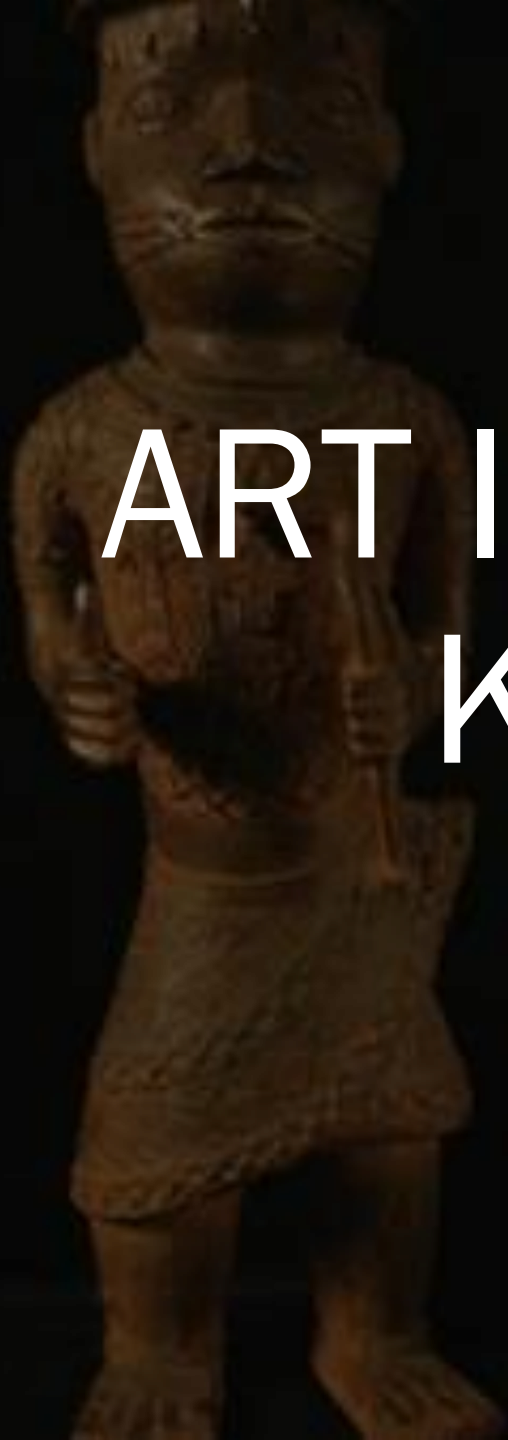


ART IN THE BENIN KINGDOM



- In Benin City, craft workers were organized into groups known as guilds. There were guilds for wood carvers, ivory carvers, leather workers, blacksmiths and weavers. Most important of all was the brass casters' guild. They were only allowed to work for the Oba (king).
- The art of Benin features people, animals and gods. It provides a fascinating guide to what life and religion were like in the kingdom of Benin.
- Some animals, such as crocodiles and leopards, appear many times in the art of Benin. They are used as symbols to demonstrate the power of their king, the Oba.



Crocodile

- Crocodiles can be extremely fierce, and they can kill their prey instantly.
- In the art and legends of Benin, the Oba was often shown as a crocodile. Like a crocodile, he could act very swiftly and put his subjects to death if they dared to disobey him.



Leopard

- The leopard was seen as the king of the animals, just like the Oba was the king of his people.
- The Obas of Benin kept pet leopards as a symbol of their power. Once a year, the Oba's leopards were led through the streets in chains. This was a sign that the Oba was even more powerful than the king of beasts!



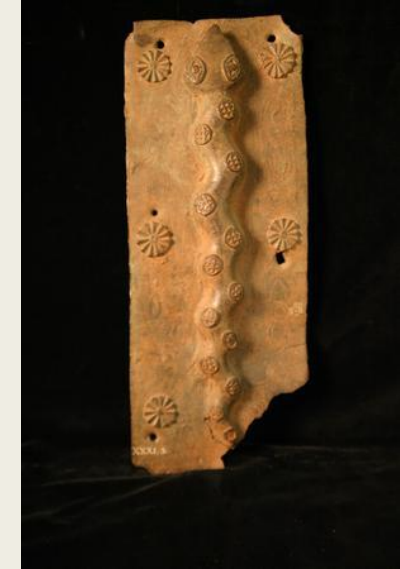
Mudfish

- Mudfish can survive in water and on land. They swim in water and they use their fins to 'walk' on land.
- The mudfish was used as a symbol for the Oba because the Oba could also survive in two places. People believed that the Oba belonged to the world of humans (represented by land) but also to the world of the gods (represented by water).



Python

- The people of Benin saw the python as the king of all the snakes, just like the Oba was the king of all the tribes.
- They believed that pythons were sent by the god Olokun to punish anyone who did wrong. The Oba also had the role of punishing wrongdoers.



