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Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, OPENS BENIN KINGDOM GALLERY SHOWCASING ROBERT OWEN LEHMAN COLLECTION OF RARE WEST AFRICAN ART

MFA Hosts Celebration of Benin Kingdom Arts and Culture on September 25 with Benin Officials and Local Community



*Benin Kingdom Gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston*

BOSTON—The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), has unveiled a new gallery dedicated to the Robert Owen Lehman Collection of bronzes and ivories created in the ancient Kingdom of Benin, located in present-day Nigeria. The single greatest private holding of objects from Benin (not to be confused with the West African Republic of Bénin, the former Dahomey) the Lehman Collection was a gift to the Museum in 2012. The [Benin Kingdom Gallery](#) tells the story behind these magnificent works—sculptures, relief plaques, ritual objects and regalia—along with the complex history and traditions of the Edo peoples that inhabit the kingdom. Owned by kings (called Oba), the exquisitely crafted objects were kept in the royal palace in Benin

City, the capital of the kingdom, some playing roles in rituals and annual ceremonies that continue to this day. On display for the first time in Boston, the 36 objects (two Lehman Collection loans are included) comprising 30 bronzes and six ivories, all date from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The gallery, which was completely renovated, also includes two early ivories from Sierra Leone and Guinea, crafted by African artists for the European market. The dynamic installation sets the works into their artistic and historical contexts, highlighting a period when Benin traded spices, textiles and slaves for Portuguese muskets, cannons and brass bracelets—which would later be melted down and cast into the magnificent bronzes on display. An interactive touch screen allows visitors to explore the complex iconography of the works, uncovering the meanings of their designs and motifs. To further appreciate Benin's heritage, the MFA will host a special [Celebration of Benin Kingdom Arts and Culture](#) on Wednesday, September 25 from 6–9:45 pm. The free event is a partnership between the MFA and the Coalition of Committed Benin Community Organizations (representing the current Oba of Benin, along with a number of Boston-area Edo groups) and will feature dance performances, music, art and gallery activities. *The renovation of the Benin Kingdom Gallery was made possible with support from the Robert Lehman Foundation and the Vance Wall Foundation.*



Commemorative head of a defeated neighboring leader, late 15th–16th century

"These objects are the Benin Kingdom's legacy to the world and a testament to the brilliance and creativity of its artists. The MFA is honored to be able to share these treasures with our Boston audiences—and with visitors from around the world—in a new gallery that encourages deeper understanding of this era of African art," said Malcolm Rogers, Ann and Graham Gund Director of the MFA. "We are profoundly grateful to Robert Owen Lehman for this gift, which has transformed the MFA's African collection, along with his generous support in making the gallery a reality."

According to oral tradition, the history of the Benin Kingdom began in the late 12th century with the Ogiso dynasty, and continued through the second dynasty founded by Prince Oranmiyan, whose kings consolidated the state between the 13th and 15th centuries. In the last years of the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great (about 1440-73), the Portuguese arrived and trade and commerce flourished. An age of great prosperity then followed during the 16th century, with the kingdom thriving and expanding. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Benin remained an important trading partner for European countries, among them Holland, Britain and France. Toward the end of 19th century the kingdom came under British influence and, in 1892, entered into a treaty placing it under British jurisdiction. Five years later, after Benin forces killed most members of a British delegation en route to Benin City, the British launched the so-called 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 works of art from the Benin palace during this military action. Throughout Benin's complex history, there have been 38 kings in the present dynasty, 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. Through the many highs and lows endured by the kingdom and its people, one of the constants has been the production of art that ranks with the greatest achievements of mankind.

Among the most famous works from the kingdom are its bronzes, which are actually made of brass (mostly an alloy of copper and zinc). When Portuguese traders arrived in the late 15th century they traded brass in the form of bracelets (called manillas), muskets and cannons for spices, textiles and slaves. Benin artists melted down and recast the manillas, leading to flourishing production by Benin artists in this medium. The highly regarded bronze casters worked exclusively for the Oba, and employed the lost-wax method of casting to create the objects. Superior examples include two royal commemorative heads from the 16th century. 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 an Oba, his successor conducted elaborate funerary ceremonies and commissioned many works to honor his predecessor. *Commemorative head of an Oba* (late 16th century) 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 braided strings hanging from the sides. Placed on an ancestral altar in the palace, it would have been used by the living



Mounted ruler (so-called horseman), 16th century

monarch to communicate with royal ancestors and assure the wellbeing of the community. Three commemorative heads of defeated neighboring leaders (late 15th–early 16th century), also referred to as a “trophy heads,” are said to have been displayed on altars devoted to the kings’ military might and prowess.

