

Classical Nigerian Sculpture

IAN ADAM

THE PHOTOGRAPHS that follow are of works drawn from a much larger gathering, one hundred artefacts selected from collections housed in the National Museums of Nigeria for a travelling exhibition to selected North American cities. They reflect the exhibition in representing two millenia of Nigerian culture, with the earliest work dated from as early as 500 B.C. and the latest coinciding with the flowering of the English Renaissance. The exhibition displays works drawn from five major cultures, named after the cities or towns with which they are associated: Nok (c. 500 B.C./A.D. 200), Igbo-Ukwu (A.D. 800-1000), Ife (A.D. 1100-1600), Owo (A.D. 1400-1500), and Benin (A.D. 1500-1897). In addition artefacts are shown from cultures of which little is yet known. We show works from the Nok (plate 1), Ife (plate 4), and Benin cultures (plates 5-8), as well as two of more mysterious origin (plates 2 and 3).

The Nok figure in plate 1 is possibly the first known representation of an elephant in Black African art. Both the piercing of the eyes and their triangular form are characteristic of Nok sculpture (in the human figures mouth and nostrils are also pierced). Such stylization gives Nok art great power and conveys a strong sense of the uncanny. Nok figures have been found over a wide area in northeastern Nigeria, entirely since 1943.

Plates 2 and 3 show two of nine bronzes found in northwestern Nigeria in the village of Tada on the bank of the river Niger and in a village on the Island of Jebba in the same region. The bronzes are not worked in a single style, but either fall into groups that suggest a common origin or are one of a kind, as are the two figures shown here. The seated figure in plate 2 is one of two that

have been firmly dated. Its asymmetrical posture is unique in early African sculpture. It has been attributed to Ife, but unlike other Ife work has proportions of head and limbs corresponding to actual human form. The figure conveys an almost Buddhist sense of composure and inner serenity. The figure in plate 3 is generally seen as a Yoruba work. Its large bulging eyes, prominent lips, and stylized ears all distinguish a major period in Yoruba style, and the gesture of the hands, in which one grasps the thumb of the other, "is characteristic of the Ogboni Society, which is responsible for the cult of the earth in Yorubaland."¹

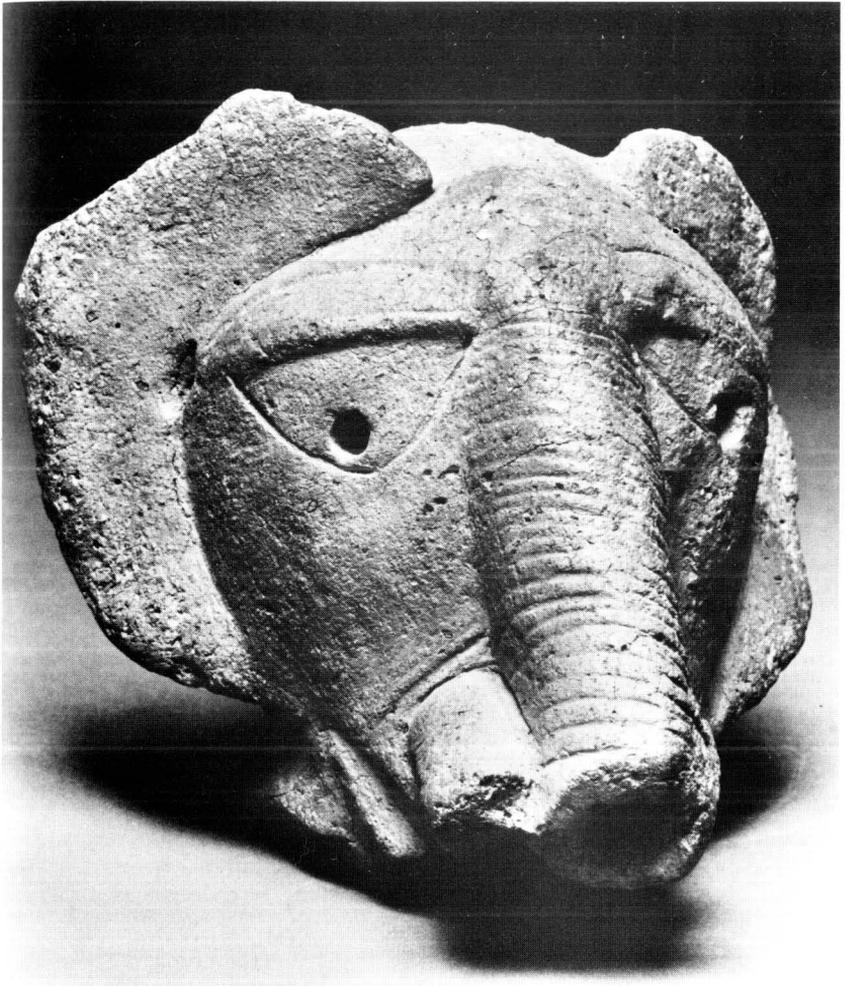
Plate 4 shows a particularly fine head of an Oni (King — or Queen?) of the city state of Ife in southwestern Nigeria. The head is naturalistic, though the ears are quite stylized, resembling those in plate 3. Striations probably represent ritual sacrifice, but artistically they function to emphasize the sensitive modelling of the features and as independent composition.

