A palace is a space where power and grandeur are displayed, where art and symbolism are integral aspects of communicating power and royal splendor. This symbolic role of art as conveyor of royal power struck me more than anything else during my recent research trip to Dutse in Northwestern Nigeria. There, I encountered firsthand the aesthetic, spiritual, and political significance of palace art. As a guest of the Emir (spiritual and traditional ruler) of Dutse, Alhaji Nuhu Sanusi, I was given uncommon access to the palace, and an opportunity to behold and understand its history, evolution, and more importantly, its critical artistic significance.

The function of art is often bound up with conceptions of leadership, authority, and the exercise of power. The aesthetic elements of visual artistic objects reinforce and are reinforced by the function of art as a communicator of political value. My Dutse palace tour substantiated this interpretation, as the art of the Dutse palace is as storied as the palace itself, the palace and the paintings, drawings, etchings, and inscriptions that adorn its walls have evolved together over several centuries. So, consciousness has been this evolution that the old palace at Guri and the new palace and Emir's residence at Sumore (Yadi Kasarau) now look aesthetically identical, visually blurring the temporal and architectural distance between them. In this sense, art is a vital connection between the past of the palace and its present, between the spiritual-aesthetic preoccupations of the past and the romanticized nostalgia of the present.

The Islamic Emirate of Dutse

The history of the palace and its art is intertwined with that of Dutse as a ruling house of an important Islamic emirate in Northern Nigeria. As the power and influence of Dutse grew, so did the need to project them through the high degree of symbolism that the palace's visual impact is intended to complement the visual political effect of the Emir's occasional appearance in full kingly regalia on decorated royal horses during Islamic celebrations (see fig. 1). The palace's artistic renaissance corresponds to the recent restoration of its independence, first-class Islamic emirate. This effort of political reclamation through art was so successful that the Nigerian government recently included the Dutse palace in its carefully compiled list of national landmarks, which is part of its “Heart of Africa” campaign aimed at showcasing Nigeria's attractions and reviving tourism in the country. The Emir does not openly link this artistic revival to the emirate's freedom from Kano control, which is understandable given Kano's historical role as a mentor to Dutse and the colonial relations that now exist between the two ruling houses. He however speaks proudly of his effort to “restore and attract prestige and attention to Dutse,” a veiled acknowledgment that Dutse's identity had been subsumed under Kano's ubiquitous shadow, and that the Emirate needs to remake itself on its own terms.

The Northern Knot, [symbol of unity in diversity], was adopted in the 1950s when Nigerian elites were preparing for political independence from Britain. Its symbolic role of art as conveyer of royal power struck me more than anything during my recent research trip to Dutse, a veiled acknowledgment that Dutse's identity had been subsumed under Kano's ubiquitous shadow, and that the Emir needs to remake itself on its own terms.