

PALACE SCULPTURES OF

Abomey

History Told on Walls





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Los Angeles

Cover: Bas-relief from the palace of Guezo depicting an Amazon warrior carrying off a captured enemy.

Title page: Bas-relief from the zinkpoho, formerly known as the Hall of Thrones, depicting a Fon god (see page 75).

Contents page: Bas-relief from the palace of Guezo. According to legend, horsemen were invisible when they rode into battle standing on their heads.

Photographs by Susan Middleton, 1994.

The Getty Conservation Institute works internationally to further appreciation and preservation of the world's cultural heritage for the enrichment and use of present and future generations. The Institute is an operating program of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

This is the third volume in the Conservation and Cultural Heritage series, which aims to provide information in a popular format about selected culturally significant sites throughout the world.

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Editorial note: The separate texts written by the authors and contributors in their respective areas of expertise have been merged into a single manuscript.

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Printed by CS Graphics, Singapore
Separations by Professional Graphics, Rockford, Illinois

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

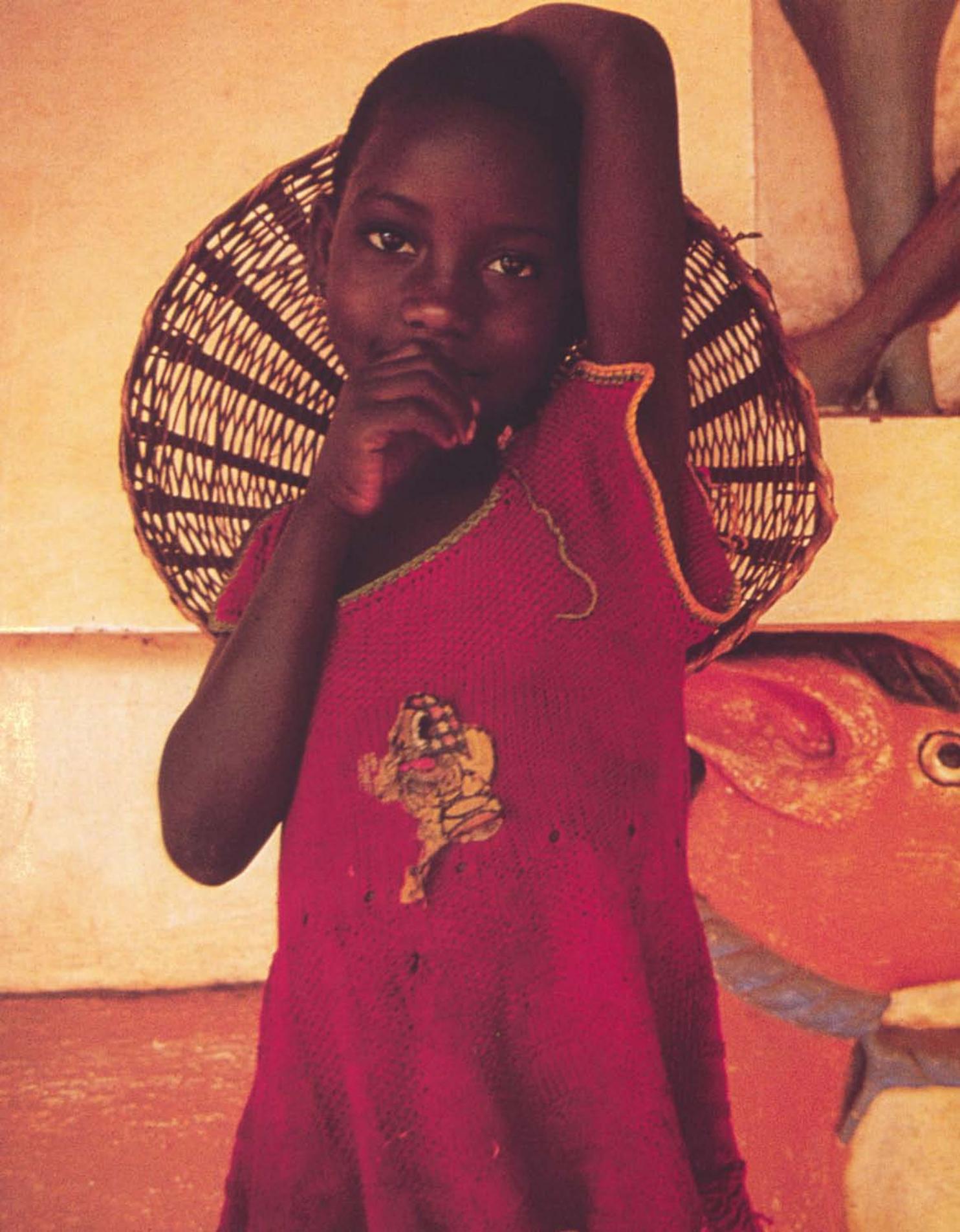
Piqué, Francesca, 1962—
Palace sculptures of Abomey : history told on walls / Francesca Piqué and Leslie H. Rainer ; with contributions by Jérôme C. Alladaye, Rachida de Souza-Ayari, [and] Suzanne Preston Blier.
p. cm. —(Conservation and cultural heritage)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-89236-569-2
1. Bas-relief—Benin—Abomey. 2. Palaces—Benin—Abomey.
3. Abomey (Benin)—History. I. Rainer, Leslie H., 1960— II. Title. III. Series.
NB1099.D32P57 1999
730'.96683—dc21

