

Part one - The Overview and the Debate

DOCUMENT 1

Decolonising museums isn't part of a 'culture war'. It's about keeping them relevant

Dan Hicks, *The Guardian*, Fri 7 May 2021

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's report on historical inequalities in commemoration explains that entrenched prejudices, preconceptions and pervasive racism of contemporary imperial attitudes led to hundreds of thousands of instances of the unequal commemoration or non-commemoration of African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Caribbean people who fought for Britain in the first and second world wars. Claire Horton, director general of the commission, responded, "We will act to right the wrongs of the past." (...)

As the report was published, in the US a national debate about the human remains of Black people – in the context of not war memorials but the storerooms of museums – was gathering momentum. In July 2020, the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology apologised for its "unethical possession" of more than 1,300 skulls assembled by Samuel George Morton in the century for the pseudo-science of craniometry.

The ethical treatment of human remains is hardly a new topic, but it's clearly one where public dialogue is quickly shifting. When Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum (where I work) reopened after the first lockdown in September 2020, all human remains were removed from display, and the famous "Treatment of Dead Enemies" case was dismantled. That 100-year-old exhibit promoted the racist myth that "headhunting" represents a coherent type of "savage" culture, while suggesting that the purpose of a "world culture" museum is to display what was taken from opponents of the British Empire.

Since the 1990s, the return of human remains has become a normal part of curatorial practice in UK museums. London's Natural History Museum returned the human remains of 37 Indigenous people to South Australia's Narungga community in March 2019. But this is a tiny proportion of what is held. Precise numbers are hard to come by, and little progress has been made since 2003, when a scoping exercise undertaken for the Ministerial Working Group on Human Remains indicated that England's museums contain the remains of more than 60,000 people across 132 institutions, including perhaps 18,000 from overseas.

Questions about human skulls, bones, and specimens of hair and skin have gradually expanded to encompass ancestral cultural objects taken under colonialism. Today, restitution is as likely to involve artefacts as human remains. In November 2019 Manchester museum returned 43 secret ceremonial Indigenous Australian items. Mangubadijarri Yanner, representing the Gangalidda Garawa Native Title Aboriginal Corporation, observed that this return was "important and necessary for the purpose of cultural revitalisation – because locked deep within these items is our lore; our histories, our traditions and our stories".

Britain's museums sorely need such cultural revitalisation right now, and the question of human remains and artefacts offers a position from which to see debates around museums in a clearer light. Some may seek to marginalise these acts of transparency, return and repair, or to denigrate museum colleagues seeking to advance professional ethical practice, dismissing them as "activists".

The outdated view persists that curators should restrict themselves to writing history while keeping collections preserved in amber. (...)

The conservative position is that to "decolonise is to decontextualise". But anti-racism in museums isn't about pretending that colonialism never happened. It begins with not pretending any longer that colonialism and its consequences are wholly in the past. Some of Britain's colonial-era museums may try to keep on simply displaying, narrating, and thus reinscribing histories of dispossession, violence and atrocity. Others will be open to dismantling colonial infrastructure where it's making outdated worldviews and institutional racism endure. Sometimes the context changes without you.

Acting to right wrongs in the treatment and commemoration of the dead is not unpatriotic or iconoclastic, but an urgent task of truth and repair among the living. For museums, this demands a new openness to transformation, driven by equitable partnerships with the audiences, stakeholders and communities that museums serve, and from whom they derive social legitimacy. At present, the gap between London’s largest national museums and those people with the closest ties to world culture collections, both internationally and in the city, is widening. How can this gap be addressed?

One precedent here is how professional standards for managing and caring for Britain’s historic built environment have evolved over the past three decades. Values-led conservation decision-making is displacing entrenched, elitist art-historical accounts of value based on connoisseurship and the architectural canon, with approaches that centre the significance invested by people in the places that they love. We need this ethos in our museums, replacing hierarchy and traditional authority with civic values driving change. Museums have transformed themselves before, for instance, through free access. In these changed times, how can we address what Arts Council England’s Let’s Create strategy document names as its investment principles of “inclusivity and relevance”?

Let’s be transparent about the tens of thousands of human remains taken under colonialism that languish in our museum storerooms. Let’s be open to the return of stolen cultural objects, remaking international relationships with credibility and honesty. Let’s dismantle structures of inequality, exclusion and racism where these endure from the colonial era in our institutions. These aren’t iconoclastic attacks on museums, as some will claim, or part of some “culture war”. They are overdue measures to keep Britain’s global museums in step with an ever-changing world.

861 words

Dan Hicks is professor of contemporary archaeology at the University of Oxford and author of *The Brutish Museums*

DOCUMENT 2

The new vandals: how museums turned on their own collections

Douglas Murray, *The Spectator*, 03 December 2022



This week I had the pleasure of going to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. I say ‘the pleasure’ but visiting the Pitt Rivers was never precisely a pleasure. Twenty years ago, as an undergraduate, the collection was something of a rite of initiation. The place, filled with strange and wondrous objects, was famed above all for its gruesome pickled heads.

What did we think of them in those now distant days? That they were part of another age, naturally – a collection of artefacts from another time, representing another era, with its interests and curiosities.

Today the collection is still there, although the heads are not. But after a recent refurb the place has transformed into a shrine to a different time: our own. For the museum is now dominated by signs telling you that the collection is a terrible thing. Huge billboards tell the visitor that the museum is ‘a footprint of colonialism’,

is ‘not a neutral space’ and yet ‘can be an instrument of resistance’. Throughout the collection we are repeatedly hectored about ‘imperialism and colonialism’, naturally, but also colonial attitudes towards ‘race, class, culture, gender and sexuality’. The signs by the exhibits repeatedly parrot the mantras of our day about ‘hierarchies’ and ‘Eurocentric ideas’.

