Olokun's chiefs and messengers, are portrayed as if pulling Ohen through the water. A third crocodile emerges from below his waist that also carries him forward, while turning to seize and feed on an antelope along the way. And as if this is not enough imagery, there is a two-headed serpent suspended across his waist, where its body forms a pattern that contains an innate magical force!

(For more information on the exact story told on the tusk, see the link below on the art stories site from artsimia.)

Additional information on Benin altars:

A rarer component of ancestral altars was the "aseberia", a cast metal tableau portraying the Oba in complete ceremonial regalia, surrounded by chiefs and his main courtiers. Rarer, because there are very few of these know, however one of those that were, represented the Oba, the central figure, wearing a very elaborate coral beaded outfit, worn by him at the two main annual ceremonies. (The "Igue", dedicated to his head, and the "Ugie era Oba", honoring his ancestors.) One of his hands holds the ceremonial sword,"eben", with which he dances during these two rituals, touching the ground periodically to honor his divine predecessors. The other hand holds a proclamation staff (an isevbere igho) shaped like a ceremonial gong, "egogo", used as his emblem of power. And, as in the case of the carved ivory tusks, here he also has his arms supported by two high ranking chiefs. In this cast tableau

example, the Oba has two small leopards at his sides, reflecting the facts that during ceremonies in the past, the monarch had a cast life-size leopard on each of his sides and when parading through the city would be accompanied by two actual leopards! The side of the tableau also had small images of hands with their thumbs upraised, a reference to the altar of the Hand that all Oba's had in their residence too.

In addition to the ancestral and head altars already mentioned there were two other types of altars present in the Edo culture; altars of the Hand (Ikegobo), and the altars of the spirit world. Altars to the Hand originated out of the cult of the Hand, which believed that a man's right hand or arm embodies his capacity for accomplishment. Since their hands were associated with action, productivity, and victory, they were ultimately considered the source of wealth, status, and success, especially for those who depended on manual skills and physical strength. Along with this focus on a man's skills with tools, his economic effectiveness, and his capacity to win physical contests, the Hand would also protect the man, his family, and his people, from human enemies as well as evil spirits. Altars of the Hand could be composed of wood, terra-cotta, or brass depending upon the patron's social status and was mainly created for and worshiped by those in Benin society who had already achieved outstanding wealth and success.

These altars were cylindrical in form, like the legless stools commonly used in Benin in the past, with this setting on a semi-circular platform/base. Both the altar and the base were decorated with relief sculptures of sacrificial animals, attendants, and of course a central larger image of the man in full regalia, often displaying weapons, and even the heads of enemies he had taken. This object also represents the abundance of wives, slaves, and animals which he acquired through his own efforts, regardless of kinship. A spoke protruding from the top of the altar supported a smaller ivory tusk that could have additional carvings. The altars of the Hand could be placed in a more private room, adjacent to the ancestral altar, or in a second public room of the house.

The fourth and final altar in the Benin culture are the altars of the spirit world, where deceased ancestors reside. These altars are unique in that they honor a collective group; descent groups, territorial communities at all levels, occupational guilds, associations of retainers in the king's palace, and even cult groups worshipping specific deities. The living elders of any of these groups communicate with their collective forerunners using the wooden rattle staff, ("ukhurhe") and offer sustenance through various sacrifices.

A footnote to the arts of the Benin Empire and its' Edo people, is that of the over 2,400 pieces held today, most are in European and American collections/museums, with as few as 50 pieces actually remaining in Nigeria. (The African nation where most of the original Benin Empire existed.) This of course is not surprising given the treatment African countries by European explorers/conquerors. It was the Punitive British Expedition of 1897 that accounted for the sack and total destruction of the Benin Empire, and the military acquisition of the vast majority of their arts, those being the creations that decorated the Royal Palace and the nobility's residences, all of which had been accumulated there over many centuries.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

The kings (Oba) of Benin and the high-ranking chiefs who served them displayed ivory tusks on altars honoring their ancestors. This tusk was commissioned by Ekeneza in 1775, the year he became ezomo, or military commander, under King Akengbuda (reigned 1750–1804). The size of the tusk and complexity

of the images, meant to be read from bottom to top, rival altar tusks created for an Oba. Motifs include deified kings and important commanders from the past; warriors, European soldiers, and courtly women; leopards, elephants, reptiles, and mudfish.

Note the mudfish-legged figure on the second row, signifying a deified Oba (others occur higher up), and just above him the small, long-haired figure representing a Portuguese soldier.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Article on the Tusk, on artsmia Art Stories: <http://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/1312>

Also, a short video from artsmia on the British Punitive Expedition:
<http://artstories.artsmia.org/#/stories/279>

And here is a direct link to the tale told on the tusk:

<http://artstories.artsmia.org/#/stories/233>

The Art Institute of Chicago: <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/African/Tusk>

Kingdom of Benin, presentation, from British Museum (PDF):
https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/KingdomOfBenin_Presentation.pdf

A photo of an Oba's Ancestral Altar is in the docent files, with a link to an online version:
<https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/art/palace.jpg>

National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian): <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/treasures2008/tusk3.html>

Wikipedia (Oba of Benin and Benin Empire)

Art Institute of Chicago: *Benin - Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria*:
<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/benin/index>