PALACE SCULPTURES OF Abomey

History Told on Walls

CONSERVATION and CULTURAL HERITAGE

PALACE SCULPTURES OF

Abomey

History Told on Walls

Francesca Piqué and Leslie H. Rainer

with contributions by
Jérôme C. Alladaye
Rachida de Souza-Ayari
Suzanne Preston Blier

The Getty Conservation Institute
and the J. Paul Getty Museum
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.

Tevvy Ball, *Managing Editor*
Anita Keys, *Production Coordinator*
Vickie Sawyer Karten, *Series and Book Designer*

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

© 1999 The J. Paul Getty Trust
All rights reserved
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

Contents

1 Introduction

7 The Kingdom of Dahomey

25 Warrior Kings

33 The Abomey Royal Palaces

47 Bas-Relief Art

57 Reading the Walls

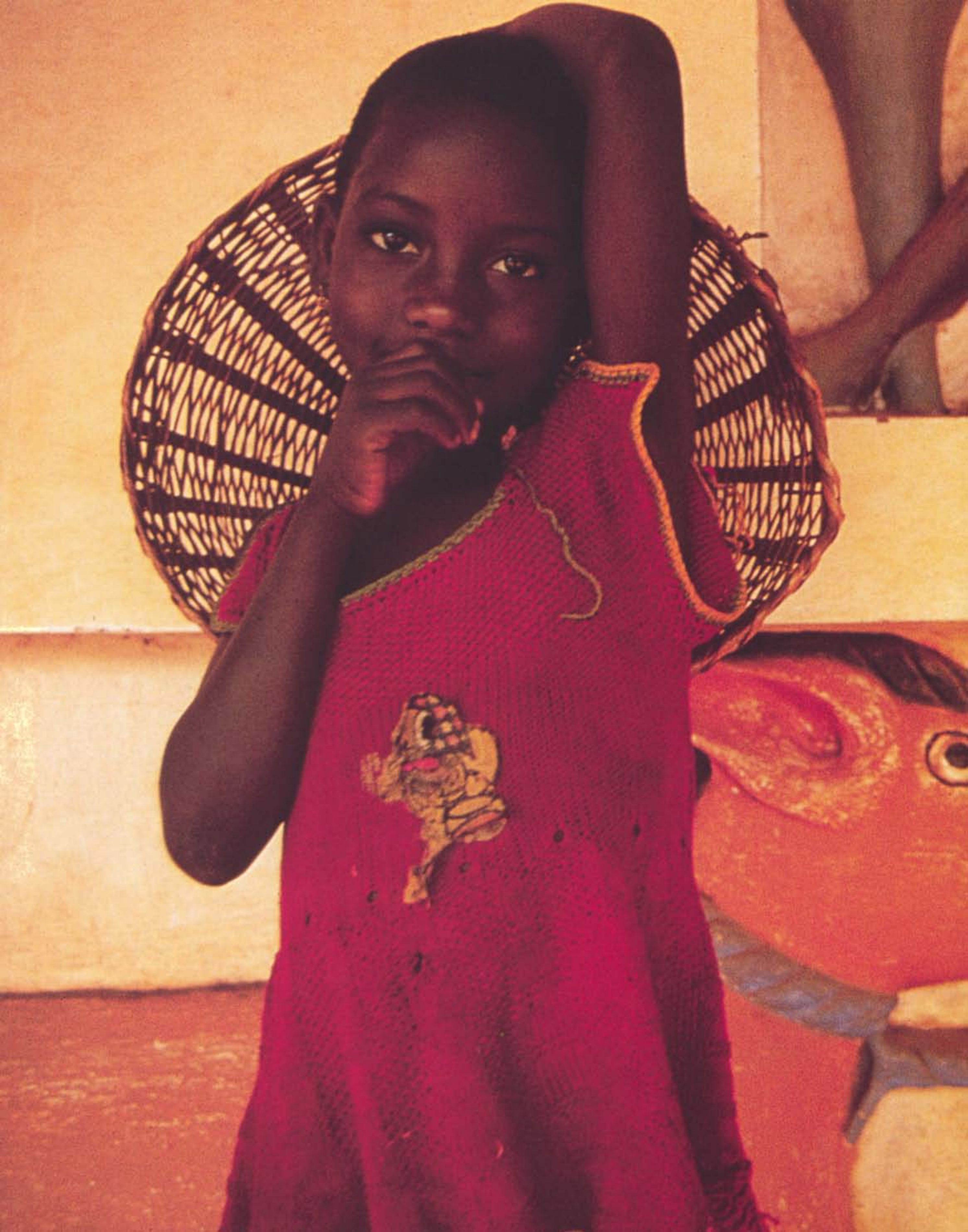
77 Conserving the Bas-Reliefs

95 The Historic Museum of Abomey

105 A Living Tradition

114 Suggested Reading

116 Acknowledgments



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.

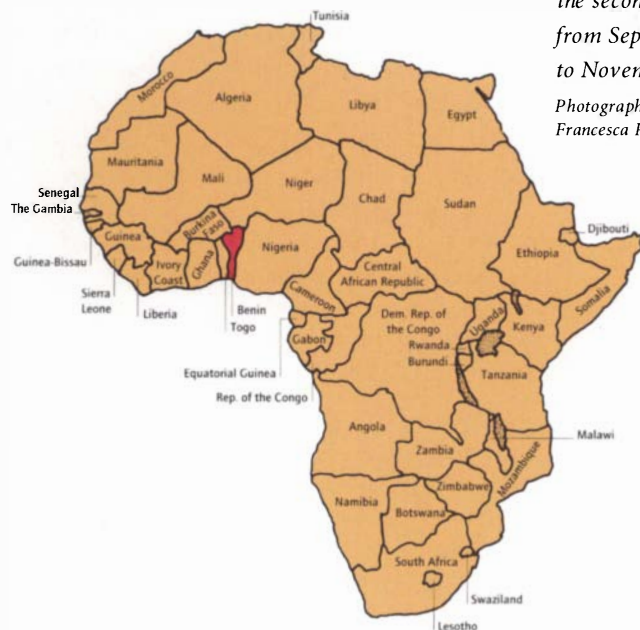
A child in front of the palace of King Guezo.

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."

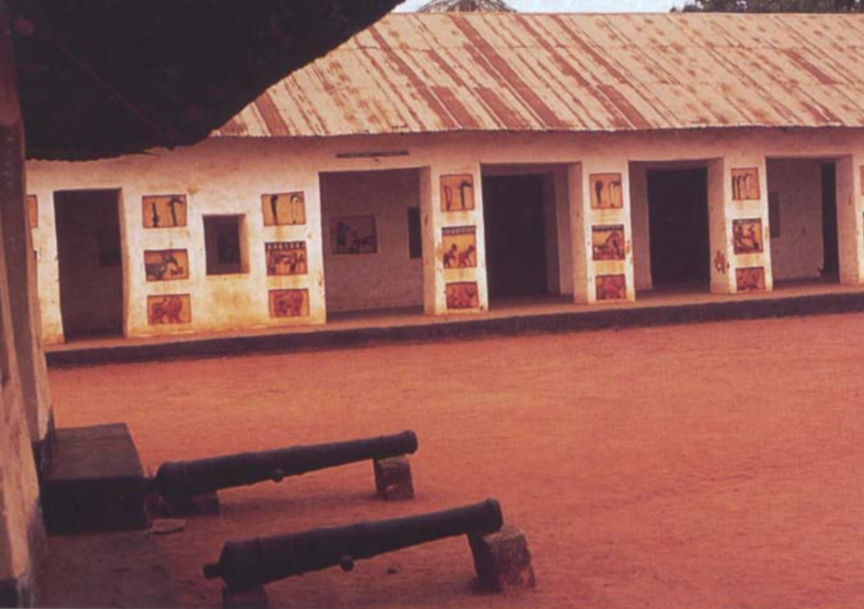
Children playing in the rain. The great rainy season lasts from March to July; the second rains last from September to November.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1997.



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

Photograph by Pedro Pablo Celedón.



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.

The Kingdom of Dahomey

When the celebrated British explorer Sir Richard Burton visited the kingdom of Dahomey in the 1860s, he encountered a militaristic traditional society ruled by an all-powerful monarch and bound together by elaborate ritual. The pageantry of the Dahomean court "is to be compared with that of Europe," he wrote. The "intense personal veneration" of the king "reminds me of . . . Mohammed the apostle and his followers. . . . To this exceeding care only can be attributed the protracted reigns of a dynasty whose . . . members have sat upon the throne 252 years, thus rivalling the seven Roman monarchs whose rule extended over nearly the same period."[1]

According to legend, the Dahomey kings were descended from the union of a mythical leopard, depicted here, and a princess from the kingdom of Tado.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

A royal storyteller; in a society with no written language, these heralds passed down the kingdom's history from generation to generation.
Photograph by T. Spini and G. Antongini, 1972.

The history of the Dahomey kingdom is indeed a long and venerable one. The ancestors of the Fon, a West African people related to the Yoruba, migrated southward from the Niger River in about the thirteenth century, settling in the southern regions of what are today Benin and Togo. Bloody quarrels for succession divided the royal leaders, and by the early 1600s, the rival camps had separated into what would become the three warring kingdoms of Allada, Porto-Novo, and Dahomey.

Like many African societies, the Fon culture was essentially oral, and the stories that recount the origins of the Dahomey kingdom are complex and often contradictory. Before the arrival of the first European visitors to the kingdom in the early eighteenth century, very little was actually recorded in written form. For centuries, chroniclers chosen by the king were entrusted with perpetuating the culture by reciting stories in public, but their narratives were largely limited to royal history—singing the praises of monarchs past and present. Because the heralds could be punished by death if they strayed from the offi-

Time Line

ca. 1200 Migrations of Fon ancestors. Kingdoms of Tado and Allada founded.

1470s First Europeans land in West Africa; slave trade soon begins.

1492 Columbus lands in the New World.

Bas-relief commemorating the kingdom's first encounter with Europeans in the early eighteenth century during the reign of King Agaja, who then adopted a European ship as one of his symbols.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1994.

cial version, their accounts varied little over time. Many of these stories are represented in the bas-reliefs on the walls of Abomey's palaces.

King Houegbadja, the third traditional Dahomean monarch, is often considered the dynasty's true founder. In the seventeenth century, he established the kingdom's capital on the rolling plain of the Abomey plateau, where he built the first royal palace and developed the administrative bureaucracy and the religious and political culture that would come to characterize the kingdom. Here, too, he initiated the kingdom's expansionist tradition, conquering the neighboring Gédévi people and various other local chiefdoms. He established control over kin groups and burial customs, implemented a system of laws—to be obeyed under penalty of death—and imposed a head tax, which he used to purchase firearms, supplementing traditional weapons such as the spear and the hatchet.

During Houegbadja's reign, the Fon people first began to call their kingdom Dahomey. According to one version of the legend, Houegbadja's son Akaba visited the house of a Gédévi chief named Dan, who

1501 African slaves introduced to the Spanish Indies.

ca. 1600 Gangnihessou and Dako settle north of Abomey.

ca. 1620 Dako ascends the throne.

ca. 1645–1685 Houegbadja establishes seat of Dahomey kingdom in Abomey, where he builds the first royal palace.

1685–1708 Akaba rules Dahomey; invents new saber to behead his enemies; promotes such crafts as gem-cutting, embroidery, and fabric dying.

opposed Houegbadja's rule. Akaba requested a plot of land on which to build a palace, a request that Dan would have been obliged to grant. After Dan reluctantly complied, Akaba asked for more, soliciting new and larger lots, until at last Dan angrily cried out, "Soon you will be building on my belly!" The next night, Akaba used this breach in etiquette as a reason to attack and kill Dan. Upon succeeding to the throne, he built his palace on Dan's grave. In Fon, *homè* means "belly." Thus, the name of the kingdom—*Dan homè*—literally means "on the belly of Dan."

It was also Houegbadja who introduced the Annual Customs ceremonies, which would soon become the kingdom's most important ritual observance. Developed and elaborated by following monarchs, the Customs were a period of festivities involving the entire population (as well as any visiting dignitaries), which both expressed and reinforced the ruler's relationship with his people. The palace courtyards and the town's public squares were ornamented with colorful banners, flags, and pavilions. Voudou ceremonies were performed, military parades displayed the king's might, and ritual dances glorified the monarch as the supreme ruler on earth.

A somewhat fanciful depiction of the annual Customs festivities being witnessed by European visitors. This drawing originally appeared in one of the first published descriptions of the kingdom, Archibald Dalzel's 1793 book, The History of Dahomy: An Inland Kingdom of Africa.

Second edition, 1967, published by Frank Cass & Company, Essex, England. © Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.

Voudou initiate in the costume of Zangbeto, guardian of the night. During the annual Customs ceremonies, priests and diviners were consulted to help decide policy for the coming year.