You might imagine the Pitt Rivers is something of an anomaly. But it is not. In today’s Britain it is to be expected that our cultural institutions are run by people who hate the collection in their care as well as our culture and our history more broadly. Lest we forget, all this has happened under a Conservative government. (...)

If any museum curator in the land wonders where all this might lead, we can now point them somewhere. Specifically to the Wellcome Collection on London’s Euston Road. In recent years the museum has been struggling with its collection, which was put together by Henry Wellcome in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The organisation has been commissioning ‘anti-colonialist’ writers to conjure up denunciations of its Medicine Man permanent exhibition. So a new sign meant to accompany the casket for Henry Wellcome’s ashes consisted of a denunciation of him for his ‘power’, ‘money’ and the British Empire. A collection put together by an open, energetic mind has been turned into a source of shame and provoked an urge for patricide.

This past weekend the collection had an online meltdown. ‘What’s the point of museums?’ asked the Wellcome’s official Twitter account. ‘Truthfully, we’re asking ourselves the same question.’ The museum went on to flagellate itself over its collection, saying that the whole idea of it was ‘problematic for a number of reasons’. One was that apparently the Medicine Man exhibition ‘told a global story of health and medicine in which disabled people, black people, indigenous peoples and people of colour were exoticised, marginalised and exploited – or even missed out altogether’. And whereas the remains of minorities cannot be displayed, the remains of white people can be displayed but only so long as they are insulted. At the Wellcome, a fragment of the skin of Jeremy Bentham has an accompanying note by a pseudo-scholar, Dan Hicks, that says that Bentham leaving his body to science simply demonstrates the centring by museums of ‘the white cis-male body’. Hicks goes on (at the invitation of Wellcome): ‘Time’s up. Dismantle Wellcome’s enduring colonialism, its white infrastructure.’ After that, I wouldn’t just avoid donating my skin to a museum in this country. I wouldn’t leave them the shirt on my back, and don’t see why anyone else should either.

[The curators’] struggle session continued interminably. And so: ‘The display still perpetuates a version of medical history that is based on racist, sexist and ableist theories and language. This is why this Sunday on 27 November, we will be closing Medicine Man for good.’ They had tried to find a way around it, but in the end the fact that this display had been put together at all – by a man ‘with enormous wealth, power and privilege’ – made it impossible to continue.

[The] Pitt Rivers and every other collection in the land should take note. Once you start playing this game, you cannot win. Once you begin to shut yourself down, there is only one logical end point: total self-destruction.

711 words

DOCUMENT 3

Colonialism Made the Modern World. Let’s Remake It.

The New York Times, July 27, 2020, **By Adom Getachew**

Dr. Getachew is a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and the author of “Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination.”

“Decolonize this place!” “Decolonize the university!” “Decolonize the museum!”

In the past few years, decolonization has gained new political currency — inside the borders of the old colonial powers. Indigenous movements have reclaimed the mantle of “decolonization” in protests like those at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access pipeline. Students from South Africa to Britain have marched under its banner to challenge Eurocentric curriculums. Museums such as the Natural History Museum in New York and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels have been compelled to confront their representation of colonized African and Indigenous peoples.

But what is “decolonization?” What the word means and what it requires have been contested for a century.

After World War I, European colonial administrators viewed decolonization as the process in which they would allow their imperial charges to graduate to independence by modeling themselves on European states. But in the mid-20th century, anticolonial activists and intellectuals demanded immediate independence and refused to model their societies on the terms set by imperialists. Between 1945 and 1975, as struggles for independence were won in Africa and Asia, United Nations membership grew from 51 to 144 countries. In that period, decolonization was primarily political and economic.

As more colonies gained independence, however, cultural decolonization became more significant. European political and economic domination coincided with a Eurocentrism that valorized European civilization as the apex of human achievement. Indigenous cultural traditions and systems of knowledge were denigrated as backward and uncivilized. The colonized were treated as people without history. The struggle against this has been especially central in settler colonies in which the displacement of Indigenous institutions was most violent.

South Africa, where a reckoning with the persistence of the settler regime has gripped national politics, reignited the latest calls for decolonization in 2015 with the #RhodesMustFall movement. Students at the University of Cape Town targeted the statue of the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes, but saw its removal as only the opening act in a wider struggle to bring white supremacy to an end. Under the banners of “more than a statue” and “decolonize the university,” students called for social and economic transformation to undo the racial hierarchies that persist in post-apartheid South Africa, free university tuition and an Africa-centered curriculum.

Now, partly riding the global surge of Black Lives Matter mobilizations, calls for decolonization have swept Europe’s former imperial metropolises. In Bristol, England, last month, protesters tore down the statue of Edward Colston, the director of the Royal African Company, which dominated the African slave trade in the 17th and 18th centuries. Across Belgium, protesters have focused on statues of King Leopold II, who ruled the Congo Free State (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) as his personal property from 1885 to 1908. King Philippe II of Belgium recently expressed “regret” for his ancestor’s brutal regime, which caused the death of 10 million people.

Colonialism, the protesters insist, did not just shape the global south. It made Europe and the modern world. Profits from the slave trade fueled the rise of port cities like Bristol, Liverpool and London while the Atlantic economy that slavery created helped to fuel the Industrial Revolution. King Leopold amassed a fortune of well over \$1.1 billion in today’s dollars from Congo. His vision of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, which opened in 1910 soon after his death, reproduced a narrative of African backwardness while obscuring the violent exploitation of the Congolese. By tearing down or defacing these statues, protesters burst open the national narrative and force a confrontation with the history of empire. This is a decolonization of the sensory world, the illusion that empire was somewhere else. (...)

This historical reckoning is only the first step. Acknowledging that colonial history shapes the current inequalities and hierarchies that structure the world sets the stage for the next one: reparations and restitution.

