



Leopard Hip Ornament, 18th Century
 Benin Kingdom (Nigeria, West Africa)
 Brass | 8 ½ x 5 7/8 x 3 ¼ in. (21.6 x 14.9 x 8.3 cm)

- How does the artist use the materials to guide the eye of the viewer? What details seem to be most important or heavily emphasized?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

There are several tribes from southern Nigeria that have a history of creating **brass** works, including hip ornaments. This work can be specifically identified as a product of the Benin Kingdom because of certain stylistic conventions established in Benin brass, dating back to the 16th century: the features are generally asymmetrical, and there are certain characteristics

of the leopard that are unique to Benin craftsmen.

The leopard's features have a whimsical look about them. The eyes are wide and slant upwards, and the leaf-like ears are placed close together at the top of the head. The mouth gapes open in a kind of leering grin, with sharp, pointed fangs that overlap each other with a bit of its tongue sticking out. On either side of the face are three rope-like whiskers, which wrap around the face starting from the mouth. The face itself features smooth, raised brass 'spots' on top of a stippled surface. Framing the head is a semi-circular "crown," and a similar collar frames the bottom. These structures, though still made of brass, are quite detailed and delicate, with small spiral designs, and woven cross-hatched patterns.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

This leopard **ornament** is made of cast brass and is a product of the 800-year-old Benin Kingdom, located in southern Nigeria. Thought to be made in the 18th, or possibly even 17th century, the hip ornament was designed to be worn only by the divine king of the Benin people, called the oba, or by an official or soldier who was given permission by the oba to take a human life. In this way, it served as a reminder of the oba's power, and ultimately, the power of the gods and spiritual ancestors. The identification of the oba with the leopard has been so strong throughout Benin history that he is often called "The Leopard of the Civilized World."

In Benin culture, the leopard has special significance. It is considered to be a powerful predator that is also graceful, elegant, and intelligent. Leopards were thought to be the oba's **alter ego**, representing both his warrior-like power and spiritual authority. In fact, leopards were the symbol of warriors,

- What features of this ornament evoke the idea a powerful warrior and what visual clues are used to indicate this?
- Would this ornament evoke fear in those that see it?

for warriors alone in Benin culture were allowed to wear the skins or teeth of the animal. In fact, there is a well-known saying among the Benin, “*Aimien aro ekpen fi ekpen,*” or “You can never look the leopard in the eye.”

The ornament was intended to be worn on the left hip, and attached by hoops on its back, over the tie or closure of a skirt. On the bottom, there are small hanging bells (called “crotals”), which made noise to signal the arrival of the oba or other official as they approached.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

The brass itself looks greenish or gray, as it slowly **oxidizes**. Originally, it would have been a shiny red color. In Benin culture, brass is considered sacred—since **brass** does not rust or fully corrode, it was therefore equivalent to the continuity and permanence of kingship. The shiny surface of brass was considered beautiful and always kept bright and shining, and the red tones were believed to be threatening to evil spirits.

The area that encompasses present-day Nigeria has been inhabited for thousands of years. Indeed, cultures with technology advanced enough for sophisticated metal work existed in the region as early as 500 BCE. The great

city-state of Benin arose along the western Atlantic coast, on the banks of the Niger River delta. Benin went through many rulers before the start of the great dynasty established by Prince Oranmiyan in 1170 CE.

The Benin first came into contact with Europeans when traders from Portugal arrived in the late 15th century. An active trade economy was soon established in ivory and other forest products abundant along the delta, and, later, in slaves. The kingdom prospered until 1897, when the region was conquered by the British and the oba deposed. However, the kingdom was restored to power in 1914, and the current oba continues the dynasty of Prince Oranmiyan.

The Benin monarchy has a long history of strong patronage of the arts, which are important to many of the royal ceremonial practices. Indeed, artists are part of guilds that exist within the larger palace society. Until the 20th century, artists worked exclusively at the palace, so the oba could supervise their work and the materials used (especially brass and ivory). Brass casters are the most prestigious artist’s guild in Benin society, and their works reflect the wealth of the kingdom and the worldly (and otherworldly) power of the oba.

VOCABULARY

Alter Ego: A second self.

Brass: A metal alloy made from copper and zinc.

Ornament: Something, in this case an accessory, which adds grace and beauty.

Oxidize: The loss of electrons by a molecule, ion, or atom; one of the principal causes of the corrosion of brass and other copper alloys.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Research
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes; Measurement
- **Sciences:** Life Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** Economics; Geography; Government; History; People in Societies; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

SCIENCE: Examine the chemical nature and qualities of brass. Explore how it is made, and what scientific processes happen as it is made, and then ages. How might the Benin have worked with this material during the 18th century? (*High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Does this object look like other African tribal works the students might be familiar with? Why or why not? Research the many different types of techniques and materials used by African tribes, especially those of Sub-Saharan Africa (such as the Benin, Ife, or Nok cultures, or others in the areas of present-day Ghana and Nigeria). Why were these materials widely used and considered important? (*Elementary and Middle School*)

VISUAL ARTS: Create a hip ornament that symbolizes a quality that is important. Which animal most represents this quality or idea, and why? The ornament can be an idealized depiction of the animal, or include personal traits of the student. (*Elementary School*)