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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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AFRICAN NEGRO ART EXHIBITION
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This statue, beautifully cast in bronze, was found in the ruins of Benin, chief city of one of the great Negro empires that flourished and had cultural arts as early as the tenth century. It is cast by the difficult "cire perdue" method in which the sculptor prepares a wax model with an earthen core. The wax is then covered with numerous thin, liquid coats of fine potter's clay, each coat being allowed to dry separately. When they form a sufficiently thick layer over the wax the model is enveloped in earth, which hardens as it dries. Then the entire object is heated. The wax melts and escapes through vents. When empty of wax, molten metal is poured in through the vents to take the place of the wax. After cooling, the clay and earthen mold is broken, leaving a metal cast that exactly reproduces the image modeled in wax.

This intricate process was first thought to have been introduced into Negro Africa by the Portugese in the fifteenth century. Later discoveries lead to the belief that the Benin Empire inherited its strange art and civilization from other Negro empires that were constantly in touch with Egypt many centuries before.

The great capital city of Benin was described by Dutch explorers in the seventeenth century. According to them the main street of the city was seven or eight times wider than the main street of Amsterdam and stretched out of sight in the distance. The city was fortified by a rampart ten feet high and its royal palace was said to be "as large as the whole city of Harlem." The magnificent structures which composed it were linked together by long impressive colonnades of wooden pillars covered from top to bottom with bronze plaques depicting battle scenes. Thirty broad streets then ran the length of the city, each lined with carefully constructed houses. The dwellings were low but large, with long interior galleries and numerous rooms, the walls of which were made of smooth red clay polished till it gave the appearance pf marble.

The city was destroyed by civil war toward the end of the seventeenth century. It was rebuilt in the eighteenth century, but never regained its former splendor. A few years later the palace was again destroyed in an insurrection. At the end of the nineteenth century the city was completely demolished by a British punitive expedition.