Reparations is not a single act. The Caribbean Community has already demanded reparations for slavery and Indigenous genocide from Britain, France, Spain and the Netherlands. Although there is little movement at the level of states, the University of Glasgow agreed last year to pay 20 million pounds (about \$25 million) for development research with the University of the West Indies in recognition of how the university benefited from the profits of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. (...)

But reparations should not focus only on the former colonies and their relations with European states. Colonialism lives on inside Europe’s borders, and Europe itself must be decolonized. Black Europeans experience discrimination in employment and education, are racially profiled and are subject to racist violence at the hands of the police and fellow citizens. (...)

Repair and redress is owed as much to Black Europeans as it is to former colonial states. It would mean treating Black Europeans, and all migrants from the colonized world, as equal participants in European society. And this form of reparation cannot be perceived as one-off transactions. Instead, it must be the basis of building an inclusive and egalitarian Europe.

This is no easy task and will not happen overnight. But we should remember that just 80 years ago, colonial rule appeared to be a stable and almost permanent feature of international politics. In just three decades, anticolonial nationalists had transformed the world’s map.

DOCUMENT 4 **Why are Western museums giving back their artefacts?**

Institutions are under pressure to return the spoils of empire, but doing so is far from simple



The Economist explains, Apr 20th 2021

NIGERIA IS MOVING closer to securing the return of some of its most treasured cultural artefacts. The **Benin bronzes**, sculptures that once decorated the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin, now in south-eastern Nigeria, were looted by British forces in 1897, along with thousands of other precious items. They are now scattered across more than 160 museums and countless private collections, mostly in the West. In March a German official travelled to Nigeria to discuss the return of some of the bronzes held in Berlin. The University of Aberdeen, in Scotland, has promised to return one of the bronzes within weeks. And this month the Horniman Museum in London announced it will consider returning its pieces. Why are they giving back the artefacts, and how far will the process of restitution go?

Some of the Benin bronzes lie in London, behind thick vitrine glass in room 25 of the British Museum's Africa Galleries. An inscription describes how the items came to be in the museum's collection. It has changed over the years. It used to tell of imperial bravery against bush savages; now it tells a story of colonial violence and expansion. At the end of the 19th century British forces razed the city of Benin to the ground, demolishing the mud-walled compounds, as well as hundreds of houses and ceremonial buildings. On the former palace grounds, officers built a golf course. Then they seized thousands of royal and sacred objects to take home with them. The bronzes were initially exhibited to show the vast reach of the empire. Today institutions such as the British Museum find themselves at an impasse, struggling to come to terms with their colonial legacy, taking some steps to **return artefacts** but not wanting to lose their prized collections.

Restitution also faces legal obstacles. Many Western museums are prohibited from disposing of their collections. In France, for example, all public collections are considered inalienable, making it impossible to remove even the smallest piece, whether to sell it or, more altruistically, to return it. The British Museum Act, a law from 1963, prevents the museum in London from doing the same. The law does set out limited exceptions (such as if the object is a duplicate), but returning the loot of empire is not one of them.

Still, there is precedent for governments relaxing such restrictions. In 1998, 44 countries agreed to the "Washington Principles of Nazi-confiscated art", a pact to identify and return works stolen during the Third Reich. When Britain's High Court ruled in 2005 that British Museum trustees could not return four drawings by old masters stolen by Nazis from a private collection in Czechoslovakia in 1939, the government passed a law to deal with the obvious injustice. Since 2009 trustees of various museums (including the British Museum) have had specific authority to return property stolen during the Nazi era back to its Jewish owners or their heirs.

Similar legislation could ensure the return of colonial-era artefacts. France offers an example. As the first president born after the colonial period, Emmanuel Macron has been more willing than his predecessors to consider restitution. He commissioned a report in 2017 which recommended the complete transfer of property to their countries of origin rather than long-term loans (as some museums have proposed). In November 2020, a new law was passed to allow

the return of 27 artefacts to former colonies. Hermann Parzinger, the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, a government body that oversees 27 German museums, has called for international guidelines akin to the Washington Principles to help museums identify and return colonial heritage.

But this is unlikely to happen soon, especially in Britain. “Colonial history is still a touchy subject in this country, and you would need someone to put forward a test case,” says Alice Procter, an art historian and author. According to Ms Procter, one reason that British lawmakers made an exception for Holocaust-era artefacts is the knowledge that Britain had no responsibility for the atrocities. But when it comes to the Benin bronzes, “the historical violence being compensated for is a British act, not a German one,” making restitution a more delicate issue. Germany faces similar questions. In 2018 its government returned to Namibia the skulls of [Herero and Nama people](#), whom German soldiers sought to wipe out after their rebellion in what was then German South West Africa. Indigenous groups criticised the German government for dragging its feet over the return, and over offering an apology. And the Natural History Museum in Berlin has been dodging requests from the Tanzanian government for years, asking for the return of a 39ft-long (13m) dinosaur skeleton discovered in the early 1900s by German scientists.

Legal hurdles may frustrate restitution requests, but politicians and institutions have shown a clear desire to defuse the colonial timebombs sitting in their public collections. Some governments, such as those of Germany and France, are now backing the return of part of their holdings. Others, such as Britain’s, will probably continue to “retain and explain” controversial artefacts instead, even though the vast majority are not on public display. The British Museum, for example, has 900 Benin bronzes and displays fewer than 100 in its permanent collection.

DOCUMENT 5

Les défis posés par la restitution à l’Afrique des biens culturels pillés durant la colonisation

Par Francesca Fattori, Floriane Picard, Eric Dedier, Victor Simonnet et Cécile Hennion
Le Monde, 27 novembre 2022

Factuel - Alors que 90 % du patrimoine culturel subsaharien est éparpillé hors du continent, Paris s’est engagé, en 2017, à rendre possible, à l’horizon 2022, la restitution des pièces conservées en France à la suite des pillages coloniaux. Jusqu’à présent, très peu ont retrouvé leur terre d’origine.