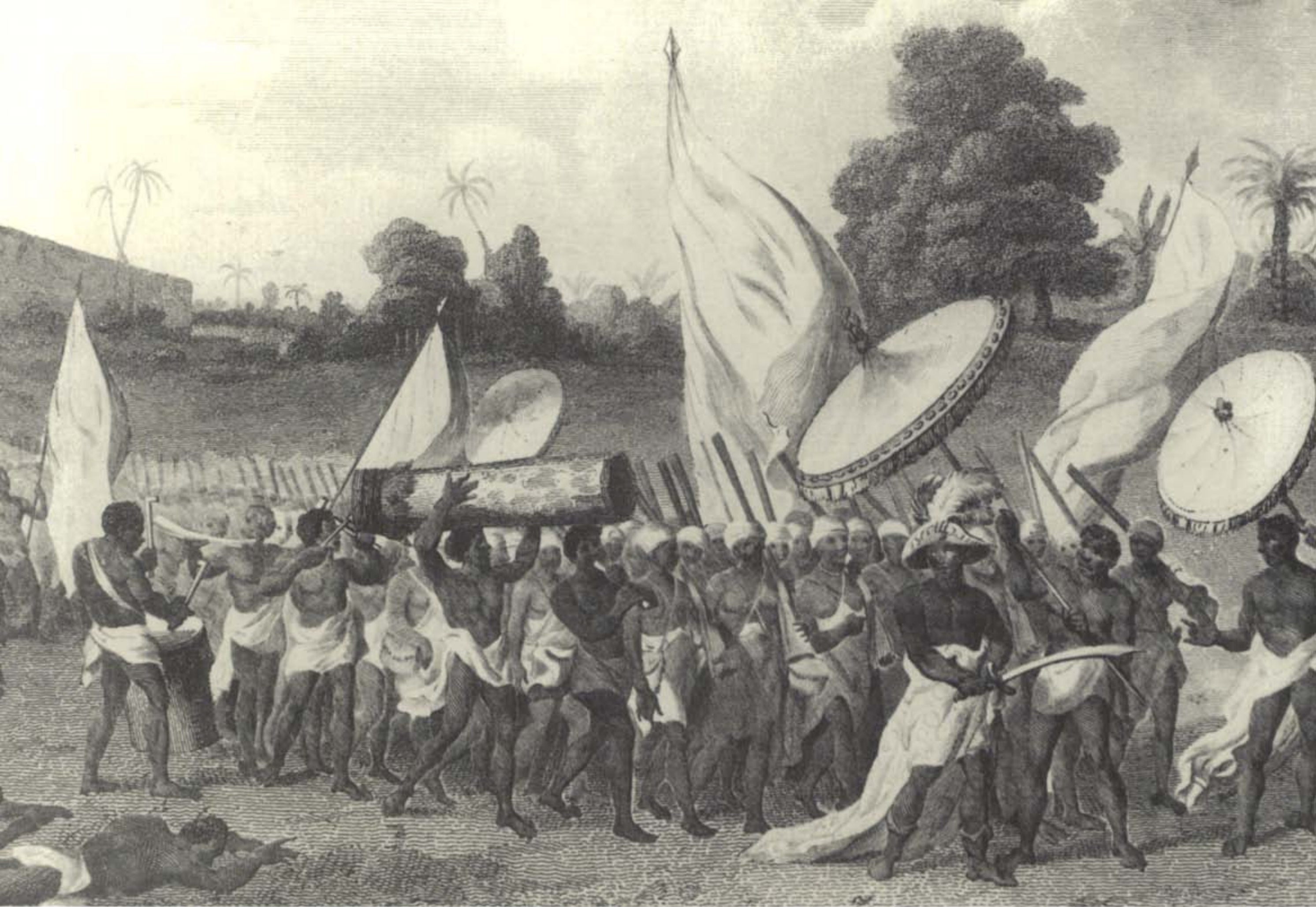
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

1708–1732 Agaja rules Dahomey during the greatest period of expansion in the kingdom's history. He is the first king to have contact with Europeans.

1724–1727 Dahomey conquers neighboring states of Allada and Ouidah and begins to dominate region's slave trade.

1732–1774 Tegbessou rules Dahomey; Ouidah becomes a flourishing port and the kingdom's second-largest city.

1738 Oyo empire invades Dahomey, establishes a tribute system.



A romanticized late-eighteenth-century depiction of the Dahomey army heading into battle, reflecting the growing fame in Europe of the kingdom's female warriors.

From Dalzel, History of Dahomy, *1793; second edition, 1967, published by Frank Cass & Company, Essex, England. © Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.*

According to traditional Fon belief, the visible world was but part of a vaster reality that included the unseen world of the spirits and ancestors. During the Customs ceremonies, criminals and prisoners of war were sacrificed as "messengers" bearing questions to the "deadland" of royal ancestors. Answers from the ancestors were received through divination, including the spirit possession of voudou priests, thereby consecrating the current regime by reinvoking its ties to the past. The practice troubled the European visitors who witnessed it. "The celebration of the *Customs* usually continues about a month, during

1774–1789 Kpengla rules Dahomey, strengthens army, and conquers coastal cities in modern-day Nigeria and Togo.

1789–1797 Agonglo rules Dahomey, opens the kingdom to Christian and Muslim missionaries.

1797–1818 Adandozan rules Dahomey; he is overthrown in a palace coup.

1818–1858 Guezo rules Dahomey, liberates kingdom from Oyo domination, promotes palm-oil processing as an economic alternative to the slave trade.

ca. 1830 Several European countries outlaw the slave trade.

which there is some exhibition every fourth, or market, day," noted the English adventurer Archibald Dalzel in 1793. "The whole would afford a very amusing spectacle, if it were not for the human sacrifices which are annually made for the purpose of *watering*, according to the country expression, the graves of the deceased royal family."[2]

From legendary origins, then, grew a highly organized and fiercely expansionist kingdom in which each ruler waged war to honor a traditional obligation to make Dahomey ever greater. In the 1720s, aided by a corps of fierce female warriors, Akaba's brother, King Agaja, overcame larger armies to subjugate several neighboring rival kingdoms—including the strategically critical port town of Ouidah, which by then served as a major center of the West African slave trade. The Dahomey women warriors were called Amazons by the Europeans, after the legendary female warriors of Greek mythology; they would become a dynastic tradition.

Dahomey's conquests permitted direct commerce with the traders, especially the Portuguese and French, who were exporting an estimated six thousand slaves a year from West Africa to plantations in the New World. During the second half of the eighteenth century, Dahomey's prowess as a warrior nation allowed it to monopolize the Ouidah slave trade. Armed with weapons obtained in exchange for slaves, the Fon were able to defend themselves against ongoing threats from the larger Oyo empire, a powerful Yoruba kingdom to the east, in what is today Nigeria.

Nonetheless, the Oyo succeeded in exacting annual tribute payments from generations of Dahomey's kings. It was not until 1818, at the beginning of the reign of Guezo, one of Dahomey's most famous monarchs, that the Fon were finally able to liberate themselves from their Oyo overlords. In the decades that followed, Guezo continued to strengthen and expand the kingdom, allying himself with a Portuguese adventurer who had helped him come to power and who, in return, was granted a virtual monopoly over the Ouidah arms and slave trade.[3] Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Dahomey was one of the richest and most powerful kingdoms in Africa. Its army at this time was estimated to number some twelve thousand soldiers and four thousand Amazons. The Amazons constituted one of the army's elite corps, serving as the king's palace guards and forming a special phalanx that accompanied the monarch into battle.

The Dahomean monarchy, however, would prove no match for the upheavals that were to come. The development of the slave trade had attracted Europeans intent

Dahomean women warriors, or Amazons. The horns, probably made of tin, were an insignia of rank: these are officers. Horns were also icons of power, associated with such animals as the antelope and buffalo; "furious antelope" and "wild buffalo" cadres were among the fiercest Amazon battalions.

Photograph by a French military doctor who accompanied the colonial army, ca. 1894. Courtesy Getty Research Institute, Research Library, 94.R.56.

on exploiting West Africa's economic potential. In the 1800s, as international abolitionist voices called for a worldwide end to slavery, slave traders searched for alternative sources of income. Throughout the region, European interest shifted to palm oil, which was extracted from the nuts of the area's abundant palm trees and was highly prized for lubricating machinery and as a key ingredient in margarine, candles, and soap. King Guezo established a palm-oil industry and attempted to

1839 British seize Portuguese slave ships; the slave trade curtailed.

1851 Dahomean troops under Guezo attack the Egba capital of Abeokuta but are soundly defeated; Amazon cadres incur heavy losses.

1858–1889 Glélé rules Dahomey, rebuffs European intervention in Dahomey's affairs.

1864 Seeking revenge for his father's defeat, Glélé attacks Abeokuta; another defeat leaves Dahomean army severely weakened.

1889–1894 Behanzin rules Dahomey.

1892–1894 French invade and conquer Dahomey; Behanzin orders his troops to burn the royal palaces at Abomey.

increase Dahomey's agricultural output, though he continued to deal in slaves as well. Ironically, antislavery efforts drove up the price of the human "merchandise," making slave trading even more profitable than before.

Like his father, Guezo, Dahomey's next king, Glélé, resisted European pressure to eliminate both the slave trade and the practice of ritual human sacrifice. Sir Richard Burton's visit in the 1860s was a mission from the British government to negotiate such matters with the Dahomean ruler. While impressed by the king's regal demeanor, Burton was disappointed to find that the monarch would not readily accede to British demands. "The personal courtesies of the king," he wrote, "compared badly with his stubborn resolve to ignore, even in the smallest matters, the wishes of Her Majesty's Government." (Glélé's assessment of Burton, according to Burton himself, was that the Englishman "was a good man, but too angry.")[4]

Burton conceded that "to abolish human sacrifice here is to abolish Dahome. The practice originates from filial piety, it is sanctioned by long use and custom, and it is strenuously upheld by a powerful and interested priesthood. . . . Gelele, I am persuaded, could not abolish human sacrifice if he would; and he would not if he could."[5] Regarding the slave trade, Glélé responded to Burton that it was a practice established by the Europeans themselves, and he would continue to sell what the Europeans wanted.

Map published in Le Petit Journal, *a French illustrated magazine, in September 1892, on the eve of the French conquest. The legend notes that the red lines trace the routes of European explorers and shipping lines; the small tricolor flags show the position of French troops. The neighboring territories are labeled simply "German colony" and "English colony"—suggesting the strategic importance of Dahomey to the French colonial empire.*

1894 Behanzin surrenders; Dahomey becomes a French protectorate; Agoli-Agbo I installed on the throne by the French; first restoration of royal palaces at Abomey begins.

1900 Deposition and exile of Agoli-Agbo I.

1911 The French colonial official E. G. Waterlot creates casts of palace bas-reliefs.

1914 World War I begins; Africans from several French colonies serve with distinction in the French army.

1914–1916 Resistance movements against the French colonizers organized.

1918 World War I ends; Germany loses its African colonies.

Le Petit Journal

TOUS LES VENDREDIS
Le Supplément illustré
5 Centimes

SUPPLÉMENT ILLUSTRÉ
Huit pages : CINQ centimes

TOUS LES JOURS
Le Petit Journal
5 Centimes

Troisième Année — SAMEDI 20 AOUT 1892 — Numéro 91

ATTAQUE DE DAHOMÉENS
repoussée par une canonnière française

Cover of Le Petit Journal, *August 20, 1892. In the late nineteenth century, illustrated magazines were very popular in France.* Le Petit Journal, *a conservative daily that often sought to glorify the French colonial effort, reported regularly on the Dahomey campaign. The magazine's caption claims that the "attack of the Dahomeans" is being "repulsed by a French gunboat"; in reality, the French retreated, alarming many colonial officials, who were astonished that their army had lost a skirmish to an African force composed largely of women.*

In Dahomean society, battles were commemorated by bas-reliefs. In this one from Glélé's ajalala, a Dahomean warrior is shooting a Yoruba enemy.

Photograph by Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.

By the late nineteenth century, the colonial powers—primarily Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany—were vying for superiority in Africa, which in many respects had become an arena for the dispute of European imperial rivalries. The powerful Dahomean army, meanwhile, had been weakened by several defeats in battles with the neighboring Egba kingdom. Largely for strategic purposes, the French sided with another of Dahomey's longtime enemies, the kingdom of Porto-Novo. Glélé's successor, Behanzin, also clashed with France over such issues as slavery and the right to wage war against Dahomey's traditional enemies. The French found a pretext for conquest in a disagreement over the terms

ca. 1930 Original thatch roofs of palace buildings replaced with corrugated metal.

1945 Historic Museum of Abomey opens to the public.

1960 The Republic of Dahomey wins independence.

1960–1972 Independence followed by period of political instability; numerous coups and attempted coups.

1972 Regime of revolutionary-military government begins.

A glorified depiction of French troops carrying the flag into Abomey. Behanzin had set fire to the royal palaces shortly before their arrival. Le Petit Journal, *ca. December 1892.*

of the French occupation of the port town of Cotonou. In 1890, Behanzin launched a preemptive assault on the French at Cotonou, but he took heavy losses and retreated toward Abomey. A brief truce ensued. Hunkered down in his royal compound, the last independent monarch to rule Dahomey continued to resist French challenges to the kingdom's independence.

Then, in August 1892, a French colonial army gathered in Porto-Novo marched on Abomey. A series of fierce battles followed, with Dahomean forces retreating toward their capital. In November, King Behanzin tried one last time to rally his soldiers, but to no avail. The French demanded that he lay down his arms; he refused. Finally, heavily outgunned, the king attempted to destroy what he could not save. Behanzin ordered his troops to retreat; then, rather than see the beloved palaces and their sacred tombs fall into French hands, he had the torch put to the homes of his ancestors. Behanzin and his army disappeared into the bush, where they continued to fight a guerrilla war for another year. The king eventually surrendered to the French on January 25, 1894.

Before departing into French-imposed exile, Behanzin presented a farewell address to his soldiers. With his palaces destroyed, his court and storytellers dispersed, his army defeated, and his people facing the uncertainties of a colonized future, the monarch wondered whether the powerful Dahomey kingdom might not fade from the world's memory. "When my warriors rose by the thousand to defend Dahomey

1975 Name of Dahomey is changed to the People's Republic of Benin.

1982 Abomey's palaces are designated a World Heritage cultural site by Unesco.

1985 Abomey's palaces are placed on the list of endangered sites by Unesco.

Bas-relief from Guezo's ajalala showing a warrior planting a flag on conquered territory.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

and its King, I proudly recognized the same valor shown by the warriors of Agaja, Tegbessou, Guezo, and Glélé," he said. "Despite our bravery and the justice of our cause, our troops were decimated.... Already my weeping voice awakens no echo. Where are the ardent Amazons? Where, their indomitable chiefs? ... Where, my comrades in arms? ... Who will sing of their great sacrifice? ... Departed companions ... here is the offering of memory—a little oil, a little flour, and blood of the bull.... Here the pact is renewed before the great departure. Farewell, soldiers, farewell."[6] Behanzin would die in exile some twelve years later.

Dahomey was proclaimed a French protectorate, and by the end of 1897, the French controlled the entire territory of the present-day Republic of Benin, which they called the colony of Dahomey. They installed Behanzin's half-brother, Agoli-Agbo I, on the throne, only to depose and exile him and appoint a powerful French governor. In 1904 the colony of Dahomey was integrated into the federation of French West Africa.

The French instituted an "indigent system," based on the concept that Africans were not mature enough to take care of their own affairs. Africans were considered subjects rather than citizens; they had to pay

"Once he had descended [from the Abomey plateau] to the surrounding plain, [Behanzin] stopped to look behind him. The entire plateau was in flames and the sky above like a calabash of blood. . . . After having watched his palace go up in flames, [Behanzin] remained motionless with his head between his hands. Respecting his grief, the high priests went into prayer, and the bokono made divinations to know what the future now held in store for them. Finally he got up. Then with his faithful followers of Amazons, bokono, warriors, high priests, women, and children he set off for the forest. There in its womb he lived for almost two years, unbeknownst to the French who hounded him like a beast, protected by his gris-gris and the magic of his bokono."

Maryse Condé, *The Last of the African Kings.*
© 1997 by the University of Nebraska Press. © 1992 Editions Mercure de France.
Translated by Richard Philcox. Reprinted by permission.

Above: French postcard, ca. 1905, showing Behanzin in exile with his family and servants, shortly before his death. Opposite: Agoli-Agbo I, ca. 1894, soon after the French installed him on the throne. An Amazon bodyguard, wearing horns, can be seen behind one of the king's wives.

Courtesy Getty Research Institute, Research Library, ZPC 2 (above), 94.R.56 (opposite).

