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Comprehensive Catalogue of 9th-Century Artifacts from Igbo-Ukwu

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Thurstan Shaw

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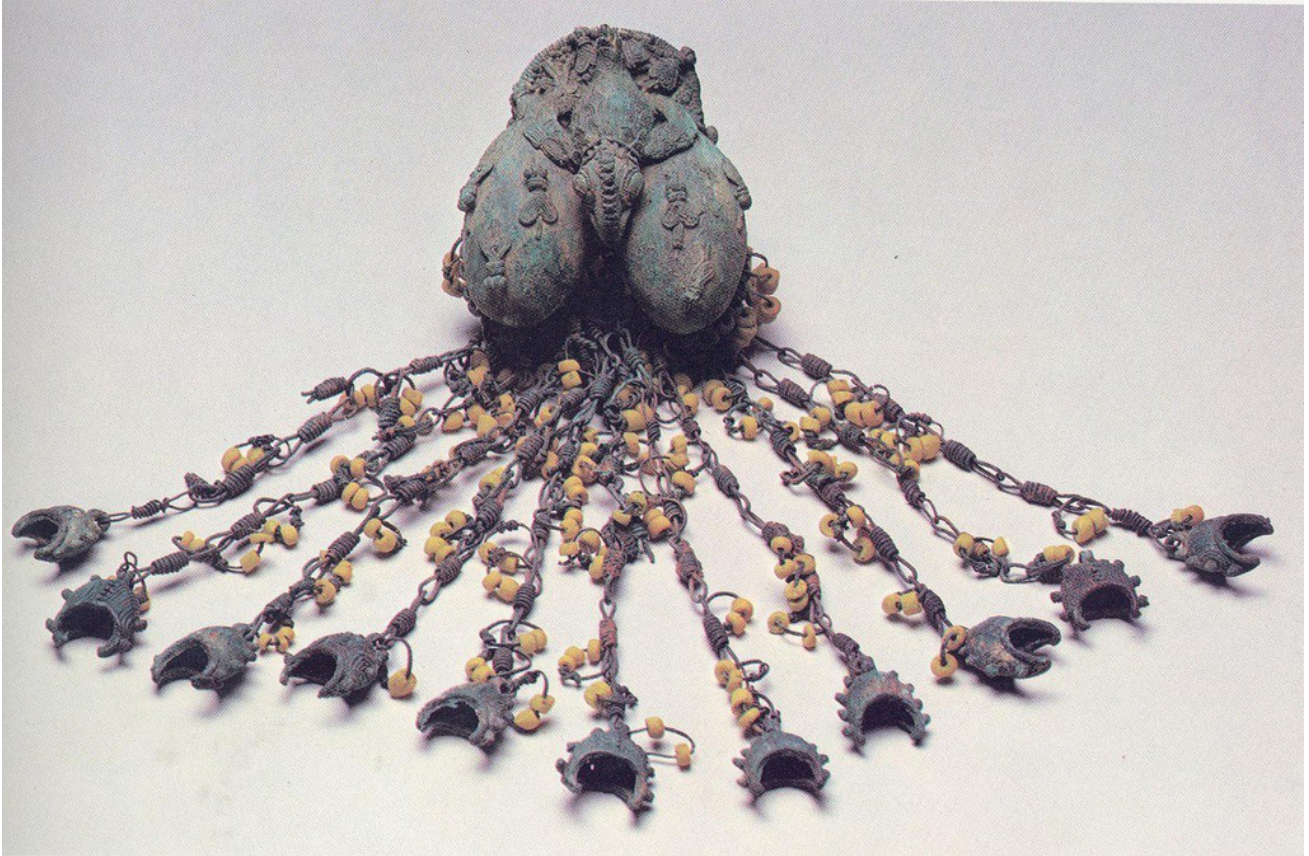
In the 9th century, artists in a kingdom on the edge of the West African rainforest created some of the most advanced works of art ever seen. Working in bronze, copper, and terracotta, they produced stunning pieces that would eventually be buried with their priest-king in an elaborately decorated tomb.

