Benin Bronze Royal Leopard



Standing figure of a royal leopard

"*Among bronze animal depictions in Benin art the leopard appears most frequently. As "king of the forest" his reputation is as great as that of the Oba, or king. Killing a leopard was a privilege of the Oba, who had his own association of leopard hunters equipped with "special powers" which enabled them to kill these animals without losing their own lives*"

The ancient Kingdom of Benin lies in the tropical rain forest of West Africa, in what is present day Nigeria, and has one of the continent’s most glorious artistic legacies. In some respects, the history of Benin resembles that of China, for it is replete with dynasties of Obas (kings) who patronized artistic creation in support of their courts.



Seated Figure of a Royal Leopard · Benin People · Republic of Benin, West Africa · 20th c. · Copper · 4.5 W x 8 D x 9.25 H inches

Item #A1200-791

The most renowned examples of Benin art are the extraordinary cast sculptures of brass. Brass has a long tradition in West Africa, being used from Mali to the coast of Guinea and from Liberia to the Lower Congo, and more than 1,000 years ago it began to be used extensively to produce “court art.”

Brasscasters held a unique position among the artisans of Benin. They were a royal guild and a sort of title of nobility was granted to artisans who distinguished themselves through their work. Nevertheless, pieces were often collaborative and even today there is no way to determine whether a piece is the creation of a single master or several workers.



Above: An excellent example of a standing figure of a royal leopard. · Part of a pair, complimentary to Item #A1100-075



Standing Figure of a Royal Leopard (detail) · Benin People · Republic of Benin, West Africa · 20th c. · Bronze Alloy · 42 W x 7.75 D x 30.5 H inches
Item #A1100-074

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Standing Figure of a Royal Leopard · Benin People · Republic of Benin, West Africa · 20th c. · Bronze Alloy · 32 W x 9 D x 28 H inches
Item #A0800-631

Animals tamed by hunters accompanied the Oba during his annual procession through Benin City and played an important role in Benin military life. Leopard hides and teeth were conferred upon the Oba's military commanders to offer protection in battle and to confirm the recipients "right to take life." The leopard symbolized the Oba's authority, the loyalty of his subjects, and high status. How the leopard came to be a royal symbol, however, is a matter of opinion. In one famous myth, the leopard is heralded for the balance between his strength and his reserve and moderation as a leader. The leopard symbolizes the complete harmony between two compelling forces – the menacing and the moderating – that, in Benin, it is believed every ideal Oba should possess.



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