

# BARBER SCHOOLS

## Ikegobo to the Iyoba

*(Ee-kay-gob-o)*

*(Ee-o-ba)*



our collection, your interpretation

# BARBER SCHOOLS

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# Welcome!

We are an art gallery and concert hall housed in a purpose-built, Grade 1 listed building.

The Barber was founded in 1932 by Dame Martha Constance Hattie Barber. Our Art Deco building, designed by Robert Atkinson, houses one of the finest small art galleries in Europe.

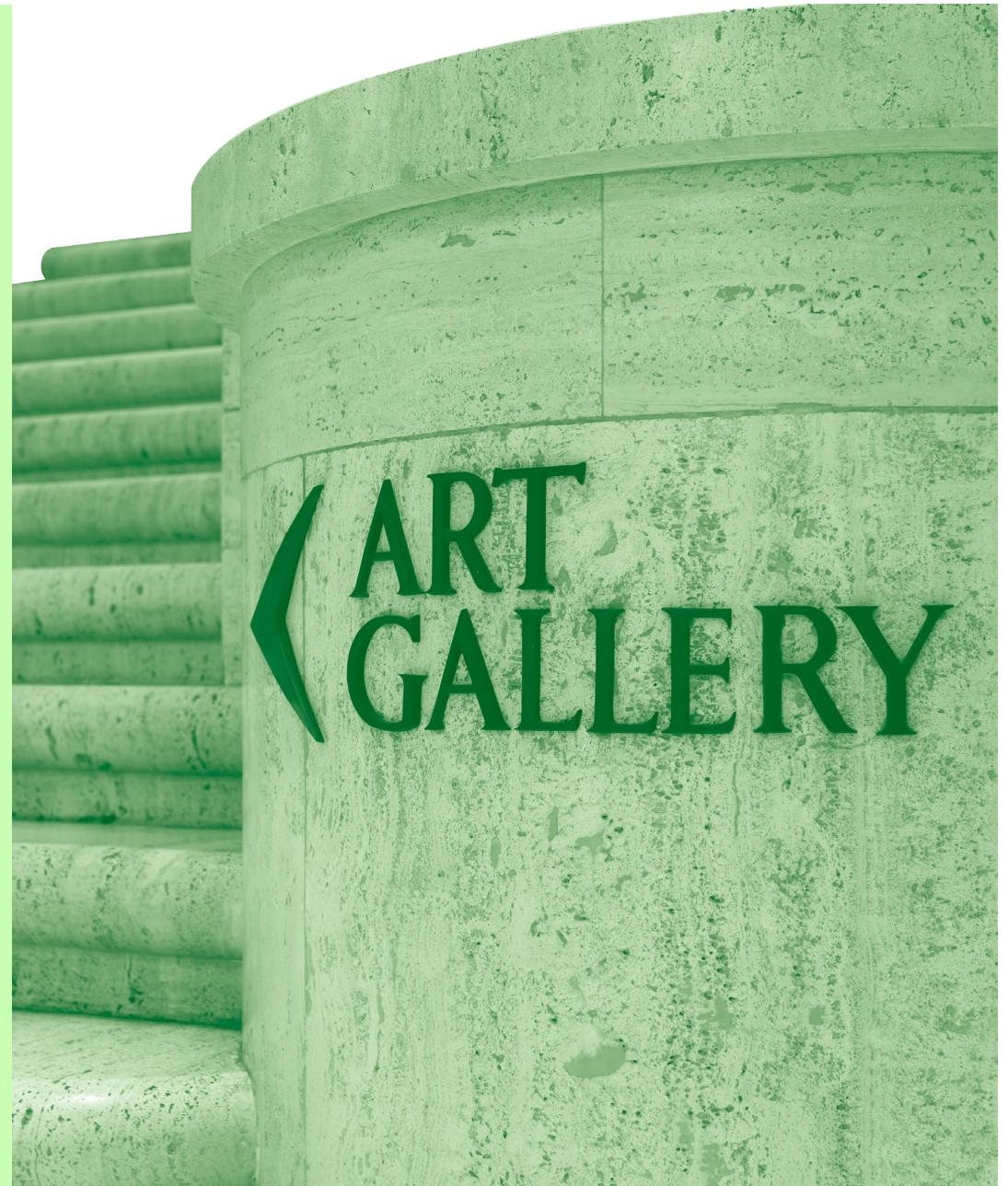
The art collection at the Barber is displayed in four main gallery spaces. In these galleries you can see paintings, works on paper (prints and drawings), sculpture, coins and many other art objects.

This resource offers the opportunity to notice, question, interact with and respond to one artwork, sculpture or object in the Barber's collection.

We'll also support you to explore creative responses, bringing the gallery to you.

