

Suggested Reading

Assogba, Romain-Philippe. *Le Musée d'Histoire de Ouidah: Découverte de la Côte des Esclaves*. Ouidah, Benin: Editions Saint Michel, 1994.

Beckwith, Carol, and Angela Fisher. "The African Roots of Voodoo." *National Geographic Magazine* 88 (August 1995): 102–13.

Blier, Suzanne Preston. *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

_____. "The Musée Historique in Abomey: Art, Politics, and the Creation of an African Museum." In *Arte in Africa 2*. Florence: Centro di Studi di Storia delle Arté Africane, 1991.

_____. "King Glele of Danhome: Divination Portraits of a Lion King and Man of Iron." *African Arts* 23, no. 4 (October 1990): 42–53, 93–94.

_____. "The Place Where Vodun Was Born." *Natural History Magazine* 104 (October 1995): 40–49.

Decalo, Samuel. *Historical Dictionary of Benin*. 3d ed. Lanham, Md., and London: Scarecrow Press, 1995.

Farwell, Byron. *Burton: A Biography of Sir Richard Francis Burton*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963.

Gilfond, Henry. *Voodoo: Its Origins and Practices*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1976.

Glélé, Maurice Ahanhanzo. *Le Danxome: Du pouvoir aja à la nation fon*. Paris: Nubia, 1974.

Haskins, Jim, and Joann Biondi. *From Afar to Zulu: A Dictionary of African Cultures*. New York: Walker and Co., 1995.

Herskovits, Melville J. *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*. Vol. 2. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967.

Koslow, Philip. *Dahomey: The Warrior Kings*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1997.

Moss, Joyce, and George Wilson. *Peoples of the World: Africans South of the Sahara*. Detroit and London: Gale Research, 1991.

Pliya, Jean. *Dahomey*. Issy-les-Moulineaux, France: Classiques Africains, 1975.

Ronen, Dov. *Dahomey: Between Tradition and Modernity*. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1975.

Waterlot, E. G. *Les bas-reliefs des Palais Royaux d'Abomey*. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1926.

In addition to the scholarly works listed above, interested readers may consult Archibald Dalzel's account of Dahomey in the late eighteenth century, *The History of Dahomy: An Inland Kingdom of Africa* (1793; reprint, London, Frank Cass and Co., 1967), and Sir Richard Burton's *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (1864; reprint, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); both offer historical European perspectives on the Dahomey kingdom. More recently, the kingdom's dramatic history has also been treated in several works of fiction. The Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé uses the story of King Behanzin's exile as a backdrop to the modern black experience in the Americas in *The Last of the African Kings* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). The English writer Bruce Chatwin's short historical novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), set in nineteenth-century Dahomey, is based on the life of a Portuguese adventurer who became an ally of the Dahomean monarchy. It was the basis for the film *Cobra Verde* by the German director Werner Herzog. There is also a 43-minute video, *History Told on Walls* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1997), that portrays the Abomey bas-reliefs and their conservation, as well as the living tradition of bas-relief art in Benin today.



Project Participants

The Getty Conservation Institute

Neville Agnew
Group Director, Information and Communications Former Director, Special Projects

Miguel Angel Corzo
Former Director

Giora Solar
Group Director, Conservation

Marta de la Torre
Group Director, Agora Former Director, Training Program

The Republic of Benin

Marius Francisco
Former Minister of Culture and Communication

Pierre Metinhoué
Former Minister of Culture and Communication

Denise Sossouhounto
Former Director, Department of Cultural Heritage

Rachida de Souza-Ayari
Former Director, Department of Cultural Heritage

Timothé Zannou
Minister of Culture and Communication

Conservation Team

Valerie Dorge
Michel Hébrard
Francesca Piqué
Leslie H. Rainer
Stephen Rickerby
Sophie Small

Trainees:

Léonard Ahonon
Justin Alaro
Dorotheé Ayadokoun
Mizéhoun
Janvier Houlonon
Gilbert Kinkin
Constant Noanti

Administration and Logistics

Mathias Labitan
Kathleen Louw
Constant Samson
Sara Tucker
Julián Zugazagoitia

Photography, Video, and Exhibit

Mahasti Afshar
Pedro Pablo Celedón
Pia Dominguez
Franck Houndégla
John Lewis
Susan Middleton
Duwayne Rude
Aurel Zeigler

Research

Joseph Adande
Jérôme Alladaye
Suzanne Preston Blier
Cynthia Godlewski
Sheri Saperstein

Dancer performing at a reception at the Motel Abomey.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

Acknowledgments

The four-year-long project to conserve the bas-reliefs of the Royal Palaces of Abomey, a collaboration between the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) and the Ministry of Culture and Communication of the Republic of Benin, grew out of a shared belief in the critical importance of the bas-reliefs as a visual record of Fon culture. An extension of that project, this book seeks to bring to a wider audience the remarkable story of the Abomey bas-reliefs and the kingdom whose history they recount.