This amazing art collection was discovered by chance during construction work in the early 20th century. The artworks seemingly came out of the blue in the annals of history, with no preceding examples to shed light on the origins of this tradition. Still, they undoubtedly represent the high point of a wealthy and fully realized artistic heritage.

This article describes these findings in detail, discussing their history, cultural significance, artistic methods, and lasting effects.

A Brief Description of the Excavations at Igbo Ukwu and the Casting Process

In the 1930s and 1960s, excavations at Igbo Ukwu uncovered more than 700 pieces of artworks, the majority of which were in bronze, copper, and copper alloys. They also found terracotta pieces and over 165,000 glass and carnelian beads. These were carefully buried with the remains of at least six individuals at three sites named after the landowners: Igbo-Richard, Igbo-Isaiah, and Igbo-Jonah. The artifacts date from between 850-875 AD.



Double egg pendant, leaded bronze, 9th-10th century, unearthed in Igbo Ukwu, Anambra. Photo: Caravans Library

Igbo-Isaiah was likely a temple called Obu that fell apart over time, leaving only four holes from its roof. Igbo-Richard had a burial chamber lined with wooden planks and mats, thought to be the grave of an Eze-Nri, a ruler. Igbo-Jonah was a pit where people buried ritual and ceremonial objects after a shrine was destroyed.



Shell Vessel with Leopard from Igbo-Ukwu. Photo: S mart History

Most of the 700 objects were cast using a method known as lost wax casting for bronze items and hammering and carving for copper items. The source of the copper and lead is from Abakaliki, about 100 km away from the location, and tin for bronze came from mines near either Igbo Ukwu or the Jos Plateau.



Bronze pot, Igbo-Ukwu By Ochiwar

The lost wax process involved shaping an object in wax or latex from the Euphorbia plant and then covering it with clay. The clay was later heated to shape a mold, which was then filled with molten bronze. The clay was then extracted. At Igbo Ukwu, this method was developed further by casting objects in pieces and later assembling them together. This technique was not practiced anywhere else in the world, which indicates that it was invented solely by Igbo Ukwu artists.

A Closer Look the Igbo-Ukwu Bronzes A bronze pendant depicting a human head wearing a crown, along with a bronze altar stand featuring a female figure with facial markings. The stand is adorned with motifs of snakes swallowing frogs and stylized spider designs. Originating from the 9th century, NCMM, Nigeria.

The Igbo-Ukwu bronzes are known for their detailed designs, particularly human figures with distinctive facial scarifications. These marks, known as ichi, radiate in all directions from the bridge of the nose. In Igboland, ichi was a custom mostly practiced by men and

performed during a special ceremony when boys became eligible for titles around 11. Women did not usually have these marks except for daughters of the Eze Nri, the priest-king.



Human and Ram's head pendants from Igbo-Ukwu in the British Museum. By Jononmac46

Similar depictions of facial scarifications also appear on cylindrical “altar stands” made of solid bronze panels decorated with patterns of hatched lozenges and triangles with stylized figures of spiders. Between the panels are walls of open work with figures of a man and woman, with face and body scarifications and wearing body ornaments.

The ichi marks are intertwined with the legend of the first Eze Nri, reputed to have introduced farming to Igboland. Their presence on numerous bronze figures signifies a profound connection between the buried figures and the rich cultural traditions of the Nri people.

Everyday Objects Turned Into Art

The Igbo-Ukwu artists often employed a technique called skeuomorphism, whereby one material was made to look like another. This style was applied to objects created to portray aspects of everyday life and symbols of power but in durable materials.

- A bronze vessel in the shape of a clay water pot, complete with designs resembling the rope net used to carry it.
- Bronze calabashes and gourds that resemble the real ones but are decorated with detailed designs and handles almost like those of the real calabashes.