Lors de son discours prononcé face à un parterre d’étudiants de l’université de Ouagadougou, au Burkina Faso, le 28 novembre 2017, le président Emmanuel Macron avait suscité la surprise en souhaitant que, « *d’ici à cinq ans, les conditions soient réunies pour des restitutions temporaires ou définitives du patrimoine africain en Afrique* ». Dans cette optique, deux chercheurs – l’écrivain sénégalais Felwine Sarr, économiste et professeur à l’Université Gaston-Berger de Saint-Louis (Sénégal), et Bénédicte Savoy, historienne de l’art française à l’Université technique de Berlin – avaient été chargés de rédiger un rapport.

Remis fin 2018, au terme d’une vaste consultation d’experts et d’acteurs politiques en France et dans quatre pays d’Afrique francophone (Bénin, Sénégal,

Mali, Cameroun), le « Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle » dresse un constat accablant. L’exergue, emprunté à une lettre de l’écrivain Michel Leiris à son épouse, datée de 1931, en donne la tonalité : « *On pille des Nègres, sous prétexte d’apprendre aux gens à les connaître et les aimer, c’est-à-dire, en fin de compte, à former d’autres ethnographes, qui iront eux aussi les “aimer” et les piller.* »

Premier constat, la quasi-totalité (de 90 % à 95 %, selon les estimations) du patrimoine matériel des pays d’Afrique situés au sud du Sahara se trouve hors du continent africain, rendue inaccessible à la jeunesse africaine au point qu’« *elle en ignore souvent la richesse et la potentialité, si ce n’est l’existence même* ».

S’appuyant notamment sur des inventaires paramétrés selon les besoins de la mission, destinée à saisir la qualité, la quantité et la provenance exacte des collections africaines des pièces conservées au Musée du quai Branly, à Paris, les chercheurs concluent que tous les biens culturels obtenus pendant la période coloniale – quelles que soient les conditions de ces acquisitions (butins de guerre, vols, missions scientifiques, efforts de christianisation de missionnaires catholiques ou protestants, etc.) –

relèvent d'une spoliation en raison des rapports inégaux entre les parties, et préconisent leur restitution. Même après les indépendances, nombre de pièces intégrant les collections muséales proviennent des guerres de conquête et des périodes de domination, après avoir transité sur le marché de l'art ou dans les familles des officiers qui les avaient rapportées.

Ce rapport a suscité de vives critiques. Stéphane Martin, à l'époque président du Quai Branly, défend alors le concept d'« universalité » de l'art et dénonce « *un cri de haine contre le concept même de musée, considéré comme une invention occidentale, comme un lieu quasi criminel dans lequel les objets sont plumés, déshabillés, où on leur retire leur magie* ». Dans les milieux liés au marché de l'art et des musées français, beaucoup redoutent que la restitution d'œuvres africaines provoque un « appel d'air » qui viderait les collections hexagonales, et s'inquiètent des conditions de conservation d'objets fragiles par des Etats jugés instables et dont les moyens muséographiques seraient insuffisants.

Au-delà de ces débats, la promesse du président Macron se heurte à des considérations juridiques. Les collections des musées publics français, dont 90 000 pièces originaires d'Afrique subsaharienne, sont protégées par leur inaliénabilité, inscrite dans le code du patrimoine (article L. 451-5). Seules des lois spécifiques peuvent permettre, au cas par cas, la restitution définitive à un Etat tiers d'un ou plusieurs objets.

Sur le plan européen, ces questions font désormais l'objet d'une vaste réflexion sur la nécessaire analyse critique des collections africaines des musées publics français, allemands, belges et britanniques, dont certains – à l'instar du Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale de Tervuren (« Musée du Congo », lors de sa création, en 1897) à Bruxelles, ou encore du Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro (1878) – ont été conçus comme des vitrines d'empire. Le rapport Sarr-Savoy souligne ainsi « *combien la recherche active de biens culturels et leur transfert dans les capitales européennes ont bien été au cœur – et non à la marge – de l'entreprise coloniale* ». (693 mots)

Royaume-Uni

Le British Museum, détenteur de la plus grande collection de bronzes du Bénin – pillés par l'armée coloniale en 1897, lors de la mise à sac du palais royal d'Edo (aujourd'hui Benin City), situé dans le sud-ouest

de l'actuel Nigeria – refuse jusqu'à présent toute restitution, au nom de l'universalité des musées. Mais les initiatives privées se multiplient. Fin 2021, les universités de Cambridge et d'Aberdeen ont rendu deux bronzes à Abuja. En septembre de la même année, une partie du butin pris à Magdala (capitale de l'ancien empire d'Abyssinie), en 1868, a été remise à l'ambassadeur d'Ethiopie à Londres, après avoir été achetée à des fonds privés par l'écrivain Tahir Shah, par le biais de sa fondation, en vue de les restituer à Addis-Abeba.