“It has been a privilege and pleasure to study the exquisite works in the Robert Owen Lehman Collection,” said Christraud Geary, Teel Senior Curator of African and Oceanic Art at the MFA. “They are among the finest in the Benin corpus and further our understanding of royal arts and creativity by artists in the service of kings. In exploring the complexities of these objects, I have been moved by their deep significance for the people of the Benin kingdom throughout history.”

In addition to these bronze heads, other works on display include pendants, freestanding sculptures and plaques in high relief. The sculpture *Mounted ruler*, also referred to as *Horseman* (16th century) depicts a prominent figure on a horse—a rare and prestigious animal in Benin—holding a lance, shield and bundle of spears. Perhaps a triumphant Oba, he wears a feather headdress and crown, which also may have contained ritual elements.

According to tradition, Oba Esigie (ruled about 1504-50) was the first to commission bronze plaques memorializing Benin’s history, hierarchy and worldview. Around 800 plaques still exist, dating to the 16th and 17th centuries, when production is believed to have ceased and they were no longer used. Subsequently, the plaques were stored in a palace courtyard for many years before being taken to England in 1897. In the 20th century, bronze casters revived this tradition, making new plaques and copies of older ones for their patrons. The 15 plaques on display in the gallery portray a range of scenes involving kings, war chiefs, warriors and other prominent individuals in splendid attire, indicating their high rank in the kingdom’s complex social and political order. Other meaningful motifs include leopards, crocodiles, mudfish, river leaves and rosettes. The bronze plaque *Three Officials* (16th–17th centuries) depicts palace officials during



Relief plaque showing a dignitary with drum and two attendants striking gongs, 16th–17th century

a ceremonial occasion, wearing helmets and leopard-teeth necklaces as part of their elaborate garments. *Dignitary with drum and two attendants striking gongs* (16th-17th centuries) shows a musician, accompanied by two palace servants at a festival or ritual occasion. *Mudfish* (16th-17th centuries) portrays the whiskered members of the catfish family that have the ability to breathe air on land for a time, crossing the boundaries between realms. An electric mudfish, which produces a shock to incapacitate prey, is commonly associated with the Oba—objects with this motif allude to the king’s supernatural powers.



Pendant with a Queen Mother (Iyoba) playing a gong, late 17th–early 18th century

"Benin craftsman produced some of the finest examples of bronze casting made anywhere in the world," said Robert Owen Lehman. "This gallery realizes my vision of sharing these objects with as many people as possible, allowing visitors from around the world to experience their power, beauty and superior technical sophistication."

Another common subject captured by Benin artists were the Portuguese. The kings of Benin enlisted the support of Portuguese soldiers to pursue their ambitious plans of expanding the kingdom by conquest. *Portuguese soldier* (16th century) brings this to life in a dynamic sculpture depicting a musketeer with every detail skillfully portrayed—armor and weapons including musket, powder horn and rapier; facial features; and even the cord wrapped around his wrist. The soldier stands barefoot on a base, with the relief of a cannon and cannon balls barely visible.

The works in ivory are as equally significant as the bronzes. Two late 15th- to 16th-century saltcellars by Sapi artists in Sierra Leone and Guinea are on display, as well as works in ivory from Benin, including a staff with horseman finial, a cup and a leopard hip ornament. *Pendant with a queen mother (Iyoba) playing a gong* (late 17th—early 18th centuries) represents the only female figure in the gallery. An influential dignitary in the Benin court, the queen mother possesses supernatural powers and fiercely supports her son, the Oba, in all his endeavors. This pendant portrays the queen mother in a high coral beaded crown, a beaded collar, crisscrossed beaded bandoliers and a wrapped skirt—possibly embroidered and held in place by a knotted belt. She strikes a gong, indicating she is shown in a ceremonial role.

About the Benin Kingdom

The Benin Kingdom, an empire located in present-day Nigeria, dates to the late 12th century and is inhabited by Edo peoples. The reign of the first dynasty, the Ogiso kings known as "rulers from the sky," remains shrouded in mystery. Kings of the second dynasty, founded by Prince Oranmiyan, consolidated the state between the 13th and the 15th centuries. During the last years of the reign of Oba (or king) Ewuare the Great (about 1440–73), the Portuguese arrived. Through them, Benin gained access to the Atlantic trade networks, exchanging slaves, ivory, cloth and pepper for imported goods such as textiles, coral beads, copper alloy and firearms.

In the late 15th and 16th centuries Benin experienced an age of great prosperity. Oba Ozolua (ruled about 1481–1504) and his successor Oba Esigie (ruled about 1504–50), with the help of their Portuguese allies, expanded the boundaries of the kingdom and gained control of trade routes and commerce. Court arts flourished and attested to the kingdom's wealth. Through the 17th and 18th centuries, Benin remained an important trading partner for European countries, among them Holland, Britain and France.