Different grades of palm oil at Abomey market.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1994.

Modern bas-relief by Cyprien Tokoudagba and family depicting the symbol of Agoli-Agbo I—a foot about to trip over a rock. The accompanying motto, "I stumbled but I did not fall," aptly expresses the Fon people's endurance.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

taxes while undergoing severe restrictions on personal and political freedom. Although Dahomey had historically derived its strength from its fierce warrior kings, most of its people were farmers who tended fruit trees, raised livestock, and planted native crops like yams, millet, and cotton, as well as the maize, tobacco, and coffee imported from the New World by European traders. French governance, which aimed to enrich the French economy at the expense of the colony, overexploited the land's resources.

Behanzin's concerns regarding the fate of Fon culture proved well founded. The French instituted a system of social services, establishing health centers in the principal towns and implementing an educational system developed largely by Catholic missionaries, who had first established schools there in the 1860s. The colonial schools systematically tried to obscure Dahomey's traditional culture. The French considered African culture generally to be uncivilized; they attempted to force indigenous Africans to abandon their own roots, embrace the civilization of Christian Europe, and adopt the French language.

Despite such pressures, however, the Fon people managed to hold fast to their own cultural beliefs, partly by drawing on their long-standing, deeply ingrained oral traditions. At the same time, Dahomey became the "Latin Quarter of West Africa," known for its writers, professionals, and artists. And, ironically, leaders of an organized anticolonial protest movement emerged from the ranks of intellectuals trained in the French-instituted schools. Immediately following World War II, Dahomey's educated elite began carrying out protests against the colonial government. In 1958, the French finally granted a popular vote to decide statehood, and the following year, the Republic of Dahomey became an independent member of the French Community of states. Dahomey, however, continued to press for complete autonomy, and on August 1, 1960, after sixty-six years of French government, the independent Republic of Dahomey installed Hubert Maga as its first president.

The new state survived a period of turbulent political activity from 1960 to 1972, followed by a revolutionary military regime under General Mathieu Kérékou from 1972 to 1990. Although the new government was initially embraced by the population, discontent soon became widespread, and in 1990 the single-party government was dismantled. A period of democratic renewal followed; in the new Republic of Benin's first presidential election, Nicéphore Soglo was voted into office in 1991, and in 1996, Kérékou—by then an advocate of democratic rule—was elected president.[7]

Campaign rally for Nicéphore Soglo, the first elected president of the Republic of Benin, in the square in front of the museum. The parasol shading the current ceremonial king, Agoli-Agbo III, bears the emblems of the Dahomean monarchs who preceded him.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.

Throughout the tumultuous twentieth century, the Fon—largely through art and ritual—have preserved a connection to their cultural identity. Today's king, a descendent of Agoli-Agbo I, is an elected representative of the royal families of Abomey who fulfills an essential ceremonial function. The Fon continue to revere their traditional leaders and to respect many age-old customs. The royal compound at Abomey serves as the heart of those observances and houses the museum where the Dahomey kingdom's treasures are displayed. A century after Behanzin's surrender to the French, the plea implicit in his farewell address—that the Dahomean dynasty not be forgotten—has found its echo.

NOTES

1. Richard Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome* (1864; reprint, with an introduction and notes by C.W. Newbury, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 149.
2. Archibald Dalzel, *The History of Dahomy: An Inland Kingdom of Africa* (1793; reprint, London: Frank Cass and Co., 1967), pp. xxi–xxii.
3. This story is vividly—if sorrowfully—recounted in fictional form in Bruce Chatwin's short historical novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), which was made into the film *Cobra Verde* by the German director Werner Herzog.
4. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele*, pp. 347, 348.
5. Ibid., pp. 235–36.
6. Jean Pliya, *Dahomey* (Issy-les-Moulineaux: Classiques Africains, 1975), pp. 127–28.
7. The Republic of Benin should not be confused with the modern Nigerian city of Benin, or with the historical kingdom of Benin, situated in present-day Nigeria and also renowned for its art—particularly its bronzes.

1988 Fifty-six bas-reliefs detached from one of Glélé's palace buildings (*ajalala*) and placed in storage.

1988–1997 Glélé's ajalala, structurally damaged, is rebuilt.

1989–1990 Benin becomes a democracy; name changed to Republic of Benin.

1993–1997 Conservation of bas-reliefs at Abomey in a collaborative project of the Getty Conservation Institute and the Republic of Benin.

1997 "Past, Present, and Future of the Royal Palaces and Sites of Abomey," a conference sponsored by the Getty Conservation Institute, the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and the Republic of Benin, is held in Abomey.

GANGNIHESSOU

1620
DAKODONOU 1645

AGADJA 1708-1732

1732
TEGBESSOU 1774

GUEZO 1818-1858

GLELE 1858-1889

1645-
HOUEGBADJA 1685

AKABA 1685-1708

KPENGLA 1774-1789

AGONGLO 1789-1797

BEHANZIN 1889-1894

AGOLI-AGBO 1894-1900

Warrior Kings

Like the pharaohs of Egypt or the great kings of Persia, the monarchs of Dahomey formed the epicenter of all spheres of the kingdom's life—political, social, religious, and military. A Dahomean king was venerated as the *dokunnon* (master and possessor of all riches), the *sèmèdo* (master of the world), and the *aïnon* (eminent master of the earth). Upon assuming the throne, each monarch took on the obligation to leave behind more territory than he inherited. The Dahomean monarchy, therefore, waged an ongoing series of wars of conquest that, by the early nineteenth century, had made Dahomey one of the most powerful kingdoms in Africa.

To help ensure the monarchy's long-term stability, the transition between one king and the next was aided by a unique system of rules governing succession. Under this principle, known as *vidaxo*, the aging monarch selected from among his sons the one best suited to rule, subject to approval by royal ministers and diviners. When a prince was enthroned, he would select a "name motto"—a slogan that expressed such attributes as strength, wisdom, and cunning—as well as a royal name, or "strong name." He would also adopt a number of emblems or symbols, which served to promote his strong name and motto, warn his enemies and rivals, commemorate his conquests, and, in general, publicize an aura of charismatic royal power. These symbols were depicted on bas-reliefs and on colorful banners and appliqués, which, during the great annual festivities known as the "Customs," decorated the palace courtyards.

Previous page: Textile appliqué with symbols of the twelve kings traditionally acknowledged to have ruled Dahomey.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

1 Gangnihessou (reigned ca. 1600)

SYMBOLS
A male *gangnihessou* bird; a drum; a throwing or hunting stick

MOTTO
"I am the biggest bird and the loudest drum. You can't keep the bird from singing, you can't keep the drum from beating."

Gangnihessou's motto notwithstanding, his younger brother Dako usurped the throne.

2 Dako (reigned ca. 1620; younger brother of Gangnihessou)

SYMBOLS
An indigo jar; a tinderbox; a war club

MOTTO
"Dako kills Konou as easily as breaking an indigo jar."

This motto is a reference to an indigo planter whom Dako killed.

3 Houegbadja (reigned ca. 1645–85; son of Gangnihessou, nephew of Dako)

SYMBOLS
A fish; a fish trap; a war club hoe

MOTTO
"The fish who has escaped the net won't go back in it."

Houegbadja's accession to the throne was seen as a rehabilitation of his father. Houegbadja is considered the founder of the Dahomey dynasty; he established the capital in Abomey, where he built a new palace, initiated a system of laws, established a bureaucracy, presided over religious ceremonies, and created a powerful political culture. His motto expresses the king's wisdom in refusing to be caught in traps laid by his enemies.

4 Akaba (reigned 1685–1708; son of Houegbadja and Nan Adonon)

SYMBOLS
A warthog; a sword (the weapon Akaba used to behead his enemies)

MOTTO
"When the warthog looks up at the sky, it gets its throat slit."

SYMBOL
A chameleon

NAME MOTTO
"Slowly, patiently the chameleon reaches the top of the Kapok tree."

The chameleon, which changes color to blend in with its environment, exemplifies the patience and practical skill Akaba demonstrated in calmly waiting until the advanced age of about sixty to ascend to the throne. The warthog emblem suggests the importance of paying close attention to affairs of the kingdom: distraction can bring disaster.

5 Agaja (reigned 1708–32; son of Houegbadja and Nan Adonon)

SYMBOL
European caravel boat

NAME MOTTO
"No one can set fire to a large tree that has fallen whole with its branches (first it must be cut)."

Known as "the Great Warrior," Agaja ruled over the period of largest expansion in Dahomey's history. His annexation of the neighboring Xweda kingdom extended Dahomey's borders to the sea and allowed Dahomey to deal directly with European traders. He formed an elite corps of women warriors—an innovation that became a long-standing dynastic tradition—and was the first king to have contact with Europeans—hence his symbol of a European boat. Agaja's motto expresses the importance of strength and unity.

6 Tegbessou (reigned 1732–74; son of Agaja and Nan Huanjile)

SYMBOL
A buffalo wearing a tunic

MOTTO
"Nothing can force the buffalo to take off his tunic."

SYMBOLS
A blunderbuss (the first firearm that the Dahomey royal army used); a door decorated with three noseless heads

NAME MOTTO
"The many grasses and leaves that cover the ground do not keep the small tégbésu *plant from growing."*

When still a prince, Tegbessou was sent to reside in the Oyo kingdom as part of the tribute Dahomey had to pay its rival state. He later returned to his homeland, where he was selected to be the next ruler. According to custom, the king-to-be had to wear his father's tunic for one whole day. Hoping to make Tegbessou take off the tunic—and therefore abandon his quest for the throne—a rival placed stinging nettle leaves in it. However, Tegbessou kept the tunic on and became king. His name motto reminded his subjects that he had acceded to the throne despite the maneuvering of his rivals; the emblem of a door bearing heads without noses evoked his victory over a rebellious conquered people whose corpses he had mutilated.

7 **Kpengla** (reigned 1774–89; son of Tegbessou and Nan Cai)

SYMBOLS

An *akpan* bird; a gun

MOTTO

"The agitated akpan strikes out at the other birds."

NAME MOTTO

"In the water, the stone does not feel or fear the cold."

Kpengla strengthened the army and engaged in many battle campaigns—an activity evoked by the bird motto. He conquered coastal cities, consolidating the kingdom's rule over the Xweda and further tightening Dahomey's grip on the slave trade. The stone name motto suggests that the king no more fears his enemies than a stone fears cold water, while the gun emblem refers to the fact that flintlock firearms became standard issue in the Dahomean army during Kpengla's reign.

8 **Agonglo** (reigned 1789–97; son of Kpengla and Nan Senume)

SYMBOL

A pineapple plant

NAME MOTTO

"Lightning strikes the palm tree but never the pineapple plant, which is close to the earth."

Agonglo is remembered as a great reformer. He rescinded taxes that had paralyzed the port of Ouidah; outlawed the wooden gag that had been used on condemned prisoners to keep them from calling down curses on the kingdom; and enhanced the voudou cult by instituting a rite known as Zomadonou, which became the dynasty's specific cult. Agonglo also opened his kingdom to Christian and Muslim missionaries and was the first Dahomean ruler to take a European woman as one of his wives. His symbol and name motto refer to the king's success in surviving his enemies' intrigues and attempt to justify his peaceful ways in the eyes of those who preferred a more military ruler.

■ **Adandozan** (reigned 1797–1818; eldest son of Agonglo)

SYMBOL

A large parasol

NAME MOTTO

"The king overshadows his enemies."

Considered by some to have usurped the throne from his brother, Adandozan is a highly controversial figure. During his reign, he tried to initiate various unpopular changes, reducing the power of the priests and apparently extending slavery and ritual human sacrifice to include members of the Dahomey noble classes. He was overthrown in a palace coup and placed under arrest. Adandozan continued to be highly regarded; he outlived his

successor and, when he died in 1861, was buried, discreetly, with full royal honors. His name, however, has since disappeared from the oral tradition and was removed from the dynastic list. Adandozan's emblem, therefore, does not appear on the appliqué on pages 24–25.

9 Guezo (reigned 1818–58; son of Agonglo and Nan Agontimè)

SYMBOL
A jar pierced with holes, held aloft by two hands

MOTTO
"Our freedom can be compared to a jar with many holes, which cannot hold water. If each one of you, the sons of this nation, can put your finger in one hole, the jar will hold water."

SYMBOL
A buffalo

MOTTO
"The powerful buffalo crosses the country and nothing can stop or confront it."

NAME MOTTO
"The red feathers of the cardinal may look like fire, but it cannot set fire to the bush."

Following the unprecedented coup that brought him to the throne, Guezo worked to unify his kingdom. Regarded as a skillful diplomat, he was able to reconcile the friends and foes of Adandozan; he also strengthened the army and finally liberated Dahomey from the powerful neighboring Oyo kingdom. Guezo is celebrated as one of Dahomey's greatest rulers. The jar emblem and its accompanying motto reminded his subjects of the importance of national unity; the jar is now the national symbol of Benin.

10 Glélé (reigned 1858–89; son of Guezo and Nan Zognidi)

SYMBOL
A lion

MOTTO
"The lion cub strikes terror in his enemies as soon as his teeth have grown."

SYMBOL
The ritual knife of Gu, god of war

MOTTO
"The knife of Gu punishes rebels."

NAME MOTTO
"The man is stretched out at full length, and his enemies cannot lift him."

At the end of Guezo's reign, supporters of Adandozan—a number of whom remained in Abomey—set fire to the palace treasure-houses to protest Glélé's ascent to the throne. From the beginning of his reign, therefore, Glélé faced internal as well as external opposition, which he sought to diffuse through these symbols and mottoes. Glélé would go on to consolidate Dahomey's supremacy in the region by leading more

than thirty war campaigns; in addition, he developed such cultural practices as music, dance, and ritual ceremonies. Glélé became renowned in Europe as one of the great African kings. He resisted European anti-slavery efforts but was eventually forced to abandon commercial slave trading; nevertheless, he continued to use slaves in his fields and as human sacrifices who "carried messages" to the ancestors. His name motto evokes the values of patience and hard work.

11 Behanzin (reigned 1889–94; son of Glélé and Nan Zevoton)

SYMBOL
An egg

NAME MOTTO
"The world holds the egg that the earth desires."

SYMBOL
A shark

MOTTO
"I am the shark: I will not relinquish an inch of my kingdom."

Dahomey's last independent ruler is celebrated as a great resistance fighter who tried to save his kingdom from French colonizers. Behanzin was unable to live up to his motto, however, and finally burned the Abomey royal palaces rather than see them fall into French hands. His farewell address to his soldiers, before he went into French-imposed exile, is considered one of the most important speeches in the history of the Fon people; today, the address is taught to Beninois schoolchildren. Behanzin died in exile in Algeria in 1906; in 1928 he was reburied in his homeland.