Allemagne

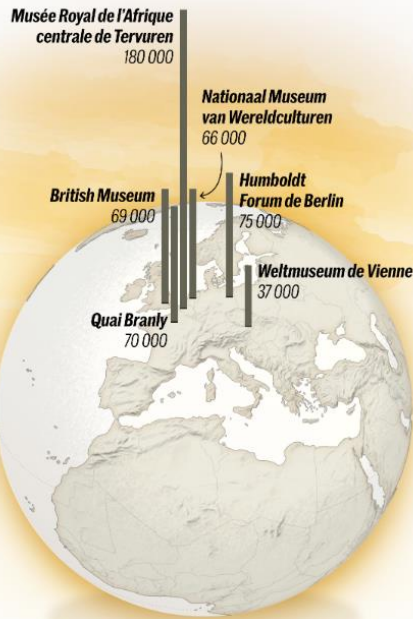
En 2011, l'Allemagne rend à la Namibie (colonie allemande jusqu'en 1918) des crânes d'indigènes herero et nama, victimes d'un génocide entre 1904 et 1908. En 2019, elle restitue encore la croix en pierre de Cape Cross – un objet du XV^e siècle qui servait de repère à la navigation –, la bible et le fouet du héros Hendrik Witbooi, chef du peuple nama tué en octobre 1905 en combattant les troupes coloniales. En août, Berlin signe avec le Nigéria un accord prévoyant la restitution de 512 bronzes (sur plus d'un millier conservés en Allemagne) issus du pillage du royaume du Bénin par les Britanniques.

Belgique

En février, Bruxelles remet à Kinshasa un inventaire de 84 000 œuvres prises au Congo (actuelle République démocratique du Congo, RDC) sous le règne du roi Léopold II (1865-1909) en vue d'une restitution. Le souverain belge, qui administra le Congo comme sa propriété personnelle, avait fait bâtir un musée pour accueillir les œuvres dérobées : le Musée de l'Afrique de Tervuren affiche désormais sa volonté de « *décoloniser* » ses collections.

Cinq ans après la déclaration de Ouagadougou, le bilan de la restitution est mitigé. Sur sept demandes présentées officiellement par le Bénin (en 2016), la Côte d'Ivoire (2018), l'Ethiopie (2019), le Tchad (2019), le Sénégal (2019), le Mali (2020) et Madagascar (2020), seules deux ont obtenu gain de cause grâce à l'adoption d'une loi, le 24 décembre 2020 : le Bénin et le Sénégal. Les requêtes d'Antananarivo et d'Abidjan ont reçu une réponse favorable, mais sont toujours en attente d'une loi qui permette sa concrétisation. Les trois autres demeurent en suspens. Tous plaident pour l'adoption d'une loi-cadre qui permettrait d'accélérer ce processus et de le généraliser à l'échelle du continent.

Présence d'objets africains dans les musées,
en nombre d'œuvres par musée



Source : Bénédicte Savoy, « Accumulation primitive. La géographie du patrimoine artistique africain dans le monde aujourd'hui », De Facto (en ligne), 2021

Infographie Le Monde

Part two – “Putting women back in the picture

DOCUMENT 6 - **Au musée, les expositions sortent les femmes de leurs réserves**

Par Zineb Dryef, *Le Monde*, 27 novembre 2022

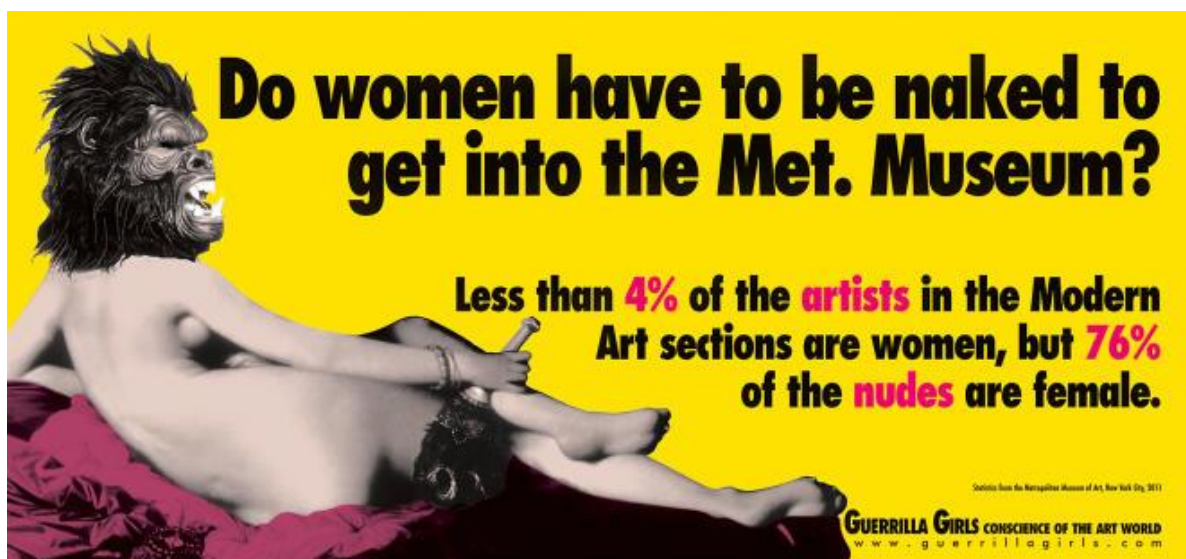
Enquête (Extraits)

Les expositions consacrées aux artistes de sexe féminin se multiplient. Le fruit du combat mené par des femmes commissaires et des conservatrices soucieuses de donner enfin leur place à celles que l'histoire de l'art a laissées de côté.

Le portrait, superbe, montre une inconnue, visage fermé, installée confortablement dans son fauteuil, le bras levé exposant ses poils sous l'aisselle. Cette femme, c'est l'artiste marxiste Irene Peslikis, figure marquante du féminisme américain des années 1960. C'est elle que les Parisiens peuvent voir sur les affiches annonçant la première grande exposition française consacrée à la peintre Alice Neel, au Centre Pompidou.

Deux femmes, toutes deux activistes, toutes deux artistes et inconnues du grand public en France. Un rêve de Guerrilla Girls.