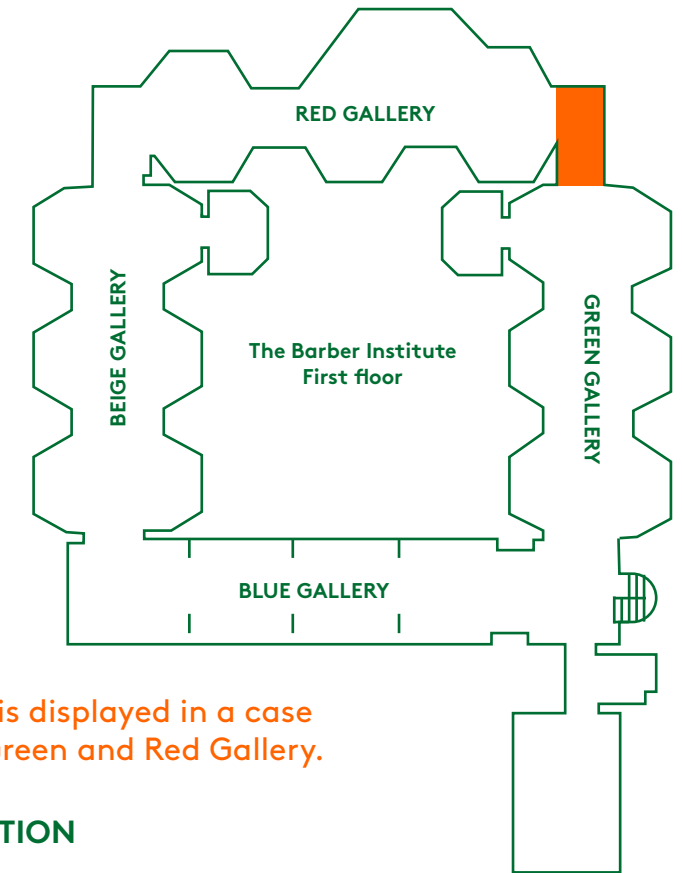
You can print this resource or use as a PowerPoint.

Please be aware that this pack contains age-appropriate discussion and images of the historical invasion and looting in Benin City, Nigeria.



# MEET THE IKEGOBO

Let's find out more about how, why and where this sculpture was made. We'll also explore how it came to be in Birmingham today, colonial histories and discuss a contemporary artist's response to this sculpture.



This sculpture is displayed in a case between the Green and Red Gallery.

## KEY INFORMATION

- Title:** *Ikegobo to the Iyoba (Hand Altar to the Queen Mother)*
- Artist:** Unrecorded African artist
- Date:** About 18th/19th century
- Material:** Brass
- Geography:** Benin, Edo state, (modern day) southern Nigeria
- Culture:** Edo people
- Dimensions:** 21.3 x 26.7cm diameter at base; 21.3 x 23 x 23cm

## WORD ASSOCIATION

What words come to mind when looking at the artwork?



## WORD ASSOCIATION

Here are some words we thought of. Add yours below:

SOLID

DETAILED

FIGURES

3-DIMENSIONAL

PATTERN

HARD

MARKED

METALLIC

OLD

SERIOUS

ORNATE

STATIC

SCULPTURE

MEANING

DARK

HISTORY

STORY

Were any of them the same?

# WHAT CAN YOU SEE?

## LINES

Are the lines curved, jagged, rough or sketchy?  
Is there a line of sight, are the figures in the sculpture all looking/  
pointing the same way?

## LIGHT

Is the sculpture light or dark, warm or cool, natural or artificial?  
When discussing a sculpture how does light influence the piece?

## MOVEMENT

Does the sculpture create a sense of movement?  
If so, how and what?

## COLOUR

What hue is present (red, green, blue etc)?  
Is the colour light or dark?  
How intense is the colour and how do the colours work together?

# Consider the following prompts

## BALANCE

How do the shapes, colours, textures work together?  
Are they harmonious or not?

## SHAPE

Are the shapes geometric or are they more natural?  
Is there one dominant shape or are there a variety of shapes?

## FOCAL POINT

Is there a particular focal point in the sculpture?  
Is there more than one?  
Why are you attracted to that focal point?

## SPACE

How much space is there around and between the sculpture?  
What is the perspective (depth)?

What other observations can you make about this artwork?

# WHAT CAN YOU SEE?

# Observation

## IYOBA

In the centre of the sculpture is the iyoba (Queen Mother). She is the largest figure as she is the most important.

Her hands are raised in a gesture that symbolises wealth. She wears a shell vest and rings around her neck, a sign of high status.

On her head is a traditional crown. This peaked crown is made of coral beads. It points forward towards the viewer.

## FEMALE FIGURES

Most of the figures on this Ikegobo are female.

Either side of the iyoba are two young female attendants holding fans. They may be in training as wives for the king, known as the Oba.