12 Agoli-Agbo I (reigned 1894–1900; son of Glélé and Nan Kannanyi)

SYMBOL
A foot tripping over a rock

NAME MOTTO
"Beware! The royal Dahomean dynasty has stumbled but has not fallen."

SYMBOL
A broom

MOTTO
"The king is like a broom that sweeps up his enemies."

SYMBOL
A bow

The French installed Agoli-Agbo I on the throne; his motto sought to promote a sense of dynastic continuity. The bow symbol signified a French-imposed return to less-dangerous traditional weapons—as opposed to the considerable stock of firearms that earlier kings had accumulated by trading slaves. One of Agoli-Agbo's greatest priorities was the reconstruction of the Abomey royal palaces. Under French rule, however, the monarchy was stripped of its power, and Agoli-Agbo I was unable to govern successfully. When he refused to act as a French pawn, he was exiled, and the French formally abolished royalty in Dahomey.

The Abomey Royal Palaces

The royal palaces of Abomey were slowly fashioned over the course of two and a half centuries, beginning with King Houegbadja—who founded the city in 1645—and continuing with each successive ruler, who added his own buildings to those of his predecessors. The right to raise structures of more than one story belonged exclusively to royalty, and the palaces' red earthen walls rose above the surrounding low-slung dwellings of the king's subjects. The imposing height—up to ten meters—of even the earliest palaces embodied the dynasty's power and prestige; soon the palace complex came to symbolize for Dahomeans the concept of kingship itself.

Ceremony in front of Glélé's ajalala. The custom of prostrating before the king began during the reign of Houegbadja.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1997.

Artist's rendering of the exterior of King Glélé's palace as it appeared in 1856.

From Sir Richard Burton, A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome *(1864; reprint, with an introduction and notes by C.W. Newbury, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Used by permission.*

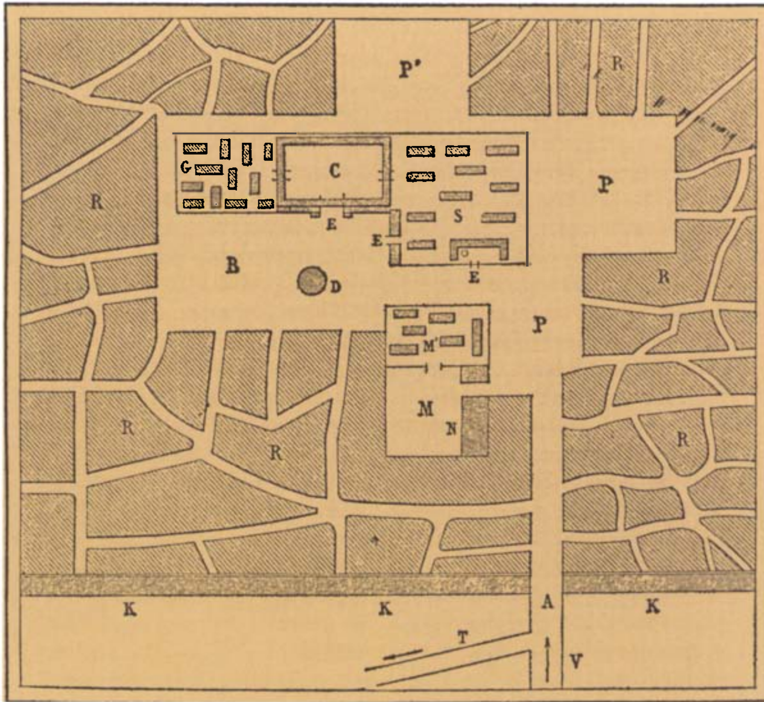
Since the kingdom's growth was due largely to a combination of trickery and armed conquest, its rulers remained keenly aware of their need for protection from those who would overthrow them. Not surprisingly, therefore, the first palaces were erected to defend the king and his court against their enemies. A succession of monarchs settled their cousins and other relatives in the zone around the palaces, in an attempt to provide an additional security buffer between the outside world and the inner sanctums.

In addition to affording protection, the palaces fulfilled a range of other functions: royal residence, center of political life, seat of government, and site of the kingdom's most important state functions. Here, for example, the king's subjects would come to solicit an audience with their ruler. Here the king would dispense justice. And here, too, the monarch would preside over the Annual Customs ceremonies.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the Abomey palace compound had grown into a sprawling complex of earthen buildings housing several thousand people.

Detail of a wall of King Guezo's palace.

Photographer unknown, ca. 1900. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The Photo Study Collection.



Plan of Abomey, 1856.

A. *Bridge and town gate from Kana.*
B. *Main square.*
C. *Courtyard of king's palace with rooms for official reception.*
D. *Sacrificial hut.*
E. *Gates to king's palace.*
G. *Huts of the Amazons.*
K. *Ditch and wall around the town.*
P. *Squares where markets were held.*
R. *Maze of small streets between compound walls.*
S. *Wives' huts.*
T. *Road to prince's house.*
V. *Road from Kana to Abomey.*

From Burton, Mission to Gelele *(1864; reprint, with an introduction and notes by C.W. Newbury, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Used by permission.*

This growth mirrored the kingdom's expansion; as each king fulfilled his pledge to leave behind more land than he inherited, the compound grew ever larger. Though a number of wives would sacrifice themselves to accompany the deceased king on his journey to the next world, others would often continue to live in the palace after his death, commemorating their late husband through ancestor-cult ceremonies.

One observer described the royal court of the mid-1800s as "a kingdom within a kingdom." Heavily fortified and zealously guarded by the monarch's elite guards—including the Amazon warriors—the compound was indeed a world unto itself—a world to which, along with the extended royal family, only nobles, courtesans, and appropriate servants enjoyed right of entry. Lives were governed by elaborate protocol. Only certain members of the royal retinue were permitted to address the king. Queens and princesses were not allowed to venture unguarded beyond the palace walls, and commoners could enter the complex only rarely, notably during the great annual celebrations, although even then most areas remained off-limits.

The diverse functions of the royal compound determined both the architecture and the arrangement of palace buildings. Each king's palace comprised a labyrinth of buildings grouped around several courtyards—typically, the *kpodoji* courtyard and its buildings, the *ajalalahennu* courtyard and its buildings, and the *honga.*

The kpodoji courtyard, a gathering place where the king and his court listened to songs and watched sacred dances, was usually flanked by three buildings: the *logodo,* where the council met to discuss day-to-day matters; the *lègèdèxo,* which

The ajalala of King Guezo.

Photograph by F. Gadmer, 1930. Courtesy Musée Albert-Kahn–Département des Hauts-de-Seine, France.

housed the guards; and the *tasinonxo,* which were the living quarters for the princesses in charge of the ancestors' cult. Some kings constructed a fourth building, the *jononho,* where they received foreign visitors.

The ajalalahennu courtyard, with its monuments and altars for offerings, was reserved for formal receptions and for ancestor worship. Around it were arrayed the principal royal apartments. The largest, the multiportal "hall of many openings" (ajalala), consisted of a bedroom at each end—one for the king, the other for a woman in charge of watching over the courtyard—and a great reception hall in between. The back doors of the ajalala led to the royal dwelling, the honga, to which the king admitted only his favorite

Ceremony in front of the ajalala of King Glélé.

Photographer/date unknown.

wives and children, his healers, his five principal ministers, and his designated heir.

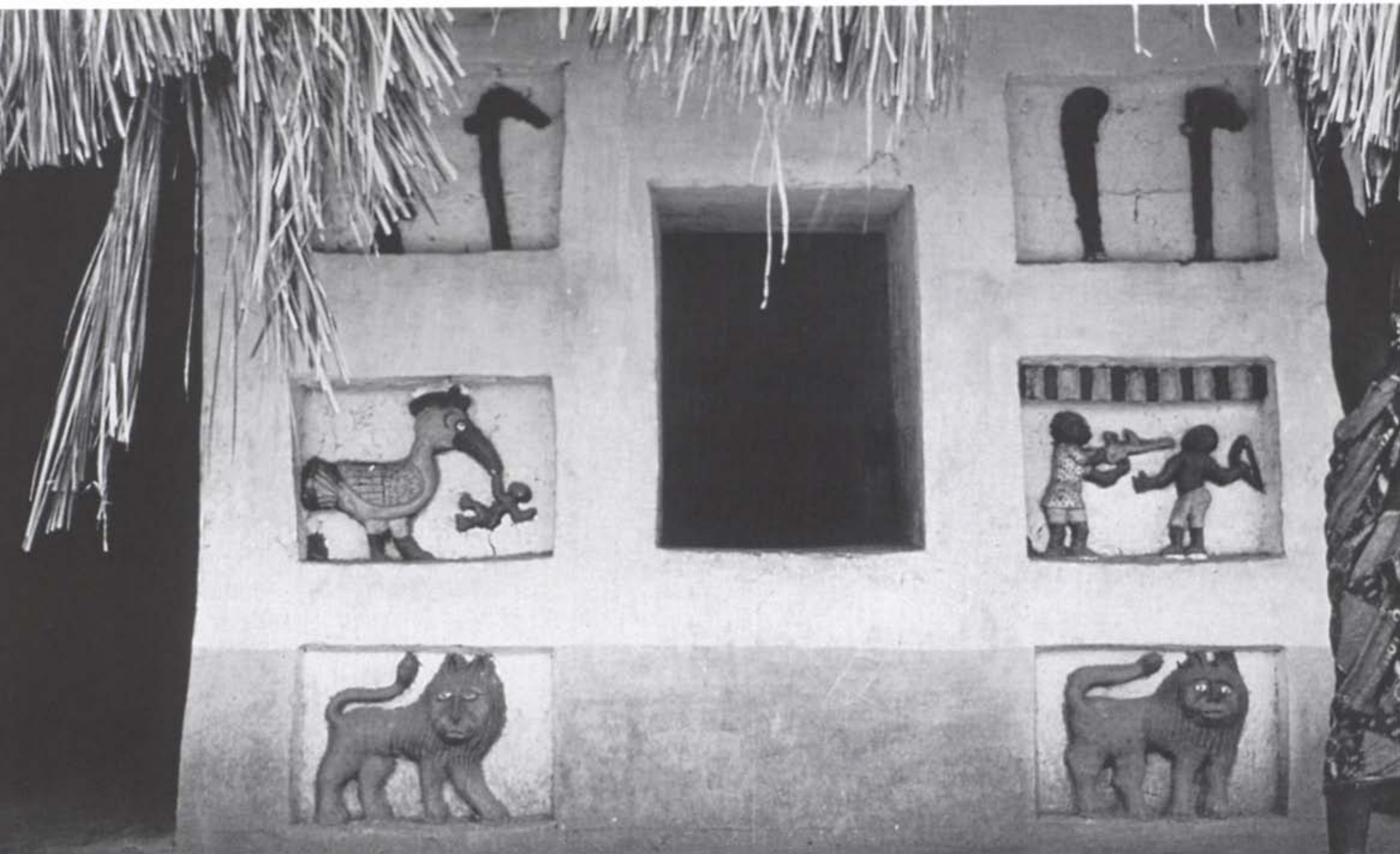
A long open gallery lined the ajalala's main facade, creating a portico that spanned the length of the structure. Seated outdoors in the ajalalahennu courtyard, the king presided over enthronement ceremonies and rites held to honor the royal dead. These festivals became important occasions for displaying the kingdom's artistic wealth and reinforcing the popular perception of the monarch's power. During performances, the large open court was filled to capacity, while the ajalala provided a vibrant backdrop: brightly colored textile appliqués were draped everywhere, complementing the bas-reliefs adorning the facade. Both appliqués and bas-reliefs displayed royal emblems and imagery that illustrated the ritual dances and storytelling.

Throughout the complex, formal entries filtered passage between buildings and courtyards. The palaces also harbored secret entries, called *tonli*, which the king used when he embarked on a clandestine evening outing or needed an unobtrusive route to safety. Other doors linked the various internal sections of each palace. In addition, small doors sheltered by overhanging grass roofs connected the various kings' complexes, thereby symbolizing the link between the dynasty's rulers.

When Behanzin set fire to the royal compound rather than let it fall into the hands of French colonizers, the flames consumed at least the thatch roofs of many of the palaces. Left unprotected, the earthen buildings suffered heavy damage during the rainy seasons in following years; eventually, the buildings fell into decay. During both the French colonial period and the period

of Benin independence that followed, the buildings were alternately neglected, demolished, restored, modified, or rebuilt, depending on the prevailing political and economic conditions.

Of the 44 hectares (190 acres) originally forming the royal compound, only the palaces of Guezo and Glélé, which now house the Historic Museum of Abomey, have been maintained. Restoration of the buildings was first attempted by Behanzin's half-brother, Agoli-Agbo I, apparently soon after Dahomey fell to the French. After he was exiled in 1900, however, the compound again fell into ruin. Today, it is not clear how much of the palaces were destroyed in the fire set by Behanzin and reconstructed early on, and there are many questions regarding the dates of origin of the surviving bas-reliefs. Some or all may have been



Bas-reliefs adorning the ajalala of Glélé. The top pair depict weapons; a battle scene and two of the king's symbolic animals—the hornbill and the lion—are also shown.

Photograph by Eva Meyerowitz, 1937. Neg. no. A1987-09-09, frame 34. Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The ajalala of King Guezo, a few years after the palace fires, showing crumbled walls.

Photographer unknown, ca. 1900. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The Photo Study Collection.

reproduced after the French conquest. According to the Frenchman René Le Herissé, however, who visited the site at the beginning of the century, the ajalala of King Glélé was among the surviving buildings; its bas-reliefs are therefore thought to be among the oldest extant originals.

The first French effort to restore Glélé's palace seems to have been undertaken prior to 1911 by a colonial administrator, E. Chaudoin, who had first "visited" the palace in 1890 as Behanzin's prisoner. Photographs of the palaces taken in 1911 by E. G. Waterlot, a French official, clearly show steep-pitched, wide-eaved thatch roofs in the traditional style. A 1930 photograph by a French photographer indicates that the wooden posts holding up the thatch roofs had been removed, possibly during a later restoration carried out by

As the palace compound developed over the reigns of successive kings, the courtyards were linked by small doorways.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

In addition to the principal palaces, the royal families built palaces of lesser importance in outlying areas. The crown princes lived in these residences before succeeding to the throne.

Photograph by a French military doctor who followed the colonial army, ca. 1893. Courtesy Getty Research Institute, Research Library, 94.R.56.

Postcard showing King Guezo's palace with its wide-eaved thatch roof.

Photograph from E. G. Waterlot, 1926.

the French colonial governor; even so, the thatch roofs remained.