Longtemps jugé radical, ce groupe d'artistes féministes, dont les membres souhaitent rester anonymes, milite depuis 1985 contre toutes les discriminations dans le monde de l'art. L'une de ses affiches les plus célèbres, qui montre le corps nu de *La Grande Odalisque*, d'Ingres, la tête couverte d'un masque de gorille, s'adressait ainsi au Metropolitan Museum de New York dont la collection comptait alors 95 % d'artistes hommes : « *Les femmes doivent-elles être nues pour entrer au Met ?* »



Aujourd'hui, si l'égalité hommes-femmes n'est toujours pas de mise dans les collections des musées, les artistes femmes sont néanmoins de plus en plus nombreuses à être exposées. En France comme aux Etats-Unis, ces deux dernières années, il est impossible d'échapper à la profusion d'expositions qui leur sont consacrées. Après « Peintres femmes 1780-1830 » et « Pionnières » au Musée du Luxembourg, à Paris, après « Elles font l'abstraction » et « Georgia O'Keeffe » au Centre Pompidou, après « Valadon et ses contemporaines » au monastère royal de Brou à Bourg-en-Bresse, après « Toyen, l'écart absolu » au Musée d'art moderne de Paris (MAM), le public peut découvrir cet automne, dans la capitale, Alice Neel au Centre Pompidou, Zoe Leonard au Musée d'art moderne, Rosa Bonheur au Musée d'Orsay et Joan Mitchell à la Fondation Louis Vuitton.

Un rééquilibrage « naturel »

Le phénomène est partout, dans les grandes comme les petites institutions. Il est d'une telle ampleur, au regard de l'histoire très masculine de l'art, qu'on ne peut que s'interroger : s'agit-il d'une logique de rééquilibrage ou d'une bonne conscience à peu de frais ? Voire d'un effet de mode ou d'une stratégie marketing ? « Faire des expositions d'artistes femmes et raconter leurs parcours, cela bouleverse l'histoire de l'art et de nos représentations », défend la commissaire Camille Morineau, dont la dernière exposition, « Pionnières, artistes dans le Paris des Années folles », a été présentée au Musée du Luxembourg au printemps.

Ce parti pris a toutefois créé un certain malaise dans les milieux de l'art féministe. A trop regrouper des artistes sans lien entre elles en dehors de leur sexe, ne court-on pas le risque de réduire l'importance et la trajectoire de chacune ? Continuer de recourir au vocable des

« pionnières » et des « combattantes » est-il pertinent quand elles sont des centaines ? « Elles font l'abstraction », montée au Centre Pompidou en 2021 par Christine Macel, avait suscité les mêmes interrogations.

« Le problème, avec les expositions de groupe, est de faire exister cette catégorie des "artistes femmes", observe Julie Botte, doctorante en histoire de l'art. Cette étiquette, on aimerait ne pas avoir à s'en servir, mais elle permet de les faire exister politiquement et de leur donner une visibilité. » A condition d'installer cette démarche dans la durée. De nombreuses institutions tentent ainsi de valoriser des pépites oubliées de leurs propres collections. Le Musée des beaux-arts de Bordeaux propose, jusqu'en février, l'exposition « Elles sortent de leur(s) réserve(s) », un accrochage 100 % féminin provenant de ses réserves.

« Ce rééquilibrage me paraît naturel », juge Fabrice Hergott, directeur du Musée d'art moderne de Paris, une institution qui, depuis sa réouverture en 2006, met de grandes artistes femmes en avant. Comme les plasticiennes Annette Messager et Hannah Höch, l'écrivaine et peintre Meret Oppenheim. En 2023, le MAM exposera la peintre norvégienne Anna-Eva Bergman, longtemps restée dans l'ombre de son mari, le peintre Hans Hartung. « L'histoire de l'art est en mouvement et, aujourd'hui, les femmes transforment le regard sur cette histoire, avance Fabrice Hergott. C'est une reconsidération formidable. »

L'enjeu central des acquisitions

L'événement fondateur, en France, de cette « redécouverte » date de 2009 avec « Elles@centrepompidou », la première grande manifestation exclusivement féminine, à Beaubourg. L'idée est à l'époque sensationnelle : dédier l'accrochage des collections permanentes du musée à

des artistes femmes. Deux étages pour découvrir ou redécouvrir Germaine Krull, Suzanne Valadon, Marie Laurencin, Sonia Delaunay, Hannah Höch, Eileen Gray, Joan Mitchell, Claude Cahun, Lisette Model... « *Ça a été extrêmement difficile* », se souvient Camille Morineau, la commissaire à l'origine du projet.

Pionnière amère

La première acquisition de Camille Morineau, *Fuck Painting* (1969), est une œuvre féministe de Betty Tompkins dont elle a découvert les pièces immenses au cours de la biennale de Lyon, en 2005. « *Ce sont des critiques acerbes de la pornographie, des œuvres qu'elle n'avait jamais montrées* », se souvient la commissaire. Pour les « *faire rentrer* » à Beaubourg, elle sait qu'il lui faudra affronter une commission d'acquisition composée essentiellement d'hommes, et qu'elle comme l'artiste qu'elle défend passent pour des « *folles féministes* ». Camille Morineau se garde alors de prononcer le mot « *féministe* ». Alfred Pacquement, directeur du musée, dit oui.

Si « *Elles@centrepompidou* » a été un succès considérable, à ses débuts, l'exposition choque : on accuse Camille Morineau de « *ghettoïser* » les artistes femmes, de les essentialiser, de les réduire à leur sexe. Au commissariat général, à ses côtés, il y a aussi Emma Lavigne, Cécile Debray, Valérie Guillaume et Quentin Bajac. Ensemble, ils ont, pendant un an, rassemblé et organisé les œuvres pour préparer l'exposition, collecté des informations sur des artistes dont les fiches étaient vierges... Le projet a profondément marqué cette génération, qui est aujourd'hui à la tête d'institutions majeures. (...)