Igbo-Ukwu high priest / Springer

Several objects from Igbo-Ukwu were created to portray political and religious power. A case in point is the decorated staff (alo) that the leaders used. The designs of these staff are detailed, like:

- Beetles, mudfish, or monkey heads
- Snakes holding eggs in their mouths

- Birds carrying grasshoppers or locusts
- Bronze bells in three different styles.
- Large copper fan-holders with semi-circular plates are decorated with small holes and patterns for holding feathers.

In Igboland, leaders still use staff like these. They are symbols of rank and give leaders special protection, similar to “diplomatic immunity.”

The incorporation of animals such as grasshoppers, locusts, and beetles into the designs reflects the cultural beliefs surrounding the Eze Nri. It was widely believed that the Eze Nri could harness natural forces, including these creatures, to aid his people. This formidable power was thought to guarantee bountiful harvests and prosperity for the community.



Bronze ceremonial vessel in the form of a snail shell, 9th century, Igbo-Ukwu – By Ochiwar

But the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes are more than just beautiful works of art; they also unveil the spiritual, cultural, and political complexities of the Nri-Igbo people of a bygone era.



The Discovery of Igbo-Ukwu Artefacts

These artefacts were accidentally discovered in 1938 by a villager, Isaiah Anozie, digging a well. Archaeologists later examined the site, and in the 1950s and 1960s, the British archaeologist Thurstan Shaw conducted a series of meticulous excavations. Three major sites were found:

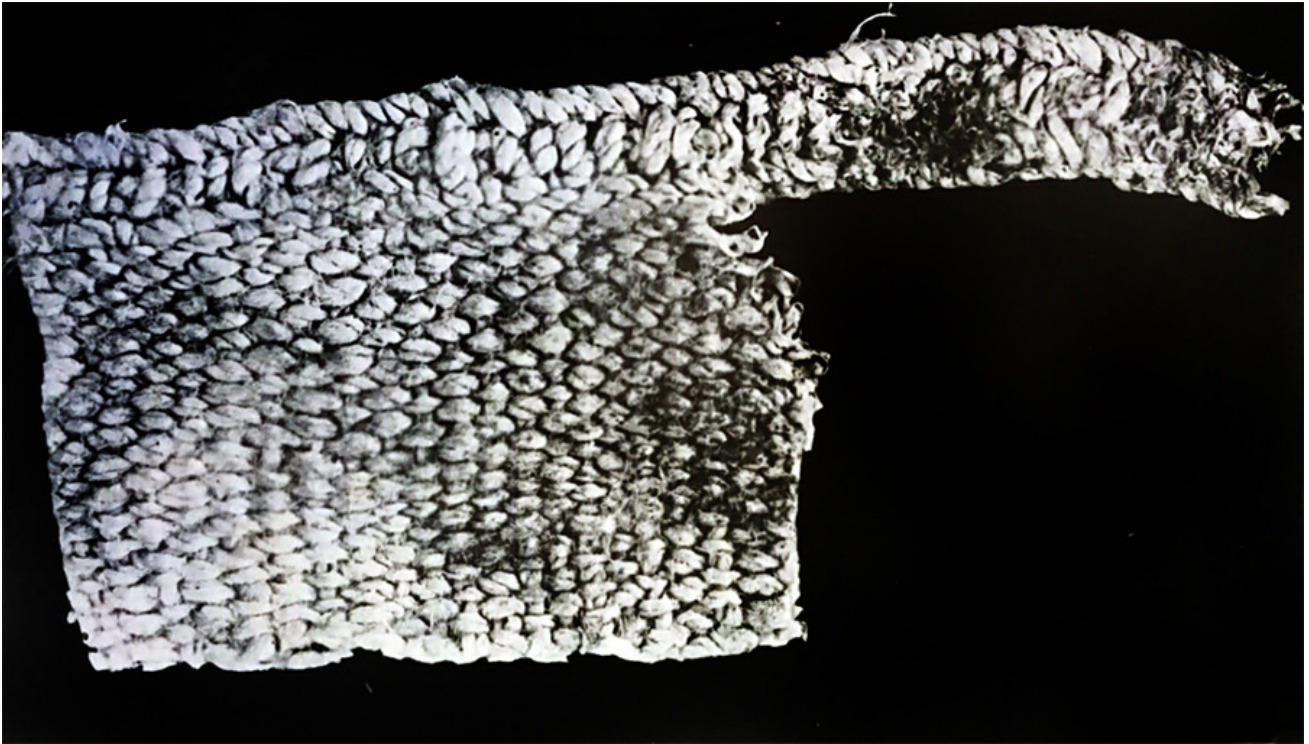
- A burial site with a high-status individual, probably a king or priest.
- A shrine with ritual objects.
- A storage area with many precious objects.

