

Commemorative Head

19th Century

Edo peoples, Benin

brass

2005/1.260

This brass head was made by the Edo peoples of the Benin Kingdom to commemorate a king, known as an *oba*. The head connects the Edo peoples with the ancestral world as well as holds great power, including the fate of the kingdom. To show their respect, the Edo peoples would have placed the head on an altar surrounded by objects that symbolize power.

The ornamentations on this commemorative head represent the authority and wealth associated with an *oba*. Cowrie shells, seen on the crown, were once used as currency and are continued to only be worn by those with high-status. Now missing, an ivory tusk would be added to the top of the crown. The tusk was a commodity reserved for royalty and would have been engraved with the king's achievements.

For centuries, these heads have been made using the lost-wax casting technique. However, the designs have changed over time, proving that traditions in African nations are evolving. In the past, the heads were much shorter and contained less decoration. It can be determined that this head was made in the 19th century due to features like the large, brick-patterned lower portion, the horn-like structures on the crown, and the object's larger size.

This head was inspired by other brass artworks that were most likely taken out of the Kingdom of Benin during the British Punitive Expedition. However, the tradition of creating commemorative heads continues in what is now Edo City, present-day Nigeria.

written by **Allison Malkowski**