The conservation project and this book would not have been possible without the dedicated work of many individuals and the support of a number of institutions. We gratefully acknowledge the services rendered by officials of the Ministry of Culture and Communication. The GCI would also like to thank the staff of the Department of Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Benin; we owe particular debts of gratitude to the Department's conservation trainees—Léonard Ahonon, Justin Alaro, and Dorothé Ayadokoun Mizéhoun—who became indispensable colleagues. The staff of the Historic Museum of Abomey provided valuable support as well.

In the first of their many contributions to the project, Joseph Adande, of the National University of Benin, and Suzanne Preston Blier, of Harvard University, initially brought the challenge of conserving the Abomey bas-reliefs to the attention of the GCI. Nondichao Bachalou, the official historian of the Royal Families of Abomey, shared his extensive knowledge of the history of the bas-reliefs and their importance in Benin today. Three wall paintings conservators—Michel Hébrard, Stephen Rickerby, and Sophie Small—provided technical expertise. Constant Samson coordinated logistics in Benin and offered advice on protocol. Susan Middleton provided superb photographic documentation. Claude Savary shared material collected during his work in Benin.

At the GCI, Neville Agnew supported the project from its inception, encouraging the work of GCI staffers in the field, while Giora Solar brought the project to successful completion. Valerie Dorge coordinated the training of the Beninois conservation technicians; Sheri Saperstein compiled the training material; and Kathleen Louw, Anna Zagorski, and Cynthia Godlewski handled support services. Kathleen Louw also organized the September 1997 conference on the conservation of the Abomey bas-reliefs, which served as a fitting finale not only to the GCI's project but also to the initiatives carried out concurrently by other international organizations.

In this regard, the GCI would like to thank its colleagues from ICCROM PREMA, CRATerre-EAG, the French Cooperation Agency, and Unesco for their work to preserve the Royal Palaces of Abomey and the collections of the Historic Museum of Abomey.

A number of institutions supplied historical information and visual material on the Dahomey kingdom. We would like to thank the Musée Albert-Kahn–Département des Hauts-de-Seine, France; the Musée de l'Homme, Paris; the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Pierre Verger Foundation, Bahia, Brazil; the Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles; and the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities (GRI), Los Angeles.

We thank the authors, Francesca Piqué, conservation specialist at the GCI, and Leslie H. Rainer, conservation consultant, for their dedication in managing the project to conserve the bas-reliefs and for their work on this book. Jérôme Alladaye, professor of history, National University of Benin; Rachida de Souza-Ayari, former director, Department of Cultural Heritage, Republic of Benin; and Suzanne Preston Blier, professor of African art history, Harvard University all made invaluable contributions to the text. Mark Greenberg offered wise counsel throughout. We also thank the GRI staff members who helped locate rare archival photographs, and the staff of Visual Resource Management and the Information Center at the GCI, who assisted with photo archiving and bibliographic research. Special thanks go to Vickie Karten for the attractive design of the book, and to Anita Keys for her work in developing the manuscript and coordinating its production. We extend our gratitude to the book's managing editor, Tevvy Ball, who refined the draft manuscript into a seamless whole, adding new text and illustrations to round out the narrative as he shepherded this volume through to completion. Finally, we are indebted to Neville Agnew, director of Information and Communications at the GCI, and Chris Hudson, director of publications at the J. Paul Getty Museum, for making this book a reality.

Timothy P. Whalen
Director
Getty Conservation Institute

*Back cover:
Reconstructed palace
of Glélé.*

*Photographs by
Susan Middleton, 1996.*



The Republic of Benin in West Africa is home to more than forty ethnic groups, the largest of which is the Fon. In the early seventeenth century, the Fon established a society ruled by a dynasty of kings, who over the years forged the powerful kingdom of Dahomey. In their capital city of Abomey, the rulers built a remarkable complex of palaces that became the center of the kingdom's political, social, and religious life. The palace walls were decorated with colorful low-relief sculptures, or bas-reliefs, which recount legends and battles and glorify the dynasty's reign. In a society with no written language, these visual stories have perpetuated the history and myths of the Fon people.

Palace Sculptures of Abomey combines color photographs of the bas-reliefs with a lively history of Dahomey, complemented by rare historical images. As well as providing a vivid portrait of these narrative sculptures, the book details the collaborative efforts of the Benin Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Getty Conservation Institute to conserve the reliefs; describes the Historic Museum of Abomey, now housed in the palace compound; and discusses the continuing popularity of bas-reliefs in contemporary Beninois art.

ISBN 0-89236-569-2