During the 1930s, the thatch roofs were replaced with corrugated metal roofs with much shorter overhanging eaves. This change had dire consequences for the exterior walls and their sculpted decorations, which were no longer protected from direct exposure to the elements. The most severe problems occurred in the lower areas, particularly in the bas-reliefs located at the base of the walls. On the ajalala of Glélé, these included a row of lions—the emblem of the king.

In the early 1940s, the Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire restored the buildings of Guezo and Glélé. When the complex was opened to the public as the Musée Historique d'Abomey (Historic Museum of Abomey) in 1945, the restored

The entry buildings of the palaces of Glélé, left, and Guezo, far right, and Singbodji Square.

Photograph by F. Gadmer, 1930. Courtesy Musée Albert-Kahn–Département des Hauts-de-Seine, France.

historical buildings housed the museum, which exhibited treasures from the kingdom. In 1960, following independence from France, the Republic of Dahomey received its first Unesco funds for work on the palace compound. Several other Unesco missions followed. Modifications, including the repainting of some bas-reliefs, were carried out during this period. In 1982, Benin ratified the World Heritage Convention, and the Royal Palaces of Abomey were included as a cultural site on the Unesco World Heritage List; three years later they were added to the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger.

By the late 1980s, several buildings within the museum precincts—for example, those of King Guezo—had already been completely renovated. Glélé's ajalala remained one of the only intact original

The ajalala of Glélé, with the bas-reliefs in their original positions before their removal and subsequent conservation.
Photograph by Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.

structures with original bas-reliefs probably dating to the time of the Dahomean monarchy. For structural reasons, in 1988 the museum determined that Glélé's ajalala should be rebuilt—a decision in keeping with the historical practice of renovating palace buildings in the compound.

Recognizing the historical value of the bas-reliefs, the museum sought the advice of an architect working for the German embassy in Benin, who suggested detaching them from the facade before the building was reconstructed—a potentially risky undertaking. The bas-reliefs were cut from the walls and remounted as individual panels in heavy casings of earth strengthened with cement. These were supported by wooden frames and stored upright in the museum.

The ajalala of King Glélé was rebuilt out of stabilized earth—local earth mixed with a small amount of cement to ensure stability and longevity. Working closely from the originals, Beninois artists fashioned a new set of replica bas-reliefs, also of stabilized earth, and modern materials were used to paint them. The building was completed in 1996. Along with the restored palace of Guezo, it houses the Historic Museum of Abomey. Of the fifty-six bas-reliefs originally on Glélé's ajalala, fifty were saved. A selection of these is displayed in the museum's collection.

Guezo's palace courtyard and the rebuilt palace buildings.
Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1995.

Bas-Relief Art

Early in the eighteenth century, King Agaja is believed to have initiated the tradition of decorating palace walls. Decoration consisted of murals, encrusted shells and pearls, perforations, and bas-reliefs, but it is the bas-reliefs that have remained the most remarkable element. In addition to their exceptional artistry, which has led them to be described as "one of the most beautiful artistic creations of the people of the West African coast," they provide a document of exceptional historical value, because few other areas in Africa have so well preserved the traces of a cultural memory as it developed over the centuries. Examples can be found on temples, palaces, and other buildings throughout the region.

Bas-relief at temple near Abomey.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1996.

AGADJA

The original earth used to make bas-reliefs came from termite mounds such as this one near Abomey.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1996.

Commonly called *noudidè* in Fon, from the root word meaning "to design" or "to portray," the bas-reliefs are three-dimensional, modeled- and painted-earth pictograms. Early examples of the form, first in religious temples and then in the palaces, were more abstract than figurative. Gradually, figurative depictions became the prevalent style, illustrating the tales told by the kings' heralds and other Fon storytellers.

Palace bas-reliefs were fashioned according to a long-standing tradition of architectural and sculptural renovation. Ruling monarchs commissioned new palaces and artworks, as well as alterations of earlier ones, thereby glorifying the past while bringing its art and architecture up to date. While much of the original earth or clay was probably used again in the new building

Princess Houedehoun seated in her temple, which is decorated by several types of three-dimensional wall decorations.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.

Traditional coloring materials.

Photographs by Francesca Piqué, 1994.

Woman at an Abomey market selling balls of kaolin clay used as a white coloring material.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1994.

structure, the bas-relief designs themselves were subtly altered over time. Although this alteration complicates the issue of their originality, it also emphasizes the important function of the bas-reliefs as visual records of the kingdom's history. Some bas-reliefs may have been commissioned by newly enthroned rulers for their predecessors' *ajalalas,* or reception halls. Or, perhaps, the late king's bas-reliefs may have been remodeled and repainted to coincide with the Grand Customs ceremonies held in his honor after his death. The subject matter treated in some of the ajalala bas-reliefs of King Guezo, for example, suggest that they may have been completed soon after Glélé came to the throne in 1858. Glélé's bas-reliefs, in turn, were perhaps finished under the reign of King Behanzin, in preparation for ceremonies planned for the early 1890s but canceled because of the French conquest. Even today, the repainting and redecoration of important local buildings are timed to coincide with the onset of ritual ceremonies.

Bas-relief from the compound of the Hountondji family, whose generations of artisans fashioned the Abomey palace bas-reliefs.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1994.

Example of the earliest and most abstract form of three-dimensional wall decoration showing sculptural forms in window spaces (detail at right), in a temple.
Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1995.

The bas-reliefs are embedded in the walls, usually in niches on the facades of palace buildings and voudou temples. Originally, earth used in their fabrication came from termite mounds; it was dried, crushed, and mixed with a liquid residue of palm oil—a by-product of palm oil production—with some fibers added for strength. The sculptures were allowed to dry and then brightly decorated. Paint was made locally with organic colorants and inorganic pigments: dried and ground indigo leaves for blue; wild gingerroot for bright yellow; a wood powder or millet-stalk extract for red; and lamp soot for black. Kaolin, a natural clay, was used for white.

The first two types of bas-reliefs, showing the evolution toward a more figurative style, in the temple of Princess Houedehoun.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.

While statuettes and pottery were traditionally made by women, bas-reliefs were fashioned only by men. Historically, these artisans were part of the larger Hountondji family guild, whose members included blacksmiths and jewelers working exclusively for the royal court making metal sculptures and decorative arts of striking originality and beauty. This attribution is supported by the fact that bas-reliefs decorating the Hountondji family temple today are stylistically similar to the original bas-reliefs of Glélé. Also, it was the head of the Hountondji family who often explained to foreign visitors the objects and presentations performed during the ceremonies. By including various ceremonial motifs in the palace bas-reliefs, these artisans at once both artistically encapsulated and preserved a record of the kingdom's most important ritual.

Early European descriptions of the decorated palaces are relatively sparse. Such travelers as Alexandre d'Albeca (1895), Edouard Foa (1895), and René Le Herissé (1903 and 1911) all wrote reports, but the first comprehensive documentation was rendered in 1911 by E. G. Waterlot, who was so taken with the originality of the bas-reliefs that he had molds made of thirty-six of them at his own expense. Today these molds constitute an invaluable archival record, housed at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, with casts made from the molds in

The second type of bas-relief, with three-dimensional sculptural elements set into niches, in the temple at Tinji outside Abomey.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

Abomey. Together with old photographs and contemporary surveys of palace buildings and local temples, this documentation provides important clues to the stylistic development of the bas-reliefs.

Three broad stylistic patterns of three-dimensional wall decoration seem to have predominated at various periods of Abomey's history. The first type—abstract, or iconic, in nature—appears to consist of simple wall perforations in geometric form—usually triangular, rectilinear, or circular—that actually cut through the body of the wall. They probably appeared first in temples; even today, temple bas-reliefs tend to be more abstract than figurative. The adventurer J. A. Skertchly, who visited King Agaja's ajalala in the late nineteenth century, described the whitewashed walls pierced with square punctures, generally arranged in five motifs representing *weke*, the cosmos, and marking the four cardinal directions and the central sun. This icon, which can also take the form of a cross within a circle, appears frequently in Abomey today on royal stools, umbrellas, jewelry, and other artifacts, as well as in the inner temples of important gods and historical figures. It symbolizes the centrality and cohesion of the Dahomey kingdom as a divinely sanctioned space.

These perforations were functional as well as decorative and symbolic. Cutouts, for example, could harbor small oil lamps that provided light for nighttime ceremonies. Others served as windows for ventilation and light. Still others were used as spy holes. Skertchly, for example, observed the Amazons—the elite female warriors who formed part of the palace guard—"peeping through loop-holes . . . in the wall."

The second type of wall decoration found in early palace and temple architec-

Bas-reliefs set in niches in the walls.

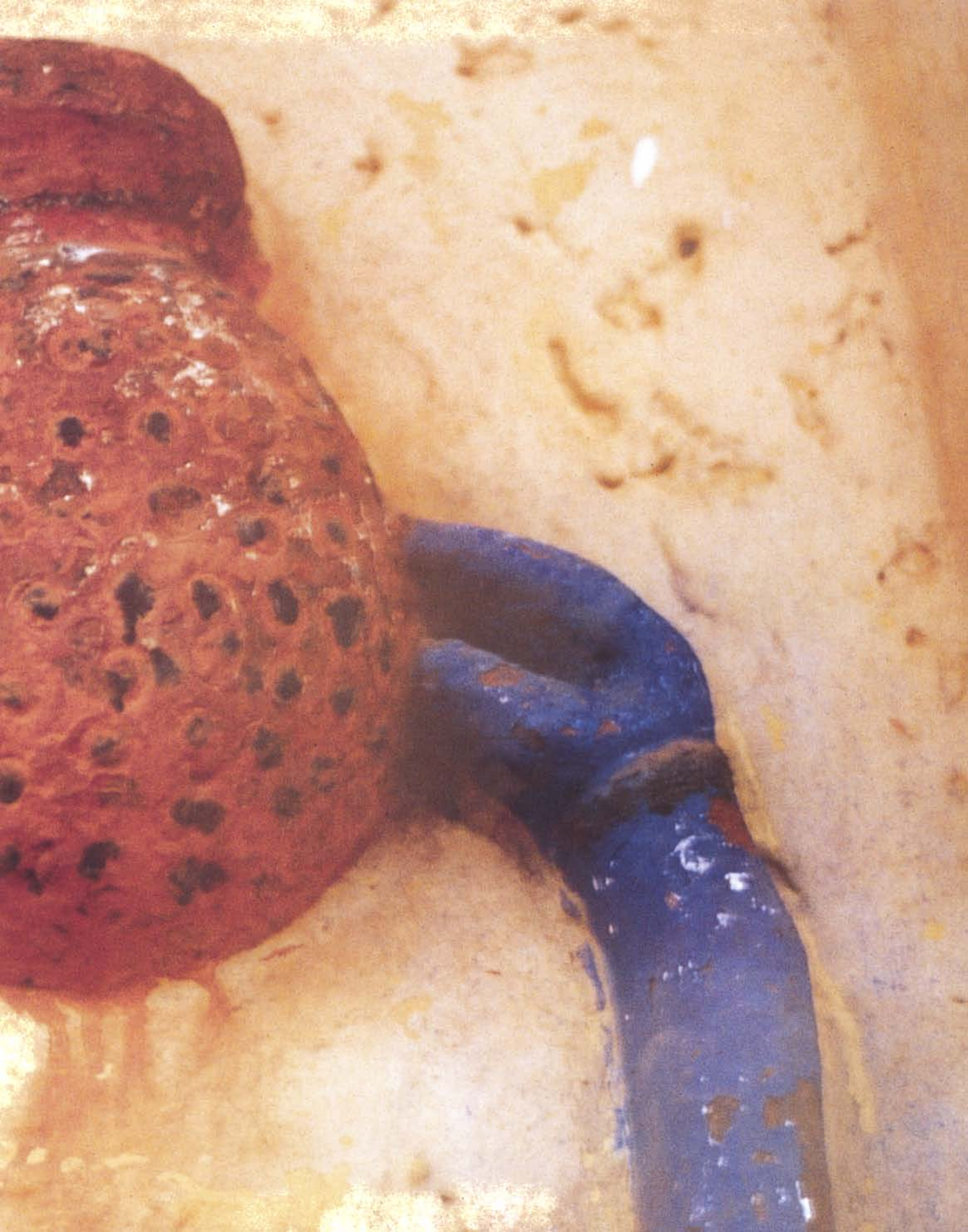
Photograph by Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.

ture combined the geometric cutouts with three-dimensionally modeled forms ranging from sculpted religious vessels to symbolically important animals. These decorations can be found in temples, where they depict gods; secular examples dating to the eighteenth-century reigns of Agaja and Tegbessou survive in the inner areas of some of these kings' private palaces. They are obvious forerunners of the last and most prevalent style, which consists of symbolically significant figures—humans, animals, weaponry, and other objects—all of which had particular meanings for the ruling king. Bas-reliefs of this type figure most prominently in the ajalalas of the kings Guezo and Glélé.

The Abomey bas-reliefs, while carefully rewrought by generations of artisans, have always retained their historical and artistic authenticity. Both in safeguarding the earlier bas-reliefs and in remodeling and repainting contemporary forms, conservation efforts during the twentieth century reinforce the interaction between past and present, between royal and popular art.

Example of the last and most fully rendered type of bas-relief, from the palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.



Reading the Walls

Column from Glélé's rebuilt ajalala *showing typical arrangement of bas-reliefs, with depictions of weapons forming the top row, various narratives in the middle, and royal symbols along the bottom.*
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1996.

Previous page: Detail of the jar-of-unity bas-relief before its removal from the ajalala of Glélé.
Photograph by Suzanne Preston Blier, 1986.

The palace bas-reliefs compensated in part for the lack of writing in Fon culture, serving as visual stories that recounted the history, customs, and rituals of the people. For nearly three centuries, the history of the Dahomey dynasty was perpetuated by various figures, from cult keepers and warrior chiefs to heralds who recited epic tales of kings. The bas-reliefs can be interpreted both as symbols and allegories, on the one hand, and as illustrated history, on the other. Their overarching theme is the glory of kingship—or, more prosaically stated, the strength and centralization of royal power.

Perhaps because the stories were transmitted orally before their depiction in the bas-reliefs, their narratives are very precise. They might illustrate the circumstances surrounding a king's accession to the throne, describe his program of government, or glorify his victories in battle. Royal omnipotence is often evoked through animal figures that symbolize powerful qualities attributed to a particular ruler—such as strength, perseverance, or courage—and through allegories that praise and sanctify the Dahomean monarchy. Once we are aware of the specific associations evoked by each bas-relief, we can "read" the stories on the walls.

"Our freedom can be compared to a jar with many holes, which cannot hold water. If each one of you, the sons of this nation, can put his finger in one hole, the jar will hold water."