These artefacts date back to the 9th century CE and are some of the earliest examples of skilled metalwork in sub-Saharan Africa.

What is so Special about the Igbo-Ukwu Artefacts?

The Igbo-Ukwu people were masters of the lost-wax casting technique. They made complex shapes with wax, coated these with clay, and then fired them to make moulds into which metal could be poured. The detail they achieved is stunning, even by today's standards.

They used metals such as bronze, copper, and leaded bronze. They also included special decorations, like geometric patterns, spirals, and symbols for plants and animals. These items show a strong knowledge of materials and a commitment to good craftsmanship.



Igbo-ukwu textile associated with copper chain with weave pattern and selvedge

Many bronze pots and bowls were found, nicely decorated with patterns and symbols. These were used during religious ceremonies for offerings or drinks.

Glass and stone beads found at the site show that Igbo-Ukwu was part of a big trade network. These beads probably came from faraway places like the Mediterranean or India, showing the area's involvement in international trade.



Glass beads from Igbo-Ukwu by Rubens Anu



Igbo Ukwu pendant By Ukabia

Things like staffs, swords, and regalia were found. These items were used by leaders and priests, showing that the society had a clear social hierarchy.

Some bronze items, such as small tools and pendants, were also found. They were used for both practical purposes and decoration.



Igbo Ukwu vessel By Ukabia



Crescent-shaped bronze bowl, resembling pinched calabash, 9th century, found in Igbo-Ukwu, Anambra State, Nigeria. Located in the National Museum, Onikan, Lagos, Nigeria. By Ochiwar



9th-century bronze staff head in the form of a coiled snake found in Igbo-Ukwu, Anambra State, Nigeria. Located in the National Museum Onikan, Lagos, Nigeria.



Photograph of a 9th-century bronze staff head excavated in Igbo-Ukwu, Anambra State Nigeria. Presently located in the National Museum, Onikan, Lagos, Nigeria



Igbo Ukwu bronzes in the British Museum By Ukabia Modestusonyeke

Cultural and Religious Significance

The artefacts show that religion and rituals were very important to the people of Igbo-Ukwu. Many objects are believed to have spiritual meanings, like the symbols of animals, plants, and abstract patterns. This shows the beliefs and values of the Igbo people at that time.

The burial site indicates that it was a structured society with powerful leaders since the high-status individual was buried with many valuable items.



Igbo-Ukwu vessel in the form of a shell, 9th-10th century. Leaded bronze. National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria.

One of the most interesting things about Igbo-Ukwu has to do with its connection to the wider world. The presence of foreign beads and materials at Igbo-Ukwu indicated that it was a center of trade. Traders likely came from as far away as North Africa and the Middle East to Igbo-Ukwu, or at least traded with its people. This exchange of goods and ideas altered their art and technology.

Today, the Igbo-Ukwu artefacts are preserved in some of the world's greatest museums, like the British Museum and the Nigerian National Museum, Lagos. They continue to influence artists, historians, and archaeologists. They have also played a vital role in changing old beliefs that denied the existence of technology and art in Africa before colonization. The artefacts prove that long before the influence of Europeans, African societies were creative, and their cultures were rich.

The Igbo-Ukwu artefacts are more than just old objects; they give us a



view into the lives, skills, and beliefs of the Igbo people from over 1,000 years ago. They reveal that this society was skilled in the arts, trade, and religion. These treasures are still a source of pride for Africa and the world, reminding us of the continent's rich history and contributions to global events.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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