The final four plates represent the royal art of the city-state of Benin in south-central Nigeria; guilds of craftsmen cast bronzes and fashioned ivory by prerogative of the King (Oba). The culture came to a close with the seizure and dispersal of its treasures by the British punitive expedition of 1897.

Plate 5 is in terracotta, and while from the early/middle period, copies the form of heads from the early period, many of which have hair represented rather than a crown. The magnificently regal Queen Mother head (plate 6) originates from the early period, and has the characteristic crown. Plate 7 gives an example of the plaques used to decorate the royal palace at Benin, with the holes through which the plaques were nailed to supporting columns clearly visible above the heads of the attendants. Finally, plate 8 shows a pair of bronze leopards of the kind placed on altars to royal ancestors. Their fine detail and sense of animation reveal a high point in the development of realism in Benin art.

NOTES

¹ Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett, *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 47. This splendidly illustrated catalogue has provided the basis of these introductory notes.



Elephant head in terracotta
Agwazo Mine, Udegi, near Nassarawa, c. 500 B.C./A.D. 200



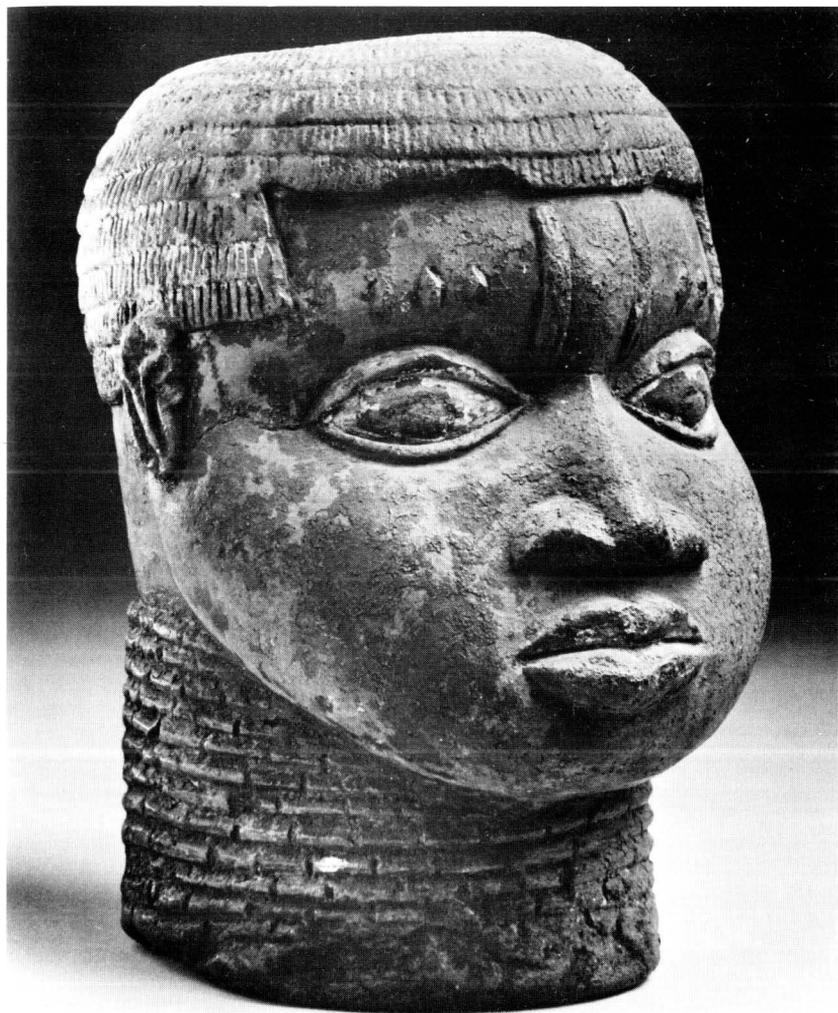
Seated figure, cast in copper
Tada, c. late 13th/early 14th century



Standing figure, cast in copper
Tada, probably 16th/17th century



*Crowned head of an Oni (King or Queen), in bronze
Ife, 12th/15th century*



Terracotta head
Benin, late 15th/mid-16th century



Head of the Queen Mother, in bronze
Benin, early 16th century



Bronze plaque showing three court attendants
Benin, late 16th/early 17th century



Pair of bronze leopards
Benin, mid-16th century