

The History of Benin Art

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Introduction

The history of Benin art can be traced back to the 19th century when British settlers started to ship Benin art to Britain. Benin Art was displayed in Benin in the 15th century when the British started arriving in Benin. According to Freedberg and Jane (2012,p.15), Benin became powerful and started to control all trade routes in West Africa, and this led to the transportation of most Arts that were seized from the Kingdom of Benin to Britain. However, in 1897, the art that had been seized from Benin was displayed in the British Museum, and it attracted quite a lot of people.

Some of the Art which were displayed is the image of the Oba appearing on several plaques, Oba with Europeans, Edo people during the 16th century AD, Oba holding leopards and wearing a mudfish belt, commemorative head of Queen Mother and the Bronze figure of a huntsman. These Arts are significant to the history of Art of Benin and the way they are placed in the Museum is also significant as well.

Most importantly, every Art displayed indicates a significant aspect of art. The way images are dressed and placed also means something important to the history of Benin and Art in general. Therefore, the Oba's images displayed at the British Museum wearing coral beads translate that Oba was the King of Benin. As stated by Oma-Piu (2017, p. 10) the coral beads regalia are very rare and expensive and therefore, it is best symbol for the King. It is also because the future of Benin City and its long-distance trade depends on the power of the King. The plaques that are featured in several works of art at the gallery can be traced to the long-distance trade (Oma-Piu, 2017, p. 5). Plaques are symbolically known for the decoration of the King's palace, and therefore, plaques were to design and glorify the prestige of the King. This is the reason several arts are in plaques.

There are also Arts such as bracelets (Brass Manila), brass figures of the Portuguese, and the plaque of Europe. These Arts are significant to Benin's history because they were given to Portuguese traders during the early days as an exchange for gold since Benin did not have any Gold. However, each of the Art was encountered at a specific time in the history of Benin, and each Art was designed at a specific time to indicate specific things that were happening in the society at that time. For instance, the image of Oba holding a leopard, which features in the British Museum, can mean that Oba is the King. It means that he was the King of the jungle and deserves respect from his subjects. The leopard is respected in the jungle, and it is also the King in the jungle; therefore, the image and context of the image reflect what is expected from the people (Briebe, Marcos, Helmut, & Raphael, 2014, p. 25).

It is also noted that Art is translated based on context and image, which makes a viewer imagine things that can relate to a specific art in order to understand art. Research has established that the

artwork reflects how art should be understood, and this can be done through the analysis of the texture, shape of an image, time of history, and also the background of art (Briebe, Marcos, Helmut, & Raphael, 2014). For instance, the image of Oba carrying a leopard requires an understanding of Benin's nature and history for an individual to understand what it means. The context of art provides an understanding of art; therefore, when translating art, the context, shape, background, and historical aspects of art must be looked at for a complete understanding of what art means. Nevertheless, the emotions that are involved in the art context also shape how people understand art. According to Freedberg and Jane (2012, p. 35), art usually attracts attention, and people tend to relate certain art to specific things that have happened in society. Therefore, the connection and emotions shape how we translate and understand art. This is also based on the history of a specific art, which makes people relate or connect to it.

However, the discipline of Art can contribute to the understanding of Artwork through the examination of the history of each art. It is argued that art history is dynamic and can be traced from ancient times; therefore, art history contributes to the understanding of artwork through the provision of certain things that used to happen in society during a particular time in history. The history of art describes the chronological events of certain art. It provides an overview of what happened during a certain time in history, which makes it possible for viewers to understand an Art. For example, the Art featuring an image of Oba holding a leopard could only be understood after learning the history of Benin and the traditional kingship leadership (Freedberg & Jane, 2012, p. 30). Every piece of art can be traced and relate to certain events in history, and even all the art featured at the British Museum exhibition can be traced to Benin and relate to a specific time. Their importance can also be traced as well. Therefore, art history makes a significant contribution to understanding art and the contribution of art to society.

Bibliography

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