In the early nineteenth century, King Guezo had just wrested the throne from his older brother Adandozan, under circumstances that could have caused a rift among the people of Abomey, and he relied on stories, song, and imagery to send them a powerful message of unity. This conserved bas-relief is replicated on the rebuilt palace walls of Guezo's son and successor, King Glélé. The image has been adopted as the national symbol of Benin.

The jar-of-unity bas-relief, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1996.

"The powerful buffalo crosses the country and nothing can stop or confront it."

As well as calling for unity, Guezo projected an image of strength by comparing himself to the buffalo, an animal reproduced fourteen times on his ajalala.

From the palace of Guezo.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

"Hornbill, it is to you that Se [the god of heavenly light] gave a burden to carry. If Se had given it to just any bird, it would not be able to hold it. But when Se put it on the head of the hornbill, this bird supported the weight."

From the rebuilt palace of Glélé.
Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1997.

When Glélé, who compared himself to the hornbill, succeeded to the throne, he inherited a number of problems. The "burden" noted in this phrase, one of several slogans associated with Glélé, is the hornlike protuberance at the top of the bird's beak. Glélé is reported to have said, "The baggage of life does not stay on the head of just anyone. The baggage of the whole country is on my head."[1] The hornbill was considered "the king of birds," and its beak was depicted as strong enough to pick up a man.

"The lion cub strikes terror in his enemies as soon as his teeth have grown."

After his victories over the neighboring Mahi at the outset of his reign, the young king Glélé compared himself to a lion cub, as a message to foreign enemies who might attempt to slow the kingdom's expansion, as well as to rivals within the kingdom who might challenge his power. A lion—with a supposedly human gaze—represents King Glélé on fifteen successive bas-reliefs on the bottom row of his ajalala.

From the rebuilt palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.

From Glélé's private palace.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1995.

"The chameleon walks slowly but can go far, and he will never break even the finest branch he walks on."

The chameleon, here depicted on one of the bas-reliefs of Glélé's ajalala, evokes a wily politician and is the symbol of King Akaba, who died some 150 years before Glélé came to power. Akaba reached the age of sixty before acceding to the throne. Here, the chameleon stands over a *goubassa*—the sword of the god of war.

From the rebuilt palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1995.

"Lightning strikes the palm tree but never the pineapple plant, which is close to the earth."

From the palace of King Kpengla.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1995.

King Agonglo's *djeho*—the small, round spirit house where his soul is believed to reside—bears emblematic bas-reliefs of pineapples, his main symbol. They allude not only to the danger of being struck by lightning (which the king avoided) but also to the obstacles he overcame when he ascended to power.

From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.

One of the major themes of the Abomey bas-reliefs is the glorification of the kingdom's military conquests. The scene above depicts Glélé's sacking of the rival kingdom of Kétou. A Dahomean warrior has felled one enemy and hacked off another's arm. On the right, a warrior aims point-blank at the head of a Yoruba enemy.

From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

The bas-reliefs depicted mythological figures as well as historical events. This image is of a fierce mythical warrior named Daghessou—a human figure with an animal head, who spits fire. According to tradition, Daghessou possessed a magical power that struck terror in the hearts of enemies. The fire evokes the lightning of a Fon god; the horned figure recalls the formation of an Amazon battalion known as "the furious antelopes" (see photograph of Amazons wearing horns, p. 14).

From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.

Cast of bas-relief from the palace of Glélé.

Photograph from E. G. Waterlot, 1926.

Cast of bas-relief from the palace of Glélé.

Photograph from E. G. Waterlot, 1926.

From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

The ajalala bas-reliefs of Guezo and Glélé flaunt an arsenal of weapons. Bas-reliefs represent the king's ceremonial *recades* (messenger sticks), as well as head-splitting *makpos* and other weapons, such as rifles, sabers, and swords.

From the palace of Guezo.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

Female warriors, known as Amazons—fierce, reputedly invincible, and deeply devoted to the king—held the place of honor as an assault regiment in the Dahomean army. They appear repeatedly on Guezo's ajalala. Here an Amazon carries off a captive. The valor of the Amazons was legendary. In one account of the final battle of Abeokuta in the mid–nineteenth century, they fearlessly scaled the walls of that rival city-state, only to be repulsed and thrown from the ramparts. One warrior, to show her disdain for the defenders, sat down some distance away, with her back to the enemy, and lit her pipe, which she calmly smoked while bullets from Abeokuta sharpshooters flew around her. Finally, she was killed and, soon after, beheaded. An Abeokuta defender carried her head through the besieged town, crying,

"Look well, soldiers. These are women fighting against us."

Amazon warriors.

Photograph by Edouard Foà, ca. 1890. Courtesy Getty Research Institute, Research Library, 93.R.114.

Catholic nun with two wives of King Glélé next to the throne of Guezo.

Photograph by F. Gadmer, 1930. Courtesy Musée Albert-Kahn–Département des Hauts-de-Seine, France.

Bas-relief of Guezo's throne.

Photograph by T. Spini and G. Antongini, 1972.

Perhaps the most impressive bas-relief commemorating victory is of Guezo's imposing throne. It sits on the heads of defeated enemy chiefs and is flanked by a recade and a ram's-head makpo.

Many bas-reliefs show the punishment inflicted on conquered enemies; this one, on the ajalala of King Glélé, depicts an Amazon torturing a Kétou warrior. The victim's stomach is being split open and filled with earth.

From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

War trophies are another popular theme. Here the severed head of a chief from a neighboring kingdom has been strapped to his horse—the penalty for having warned the enemy that the Dahomean army was approaching.

From the palace of Glélé, after conservation.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1996.

Another bas-relief on Guezo's ajalala shows a spindle over a severed head. It belonged to an enemy who boasted of "killing Guezo and spinning his head on the end of a spindle," and who was himself subjected to this torture.

From the palace of Guezo.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

The bas-relief depicting a baboon holding an ear of corn is a good example of how a single image evokes a long and complex story. It memorializes Dahomey's efforts to extricate itself from the grip of the Oyo overlords. To mock the Oyo king as a glutton never satisfied with Dahomey's annual tribute payment, King Adandozan sent him a parasol on which was an appliqué of a baboon gorging itself. In response, the Oyo leader sent back a hoe, encouraging the king to cultivate the land to pay his tribute. In response, Adandozan is reputed to have raged, "Our fathers cultivated, but with rifles, not with hoes. The Dahomey kings only cultivate war." Adandozan was eventually overthrown and his name obliterated from the dynastic tradition. His successor, Guezo, continued attacking the villages allied with the Oyo; Guezo's son Glélé undertook their systematic conquest and was able to free Dahomey from Oyo rule.

Modern bas-relief by Cyprien Tokoudagba and family, from wall at Abomey market.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

"No one can blame a crocodile for eating a fish."

Photograph by T. Spini and G. Antongini, 1972.

Oral tradition holds that King Glélé excelled in allegory. Those he devised are still famous, having been faithfully conserved and sung during homage ceremonies by the royal heralds and their descendants.

One of the most simple and yet most cryptic examples is the crocodile and the fish—an image that may suggest that the king's triumphs, however violent, are part of the natural order of things.

From rebuilt palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1996.

King Guezo was compared to Dan Ayido Houédo, a serpent biting its own tail. In this bas-relief, the serpent has horns, a sign that it is in fact the symbol of the male god Dan. It is painted in Dan's emblematic colors. By comparing himself to a god, Guezo projected an aura of timeless power; this image can be interpreted to signify that the kingdom of Dahomey was so vast that it was universally known.

"The rainbow in the sky cannot hide from the universe."

From the zinkpoho, formerly known as the Hall of Thrones.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

NOTE

1. Suzanne Preston Blier, "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.

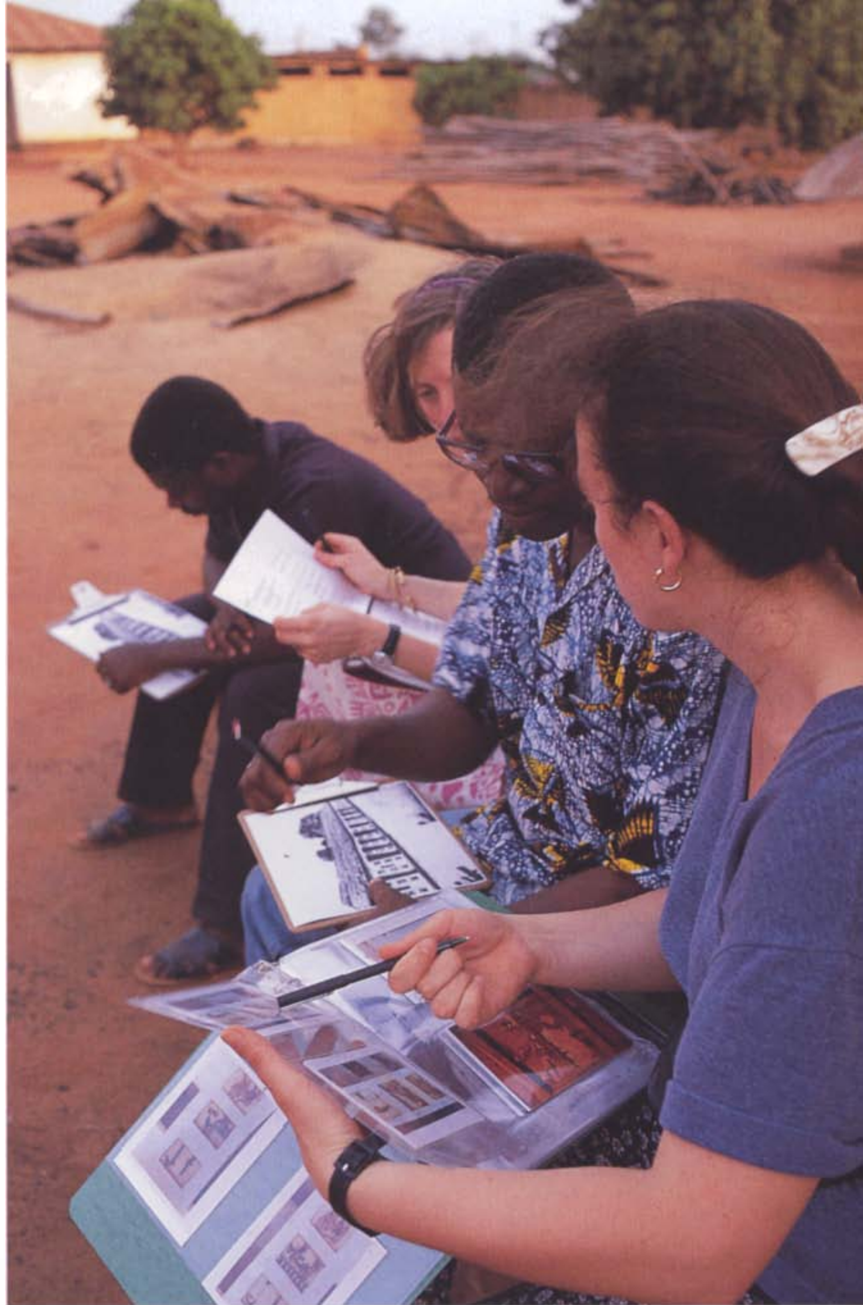
Conserving the Bas-Reliefs

In the fall of 1993, the Getty Conservation Institute and the Benin Ministry of Culture and Communication embarked on a four-year collaboration to save the bas-reliefs that had been detached from King Glélé's *ajalala* in 1988. "We knew that certain bas-reliefs were seriously threatened, and we wanted to take the first, highly urgent, preventive steps by dismounting and sheltering them," explains Rachida de Souza-Ayari, former director of Benin's Department of Cultural Heritage. "But this was not an ideal solution, because the deterioration continued. It was then that we knocked on the door of the Getty Conservation Institute."

Various earth-based mortar mixes were tested for filling cracks and cavities in the bas-reliefs.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1994.

CAUTION
IRWIN



The goal was not to try to restore the bas-reliefs to their original state but, rather, to repair major damage and arrest further deterioration. Copies of the original bas-reliefs would be created for the exterior walls of the rebuilt palace (part of the Historic Museum of Abomey), and the preserved originals would be displayed inside the museum.

The international team of conservators began by researching the history of bas-reliefs to better understand their origins and cultural context, turning to Beninois historians and local artists for information regarding the traditional methods used in making them. Oral history, early photographs, and the casts and notes made by the French colonial official E. G. Waterlot in 1911 helped identify each bas-relief and determine its original location on Glélé's ajalala facade. Next, the condition of each one was recorded, and the findings documented in written reports, photographs, and graphic diagrams.

The bas-reliefs removed from Glélé's ajalala were stored throughout the royal compound.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

Conservators referred to historic photographs, diagrams, and inventories to identify detached bas-reliefs, determine their original placement, and chart their changes over time. Of the original fifty-six bas-reliefs from Glélé's ajalala, four were destroyed during removal when the south corner of the building completely collapsed, and two others remain unaccounted for.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

Conservators carefully documented the structural and surface condition of each panel and its added support. Transparent acetate sheets were laid over black-and-white photographs of each bas-relief. Symbols were used to identify each type of damage, and a key to the symbols appeared on each transparency. The same method was used to record the treatment conducted.

Photographs by Susan Middleton, 1996 and 1994.

From structural damage to superficial problems, from broken bases to flaking paint, the fifty bas-reliefs to be conserved presented a range of conservation challenges. Photographs of the bas-reliefs taken before 1988, while they were still an integral part of the facade of Glélé's ajalala, showed them in relatively good condition. So it was clear that the heavy and fragile panels had suffered severe structural damage during the difficult detachment operation and in subsequent moves from one storage area to another in the museum.

The support frames of some of the bas-reliefs were fractured or, in one case, completely shattered. Some reliefs had become loose or separated from their supports, while others had large cavities behind the surface, with entire sections dangerously hollow. In several cases, only the relief—and not the original support—had been salvaged during the detachment; these bas-reliefs had been installed in newly made niche panels.

The long-term destructive effects of water, to which earthen materials are especially vulnerable, were also evident. In the 1930s, after the traditional wide thatch roofs were replaced with low-pitched, corrugated metal roofs, the bas-reliefs were exposed to the elements. Rainwater gradually eroded the modeled earth of the bas-relief figures. Soluble salts may be present in the building materials, in the ground, or in the cement used in earlier repairs. When

Several bas-reliefs had suffered much damage and were found with broken bases and detached fragments of relief.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.

Above: Bas-relief detail showing multiple paint layers.
Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1996.

Right: Bas-relief detail showing the effects of salt efflorescence.
Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1997.

it rains, these salts dissolve in water; then, when the water evaporates, the salts crystallize—a destructive process that damages the paint and plaster, often leaving a white veil covering the surface. This resulted in widespread damage; powdering patches of earth and paint, for example, were evident on nearly all of the lion bas-reliefs that had formed the bottom row of Glélé's ajalala.

