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Benin: Royal Art of Africa from the Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Vienna

Armand Duchateau

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The ancient kingdom of Benin lies in the tropical rain forest of West Africa, in present-day Nigeria. During its classical age, from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, it produced one of the continent's most glorious artistic legacies. To reflect the splendor of the royal court, the Oba (king) commissioned highly skilled artisans to create rare and beautiful works of cast brass and carved ivory. These included human and animal figures, relief plaques, elephant tusks, pendants, bracelets, life-size commemorative heads of Obas and queen mothers, and ceremonial objects to adorn the royal palace and the altars honoring Obas of the past. The exquisite brass heads were intended to function as objects celebrating ancestors, as war trophies, and as focal points for sacrificial ceremonies. This volume presents a superb selection of artifacts from the Museum fur Volkerkunde in Vienna, home to one of the world's foremost collections of Benin art. Most of these artifacts were acquired at the end of the last century, when the influx of Benin objects into Europe after the destruction of Benin City caused a sensation among art experts and caught the interest of museum representatives and private collectors. Of the more than one hundred works reproduced here in full color, the majority have never been seen as a group in the U.S. Most celebrated are the cast brass sculptures - including the two figures of dwarfs - which have no parallel in sub-Saharan Africa. A history of the kingdom of Benin up to the British punitive expedition of 1897 provides insight into the politics and culture of one of Africa's greatest civilizations. Further chapters discuss the court hierarchy, the art of brasscasting,the art of Benin and its symbolism, and the history of the Benin Collection in Vienna. To interpret the rich symbolism in Benin art, the book furnishes detailed analyses of the works that are reproduced. In his description of myths and ritual observances, the author presents a fa

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