



NIGERIA's GIFT TO UNESCO
25th MAY, 2005

THE BACKGROUND TO FESTAC MASK

No singular artistic work represents the face of Nigerian rich and vibrant Culture in its majestic splendour more than what has now been known as the FESTAC Mask. The Mask has its deep roots in the ancient city of Benin in Edo State of Nigeria, and can be traced to the expansive conquest of Queen Idia, who during her reign, extended the frontier of what is known as Ancient Benin Empire to unbelievable heights and wide geographical reach.

The work in all subtlety represents the esoteric beauty of the Queen complete with all the royal pomp and pageantry. This, itself is a worthy tribute to a queen, who was an unquestable foremost Art-patron who encouraged the creative impulses of her people as much as their valiant pursuit of conquest.

This beautiful Masterpiece, cast in bronze, is a constant reminder of the richness of the past, the quest for excellence of the present and the vision of the future for Nigerian people. Just as the figurines at the back of this artistic showpiece depict the protective ambience of the communities that pay homage to Queen Idia in the past, it is also correct to say that the Mask symbolises the spiritual bond for all peoples of African descent in the world today.

This was why the Mask was the symbol of the 2nd Festival of Arts & Culture that was hosted by Nigeria in 1977, where all the people of African descent showcased their rich cultural heritage. Unfortunately, the original Mask which is made of Ivory is one of thousands of Masterpieces that was taken by Britain in 1897 in the so called «Benin Massacre ». It still remains in Britain today. However, for Nigerians and all black peoples the Mask remains a veritable symbol of the resilience of the human spirit. It is the template on which the creative talent of the people married to their physical courage and vision for the future is based.