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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, RECEIVES ROBERT OWEN LEHMAN COLLECTION  
OF BRONZES AND IVORIES CREATED IN THE KINGDOM OF BENIN**



*Commemorative head of a defeated  
neighboring leader,  
late 15<sup>th</sup>–early 16<sup>th</sup> century*

BOSTON, MA (June 28, 2012)—The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), has received the Robert Owen Lehman Collection of 34 rare West African works of art. Thirty-two objects are from the Kingdom of Benin in present-day southern Nigeria and two are from present-day Guinea and Sierra Leone. The Lehman Collection is the single greatest private holding of objects from the Benin Kingdom (not to be confused with the West African Republic of Bénin, the former Dahomey) dating from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The gift, which includes 28 bronzes and six ivories, will go on display at the MFA in late 2013 in a gallery dedicated to the arts of Benin. In addition to highlighting these works in a gallery, the Museum will present a number of public programs that further the appreciation of the Kingdom of Benin's renowned arts, cultural heritage, and complex history.

"These treasures of Benin represent a highly significant addition to the MFA's growing collection of African art. This gift will transform the collection with works that bear witness to the extraordinary creativity of African artists," said Malcolm Rogers, Ann and

Graham Gund Director of the MFA. "We appreciate Robert Owen Lehman's generosity, which will allow us to share these works with visitors from around the world and further scholarship about one of the richest periods of African art."

The collection of bronzes includes a rare 16<sup>th</sup>-century horseman, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century rendering of a Portuguese rifleman, and three late 15<sup>th</sup>- to late 16<sup>th</sup>-century commemorative heads. Fifteen 16<sup>th</sup>- to 17<sup>th</sup>-century bronze plaques in high relief depicting Benin kings, royals, and dignitaries allude to the history and social structure of the kingdom. The works in ivory are equally significant and feature two late 15<sup>th</sup> - to early 16<sup>th</sup>-century saltcellars by Sapi artists in Sierra Leone and Guinea, as well as a staff with horseman finial, a pendant, a cup, and a leopard hip ornament from Benin.

Famous for its sophisticated artistry, the Benin Kingdom, whose inhabitants are Edo peoples, goes back to the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. The reign of the first dynasty, the Ogiso kings, remains shrouded in mystery. The founder of the current dynasty, Oba (King) Oranmiyan, is thought to have arrived from the neighboring ancient Ife Kingdom in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. From the early 14<sup>th</sup> century to the present, there have been 38 kings, including the current ruler Omo N'Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Erediauwa, C.F.R., Oba of Benin, who ascended to the throne in 1979. To this day, the Oba resides in the royal palace at Benin City, the kingdom's capital. Divine rulers combining vast political and spiritual powers, the Benin monarchs commissioned numerous works from artists who created them exclusively for the court. Some commemorated important events and highlighted royal achievement, while others held religious or ceremonial significance. The kingdom expanded and flourished from the late 14<sup>th</sup> through the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it came under British influence upon the conclusion of a treaty with Britain in 1892. Five years later, after Benin forces attacked and killed most members of a British delegation en route to Benin City, the British launched the Punitive Expedition of 1897, sending military forces to the capital and defeating its ruler, Oba Ovonramwen. It is estimated that the British removed more than 4,000 objects from the Benin palace during this military action. Numerous pieces were later sold in Great Britain to defray the costs of the campaign, and were acquired by private collectors and museums in Europe and the United States. Many works of art in the Lehman Collection are known to have left Benin in 1897, and the remainder likely left at the same time. A number of these appear in publications from 1900 onwards, but have not been seen by the public for several decades.

Today, notable works of art from Benin can be found at the National Museum Lagos, Nigeria, as well as many European and American museums. Collections are housed at the British Museum, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, the Ethnographic Museum in Vienna, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

Among the most famous works from the kingdom are its bronzes (copper alloy pieces created in the lost wax-casting technique), which range from sculptural heads of kings and freestanding figures, to pendants and high-relief plaques that once adorned the walls of courtyards in the palace. Artists also crafted beautiful utilitarian objects in bronze and ivory. Of the 28 bronzes in the collection, of particular note is *Commemorative head of a defeated neighboring leader* (late 15<sup>th</sup>–early 16<sup>th</sup> century), thought to depict a foreign ruler subjugated by the Benin army during the kingdom's expansion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was once displayed on an ancestral altar created in honor of a deceased Oba, recalling his achievements and connecting his successors with the royal ancestor. The head is a common motif in the Benin sculptural repertoire because it leads a person through life and a "good head" assures well-being and prosperity. After the passing of a ruler, his successor conducted elaborate funerary ceremonies and commissioned many works to commemorate his predecessor. Among them were idealized royal portrayals, such as a *Commemorative head of an Oba (King)* (late 16<sup>th</sup> century). It is a rendering of an unidentified monarch with a high collar strung from precious coral beads, and a cap-like crown decorated with clusters of beads and beaded and braided strings hanging from its sides. The heads, which have a round opening at the top, supported elaborately carved ivory tusks and graced royal altars.