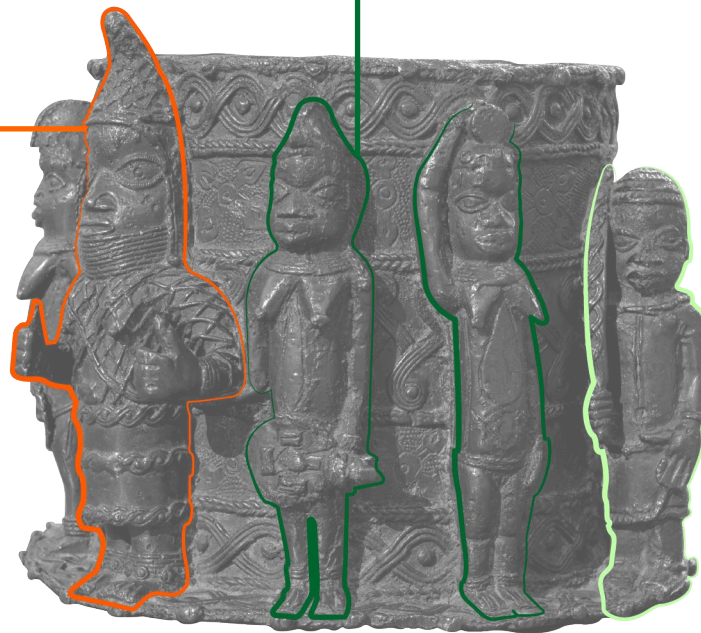
## CIRCULAR OPENING

At the top of the Ikegobo is a circular opening, which is believed to have originally held an ivory tusk. This likely went missing from 1897 during the sacking of Benin city.



## SURFACE

The surface of the Ikegobo is smooth and shiny, textured with pattern.



## MALE FIGURES

There are two male figures. They stand on either side of the group of females. They carry what seem to be weapons. This could suggest they are guards, protecting the royal party of females.





## WHAT IS AN IKEGOBO?



This sculpture is known as an Ikegobo, the Edo term for 'Altar to the Hand'. The cylindrical sculpture was used as a shrine in the Benin Kingdom.

An Ikegobo is cast as one cylindrical object. This is a rectangular or semi-circular base with a frieze of images or patterns and figures celebrating a successful warrior or chief.



## The Ikegobo in Benin

Ikegobos were created to celebrate the achievements of someone who has led a successful and prosperous life, the hand symbolised the actions that the individual had taken.

Accompanying the 'Altar to the Hand' would often be an 'Altar to the Head', a portrait sculpture, which in contrast, celebrated inherited status that was given at birth. Usually Ikegobos celebrated military achievements of high-ranking male chiefs.

The Ikegobo at the Barber celebrates an *lyoba* (Queen Mother), who spiritually embodies the kingdom. Unfortunately, we don't know which *lyoba* this Ikegobo celebrates, but we do know that the first *lyoba* was called *Idia*. *Idia* was a legendary historical figure. *Idia* used her skill, bravery and influence in the 1500s to create the female royal position of the *lyoba*.

Royal artworks from Benin include ivory masks, such as the *Pendent Mask of Idia*, currently in the British Museum. Other Ikegobos can be found in the MET museum in New York.



## Royal Figures in Benin

**Oba** – The ruler, or king, seen as a divine being. The monarchy of Benin is hereditary through the male line, the eldest son therefore always becomes ruler. The current Oba is His Royal Majesty, Omo N'Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba Ewuare II, Oba of Benin

**lyoba** – The mother of the Oba. After the son was installed as king, his mother after having been invested with the title of *lyoba* was transferred to a palace just outside Benin City, in a place called *Uselu*.