99-31042
CIP



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Introduction

The Republic of Benin, situated in West Africa between Togo and Nigeria, is home to more than forty ethnic groups, including the Yoruba, the Ewe, the Fulani, and the major ethnic group, the Fon. In the early seventeenth century, the Fon established a highly organized society ruled by a dynasty of kings who, over the years, expanded their territory, conquering neighboring states and forging the powerful kingdom of Dahomey. In their capital city of Abomey, they built a remarkable complex of earthen palaces that became the center of the kingdom's political, social, and religious life.

*A child in front of the
palace of King Guezo.*

*Photograph by
Pedro Pablo Celedón, 1994.*



These palaces were unique in West Africa. As in many African societies, Fon culture was essentially oral: stories, dance, music, and visual arts—rather than written language—were used to pass down its history from generation to generation. As part of this oral tradition, the walls of the kingdom’s palaces were decorated with colorful low-relief sculptures, or bas-reliefs—pictograms that recounted legends, commemorated historic battles, and generally glorified the Dahomey royal dynasty. Combining ritual colors, allegorical figures, and complex symbolism, the bas-reliefs constituted a kind of codified language through which the Dahomean kings spoke to their subjects. Over the centuries, these visual stories have both represented and perpetuated the history, myths, and legends—in short, the cultural memory—of the Fon people. “The bas-reliefs are our only remaining ‘written’ history,” asserts the prominent Beninois historian Nondichao Bachalou. “They are history told on our walls.”

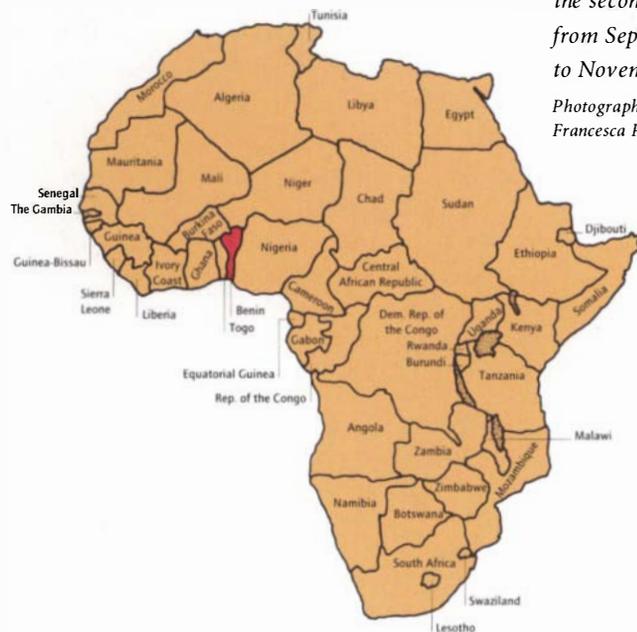
Enthronement ceremony of King Agoli-Agbo III in the palace compound, January 1994.

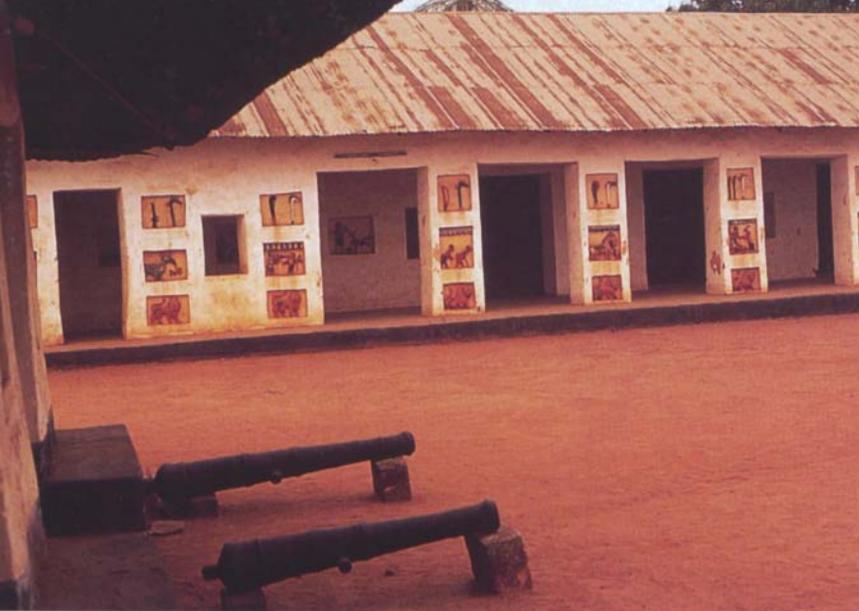
Photograph by Pedro Pablo Celedón.



