

The Art of Nok and Igbo-Ukwu

The art of Nok, named after the village where artifacts were first discovered by archaeologists in 1943, flourished in north-central Nigeria between 500 B.C. and A.D. 500. Other than the information that can be gleaned from the sculptures and a few other artifacts that have been discovered, the culture remains shrouded in mystery. It is known that in their agriculturally based society, the people had ironworking technology. They also created hollow terra-cotta sculpture of men, women, and animals (fig. 25). The sculptures of human figures are portrayed in garments and jewelry that are characteristic of royalty, but it has not been determined whether the people of the region actually formed a kingdom. Little else is known about the people and their political organization.

A second outstanding artistic tradition that existed near Ife as early as the ninth century was discovered in the 1950s in excavations at a village called Igbo-Ukwu in the eastern part of Nigeria. Cast by the lost-wax method, the metal sculptures found there are splendidly decorated, some with glass and stone beads, and show an extraordinary mastery of technique (fig. 26). A few objects are so intricately fashioned that they were first cast in parts and then joined (fig. 27). Since the raw materials for these sculptures were unavailable locally, they were most likely imported. This suggests that Igbo-Ukwu may have been involved in the early trade with North Africa. While the quality of workmanship and combinations of materials are characteristic of royal art, the nature of the society that created them is as yet unknown.

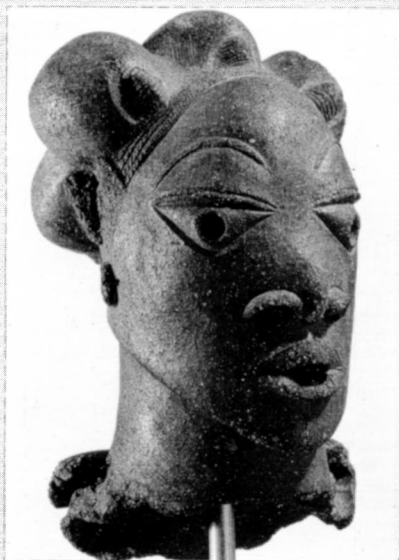


Fig. 25. Nok terra-cotta head, Rafin Kura, Nigeria. This hollow terra-cotta head from the Nok area may have been part of a full-length figure. The pierced eyes, nostrils, and mouth, triangular eyes, curved eyebrows, and elaborately detailed coiffure are characteristic of Nok sculptures.

In the Jos Museum, Nigeria. Height: 35 cm (13.8 in.).

Photograph by Eliot Elisofon



Fig. 26. Brass pendant head, presumed from Igbo-Ukwu, Nigeria. This small pendant, three inches in length, depicts a human head with facial scarification. Cast in brass, the sculpture was further enhanced by attaching beads to the coiffure or crown.

In the National Museum, Nigeria.

Height: 7.6 cm (3 in.).

Photograph by Dirk Bakker



Fig. 27. Bronze roped pot on a stand, Igbo-Ukwu, Nigeria. Evidence of the mastery of casting skills in ninth-century Igbo-Ukwu is seen in this sculpture. Entirely made of bronze, it was cast in separate pieces that were later joined by additional casting.

In the National Museum, Nigeria.

Height: 32.3 cm (12.7 in.).

Photograph by Dirk Bakker

Ife Portrait Sculptures

Radiocarbon measurements of organic matter from archaeological excavations indicate that Ife existed in A.D. 800, if not several hundred years earlier. Thermoluminescence testing of the terra-cotta sculptures has established that they were produced between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries; the brass objects have not yet been scientifically dated. Of about thirty metal sculptures that have been found, most are life-size heads that appear to represent royalty (fig. 28). In more recent times, many of these heads were repeatedly buried, dug up for rituals, and then reburied, although this probably was not how they were originally used.

Brass for casting was expensive because it had to be imported. Financed with tributes from neighboring kingdoms controlled by Ife, the metal probably came from North Africa or Europe. Brass was most likely cast under the exclusive authority of the king, who reserved metal sculpture for royal ceremonies; certain persons of elite status may have used terra-cotta images for their rituals. Although the heads are relatively naturalistic, the features are idealized. Scholars of African art speculate that they may not have been intended as true portraits of the *onis*, but rather as commemorative representations of them. Most of the metal heads have holes at the hairline, perhaps for attaching a crown or strings of beads to form a veil. Some also have holes around the lips and jaw that may have been used to attach a beard or mustache.

The heads were possibly placed in a shrine in the *oni*'s palace. Some, however, have a row of holes on the neck, suggesting they could have been attached to wooden bodies to form effigies used in funeral ceremonies. (In the tropical African climate, burial often takes place the same day a death occurs. It is frequently the custom to have a ceremonial burial some time after a person's death when the family has gathered funds to pay for it or when relatives traveling from long distances arrive.)

Ife Ornamentation

Why some of the heads have facial markings and others do not remains another unanswered question. Many of the faces bear vertical striations in patterns unlike any seen in the area today. Several are incised on the lower lip, and others have deep grooves across the face. A few have "cat's whiskers" markings (fig. 29).

Partial and full-length figures of the rulers illustrate traditional regalia and provide evidence of Ife crafts, such as embroidery. Though each figure is different, there are features common to all. The crown is usually represented as beaded and tiered, bordered by a fringe of tightly curled hair. The badge of office, a vertical double-bow pendant, is depicted hanging from a collar of heavy beads; strands of finer beads cover the chest and another heavy rope of beads hangs almost to the knees. Both arms are ringed with representations of beads and metal bracelets. The king's kilt-like garment may be shown drawn to one side and hemmed around the bottom. In some sculptures, the king holds the mace of office; in his other hand he may hold a ram's horn, which once could have been used as a container for magical substances (fig. 30). Like the heads, the figures provide no indication



Fig. 28. Brass commemorative head, Ife, Nigeria. Commemorative heads, probably representing deceased kings of Ife, were cast in brass between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. This sculpture shows the overall scarification that is characteristic of some heads, as well as the rows of holes at the hairline and around the lips and jaw. The holes were probably used to attach a crown, beaded veil, and beaded beard and mustache.

In the Museum of Ife Antiquities, Nigeria. Height: 26 cm (10.2 in.)
Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1951

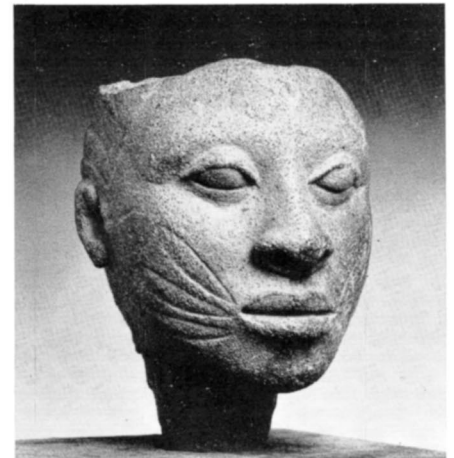


Fig. 29. Terra-cotta commemorative head fragment, Ife, Nigeria. In addition to brass, Ife commemorative heads were also created in terra-cotta. This fragment from a larger figure shows a style of facial scarification that no longer appears among present-day Yoruba peoples.

In the National Museum, Nigeria. Height: 12.5 cm (5 in.)
Photograph by Dirk Bakker