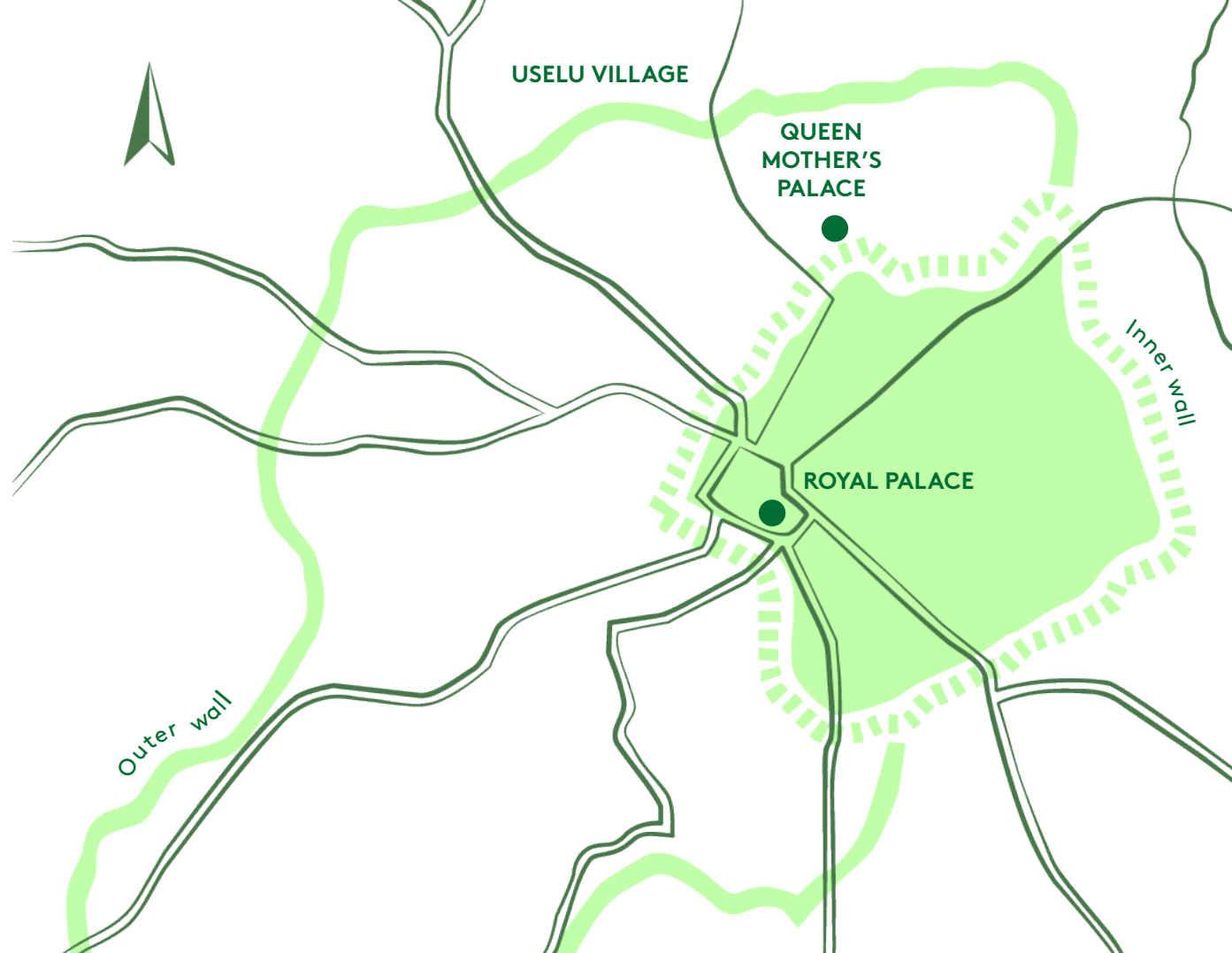
# BENIN CITY

Benin City was originally known as Edo, home to the Edo people. It was the capital of the Benin Kingdom, situated 25 miles from the Benin River.

Today, Benin City is the capital of Edo State, **Southern Nigeria**. The Edo or Beni people speak the Edo language and are the descendants of the founders of the Benin Kingdom. The Edo people are known for their love of art and design including bronze sculpture and textiles.

The Benin Kingdom was one of the oldest and most highly developed states in West Africa. It was established as early as 40 BCE and was at its height between the 14th and 16th centuries.

Benin City's walls were four times longer than the Great Wall of China, taking an estimated 150 million hours to build from clay. It's been suggested that they were once the largest single archaeological phenomenon on the planet! The walls, the moat and a high gate were all manned by soldiers and were key defences for the city. It was also one of the first cities to have street lighting - huge metal lamps placed around the city and fuelled by palm oil.



In 1691, a Portuguese ship captain, Lourenco Pinto, visited Benin City and wrote:

*"Great Benin, where the king resides, is larger than Lisbon; all the streets run straight and as far as the eye can see. The houses are large, especially that of the king, which is richly decorated and has fine columns. The city is wealthy and industrious. It is so well governed that theft is unknown and the people live in such security that they have no doors to their houses."*

# HOW WAS THE IKEGOBO MADE?

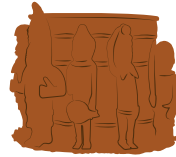
Art and design is highly valued in Benin City.

Many of the artworks serve a spiritual purpose as well as telling the stories of people from Benin history.

When the Ikegobo was made, only the Oba or Iyoba had the authority to commission works made from brass or bronze so Ikegobos were often carved from wood. The process of making a bronze or brass Ikegobo was costly, time consuming and difficult.

This was done by skilled craftspeople in the brass casters' guild. Bronze or brass Ikegobos were made using a complex method called the lost wax process.

The Benin lost wax process permits only one example to be cast from each mould so every Ikegobo is a unique sculpture. This traditional method of bronze casting is still very much active in Benin today.



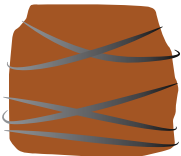
1. A basic clay mould is made.



2. Beeswax is placed over the basic clay mould. More details are added.



3. When finished another layer of clay is added.



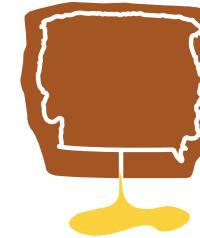
4. It is left to dry and tied up with wire.



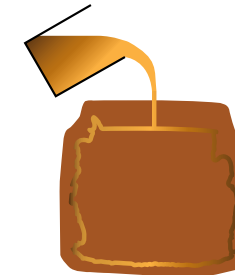
5. Another layer of clay is added.



