

West African Art

Art & Design

Court sculpture, casting and symbols, and how Europe misread them.

Sculpture, metal casting, textile and graphic systems developed across West Africa over more than two thousand years, with named workshops, court patronage and technical standards of their own.

NOK

from about 500 BCE

IFE CASTING

12th to 15th century

- Nok terracotta, Nigeria, from about 500 BCE.
- Ife heads, 12th to 15th century, cast in brass.
- Benin plaques, lost wax, from the 13th century.
- Adinkra: an Akan symbol system with fixed meanings.
- Kente: strip-woven cloth, patterns with names.
- Bogolanfini: Malian mud cloth, dyed by hand.

LOOK FOR IT

Ife heads were cast so finely that European scholars long refused to credit local authorship.

Thousands of Benin objects were looted in the punitive expedition of 1897. Restitution to Nigeria is active and ongoing.