In addition to these bronze heads, the gift to the Museum includes pendants, freestanding sculptures, and relief plaques that incorporate many motifs common in Benin art. *Pectoral showing two officials* (16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century) illustrates two dignitaries holding L-shaped metal hammers in their left hands and long staffs with knobs as insignia of their office in their right hands. They may represent either 16<sup>th</sup>-century messengers linking Benin with the ancient kingdom of Ife, or *Ewua* officials, members of a guild who cared for the king's personal needs and safeguarded the spiritual nature of the dynasties' origin from Ife. Another work, *Relief plaque showing a dignitary with a drum and two attendants striking gongs* (16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century), depicts an official with musical instruments that were played during numerous court festivals and rituals. Rectangular brass plaques also provided a visual history of the kingdom, an example of which is a superb *Relief plaque showing a battle scene* (16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century). It illustrates a Benin war chief dragging a foreign enemy, recognizable by the facial scarification, off his horse. A horn blower and other Benin soldiers, smaller in scale to emphasize the importance of the chief, accompany him on his victorious exploits. There have been different interpretations as to which historical battle the work might depict, but most scholars agree that it captures a scene of the war with Idah, when the Attah (King) of Idah unsuccessfully tried to invade Benin in 1515–16.

Works from the Benin Kingdom, which is located close to the Atlantic coast, demonstrate the way in which the flow of people, ideas, goods, and techniques in the Atlantic enriched the artistic repertoire and inspired unique visual traditions. Around 1472, the first Europeans—Portuguese sailing along the West African coast—arrived in the kingdom, bringing with them muskets and cannons, and goods such as brass in the form of bracelets (called manillas) to be traded for spices, textiles, and slaves. These manillas were later melted down and recast by Benin artists into sculptures and plaques historically referred to as “bronzes.” The kings of Benin enlisted the support of Portuguese soldiers to pursue their ambitious plans of expanding the kingdom by conquest. The motif of the Portuguese appears in many 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century works. A dynamic sculpture, *Portuguese rifleman* (16<sup>th</sup> century), features a soldier with a flintlock gun; it belongs to a distinct corpus of several similar works, among them one in the National Museum Lagos. The artists rendered Portuguese weaponry and uniforms, typical for the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, in great detail, demonstrating their interest in new technologies and objects brought across the seas.

In addition to remarkable bronzes, the Lehman Collection features six ivories, including two exquisite saltcellars dating from the late 15<sup>th</sup> to early 16<sup>th</sup> century created by Sapi artists (the ancestors of today's Bulom and Temne peoples in Sierra Leone) for the Renaissance courts of Europe. These artists were aware of the tastes of their foreign patrons and melded African motifs such as snakes and birds with intricate linear and floral designs favored in Europe. These ivories exported from West Africa to Portugal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century are some of the earliest works to reach European courts and wealthy merchants. Referred to as Afro-Portuguese ivories, they are among the most cherished objects from the African continent. Also of note is *Pendant showing an Iyoba (Queen Mother) with a gong* (late 17<sup>th</sup>–early 18<sup>th</sup> century), which portrays an unidentified Queen Mother, the highest ranking woman in the Benin political hierarchy—a motif that frequently appears in Benin iconography. In this pendant, she taps a gong and is recognizable by her high-peaked hairstyle covered with a coral net, the high collar of coral beads, crisscrossed coral bandoliers, and her richly patterned skirt.

"The artistry of these magnificent works in bronze and ivory is deeply moving. I will never forget the first time I saw the collection—I was in awe!" said Christraud Geary, Teel Senior Curator of African and Oceanic Art at the MFA. "They are a testament to the world of the Benin kings and the brilliance of artists who worked for the court. I look forward to reaching out to, and learning from, the Benin court and the Edo communities in this country as we plan the display of these superb works in the near future."

Works in the collection were acquired by Robert Owen Lehman at auction houses and through dealers in the 1950s through the '70s. "Benin craftsman produced some of the finest examples of bronze casting ever made anywhere in the world," said Lehman. "My aim in giving them to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is to have the collection enjoyed by as many people as possible. I wanted the works to go into a gallery where they could be shown in a context that makes their power, beauty, and technical sophistication evident."