5. It is heated over a fire to melt the wax.



6. The wax is poured out.



7. Molten metal is poured in.

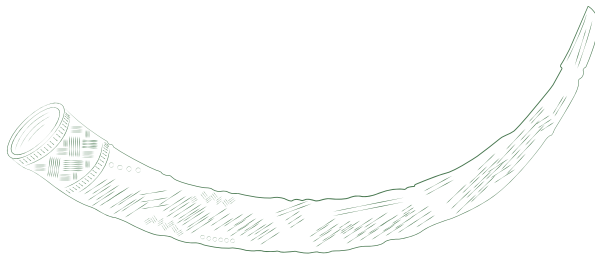


8. The clay is removed once the metal is set. The Ikegobo is then complete!

# HOW WAS THE IKEGOBO MADE?

Artists in Benin used lots of different materials to make art. Materials came from the local environment or were traded from other countries. They worked with **wood**, **clay**, **leather** and **fibres from plants** to make cloth. The most precious materials were **ivory**, **coral** and **brass**.

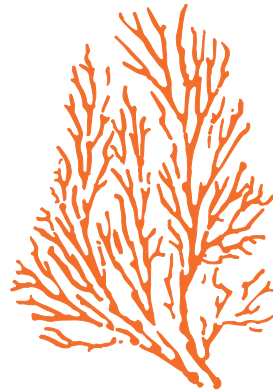
These materials had distinct meanings:



## IVORY

Ivory is a material originally from an elephant's tusk and in Benin culture was seen as a symbol of purity and strength.

Carved ivory tusks stood by the Oba's throne and ivory bracelets and pendants were worn by the Oba and important chiefs.

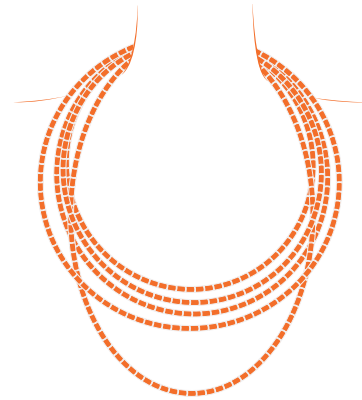


## CORAL

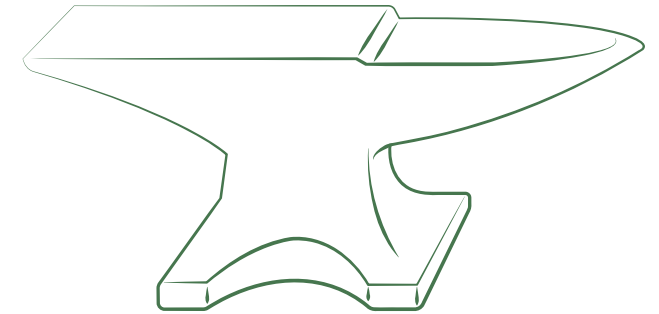
Coral is a marine animal, made up of thousands of tiny creatures called polyps. These are harvested to make coral stone

Coral was also thought to have magical powers. It was seen as a gift from Olokun, god of the sea.

Benin Chiefs were allowed to wear coral necklaces, bracelets and anklets, but only the Oba could dress completely in coral. His people believed that when he wore his coral suit all his curses would come true.



# Materials



## METALWORK

In West African and African Diaspora religions Ogun (who is also known as Oggún, Ogoun, Ogum, Gu, or Ogou) is the god of iron, metal, and metal work.

Brass artworks are sometimes referred to as bronzes. It was believed that brass had the power to drive away evil. It was so special that it could only be used in the royal court, in fact brass is naturally antibacterial.

The palace walls in Benin were covered with brass plaques showing stories about the history of the Benin Kingdom. Brass was also used to make figures and heads for the royal altars.

# BENIN'S TRADE WITH EUROPE

Benin has traded with Europe since the 1400s in materials like rubber, oil and ivory, becoming a wealthy nation. Benin traded peacefully with the Portuguese for hundreds of years. Access to trade, wealth and these new materials meant the quantity of the sculptures being made in Benin increased.

The Benin Kingdom prospered until the 1700s, when internal tensions between regions of the kingdom meant the centralised power of Benin City began to weaken.

## The British Empire and Benin

From around 1492 to 1945 Europe was actively expanding through colonisation, to gain wealth from natural resources across the world.

By the late 19th and early 20th century the British empire was one of the largest in history, covering roughly a quarter of the world's land surface and with territory on every continent.

The Benin Kingdom resisted **colonisation** for hundreds of years. Although British forces were met with fierce resistance, Benin became part of the British Empire in 1897.

The British sought the Benin Kingdom's valuable resources and the Oba's regulation of trade in the area.

The Ikegobo offers an insight into a shared history between Benin and Britain.



# LET'S DISCUSS

# Why is the Ikegobo in Birmingham?

This Ikegobo is now in Birmingham because of **invasion** and **looting** by the British army when Britain was expanding its Empire in the African continent. The British sought to control the trade of natural resources such as wood, gold and palm oil in the Benin Kingdom, which were all controlled by the Oba.

In 1897 Admiral Sir Harry Rawson and 1200 of his soldiers invaded Benin City. The British claimed that the attack was in response to a recent ambush of British soldiers by Benin guards. However, there is evidence that this invasion had been planned for over a year. Many people died in the attack that is sometimes called the **'punitive expedition'** or **'the sacking of Benin'**.