Analysis revealed that throughout their history, the bas-reliefs had been repainted several times, with some covered by as many as six layers of paint. The older layers were made from natural organic colorants and inorganic pigments mixed with an organic binder, while the newer layers appeared to be composed of synthetic paints. The fluctuating climate, along with the incompatibility of the different paint layers, resulted in serious damage: paint was flaking, powdering, or missing, and in some places where there were losses, the red earth of the support was exposed.

In devising and implementing a treatment plan, the team adhered to several basic conservation principles: intervention should be minimal; new materials should be compatible with original materials; and all treatments should be reversible. Another objective was to streamline the process so that the Beninois could easily execute future work after the GCI project was completed. The conservation training of local museum personnel was an important aspect of the project.

The bas-relief artist Cyprien Tokoudagba gave the team access to one of the local quarries. In the GCI laboratories in Los Angeles, earth taken from the quarry and earth from the bas-reliefs were analyzed and compared. In composition, particle-size distribution, and color, the samples were so similar that the quarry was selected as the source of material for the conservation project. Different mortar mixtures were tested to find the one best suited to each necessary repair. Earth stabilized with 10 percent hydraulic lime was used to fill cracks in the panels' added supports and the deep cavities behind their surfaces. For fills in the original support, local earth

Training session in a shady part of the museum courtyard.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

Gathering earth from a local quarry for use in conservation treatments.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1996.

The conservation team making mortar mixes and test blocks.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

Sieving earth to use in treatments in the museum courtyard.
Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1995.

mixed with water was found to be the best match in color and compatibility.

Bas-reliefs received emergency preliminary stabilization before being moved to the workshop for complete treatment. In cases of serious structural damage, it was necessary to insert an internal armature into the base and build up the earth around it. Large, loose fragments were pinned from behind, anchored into the support, and reattached with an earthen mortar. Paint flakes were held in place by a facing of Japanese paper, then reattached with a solution of water and acrylic resin.

Once stabilized, the panels were ready to be moved to the conservation workshop. However, weighing about 300 kilograms (over 650 pounds), a detached bas-relief panel is difficult to move and likely to crumble or crack. So the team developed a pulley system for raising and lowering the panels, as well as a large pushcart for moving them. They also adapted a small

Bas-reliefs in storage before treatment.
Photograph by Julián Zugazagoitia, 1993.

industrial dolly and a portable wooden trackway to facilitate transportation.

Before risking the original bas-reliefs on this custom-made system, the conservators decided to test it on a full-size model. Using their bare feet, they mixed a mortar of 90 percent earth from the nearby quarry and 10 percent cement, which they built up in a wooden form measuring approximately 1 by 1.2 meters. Like the detached bas-reliefs it simulated, the full-size mock-up had chicken-wire reinforcement. The team sculpted a replica of King Guezo's "perforated jar of unity" bas-relief, let it set three weeks, and then used it to test transportation methods.

Once the transportation system proved reliable, the bas-reliefs were well wrapped and moved to the workshop. There, conservators and technicians fixed structural damage, addressed inappropriate earlier interventions, and stabilized the bas-reliefs against naturally caused deterioration.

Before the damaged bas-reliefs were moved, loose paint flakes were secured by Japanese paper strips.
Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1994.

Mini-drills and micro-chisels were used to remove an incompatible cement mixture that had probably been applied at the time the panels were detached. Deep cavities were filled using syringes to inject a liquid mixture of extrafinely sieved earth, hydraulic lime, and acrylic adhesive, and superficial losses and cracks were repaired with mortar. In the last phase of conservation, the conservation team reattached loose paint flakes with an earth mortar and acrylic adhesive; consolidated powdering paint with a low-percent solution of acrylic resin; and, where necessary, carefully cleaned the surface with poultices of acetone in cotton wadding. Inpainting—the process of touching up paint where the original is missing—was performed only on the backgrounds, not on the painted relief figures themselves.

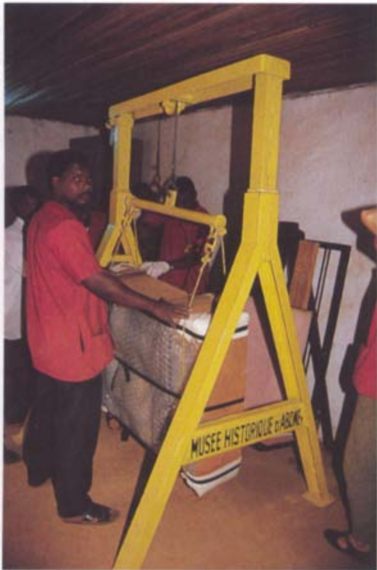
At first, all that was visible of the most seriously damaged bas-relief was the back of its shattered shell. The three-dimensional form was in so many pieces that it was hard to discern the original image.

To reassemble the pieces of the bas-relief, small sticks and string were used to create a reference grid (similar to those used at archaeological sites) that was laid over the panel. An identical grid was reproduced with chalk inside a wooden box the same size as the bas-relief. Using this grid

The team sculpted a replica of King Guezo's jar-of-unity bas-relief, let it set for three weeks, and then used it to test the transportation system.

They made a mix of stabilized earth and built it up in a wooden form, before sculpting the relief.

Photographs by Susan Middleton, 1994.



After the transportation system was tested with the model, the bas-reliefs were well wrapped, hoisted by pulley onto the push-cart, and moved along the portable path to the workshop. Here, again using the pulley, the team set the bas-reliefs onto a specially constructed easel for treatment.

Photographs top and far left by Francesca Piqué, left and opposite by Susan Middleton, 1994.

Fixing flaked paint with adhesive using a small syringe.
Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1995.

The conservation workshop.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.

Filling cracks with earth mixture.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.

Inpainting—the process of touching up paint where the original is missing.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1995.

system, conservators placed the frame face up in the wooden box; then, piece by piece, they turned over the fragments and transferred them to their corresponding positions in the box. Finally, the identity of bas-relief number 46 was revealed—a crocodile with a fish in its mouth, used by King Glélé to remind his subjects that "no one can blame the crocodile for eating the fish."

Only the fish was still attached to the earthen support, and the ground of the niche had been entirely overplastered, probably after detachment from the palace, with a mix of earth and cement. The added plaster had since come loose and broken into pieces. Conservators reassembled these pieces like a giant jigsaw puzzle to produce a silhouette outline, then assembled and attached the fragments of the relief figure's shape within this form.

Once it was stabilized in the conservation workshop, local welders fabricated a new internal armature. This support

was covered with several layers of stabilized earth before the fragments were reassembled and attached to the base. The surface was then cleaned, and the flaking paint was fixed in place to the plaster surface. The final presentation of the bas-relief shows it in its fragmentary state on the new support.

The conserved bas-reliefs were either stored or exhibited, and a maintenance

The most seriously damaged bas-relief was hard to recognize. By consulting historical photographs, the team was able to identify and position this bas-relief while reassembling it.

Photograph top left by Francesca Piqué, 1994; top right by Leslie Rainer, 1994; middle by Susan Middleton, 1995; bottom by Susan Middleton, 1997.

Bas-reliefs before and after conservation treatment, which aimed not to restore them to their original state but to repair them and prevent further deterioration. It was also important to distinguish between original and new materials.

Photographs by Susan Middleton, 1994 and 1995.

plan was prepared to ensure their long-term survival.

For both the GCI and the Beninois, the Abomey project involved more than the conservation of a set of unique and historically important objects. The joint undertaking contributed to a growing local consciousness regarding the value of conservation—which in Benin comprises not only material objects but also such performance media as ritual, music, and dance. In addition, the inclusion of a training component in the conservation project allowed Beninois museum and conservation professionals to acquire new skills. While some of these staff will remain at the Abomey site to ensure ongoing preventive treatment of the bas-reliefs, others will use their new knowledge at other sites with similar conservation problems throughout Benin.

The Historic Museum of Abomey is a unique institution, not only because of its setting within the palace compound of the kings of Dahomey but also because of its extraordinary collection of Fon art. In addition to the bas-reliefs, its exhibits cover the range of artistic objects produced during the dynasty's long reign. The palaces of kings Guezo and Glélé, once off-limits to commoners, are now open to the public. Colorful bas-reliefs line the exterior walls of the kings' *ajalalas,* or reception halls, while various palace buildings house royal costumes, thrones, weapons, sculpture, appliqués, and sacred voudou and ritual objects.

Interior gallery of reconstructed ajalala of Glélé.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1996.

Artist working on bronze mask.

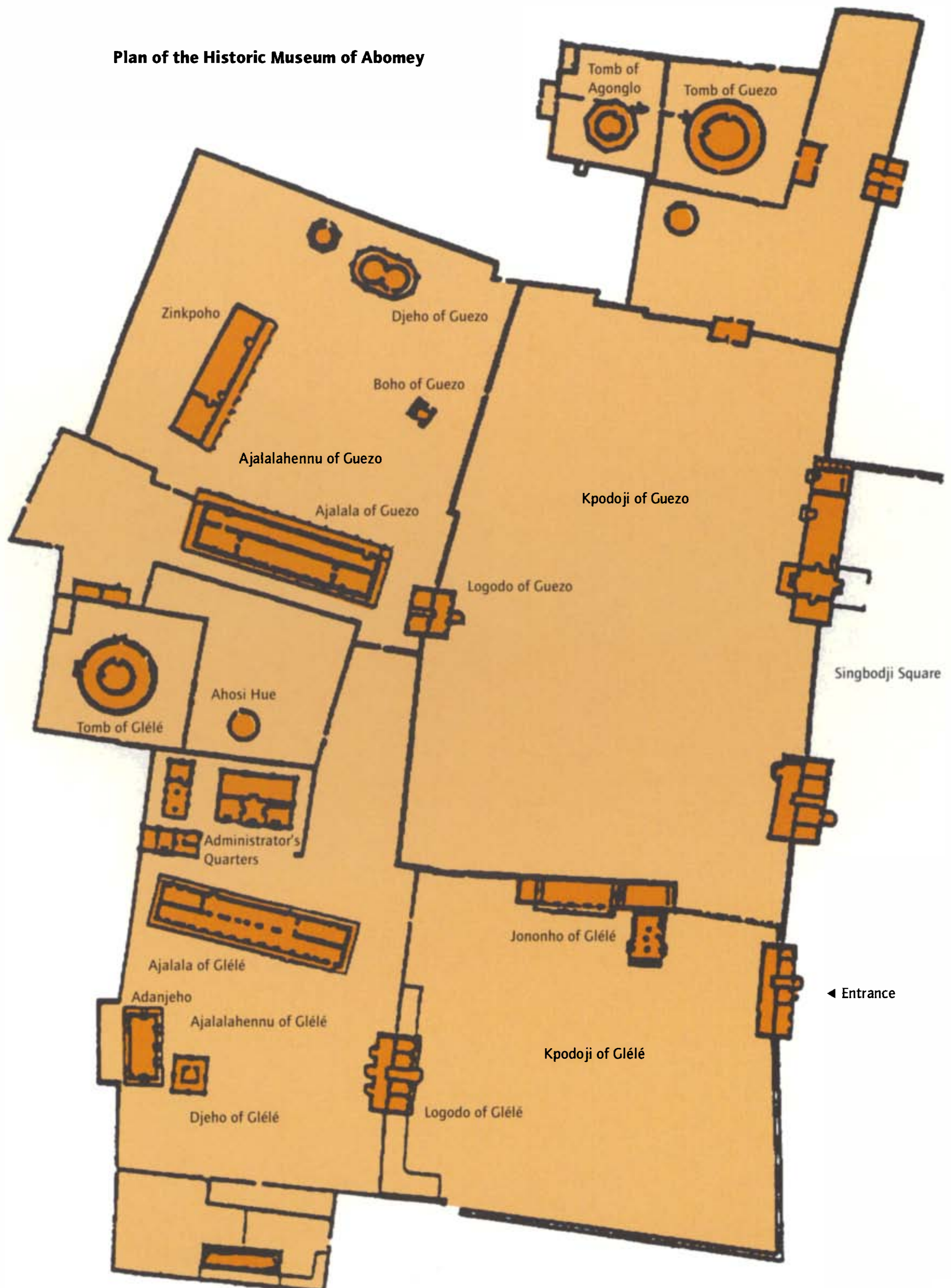
Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1997.

The original opening of the museum in 1945 was greeted with much enthusiasm. An English ethnographer, for example, called it "the first national museum . . . in West Africa housed in buildings stylistically suitable for the contents."

Today visitors enter the museum through a small rectangular building that leads to the *kpodoji,* the exterior courtyard of King Glélé. Here they are greeted by an explosion of brightly colored textiles. Hand-crafted appliqués, tablecloths, woven textiles—along with bronzes and jewelry—crowd artisans' tables along the southern edge of the courtyard, where museum tours begin. Traditionally, these wares were not sold within the palace grounds. However, the Fon were always known for their art, and, in fact, both appliqué and brass and silver artists were retained by the kings to help glorify the monarchy. The popular open-air market celebrates the many varied art forms being fashioned in Benin today.

On the northern edge of the courtyard, Glélé's *jononho*—the reception hall where, more than one hundred years ago, he received foreign visitors—houses an exhibit covering the history of Dahomey. Maps show the migration of the early

Reconstructed palace of Glélé. Visitors can compare the replica bas-reliefs seen here with the conserved originals on display inside.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1996.


Plan of the Historic Museum of Abomey
Tomb of Agonglo
Tomb of Guezo
Zinkpoho
Djeho of Guezo
Boho of Guezo
Ajalalahennu of Guezo
Ajalala of Guezo
Kpodoji of Guezo
Logodo of Guezo
Singbodji Square
Ahosi Hue
Tomb of Glélé
Administrator's Quarters
Jononho of Glélé
Ajalala of Glélé
◄ Entrance
Adanjeho
Ajalalahennu of Glélé
Kpodoji of Glélé
Djeho of Glélé
Logodo of Glélé

Dahomeans and the subsequent expansion of the kingdom.

Glélé's *logodo*, where the king once met with his council, connects the outer and inner palace courtyards. It houses models of the royal palace compound. Straight ahead, through the interior courtyard, lies the *adanjeho*, with an exhibit of military objects and regalia—*makpos*, ceremonial swords, other weapons, and costumes.

To the right is Glélé's ajalala, where costumes, appliqués, and royal parasols, as well as gifts offered to the kings by visitors from other countries, are on display. The facade is adorned by fifty-six new bas-reliefs, carefully wrought replicas of those that decorated the original structure. Those on the top row show the king's arsenal: *recades* (messenger sticks), makpos, hatchets, swords, *goubassa* (the ritual sword of Gu, god of war), and rifles. The middle

Museum exhibits include royal jewelry, above, and ceremonial recades, left.

Photographs by Francesca Piqué, 1997.