Des musées « à moitié vide »

Si les femmes sont davantage montrées, c'est aussi parce que des professionnelles à l'engagement féministe fort sont de plus en plus nombreuses aux postes de décision et d'influence. Professeures, chercheuses, artistes, critiques, curatrices... « *Depuis une quinzaine d'années, en France et à l'international, le nombre de commissaires d'exposition croît et la parité de la profession progresse puisque les femmes occupent aujourd'hui 56 % des postes* », relevait le colloque « *Art : genre féminin* », organisé en 2018-2019 avec l'association Aware, à la Monnaie de Paris.

Ce phénomène permet de revisiter les canons de l'histoire de l'art. Ainsi, à quelques mois de la

célébration du cinquantenaire de la mort de Picasso et du déferlement d'hommages à l'artiste, le Musée national Picasso, à Paris, vient de lancer un séminaire, qui s'achèvera au printemps, pour aborder frontalement les questions qui préoccupent le public sur son rapport aux femmes et à la violence. C'est Cécile Debray qui dirige le musée, la co-commissaire d'« *Elles@centrepompidou* » il y a treize ans.

À Orsay, ce sont également des femmes qui se battent pour exposer des peintres femmes. En 2019, à l'occasion de la conception d'un parcours dans les collections permanentes pour accompagner l'exposition sur la peintre impressionniste Berthe Morisot, les équipes ont mesuré que leur musée était « *à moitié vide* », pour reprendre l'expression de l'historienne de l'art sud-africaine Griselda Pollock : les femmes - exposées dans les salles (Camille Claudel, Rosa Bonheur et Marcello) ne représentaient que 0,5 % des artistes.

Les conservatrices Sabine Cazenave et Leïla Jarbouai ont donc sorti des réserves du musée plusieurs œuvres de femmes pour les présenter dans les salles d'expositions permanentes. « *Cet accrochage s'inscrit dans la durée et nous permet de rendre manifeste la présence des femmes dans l'art* », explique Leïla Jarbouai, conservatrice en chef au Musée d'Orsay et commissaire de l'exposition « *Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899)* », en cours. (...)

Enraciner et développer

L'un des enjeux demeure donc bien celui de la formation des professionnels de l'art. Une petite révolution, inaperçue, a eu lieu en 2020 : l'un des sujets du concours de l'agrégation en section art portait sur les « *artistes femmes d'Artemisia Gentileschi à l'admission des femmes à l'École des beaux-arts de Paris, en 1896* ». Il y a encore quelques années, elles n'étaient pas même considérées, se souvient Julie Botte. C'est précisément au cours de ses études, entre 2010 et 2016, à Lille puis à Paris, qu'elle prend conscience qu'on lui parle peu des femmes : « *Ce qui m'a interpellée, c'est de ne pas avoir eu conscience de leur absence dans cette histoire du XX^e siècle. Cette absence était admise.* »

« *L'histoire de l'art n'est pas figée, le musée n'est pas hors de la société. Il s'agit de s'appropriier ces sujets.* »

The Story of Art Without Men by Katy Hessel review – putting women back in the picture

This 500-year survey of art by women is an inspiring, beautifully written corrective

THE OBSERVER, SUN 11 SEPTEMBER 2022

The Royal Academy of Art has never hosted a solo exhibition by a woman in their main space. The National Gallery was founded in 1824 and held its first major solo exhibition by a female artist, [Artemisia Gentileschi, in 2020](#). The first edition of EH Gombrich's supposedly definitive *The Story of Art* featured no female artists in its first edition in 1950 – and one woman in its 16th edition. In 2015, the curator and art historian Katy Hessel “walked into an art fair and realised that, out of the thousands of artworks before me, not a single one was by a woman”.

And so she created this positive, beautifully written corrective, which should become a founding text in the history of art by women. Starting in 1500 and shooting through to artists born in the 1990s, *The Story of Art Without Men* brings centuries-old figures to life while giving form and gravitas to emergent voices and covering every substantial movement from dadaism to civil-rights-era antiracist art along the way.

The book embraces all artistic developments, but there's a particular sparkle when Hessel writes about painting

The damning facts speak for themselves, but aside from some introductory remarks the book sails on with an impressive lack of chagrin. It is thick with fascinating details, so that even readers who pride themselves on being exhibition hounds, art historians and gallery hoppers will discover new names. Consider Plautilla Nelli, who entered a nunnery in Florence at the age of 14 in 1538, set up an all-female workshop there, had a stellar career and was one of only four women namechecked by the Renaissance art historian Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists*.

We glide through multiple wars, social crises and political (and artistic) movements with exquisite lightness and focus. Hessel balances her research with an easy, intimate approach to each artist's work, combining a sense of their historical significance with an extraordinary ability to encapsulate their unique style. Tamara de Lempicka's ripplingly sensual *Group of Four Nudes*, from 1925, “fuses elements of the baroque (its high drama and stunning light effects as it thrusts into our space) with a hard-edged industrialism (the robust semi-cubist figures, their angular cheekbones and silvery eyes)”. Contemporary American star [Julie Mehretu](#)'s large paintings whirl with “sweeping lines and shapes that disrupt and interweave within the space... fracturing the once-ordered world system”.

Hessel skilfully tags numerous lesser-known names on to more famous ones. We know all about the Bauhaus weaver Anni Albers, particularly after a successful Tate retrospective in 2018. But what about Gertrud Arndt? Born in 1903, Arndt was forced out of the Bauhaus architecture course by the hostility of her male peers and took up photography, experimenting with disguise and female personae – leading us to consider the work of the great Cindy Sherman.