British troops captured Benin City and looted at least 3000 artworks, many of which were later sold in London to cover the cost of the military invasion, some even kept as souvenirs.

These artworks found their way into private and public collections across Europe and the U.S.A., with about 40% of them going to the the British Museum.

**1896** British Consul General Ralph Moor, writes to the British Home office;

*"In Benin and Warri districts ...I consider that if the efforts now being made continue unsuccessful until next dry season, an expeditionary force should be sent about January or February to remove the King."*

**1897** Henry Galway, the first vice-consul to the Benin River area, attempted to meet with the Oba. The Oba said he was too busy. Four British soldiers forced through the guards and were killed.

**1897** In retaliation, the British launched a full-scale military war effort in Benin.

Although there was strong resistance by the Oba and Chiefs, the British burnt the city to the ground. Many Edo people died, their precious treasures and sculptures were looted and the Oba was exiled to nearby Calibar. Benin became part of the British Empire.



**1897** The Ikegobo, now at the Barber, was among the objects and sculptures looted by the British. It is known that George William Neville was in Benin during that time.

**1930** The Ikegobo was purchased by William Randolph Hearst, an American newspaper magnate, at the sale of George William Neville's collection in London.

**1948** The Ikegobo was purchased from the art dealers Spink & Son in 1948 for display at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts.

**1960** Benin remained a part of the British Empire until 1960. Since independence, the Nigerian government has asked for the looted artworks to be returned. This is called repatriation.

## LOOK AT THIS PHOTOGRAPH



Who do you think these men are?

Can you describe their body language and facial expressions?

How would you describe their mood in the photograph?

What can you see around them?

Where do you think these objects came from? Why?

This photo was taken at the invasion of Benin by the British Army in 1897.

# WHAT IS REPATRIATION?

The term repatriation comes from the Latin word *repatriare*, 'return to one's own country'.

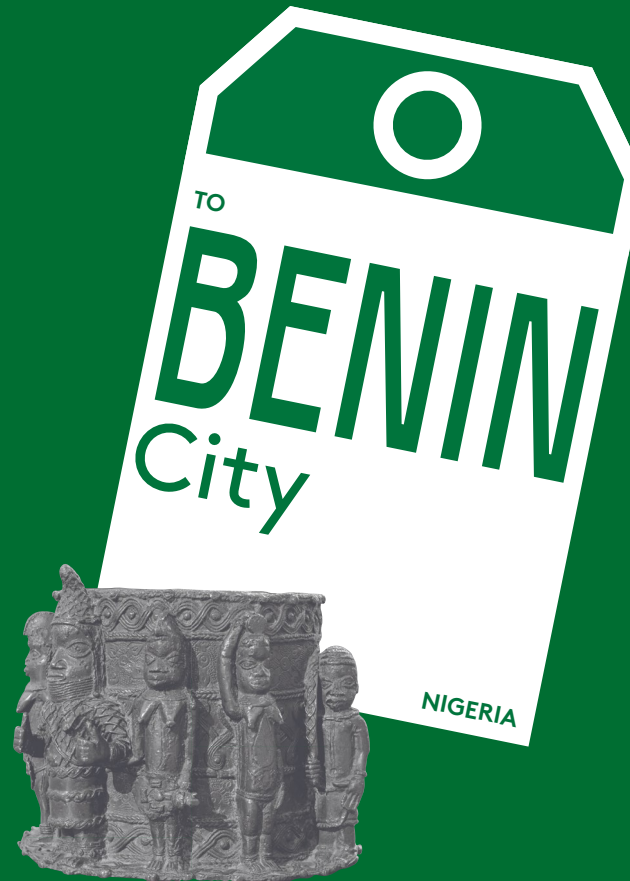
**It means: to send back or restore to the country of origin or citizenship.** This could refer to **people or objects**, a political refugee, prisoner of war or in this case, an artefact.

**Repatriation** sits within the wider conversation of **restitution**, which refers to all efforts made to acknowledge and address the legacy and continuing impacts of past injustices, including the cultural deprivations of colonialism.

In the museum context, this is usually understood to mean repatriation, the return of a cultural asset to its former owner or present-day claimants, but it could also include actions to empower affected countries and communities, including compensation and fairer access to global cultural resources.

Because of this, repatriation can be seen as positive or negative, depending on the circumstance in which the object or person is being returned.

The return of an Ikegobo from Britain to Benin City would be an example of repatriation however these sculptures often known as the 'Benin bronzes' are just one example of an artwork within the repatriation conversation.



## Discuss:

If an artwork is on display in a gallery or museum away from their original country, should they be repatriated?

Does this change if they were taken by force?

Why are cultural and historical artefacts important to a nation or community?

What do you think the benefits of returning the Benin bronzes to Nigeria might be?

