



## The arts past and present: the Benin Bronzes

*Ethnographic artefacts or works of art?*

### **Paul Wood:**

In the early 20th century with the European modern movement in art, the avant-garde, you've started to get the beginnings of a new relationship to the material culture of the rest of the world, whereas scientists and museum people in the 19th century had seen materials such as African masques or Polynesian carved huts, and things like that, they'd seen them as ethnographic artefacts, the avant-garde, people like Picasso, Matisse, Vlaminck, Derain and others, Gauguin even, they see them not as ethnographic artefacts but as art, and you get the category invented of so-called primitive art. But the story doesn't end there because you start to get this kind of work displayed in museums and departments as primitive art but, of course, one of the things that 20th century history brings home is that that whole ideology of the primitive starts to get blown away itself by the history of the 20th century with the independence movements of African countries and elsewhere, so you can't maintain this fiction of a kind of primitive unchanging culture when you've got the birth of nation states in a modern world. You have a kind of contradictory and uneven modernity, not modernity as something that happens in the west and this unchanging primitive state of nature somewhere else, so that challenges again a set of ideas about what kind of things these things are, and the thing that was a real eye opener to me, in a sense, was a process a little bit like a spiral has sort of taken place, that you've had this shift from seeing things as ethnographic artefacts through to seeing them as works of art, well now there's a kind of questioning about the whole notion of art and the extent to which it is itself a western notion, so the things start getting re-read again, very much still as works of art, but not works of art to be looked at as things in their own right just simply for themselves, like a kind of art for art's sake attitude, but to read them again as a kind of gateway into knowing about culture.

The Benin Bronzes fit the agenda of cultural diversity for various reasons. One of the most important, I think, is that they have this kind of evolving history, a history which is several hundred years old now. The first contact with that culture was a very, very long time ago indeed. The Portuguese went down the West African coast in the late 1480's, and so you've had intermittent contact, but it's not really until this cataclysmic event at the end of the 19th century that people in the west, in Europe, really come to grasp the full scale of the achievement of this earlier culture. That's when the British, as part of their expansion into Africa in the 1880's and 1890's collide basically with the Benin Empire and, not to put too fine a point on it, destroy it. And the story which captivates people, and which lies behind so much of the contemporary debate about the Bronzes, is that the British stole them, and they didn't even take them as works of art, they took them to pay for the expedition and to pay for the care of soldiers who'd been sort of wounded in the action, so they were pure and simple war booty.

There was, fortuitously, a major exhibition of Benin art travelling around Europe and also going to the States. It was shown in Berlin, Vienna, Paris and Chicago, so we leapt at the chance of going to film one of these displays, and because I had started to get very interested in the whole range of issues surrounding this thing I personally went to the other exhibitions as well, and began to get an insight into how the meanings of the works, of the sculptures, was framed by the way they were displayed, and these displays changed quite radically from Vienna to Paris, and so on.

So what happened with these different displays was that you had sort of different inflections, if you like, different meanings were put into circulation by the way the works were shown and this was particularly dramatic, I think, in the way they were shown in Vienna and Paris. In Vienna you had something like a kind of updated ethnographic display where there was a facsimile of the Royal Palace and a facsimile of an altar, and although most of the objects

were shown in glass cases in a fairly conventional way, there was this attempt to situate them in some sense of a kind of context that they were produced in. When you went to Paris you got a completely different form of display. You had no contextualisation to speak of, you had individual sculptures and individual plaques, which is one of the main forms that Benin art took, two-dimensional relief plaques, were shown essentially like paintings, like works of fine art, each lit in its own alcove with a spotlight, and so forth, so that you had this aesthetic reading, if you like of them rather than a kind of quasi scientific or sort of cultural one, and that's quite important and it's quite a dramatic difference.

I think the point of it is to make people reflect. When we are talking about different modes of display in a museum what's at stake there is the meanings of the things that they're looking at. The museum's a kind of frame, if you like, is the context, and meaning is, in large part, context-dependent. The sense you can make of something is in large part to do with the terms on which you encounter it, and in the case of something like a museum display the terms on which you encounter it are framed by the curators and so forth, how you position the objects relative to each other, how you light them, the kind of stories you tell on the labels, all these sorts of things go up to make the experience of somebody who encounters them, and therefore what they think it is that they're looking at.

When I think about what I want students to get out of this material, when I've taught on the Art History Department's summer school, for example, I take students to the British Museum, and I take them to see the display of Benin Bronzes there. When you walk into a room which has got bronze cast sculptures of a kind that are familiar, let's say from the Italian Renaissance, it's a big surprise to people, and it's not just that this material dates from the sort of 1500's and the 1600's, there are examples from places like Ife, which is quite near Benin in West Africa, going back to the 1200's. So the idea that you had a sophisticated, urbanised culture, with social stratification, with different groups in the society with guilds of artists making things in ivory, as well as in cast metal, this is a big surprise to people and it opens their eyes. It puts on the agenda what the relationship of our culture is to other cultures in the world, both in the past and in the present.