Prior to the gift, the Museum had one Benin work among its holdings of African art, an 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup>-century terracotta head commemorating a Benin chief, given to the MFA in 1991 by William E. and Bertha L. Teel. It is currently on display in the Museum's African gallery along with two additional Benin pieces on loan to the MFA—an ivory hip ornament in the form of a leopard's head and a pair of ivory armlets. The Lehman Collection gift augments the Museum's holdings of some 114 diverse works from Nigeria and elevates the MFA's entire African collection. It is the first gift to the Museum from Robert Owen Lehman, a noted collector. The MFA's relationship with the Lehman family began in 1938, when Mr. Lehman's grandfather, Philip Lehman, gave a gift in memory of his wife, Carrie L. Lehman, comprising 375 examples of historic costumes and textiles, primarily European, dating from the 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently, the Robert Lehman Foundation, founded by Robert Owen Lehman's father, supported the purchase in 1982 of 16 benches and chairs from contemporary American craft artists, expanding the "Please Be Seated" initiative at the Museum through which artistic seating is made available to visitors in MFA galleries and public spaces.

### **Scholarship and Future Gallery**

The presentation of works from the Lehman Collection and research into their background will allow Museum visitors to see and appreciate some of the oldest, most beautiful, and rarest African objects. These works also will enable the MFA to further the understanding of the Benin Kingdom, demonstrating how Africans participated in a global economy as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A slideshow of highlights from the collection is available on the Museum's website, <http://www.mfa.org/give/gifts-art/Lehman-Collection>, as is a listing of the 34 works with information that includes their provenance, or history of ownership. All of the objects will be displayed in a new gallery at the MFA, scheduled to open in late 2013. The gallery will include historical background about the kingdom and the events of 1897 that led to the removal of these objects from Benin, as well as information about each work of art. Additionally, the MFA will present a variety of special programs focusing on the Benin Kingdom and Nigeria from a cultural and historical perspective.

## African Art at the MFA

A gift of 10 works from William E. and Bertha L. Teel in 1991 and their subsequent donations of another 54 objects marked the beginning of the MFA's sub-Saharan African collection, which focuses on tradition-based wood sculpture and objects in metal, terracotta, and stone, and is overseen by the Art of Asia, Oceania, and Africa Department (AAOA). In 2003, the MFA hired Christraud Geary as its first Teel Senior Curator of African and Oceanic Art. Geary most recently co-curated the 2011 exhibition *Global Patterns: Dress and Textiles in Africa* with Pamela Parmal, the MFA's David and Roberta Logie Curator of Textile and Fashion Arts. Thanks to gifts by other collectors, most notably the late Geneviève McMillan, the Museum's African holdings in AAOA have grown to 560 objects, including 88 works from Nigeria. There are many outstanding and unique pieces, among them masks, ritual implements, and architectural elements by artists of the Yoruba peoples in Nigeria, and masks and sculptures by artists of the Fang, Chokwe, and Songye peoples in Central Africa and the Dogon, Dan, and Mende peoples in West Africa. A steatite mother and child figure (*Mintad*) from the Kongo peoples in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and a figurative iron altar (*Asen*) from the Fon peoples in the Republic of Benin in West Africa are among the most notable works in stone and metal.

In addition, the Textile and Fashion Arts Department possesses more than 200 textiles, examples of dress, and jewelry from sub-Saharan Africa, acquired through gifts and purchase, with 23 pieces from Nigeria. The Musical Instruments Department counts 46 pieces including two works from Nigeria among its holdings, and the Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs also has several works by African artists and most recently added about 4,000 early postcards photographed in Africa to its collection, a generous gift of Leonard A. Lauder. In 2010, the Contemporary Art Department acquired *Black River* (2009), a piece by the Ghanaian/Nigerian artist El Anatsui, now on display in the new Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art. These growing collections of works by African artists and other Africa-related visual materials reinforce the Museum's mission to present art from around the globe to its visitors.

*The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), is recognized for the quality and scope of its encyclopedic collection, which includes an estimated 450,000 objects. The Museum's collection is made up of: Art of the Americas; Art of Europe; Contemporary Art; Art of Asia, Oceania, and Africa; Art of the Ancient World; Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; Textile and Fashion Arts; and Musical Instruments. Open seven days a week, the MFA's hours are Saturday through Tuesday, 10 a.m. – 4:45 p.m.; Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. – 9:45 p.m. Admission (which includes two visits in a 10-day period) is \$22 for adults and \$20 for seniors and students age 18 and older, and includes entry to all galleries and special exhibitions. Admission is free for University Members and children 6 and younger. Youths 17 years of age and younger are admitted for free during non-school hours. On school days until 3 p.m., admission for youths 7–17 is \$10. Wednesday nights after 4 p.m. admission is by voluntary contribution (suggested donation \$22). The Museum is closed on New Year's Day, Patriots' Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For more information, visit [mfa.org](http://mfa.org) or call 617.267.9300.*

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