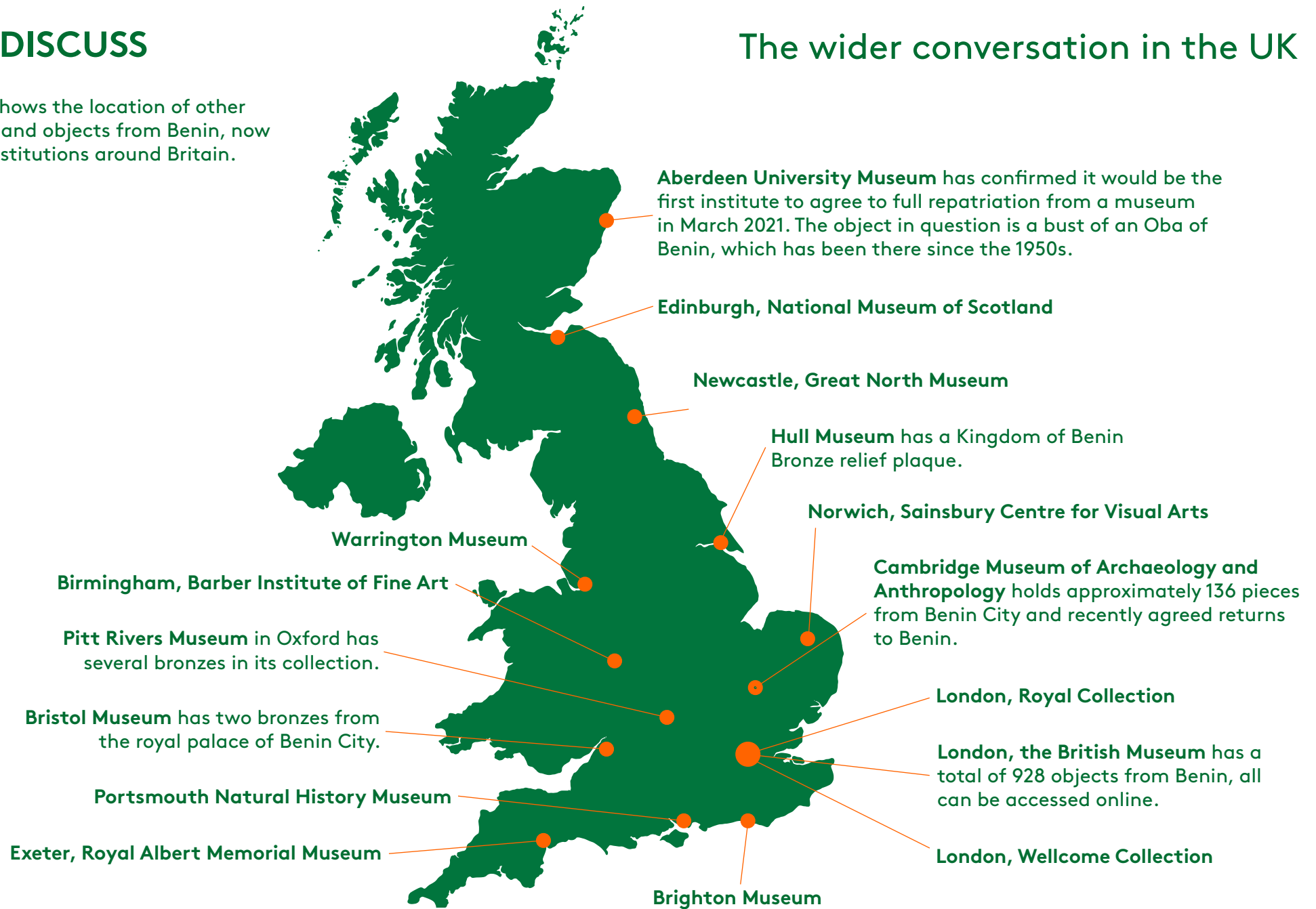
Do any Benin bronzes have a role to play in Western museums? If so, what role and why?



# LET'S DISCUSS

This map shows the location of other sculptures and objects from Benin, now found in institutions around Britain.

# The wider conversation in the UK



# AN ARTIST'S RESPONSE

## Vivian Chinesa Ezugha

We asked contemporary artist **Vivian Chinesa Ezugha** to respond to the Ikegobo's history and place in Birmingham today with her own digital artwork and poetry.

She is a Nigerian-born artist, who grew up in Birmingham and now lives and works in Hampshire.

Ezugha's work has been presented in venues across Europe, America and the UK. Her work looks at the changing identity of Black women from colonised subjects to emancipated figures.

Vivian works mostly in performance, exploring ways to reconstruct what it means to be alive in this present time and protest for a world where dreams are equal.

**Watch and Listen to Vivian Chinasa Ezugha's artwork.**



# AN ARTIST'S RESPONSE

## Vivian Chinesea Ezugha



Ikegobo Ikegobo

Gabo dabo

Dobo kabo

I am the beauty of all beauties

Crowned with honour

I sit in my kingdom

Marvellous and majestic

The crown of my people

But where am I

Looted and destabilized

I am looking for my way back

Rivers of life, rivers that flow

My title and my honour

Where art thou

My children, my children

I am lost

Looted and booted

They took my honour

They took my crown

See, see, seeeee

See my beauty

I am the vision of history

The marvel of all eyes

My head, the window to preposity

My head the crown of a nation

I am iconic

I am organic

I am nature and power

Higher than all men

Stronger than a thousand ship

I am the chosen one

Formed before my entry into the world

I was made to reign

# AN ARTIST'S RESPONSE

## Vivian Chinesa Ezugha

Consider the sculpture's meaning now that you know about the history of the Ikegobo. Discuss Ezugha's artistic response using the prompts.



