

Style

The sculpture of Ife changes ideas about African art

By Jason Edward Kaufman

March 9, 2011

Chances are that when you think of the term “African art” what comes to mind are figures and face masks carved out of wood.

Right?

Well, you’re not wrong. Most sub-Saharan art fits that description. But an exhibit at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond reveals another tradition that puts the lie to this stereotype.

“Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria” opens our eyes to the astonishingly realistic human figures cast in metal or terra cotta more than half a millennium ago in the ancient West African city-state of Ife (pronounced EE-fay). These elegant and captivating statues change the way we think of Africa and Africans, and for that reason this might be the most important African art exhibition anywhere right now.

There are more than 100 sculptures in this first major international exhibition of Ife treasures. Most of the objects belong to the Nigerian National Museums in Lagos and Ife and rarely travel abroad.

The finest were made between the 11th and 15th centuries, when the Ife kingdom was at the height of its power, enriched by trade of agricultural crops, kola nuts and locally manufactured glass beads (ancient crucibles have been found all around the area) with neighbors along the Niger River and across the Sahara. The images represent idealized rulers, average

civilians, figures with congenital deformities, gagged captives with eyes wide awaiting ritual execution, and various symbolic animals.

Many of the heads are as naturalistic and psychologically sensitive as anything made at the same time in Europe and Asia, and their artisans' mastery of lost-wax copper casting might even surpass that of their contemporaries on other continents. Had these works been made in the West, they would be revered as masterpieces, but like much African art they have been underexposed and their study neglected in relation to the art of the West and Far East.

One reason is that most remained buried at sacred groves and shrines in and around the city of Ife until the 20th century. In 1910, a German explorer dug up one of the metal heads — a 20th-century copy of which is in the show — and was taken aback because he thought he had stumbled upon the lost Greek city of Atlantis. In the late 1930s, about 18 life-size metal heads and the upper half of a figure were uncovered by construction workers building a house near the king's palace — several of the heads were punctured by pickaxes — and since then a great number of works have come to light.

For all their realism, the sculptures are a challenge to decipher. There was no written record at the time they were made, and they all came from sites altered over time, resulting in a compromised archaeological record. Even in the last century some sculptures were still in use on altars for worship of ancestors and deities that included a mix of ancient and contemporary objects.

Scientific excavation could someday provide clues to the nature and function of the figures, but we do not know precisely whom they represent or how they were used. Many were found in the precinct of the royal

palace, and their crowns and regalia identify the subjects as rulers. Copper was so valuable that it often was employed for royal commissions, and the use of this durable material suggests repeated use, possibly rituals involving renewal of the power of the ruler and his ceremonial raiments. But other copper figures were dug up far from the palace, suggesting that the sculptures had uses outside the royal court.

The best evidence we have is the objects themselves. The exhibit includes the two extant full-length hollow-cast copper-alloy figures: a 19-inch king in ceremonial garb and a half-life-size seated man wearing a patterned wrap tied at the hip. Found north of the city (but likely cast in Ife), the paunchy seated figure — actively used in a fertility shrine until the early 1900s — is the most complex surviving metal sculpture from sub-Saharan Africa.

These two works alone are reason to head to Richmond. Another is the newly expanded installation of the museum's super African holdings, among which are Yoruba beaded crowns, staves and boots that augment the Ife show. And several jaw-dropping cases contain 10 of the 19 surviving life-size copper heads, and the mask called "Obalufon" after a mythic king credited with bringing metalworking to Ife, said to have been kept in the royal palace from the time it was made 600 years ago until it was transferred to the national museum in the last century.

Other highlights include delicately detailed reddish terra cotta heads believed to have broken off full-length figures, none of which has survived. Some are beautifully preserved likenesses of women with beaded crowns indicating their membership in the royal court.

One of the most remarkable pieces is a 16th-century copper figure of a handsome young king, perhaps in his mid-20s, preserved from the waist

up and a little more than a foot tall. The head is disproportionately large for the body, reflecting the Yoruba belief that the head is the seat of an individual's essential energy and being. His face and torso are patterned with parallel scarification ridges that perhaps identify his place of origin and status.

He wears beaded necklaces and pendants that hang across his chest and a multitiered crown with a beaded crest. His right arm is broken off, but the left is ringed by bracelets and in the hand holds an animal horn that would have held powerful medicine of some kind. Like many Ife statues, it would have been painted, but only traces of red remain on the beads and some white on the face.

What is most extraordinary about this piece — and about many of the best Ife sculptures — is its combination of physical verisimilitude and psychological presence. The sculptor superbly evokes both the softness of the flesh and the inner life of the king; he seems utterly alive and self-possessed, his features expressing calm, nobility and wisdom. He carries himself with confidence and ease, gazing calmly and alertly with an air of beneficent authority. The effect is palpable; my encounter with the king felt imbued with a kind of mutual respect and admiration. It's an extraordinary achievement for any artist, and it is one repeated for a number of the Ife heads.

The making of sculpture relates to the Yoruba creation myth in which the creator sends a deity to Earth to establish civilization. By some accounts it's an artist-god who molded humans in clay, and in others it's his brother who took over after the artist-god got drunk and started turning out deformed people. Were Ife sculptors, like their mythical creators, seeking to give the spark of life to dull matter?

One imagines that Ife rulers commissioned these likenesses to serve an ongoing ritual function but also to immortalize themselves. The fact that we admire and study them today is an indication of their success. Today, Ife is a university city of 600,000 whose current king, or Ooni, is the 50th in an unbroken dynasty that is among the world's oldest. The Ooni's Web site, theooni.org, features one photograph of the incumbent in sunglasses and another of an 18-foot granite phallus.

If the ancient Ife royals would be pleased by their afterlife in the current show, how much more proud would they be to know that their images are changing the way their descendants and all of Africa are regarded abroad? Our understanding of African art has undergone tremendous rethinking in the past few decades. The landmark “ ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art” exhibition in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art demonstrated the profound debt that early modern art owed to the tribal art of Africa and Oceania.

The Ife show — co-organized by New York's Museum for African Art, the Spanish Fundacion Botin and Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments — drops another bombshell. It overturns the cliché that associates Africa inextricably with primitivism and lack of technological sophistication. The VMFA exhibit turns this perception on its head, revealing an ancient African tradition comparable to the highest forms of representational art in the West. It's a game changer and is not to be missed.

Kaufman is an art critic and reporter whose In View blog is hosted by Artinfo.com.

Dynasty and Divinity:Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria

Through May 22 at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 200 N. Boulevard,
Richmond. More information at vmfa.museum.

 **0 Comments**

The Washington Post

**Your support helps our journalists report
news that matters.**

Try 1 month for ~~\$10~~ \$1

Already a subscriber? [Sign in](#)