The Kingdom of Benin

- Current kings trace their origins to the 14th century; the Queen Mother is also politically important
- Was a powerful kingdom from 14th through late 19th century
- Had many client states that sent tribute, including artworks
- Gained wealth from conquest and trade with neighboring kingdoms and Europeans
- Traded European manila (plant fibers for paper) and guns for ivory, pepper and palm oil
- Vibrant urban culture in the capital and other cities controlled by the royal family

Art in the Kingdom of Benin

- The Oba, king, commissioned artworks to show his power and prestige
- Royal portraits were an important focus of royal ancestral shrines
- Artworks contained many religious symbols, since the king was also the spiritual leader
- Other members of the royal family and powerful chiefs commissioned artworks for status and ritual ceremonies honoring their clan and lineage
- The king sponsored royal workshops where master artists supervised apprentices
Cultural Context - Africa Art 24413

Altar Tableau: Queen Mother and Attendants,
H: 13.5 inches, 18th century,
Unknown Benin Artist, Nigeria,
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Cultural Context - Africa Art 24414

Head of an Oba,
H: 9.25 inches, Brass
16th century,
Unknown Benin Artist,
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Cultural Context - Africa Art 24415

Head of an Oba,
H: 13 inches,
18th century,
Unknown Benin Artist,
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Cultural Context - Africa Art 24416

Head of An Oba,
H: 18 inches, 19th century,
Unknown Benin Artist,
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Cultural Context - Africa Art 24417

Benin Ancestor Altar,
Photo by Elliott Elifison, 1970
U. S. Library of Congress

Cultural Context - Africa Art 24418

Benin Ancestor Altar,
Photo by Elliott Elifison, 1970
U. S. Library of Congress
Altar of the Hand,
Unknown Benin Artist,
Late 19th century,
The British Museum

Bracelets: Crocodile Heads, Brass and Gilt, L: 5.25 inches.
17th - 19th century, Unknown Benin Artist,
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Mudfish Stool,
Unknown Benin Artist,
Africa, 16th century,
National Museum, Lagos

Warrior Chief and Attendants,
16th century,
Unknown Benin Artist, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Salt Cellar: Portuguese Figures, H: 7.5 inches, Ivory, Unknown Benin Artist, 15th-16th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Leopard Aquamanile, Bronze, H: 17 inches. 18th century, Unknown Benin Artist, Minneapolis Institute of Art

Benin artists lived in a culture where:
- **Politics:** the government was centered at the king’s palace.
- **Religion:** was based on ancestor worship and the king was the spiritual leader.
- **Economics:** trade with Europeans and other African kingdoms brought wealth and power.
- **Social Organization:** artists were important members of the community and enjoyed royal support.
- **Social Organization:** artists provided important artworks for royal ritual ceremonies and household shrines.
Benin artists lived in a culture where:

- Artistic Influences: artists in royal workshops where masters trained apprentices.
- Artistic Influences: artworks were prominently displayed in the king’s palaces and warriors’ homes.
- Artistic Influences: patrons could see the creations of many artists on a daily basis.

International Influences: Merchants in Benin traded with many other African kingdoms, bringing new ideas to their culture.

International Influences: Portuguese and British merchants bought slaves and gold from Benin; images of the traders were incorporated into status artworks.

International Influences: European craftsmen lived and worked in the cities of Benin where local artists could see their work and learn from them.