



MAY 2016

## Signs of Royalty

### *Commemorative Head of a King (Oba)*



**VISIT THE BMA**  
and see *Commemorative Head of a King (Oba)* in the African Art Galleries.

Artist unidentified. *Commemorative Head of a King (Oba)*. 1848–1897. Edo region, Nigeria. Copper alloy. 20¼ x 11 x 11 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzbarger, BMA 1954.145.44

**BALTIMORE  
MUSEUM OF  
ART BMA**

To comment or register for Art-To-Go, email [ebenskin@artbma.org](mailto:ebenskin@artbma.org)

For visitor information: [artbma.org](http://artbma.org)

Sponsored in memory of dedicated BMA docent Ruth H. Singer by her family.

Long ago, the African land that we know today as Nigeria was divided into many kingdoms. The Kingdom of Benin was ruled by powerful *obas* who lived in the royal palace in Benin City. When one *oba* reached the end of his life, his eldest son traditionally took his place as the new ruler.

One of the first duties of the new *oba* was to ask palace artists to cast a bronze head in memory of his father. The hollow head would be placed on a shrine where the *oba* could go to pray to his ancestors and ask for their wisdom and strength. The head was not supposed to look exactly like the old king. Instead, its swollen cheeks, bulging oval eyes, and raised scars on each side of the forehead were meant to convey royal authority.

The head would also show that the former ruler possessed a great number of expensive coral beads, a symbol of wealth and power. Here the *oba* wears a high collar made of 36 rows of beads that completely cover his neck and chin, reaching all the way to his lower lip. His heavy netted cap and the two “wings” that rise on either side also represent official regalia that would have been constructed with coral beads. Additional beads hang straight down from the edge of the cap—six strands in front of each ear and six more behind. A lone bead at the very center of the forehead alludes to the *oba*’s stature as the mighty “leopard of the house.” As a show of strength, some *obas* kept tame leopards in the royal palace and paraded with them throughout the streets of Benin City.

### CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Compare the ceremonial regalia of Erediauwa, the recently deceased Oba of Benin, with that of the 19th-century bronze *Commemorative Head of a King (Oba)*. [bit.ly/1NjLIWX](http://bit.ly/1NjLIWX) and [bit.ly/1Zc3FYh](http://bit.ly/1Zc3FYh)

View a palace shrine and see how elephant tusks were inserted into holes in the top of bronze heads. [bit.ly/23oM6VV](http://bit.ly/23oM6VV)

Learn about:

The Kingdom of Benin, its history, *obas*, and royal palace. [bit.ly/1KIWJaf](http://bit.ly/1KIWJaf)

The life of Erediauwa, the former Oba of Benin. [bit.ly/1SYhTKA](http://bit.ly/1SYhTKA)

Witness ceremonies that accompanied the recent naming of Erediauwa’s successor. [bit.ly/24qcRiO](http://bit.ly/24qcRiO)

**PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**



*Commemorative Head of a King (Oba).*

Artist unidentified. 1848–1897. Edo region, Nigeria. Copper alloy. 20¼ x 11 x 11 inches.  
The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzbarger, BMA 1954.145.44