Children playing in the rain. The great rainy season lasts from March to July; the second rains last from September to November.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1997.





The palace of King Glélé two years before it was rebuilt.

Photograph by Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.

A sacred baobab tree in front of the museum.

Photograph by Pedro Pablo Celedón, 1994.



By the late 1800s, the sprawling palace compound at Abomey contained a labyrinth of buildings representing ten generations of successive reigns. However, fires set in 1892, when French colonizers were poised to occupy the capital, damaged the palace complex. Many original structures were lost; while several palaces were partially renovated, the compound generally suffered from neglect, and it deteriorated further in the decades that followed. Earthen structures in a land drenched by two rainy seasons a year, the palaces also faced a constant threat from the elements. Nonetheless, throughout the tumultuous twentieth century, the surviving palaces and their bas-reliefs have endured as important landmarks, not only for the local community—particularly the traditional descendants of the Dahomey kings—but also for an international audience. Since 1945 the royal palaces have housed the Historic Museum

of Abomey, the first national museum established in West Africa.

In 1985 the entire palace compound was placed among the endangered sites on Unesco's World Heritage List. Three years later, one of the surviving buildings—part of the palace of the great nineteenth-century monarch King Glélé—had to be rebuilt because of structural damage; before it was demolished, its fifty-six bas-reliefs were cut out of the walls in an effort to save them from destruction. Fragile and vulnerable to further decay, these heavy panels were stored throughout the royal compound.

When a delegation from the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) assessing conservation needs in West Africa first visited Abomey in 1991, the bas-reliefs removed from King Glélé's palace facade—among the last of Abomey's original palace wall sculptures—were on the verge of being lost. During that visit, the delegation was impressed by the unique role that the Historic Museum of Abomey—indeed, the entire royal compound—plays in the cultural life of the Fon people in Benin today. These sacred places, in fact, continue to exert a powerful influence, just as they did for generations past, through three centuries of Fon dominance in the region. “These sites are not simply material places and buildings,” explains Rachida de Souza-Ayari, former director of Benin's Department of Cultural Heritage, “but places of living tradition.”

The bruised and battered bas-reliefs represented a unique visual repository of Fon history and culture that had to be saved. From 1993 to late 1997, the Republic of Benin's Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Getty Conservation Institute undertook an intensive collaborative effort to document the condition of the bas-reliefs, study the causes of their

deterioration, and conserve them. In addition, important components of the project involved conservation training for members of Benin's Department of Cultural Heritage, as well as a maintenance and monitoring program to ensure the bas-reliefs' long-term survival. During the project, the GCI's team of scientists and conservators concentrated on repairing the original reliefs, while the government of Benin reconstructed the palace building from which they had been removed. Local artists, meanwhile, were engaged to fashion replicas of the original bas-reliefs for the new building's facade. Within a decade of the GCI delegation's initial visit to the Abomey palace compound, the ravages of time, nature, and humankind had been in large part arrested, and a set of fifty authentic bas-reliefs rescued from further decay or destruction. They are now an integral part of the Historic Museum's exhibitions, allowing visitors the opportunity to encounter, face to face, their powerful imagery and the cultural heritage they represent.

The palace buildings, the bas-reliefs, and the museum's collection of other objects are important not simply for the past they evoke but also for the living tradition they help maintain. Today King Agoli-Agbo III is the steward of the Fon tradition. He and his royal entourage carry out age-old rituals and ceremonies at the palace compound. The venerable tradition of Abomey bas-relief art, meanwhile, lives on in the work of contemporary Beninois artists, whose works adorn public and private buildings throughout the country. While the manner of their making has evolved slightly, they are still essentially fashioned as they were in centuries past, with traditional methods steeped in the history and culture of the Fon people.

King Agoli-Agbo III. The silver nosepiece is a symbol of his royal descent. When Agoli-Agbo I was imprisoned by the French after the conquest of Dahomey in the 1890s, he was

given a nose guard by a servant who was mortified by the stench in his monarch's holding cell.

Photograph by Pedro Pablo Celedón, 1994.