What materials did craftworkers use?

CRAFT WORKERS IN BENIN USED LOTS OF DIFFERENT MATERIALS. PEOPLE WORKED WITH CLAY, WOOD AND LEATHER. WEAVERS USED FIBRES FROM PLANTS TO MAKE COLOURFUL CLOTH. THE MOST PRECIOUS MATERIALS WERE BRASS, CORAL AND IVORY.

PEOPLE BELIEVED THAT BRASS HAD THE POWER TO DRIVE AWAY EVIL. IT WAS SO SPECIAL THAT IT COULD ONLY BE USED IN THE ROYAL COURT. THE PALACE WALLS WERE COVERED WITH PLAQUES MADE FROM BRASS AND IT WAS USED TO MAKE FIGURES AND HEADS FOR THE ROYAL ALTARS.

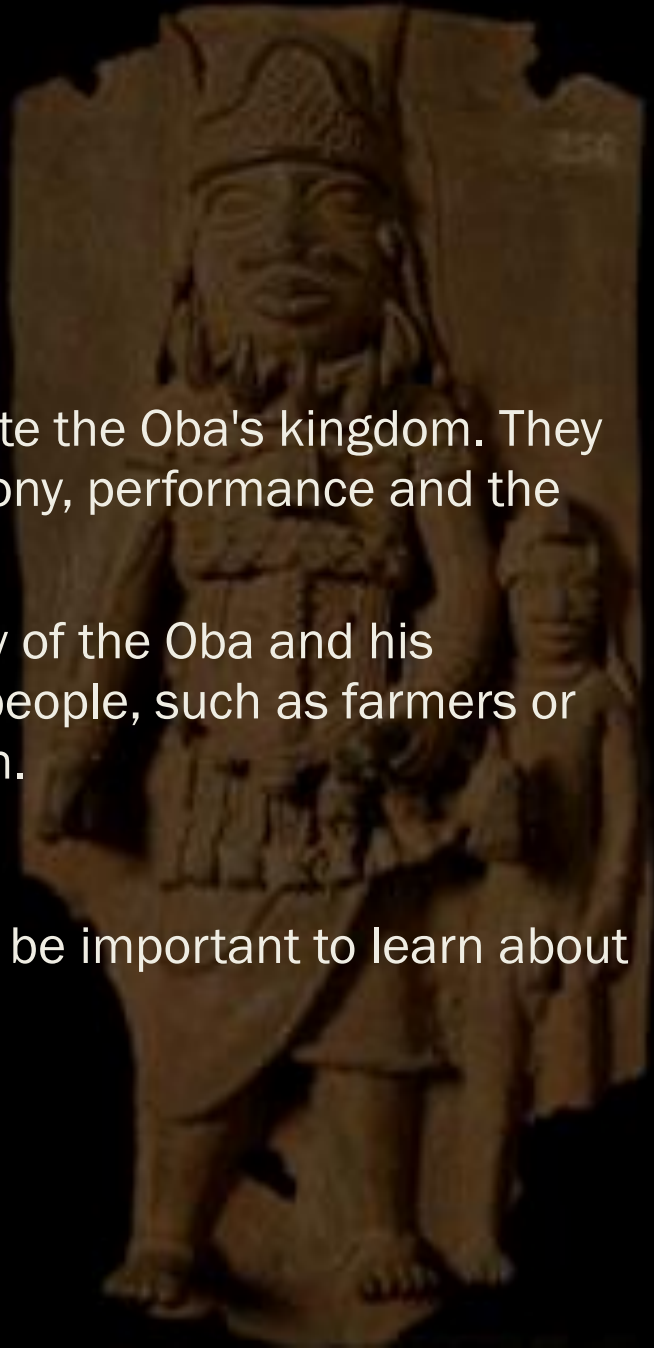
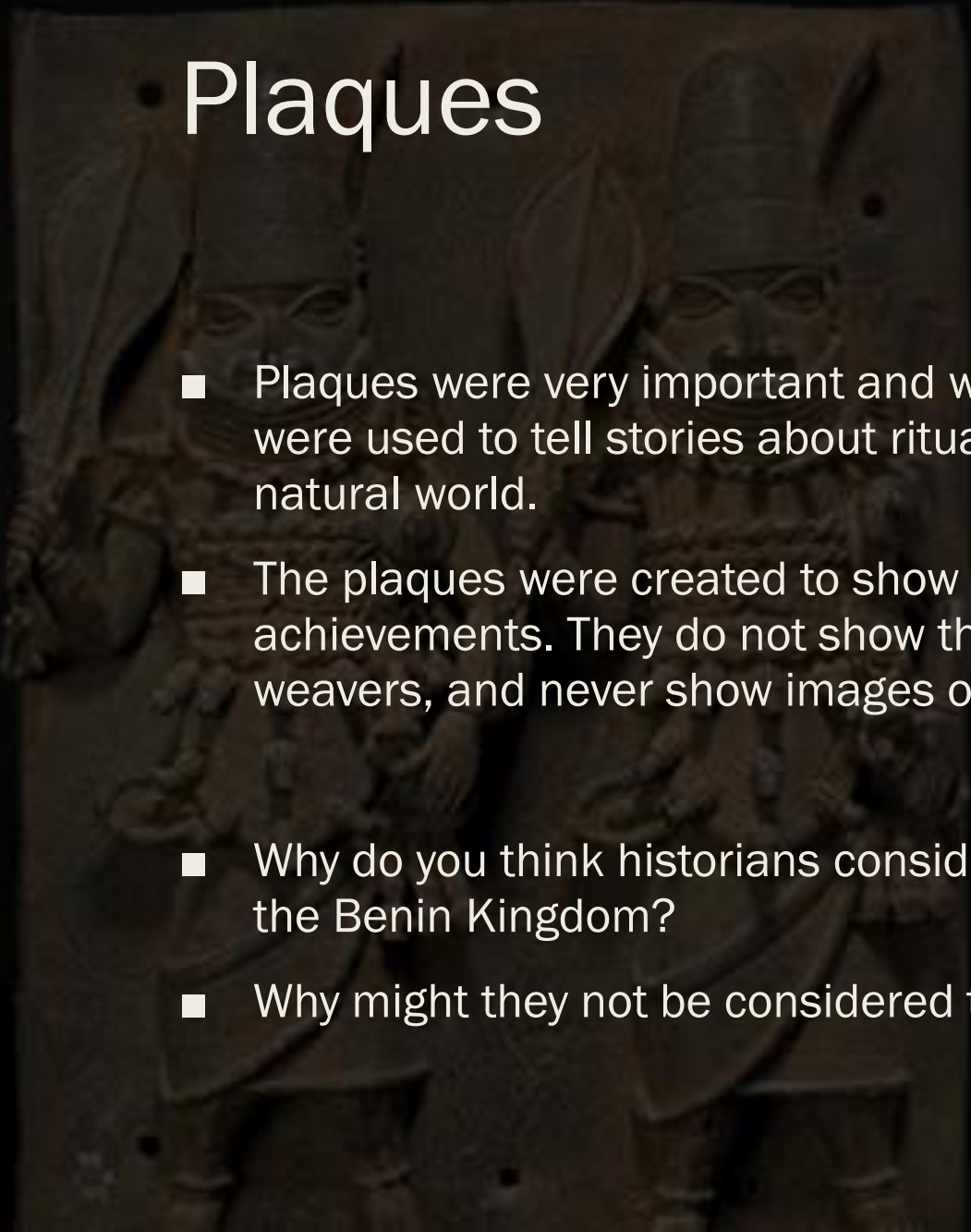
CORAL WAS ALSO THOUGHT TO HAVE MAGICAL POWERS. THEY BELIEVED IT WAS A GIFT FROM OLOKUN, GOD OF THE SEA. CHIEFS WERE ALLOWED TO WEAR CORAL NECKLACES, BRACELETS AND ANKLETS, BUT ONLY THE OBA COULD DRESS COMPLETELY IN CORAL. HIS PEOPLE BELIEVED THAT WHEN HE WORE HIS CORAL SUIT ALL HIS CURSES WOULD COME TRUE!

IVORY WAS SEEN AS A SYMBOL OF PURITY AND STRENGTH. CARVED IVORY TUSKS STOOD BY THE OBA'S THRONE AND IVORY BRACELETS AND PENDANTS WERE WORN BY THE OBA AND IMPORTANT CHIEFS.

METAL WORKERS IN BENIN MADE BEAUTIFUL PLAQUES, MASKS AND STATUES FOR THE OBA. THESE ARE OFTEN CALLED 'BENIN BRONZES', HOWEVER MOST ARE ACTUALLY MADE OF BRASS RATHER THAN BRONZE.

Plaques

- Plaques were very important and were used to decorate the Oba's kingdom. They were used to tell stories about rituals, warfare, ceremony, performance and the natural world.
- The plaques were created to show the power and glory of the Oba and his achievements. They do not show the life of every day people, such as farmers or weavers, and never show images of women or children.
- Why do you think historians consider these plaques to be important to learn about the Benin Kingdom?
- Why might they not be considered that reliable?





WHAT DO YOU THINK THESE
PLAQUES ARE SHOWING?









TASK

Design and sketch your own plaque that would be given as a gift to an Oba in the Benin Kingdom.