What does the poem describe?  
What does it provoke in you?

What three words would you use  
to describe the sculpture?

Thinking about the Ikegobo,  
how does it make you feel?

Look at the sculpture and consider what  
**your own** Ikegobo would look like?

# AN ARTIST'S RESPONSE

Vivian Chinesa Ezugha



## lyoba

We know about Idia, the first lyoba, but we don't know who the lyoba shown in the Barber's Ikegobo was. Imagine her achievements and write a short story...



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# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

## DIGITAL BENIN



# The Edo Museum of West African Art

The Oba made the first request for the return of Royal artworks to Benin in 1935. Many people today feel that museums across Europe and the USA should permanently return artworks that were stolen during the invasion in 1897.

Plans to open The Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA), founded by The Legacy Restoration Trust in Lagos, are underway with designs in progress by the award winning architect Sir David Adjaye.

Sir Adjaye and the Trust are working with archaeologists to uncover the lost boundaries of historic remains of Benin City that were lost in the attack of 1897 as the site for the new Museum, connecting past and present Edo culture art and design.

In 2020 the Barber joined an online project called Digital Benin that lists all the Benin artworks across the world. The groups aim is to gather as much information as possible, making this accessible to others, whether in Nigeria or elsewhere, including the Nigerian diaspora for educational and cultural understanding.

These images show architectural visualisations of the new EMOWAA. Adjaye Associates describe the new site as 'A new dedicated space, EMOWAA will contain the rich, regal and sacred objects of Benin's past, in a way that allows visitors not just the possibility of "looking in" but "looking out" into the visual landscape of imagining the once historic borders of a restored ancient kingdom.'

# FURTHER RESOURCES

## **BENIN EMPIRE**

[BBC Bitesize, KS2 History: The Kingdom of Benin](#)

[MET Museum: Queen Mother Pendent Mask](#)

## **SLAVERY AND THE BENIN KINGDOM**

[The International Slavery Museum Teachers Pack](#)

## **RETURN OF ARTWORKS TO BENIN**

[New York Post Article](#)

[Sir David Adjaye Architects](#)

## **THE BRITISH EMPIRE**

[BBC Bitesize – The British Empire](#)

[Oxford Reference Timeline of The British Empire](#)

[Sight of Wonder, Victorians in Egypt](#)

[Colonial Countryside](#)

## **ARTWORK AND MATERIAL PROCESS**

[Bronze casting in Benin](#)

[BBC Africa, Benin Bronze Article](#)

[Digital Benin](#)

[BBC- Benin Bronze Casting Today](#)

## **ARTICLES & READING**

[Good intentions are not enough: Decolonizing intercultural education, Paul C. Gorski, 2008](#)

Developing intercultural understanding and skills: models and approaches, Laura B. Perry and Leonie Southwell, 2011

The British Museum, Dan Hicks, 2020

Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes, Barnaby Phillips, 2021

# COLLABORATORS



## VIVIAN CHINESA EZUGHA

Contemporary Artist Vivian Chinese Ezugha.

Ezugha's work has been presented in venues across Europe, America and the UK. She is a Nigerian-born artist, who grew up in Birmingham and now lives and works in Hampshire.

Her work looks at the changing identity of Black women from colonised subjects to emancipated figures. Vivian works mostly in performance, exploring ways to reconstruct what it means to be alive in this present time and protest for a world where dreams are equal.



## ADWOA OWUSU-BARNIEH

Adwoa Owusu-Barnieh is a writer, poet, and researcher. Having studied an undergraduate degree in Classical Literature and Civilisations at the University of Birmingham, Adwoa became aware of the processes by which certain European narratives are allowed to become canon and taken as fact.

Unnerved by the prevalence of histories told from the perspective of those with victory in conquest, much of Adwoa's work is rooted in truth-telling and facilitating space for different perspectives to take centre stage.



## DZIFA BENSON

Dzifa Benson is a multi-disciplinary live artist who uses literature as her primary mode of expression. She explores this through poetry, storytelling, theatre, performance, libretti, essay, journalism and a range of other media.

She also embraces education, collaboration and participation at the heart of her practice.

Dzifa worked with the the Barber's Learning & Engagement team as a consultant for this resource.



# BARBER SCHOOLS

Thank you taking the time to engage with this resource and the Barber's collection. This resource was created by the Barber's Learning & Engagement team with the support and guidance of our collaborators. We'd love to hear what you thoughts or to how you responded.

This activity was generously supported by Paul Hamlyn Foundation through a programme organised by Engage, the National Association for Gallery Education.

If you'd like to share feedback with us or have any enquiries please get in touch:

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barber institute



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