

Ife Uncovered

The Art of the Kingdom of Ife, in West Africa (Nigeria)

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Meet the artists: Skilled artists of the Yoruba tribes from the 11th to 15th centuries CE

Meet the subject: Bronze heads of the Ife Culture

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Bronze head of the Ife Culture

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Bronze head of the Ife Culture

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The beautiful bronze heads reflect serene and powerful images of humans clearly in prime condition. These sculptures were unearthed in 1938 at the town of Ife in Nigeria, the religious and past royal center of the Yoruba people. The sculptures of Ife very likely influenced those produced in the kingdom of Benin (12th to 15th century CE), also in Nigeria and largely composed of the Yoruba people. In Benin oral traditions, it was the king of Ife who sent a master craftsman to Benin to teach his sculpting skills to others. There was recorded movement of iron-working Yoruba peoples into the territory of the Edo in Benin and there are many points of similarity in the art of the Ife and Benin cultures. Although the kingdom of Ife ceased to exist by the late 15th century CE, exactly why it declined is not known. Ife still exists today as a small rural town that holds a position of religious importance with shrines and sacred groves dedicated to traditional gods.

The Artists:

Artists of the Kingdom of Ife, located in today's Nigeria, like the Kingdom of Benin, flourished between the 11th and 15th centuries CE. The kingdom's artists produced many fine cast bronzes, especially expressive sculptures of human heads. Ife may have been influenced by the earlier Nok Culture (5th century BCE to 2nd century CE) and Igbo-Ukwu (at its zenith in the 9th century CE).

Curious fact:

Nok culture provides the earliest example of iron-smelting technology in sub-Saharan Africa which permitted Nok to jump straight from the Stone Age to the Iron Age and skip the Bronze Age stage that is typical of developments elsewhere. No one knows how or why.

More info-bites:

- The first European explorers to see Ife art did not believe it was done by those peoples; it was assumed a Greek settlement – perhaps the lost Atlantis – was responsible for the art.
- The Yoruba considered the site of Ife the exact place of creation, that is where the gods descended from heaven and created the world as we know it.
- A second type of unique art objects were ceremonial stools from single blocks of quartz.

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How was it done:

Lost wax bronze casting technique was used. An excellent demonstration is included in the videos referenced below.



Want to learn more?

Read more at <https://www.ancient.eu/ife/> and https://www.ancient.eu/Kingdom_of_Benin/

Watch videos on YouTube:

Ife uncovered: Sculptures of West Africa – The British Museum (5 minutes)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNmCg3nNi1U&feature=emb_logo

More complete history of archeological discovery and the technique of casting (15 minutes)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa0st_aMjmA&feature=emb_rel_pause

The Benin Bronzes – art exhibit the British Museum: BBC report (4 ¼ minutes)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=rp8flCwvoAU&feature=emb_logo