Suggested Reading


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.
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Dancer performing at a reception at the Motel Abomey.
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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.

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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.