With the rise of imperialism in the 19th century, Benin's fortunes changed. In 1892, Oba Ovonramwen (ruled 1888–97) entered into a treaty with Great Britain, placing the kingdom under British jurisdiction. Five years later, after Benin forces killed members of

a British delegation en route to Benin City, the British dispatched the so-called Punitive Expedition to the capital. They defeated Ovonramwen, sent him into exile, and removed more than 4,000 works of art from the palace.

From the early 14th century to the present, there have been 38 kings in the second dynasty, including the current ruler Omo N'Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Erediauwa, C.F.R., Oba of Benin, who ascended the throne in 1979. To this day, the Oba resides in the royal palace at Benin City, the kingdom's capital, which has over a million inhabitants.

Celebration of Benin Kingdom Arts and Culture **Wednesday, September 25, 6–9:45 pm**

This free public event celebrates the opening of the MFA's Benin Kingdom Gallery with a full slate of evening activities for the community to enjoy. MFA Director Malcolm Rogers and His Royal Highness Professor Gregory I. Akenzua, the current Oba of Benin's brother, will welcome visitors to the event. The Ugho Dance troupe, led by Eunice Ighodaro, will perform traditional Edo dancing, drumming and singing. Other activities include drawing in the galleries and the opportunity to learn about the ancient technique of bronze casting from MFA objects conservator Susanne Gansicke. Barbara and Theodore Alfond Curator of Education Barbara Martin will lead tours in the gallery throughout the evening.

This celebration is a partnership between the MFA and the Coalition of Committed Benin Community Organizations, which is representing Omo N'Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Erediauwa, C.F.R., Oba of Benin. Also attending are Palace Chiefs Esosa Eghobamien, the Obobaifo of Benin Kingdom and Nicholas O. Obaseki, the Aighobahi of Benin Kingdom. Dr. Arese Carrington and her husband, Ambassador Walter Carrington will also be in attendance. Dr. Carrington, a member of the MFA's Visiting Committee for the arts of Asia, Oceania and Africa, is a descendant of Oba Ovonranwen, who ruled the Benin Kingdom in the 19th century.

African Art at the MFA

In addition to the Benin Kingdom Gallery, the MFA has also reopened the adjacent Arts of Africa Gallery which has more than 70 works on display from across the continent. Recently reinstalled, the Richard B. Carter Gallery explores several themes, including the arts of the masquerade and the passages of life, along with a new section devoted to the elegance of useful objects. In this section, there are a number of objects on view for the first time. Included in the gallery are masks and sculpture from west and central Africa from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A central case highlights arts in metal—objects of beautiful form forged from iron or cast from bronze and brass. Most works were made by anonymous artists who lived and worked in many different countries, ranging from South Africa to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, the Côte d'Ivoire and Mali.

The MFA has approximately 820 African objects across its encyclopedic collections, including 79 works from Nigeria. 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 collection of pieces from sub-Saharan Africa and focuses on tradition-based wood sculpture and objects in metal, terracotta and stone. Gifts from other collectors, including the late Geneviève McMillan, continued to grow the collection and Robert Owen Lehman's 2012 gift of Benin bronzes and ivories represented one of the most significant in the Museum's history. There are many outstanding and unique pieces in the collection, among them masks, ritual implements, and architectural elements by artists of the Yoruba peoples in Nigeria as well as masks and sculptures by artists of the Fang, Chokwe and Songye peoples (Central Africa) and the Dogon, Dan and Mende (West Africa). The Museum also has more than 200 textiles—examples of dress and jewelry from sub-Saharan Africa—46 musical instruments, several works on paper and one contemporary object. Additionally, the Museum recently added over 4,000 early postcards photographed in Africa to its collection.

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.; and Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. – 9:45 p.m. Admission (which includes one repeat visit within 10 days) is \$25 for adults and \$23 for seniors and students age 18 and older, and includes entry to all

galleries and special exhibitions. Admission is free for University Members and youths age 17 and younger on weekdays after 3 p.m., weekends, and Boston Public Schools holidays; otherwise \$10. Wednesday nights after 4 p.m. admission is by voluntary contribution (suggested donation \$25). MFA Members are always admitted for free. The MFA's multi-media guide is available at ticket desks and the Sharf Visitor Center for \$5, members; \$6, non-members; and \$4, youths. The Museum is closed on New Year's Day, Patriots' Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For more information, visit mfa.org or call 617.267.9300. The MFA is located on the Avenue of the Arts at 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115.

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