

Commemorative Head

19th Century

Edo peoples, Benin

brass

2005/1.260

This commemorative head represents an *oba*, a ruler of the highest political and religious authority in Benin culture, but it does not represent one specific ruler. Rather, it represents a general image of Benin rulers recognizable by the attire. These heads can be dated based on their attire, showing the changing and growing arts of Africa over time. On this head, the high collar, elaborate headgear, and heavy use of brass date it to the 19th century. The head was made using the lost wax casting method.

After ascending to the throne, a newly crowned *oba* would build an ancestral altar for his deceased father and commission one of these commemorative heads for it. The ancestral altars on which they were placed were built in a special part of the palace and served as places of royal worship, as well as indicating power and prestige.

The opening on the top of the head would hold a carved ivory tusk which would be covered in relief carvings of important accomplishments in the *oba*'s life. Unlike the general nature of the head itself, the tusk would commemorate the specific *oba*. Ivory was also a symbol of wealth and power, since only kings and high-ranking chiefs had access to it.

A saying exists: "one's own head leads one through life." In the case of the king, the wellbeing of his people, his clan, and his whole country depends on his head; all the more reason to commemorate the head of the *oba*.

written by **Alice Brown**