Appliqués at artists' market.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

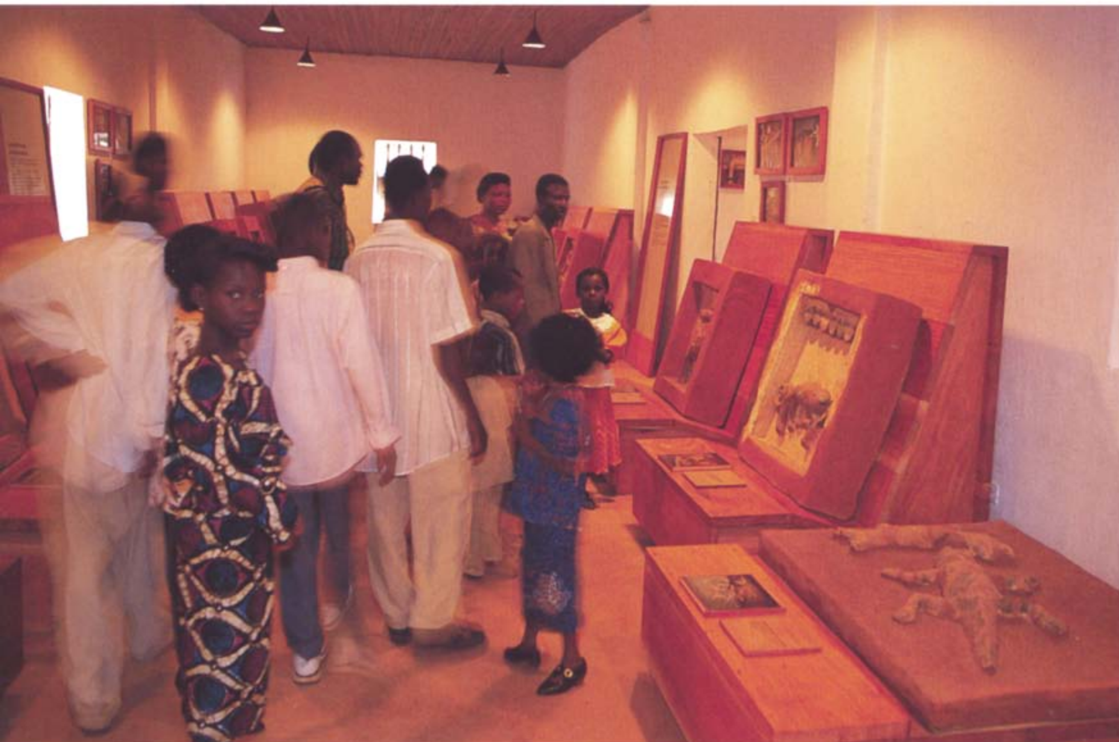
row depicts battles, scenes of enemies being tortured, and royal allegories. Along the bottom row are bas-reliefs depicting Glélé's symbol of strength, the lion.

Some of the conserved original bas-reliefs from Glélé's ajalala are exhibited in the former quarters of the French colonial administrator, where they are protected from the elements. The exhibit also presents information about preservation efforts from the early 1900s onward, describes the bas-reliefs' removal from the palace walls, explains the iconography of their scenes and symbols, and documents their recent conservation. Bas-reliefs not on display are kept in long-term storage; they constitute an important archive of information about the Dahomey kingdom.

Visitors to the museum can view other palace buildings from the times of Guezo and Glélé—buildings to which not only commoners but also important

Funerary symbol and sculpture on display in museum.

Photographs by Francesca Piqué, 1997.



Museum visitors view exhibit of conserved bas-reliefs.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

Voting in presidential election outside the palace of Glélé.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1996.

visitors, as well as the most noble-born Dahomeans, never would have gained admittance: the small *boho*—or power house—of King Guezo; the *djeho* (spirit house) where his soul is said to rest; the sacred tomb of King Glélé; and the collective tomb (*ahosi hue,* or house of the king's wives), where the forty-one wives who followed Glélé to the afterlife are buried.

The palaces are also the site of ongoing ceremonies—civil, religious, and royal—many of which are presided over by the Fon people's current royal guardian, King Agoli-Agbo III of Abomey, who lives outside the royal compound. Several of the kings' wives—royal descendants who reside on-site—make offerings every four days to the souls of Dahomey's ancestral rulers, thereby keeping alive the tradition of connecting to those who have traveled to the next world.

Royal dancers performing at ceremony in palace compound.
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

"Our colleagues tell us that this is not a museum," says Rachida de Souza-Ayari, former director of Benin's Department of Cultural Heritage, "since the objects, though they are museum pieces in the sense that they are inventoried, continue to be used.... We believe that this site lives through the existence of its material culture—its buildings, its objects, its bas-reliefs—and its non-material culture, which is its most important dimension." At the museum, history, culture, art, ritual, and commerce intersect in a space that is both sacred and secular, at a time when centuries-old art forms are being both preserved and reinvented.

A Living Tradition

From its historical origins as religious art, and then as the official art of the Dahomean royal monarchy, the bas-relief has in recent years blossomed into a popular and versatile artistic vernacular. In contemporary Benin, bas-relief art complements other traditional practices. In addition to the works in the Abomey palace compound, newly fashioned examples of the form—both secular and religious—can be found throughout the country. As practiced by various Beninois artists, the art encompasses a wide range of subject matter—from traditional royal symbols to commercial iconography, from religious and folk imagery to the epic themes of African history.

Contemporary artist Cyprien Tokoudagba, assisted by his son, making bas-relief on Abomey market wall.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1996.

Current artists execute traditional themes in a contemporary fashion, such as in this bas-relief by Tokoudagba and his family on wall surrounding Abomey market.

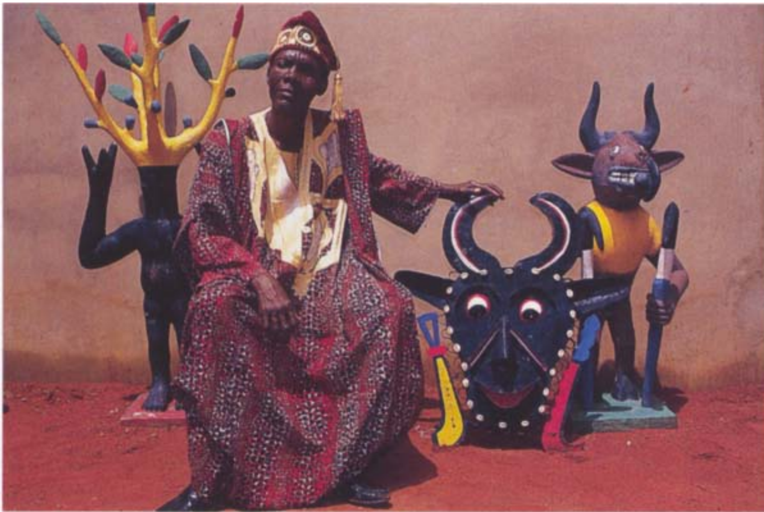
Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

Opposite: Johnny Walker bas-relief at CoEco Bar, by contemporary artist Yves Pédé.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

In Benin today, there are a number of artists working in the bas-relief form and related sculptural media. To a large extent, their craft is based in traditional techniques, which have been enhanced by recent discoveries of new materials. For example, the replica bas-reliefs on the reconstructed palace buildings of Guezo and Glélé in the Historic Museum of Abomey include a small amount of cement—rather than the traditional palm fibers—to stabilize and enhance the material's ability to withstand climatic conditions. And other bas-reliefs are often made wholly of cement rather than of the traditional earth. Also, rather than preparing their own dyes from natural pigments, today's artists generally use commercially available synthetic paint.

These artists pass their knowledge along to new generations of apprentices—often from the same family—who today, as in centuries past, form a sort of guild. In keeping with this practice, one of the



Cyprien Tokoudagba with several of his sculptures, which depict various deities and other folk figures. His art has been exhibited at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1996.

Sculpture by Cyprien Tokoudagba in the Sacred Forest, known as the home of voudou spirits, near Ouidah.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

best-known artists in Abomey, Cyprien Tokoudagba, is joined in his work by various family members. In a break from traditional guild practice, in which only men worked on bas-reliefs, Tokoudagba's wife and daughter also participate in such endeavors as the creation of the replica bas-reliefs now displayed in the Historic Museum of Abomey.

Tokoudagba's art draws from the cultural and historical imagination of the Fon people. His bas-relief depictions of the traditional iconography of the Dahomean monarchy also decorate various public places in Abomey, attesting to the enduring power these images exercise in the popular imagination. Other creations range from whimsical polychrome statuettes and small bas-relief plaques to reinforced concrete statues and wall paintings that decorate a number of temples throughout the city.

The arrangement of bas-reliefs on the Toffo monastery near Abomey is reminiscent of the royal palaces.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1998.

The monastery bas-reliefs depict biblical scenes, such as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1998.

One of the best-known works of the sculptor and architect Ayi, another contemporary master, is the chapel of the Toffo monastery, near Abomey. Here, bas-reliefs adorn columns lining an inner court, forming an integral architectural element in much the same way they did in the palaces of the Dahomean kings. The chapel bas-reliefs depict scenes from the Bible: one shows the Creation of the world, for example, while another represents the myth of the Garden of Eden with a black Adam and Eve.

Yves Pédé expresses both traditional and contemporary themes on appliqués and bas-reliefs. He is the first artist to create popular depictions of voudou priests and dancers—images that had previously been restricted to royal palaces and religious temples. Pédé's bas-reliefs depicting the symbols of Dahomey's traditional kings are on the walls of hotels and restaurants throughout the country. Contemporary symbols—

Bas-relief of Hevioso, voudou god of thunder, on the palace of Guezo. One of the powers of the thunder gods is to strike dead by lightning those who work the fields on the day commemorating a great battle.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1994.

Voudou

While about one-third of the people in Benin are Christian or Muslim, the majority believe in animism—the doctrine that spirits exist separately from physical bodies. Whatever their religion, however, they commonly practice voudou. Rooted in ancient beliefs, voudou was born among the Fon, Ewe, and Yoruba peoples of the Guinea Coast. The Fon incorporated gods of conquered tribes into their own pantheon, creating an ever-evolving animist religion. In the New World, this belief system evolved into *voodoo*, as transplanted West African slaves incorporated elements of Christianity and European folklore into their native beliefs.

The practice of voudou is based on a belief in the existence of hundreds of spirits, each with unique supernatural powers. Such deities as sky gods, thunder gods, earth gods, fate gods, and ancestor gods dwell everywhere, connecting the earthly realm to the spirit world. "You couldn't begin to count the voudou gods," cautions Suzanne Preston Blier, professor of African art history at Harvard University. "There may be two thousand, there may be two hundred thousand." They protect against evil forces and play a role in every conceivable aspect of daily life. In the modern world, for example, Gu, the ancient god of iron, exercises dominion over automobiles. However, observes Blier, "the Gu dwelling in your car would be different from the one dwelling in mine."

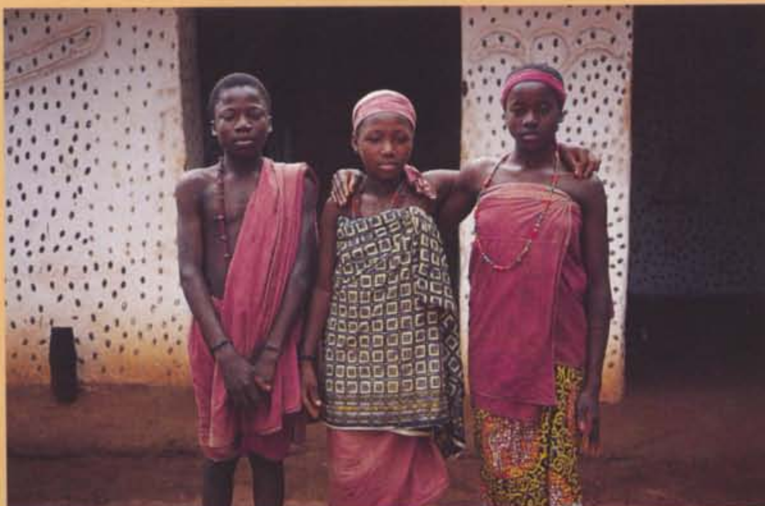
Voudou worship typically takes place in a fetish temple. Ritualized worship of the spirits or fetishes often involves blood, animal sacrifice, dance, and—perhaps most dramatically—trances in which a god is said to take possession of a devotee's body.

Temple at Tinji, outside Abomey.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

Voudou ceremony in private house.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1997.



Hut in honor of voudou spirits, with wall paintings.

Photograph from report by René Le Herissé, 1911.

Voudou priest and priestesses at Temple of Sakbata, near Abomey.

Photograph by Francesca Piqué, 1997.

White horse bas-relief by Yves Pédé at the Fifth Dimension bar in Abomey.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

The artist Yves Pédé in the courtyard of Hotel Guedevy.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

Modern bas-relief at the CoEco Bar.

Photograph by Susan Middleton, 1997.

such as the locally celebrated white horse at a popular Abomey bar and the abstracted relief figures at an Abomey hotel—also demonstrate the medium's versatility.

Bas-relief art can be found elsewhere throughout the country as well. Its scope is particularly evident in the Gate of No Return, a national monument at the end of the Slave Road in Ouidah, the seaside town conquered by the Dahomean monarch Agaja in the early eighteenth century—and which, until the late nineteenth century, served as a center of the West African slave trade. The monument, a collaborative work by artists from both Benin and neighboring countries, features an immense arch with bas-relief decoration, as well as various free-standing sculptures.

The monument's design and historical subject matter embody the tradition of visual storytelling central to the bas-relief form since the first works were commissioned by Dahomean kings in the eighteenth century. Here, however, history is told not on palace walls but against an immense natural backdrop of earth, sea, and sky; and the purpose is not to glorify the exploits of the Dahomean monarchy but to acknowledge the countless thousands of Africans deported in slave ships to the New World—including those sold to European slave traders by the Dahomean kings themselves. The monument was commissioned by Unesco and the government of Benin to commemorate the historical truths of the slave trade; it is one of the country's most visited sites.

Gate of No Return, Ouidah. In addition to honoring the memory of the Africans shipped into slavery, the monument is dedicated to their descendants living throughout the world today.

Photograph by Leslie Rainer, 1997.

The saga of the Abomey bas-reliefs suggests how conserving the art of the past can illuminate the art of the present by affording a deepened understanding of the history and traditions that nourish it. In Benin today, the practice of bas-relief art serves as an homage to the Dahomean dynasty of centuries past as well as a way of perpetuating and celebrating Fon culture in spite of the vicissitudes of history. One hundred years after the end of the kingdom of Dahomey, the art of the Dahomean kings has become the art of the Beninois people.

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
Dorothé 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