The Story of Art Without Men embraces all significant artistic developments, including photography, installation and immersion, performance art, textile art and the lens-, tech-, text- and media-based works that [Barbara Kruger](#), Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer and others popularised from the 1970s onwards. But there's a particular sparkle when Hessel writes about painting. She celebrates [Jadé Fadojutimi](#) (born in 1993), whose “paintings are full of ecstatic, vivid (almost spiritual) colouring... they seem three-dimensional, with layers of colours that swarm out of the canvas, consuming the viewer. Erupting with drama and theatricality, it's almost as though you can see something moving under the top layers of paint”. Meanwhile, [Flora Yukhnovich](#), a brilliant young artist who riffs satirically on great 18th-century works, creates “with splinter-like strokes that are simultaneously cartoonish and violent, playful and rigorous, with fleshy, food-like, painterly textures (buttery yellows, cream-like pinks, sugar-coated blues) ... constructing gusts of light, air and watery aesthetics out of paint”.

The book is not fully decoupled from traditional western gallery and critical systems. The celebrated non-white and international artists featured here – such as Zanele Muholi, Shahzia Sikander, Wangechi Mutu, Yayoi Kusama and Shirin Neshat – have all shown or been reviewed in leading London, Paris or New York outlets. It will take many more feats of scholarship and advocacy before the centre of gravity of the white, male, western, imperial canon is exploded and women are fully written into global art history. But Hessel has gone further than anyone else in attempting to make a global survey.

She brings to each artwork an attention that is both sober and pleasurable, a sensitive balance of probity, acceptance and fascination: exactly the kind of critical weight that female artists have been denied for centuries. Until things change, *The Story of Art Without Men* is inspiring and indispensable.

See also <https://theconversation.com/no-woman-could-paint-the-story-of-art-without-men-corrects-nearly-600-years-of-male-focused-art-criticism-184458>

DOCUMENT 8

Just Stop Oil's Van Gogh soup stunt is the latest streak of radical art protest by women

'What is worth more: art or life?' asked protesters Anna Holland and Phoebe Plummer this month in an echo of the suffragette who slashed Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*

Katy Hessel, *The Guardian*, Mon 24 Oct 2022

"You can get another picture, but you cannot get a life, as they are killing Mrs Pankhurst." These were the words of Mary Richardson who, on 10 March 1914, walked into London's National Gallery and slashed, with a meat chopper, Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647–51). Smashing through the glass, she scarred several times Velázquez's idealised nude in protest of the re-arrest of British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst. Richardson was subsequently sentenced to six months' imprisonment.

This type of protest – and Richardson's words – resonated this month when Anna Holland and Phoebe Plummer, part of the Just Stop Oil protest group, made headlines across the world by throwing a tin of soup over Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1888). Glueing themselves to the wall of London's National Gallery, they announced: "What is worth more: art or life? Is it worth more than ... justice?"



Grabbing attention and sparking conversation ... the Just Stop Oil protest this month. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Think what you like about the stunt – even Plummer agreed, "it is ridiculous". Ultimately, it worked for grabbing attention and sparking conversation, she goes

on, "so we can ask the questions that matter". Margaret Klein Salamon, executive director of the Climate Emergency Fund, which bankrolls Just Stop Oil, confirmed: "In terms of press coverage, the Van Gogh protest may be the most successful action I've seen in the last eight years in the climate movement. It was a breakthrough."

For centuries, activists have used art as a form of protest, and a way to get noticed. As Holland pointed out in an interview with *Frieze*: "We take inspiration from the civil rights movement, the suffragettes, the queer movement ... Our method of just throwing soup at the glass is a less violent gesture than that, but I like to think just as attention-grabbing."

Interacting with artworks and institutions is an effective way of sparking attention and controversy, and actuating change. There is power in both: they have the ability to alter the status quo. Institutions, with their role as leading cultural centres of the world, are places where debates of all sorts should happen. A recent example is Nan Goldin's successful campaign Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (Pain), which brought worldwide attention to the corruption behind the OxyContin crisis, and saw hundreds of cultural organisations drop their associations with the Sackler name.

Artworks, similarly, can reflect or be catalysts for change. Although it might not seem radical now, Van Gogh's paintings – and the style in which he worked, drawing on the impressionists – were deemed severely controversial by the establishment when they were first produced. They went on to be enormously influential in the development of modern art.

But the power of an artwork is also its ability to live on through different times, and speak to various generations and cultures. Whereas the symbol of sunflowers meant something else to Van Gogh in the 1880s, today they can represent the dying out of crops and, as the Just Stop Oil protesters remind us, how "we've seen 33 million people in Pakistan displaced by

apocalyptic floods, 36 million have had their lives absolutely ruined by the famines in east Africa”. Holland continues, “Yet, all it took was two young people to throw soup at a painting to get people talking more”. This makes us question, as a society, do we value painted ones more than real ones, real ones that will enable our planet to survive?

The Rokeby Venus by Diego Velázquez at the National Gallery. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

Images – and recognisable ones – have the power to speak to the masses and make messages accessible. One of the most effective artist-activists in recent times is the Guerrilla Girls, who formed in 1985 after MoMA failed to include more than 17 women and eight artists of colour (out of 169 artists) in a major survey exhibition on painting and sculpture.

To protest their outrage, they took to the streets, anonymously and throughout the night, “because they were free” – free in the monetary value, and free from the patriarchy-ridden museums. With bold, loud graphics and text emblazoned with shocking statistics, they exposed the truth about the lack of equality in institutions by pasting posters on walls next to museums to shock and preach truth to the public.

Privacy Notice: Newsletters may contain info about charities, online ads, and content funded by outside parties. For more information see our Privacy Policy.

We use Google reCaptcha to protect our website and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.

Disruptive from the get-go, as they once told me, “Women artists were excited and empowered, and everyone else was really pissed off!” (See, no change is without controversy). They rightly targeted institutions considering, as asked in their 1985 poster, *How Many Women Artists Had One-Person Exhibitions in NYC Art Museums Last Year?*, they found that none had had exhibitions at the Guggenheim, the Met or the Whitney, and just one at the Modern (now MoMA).

Most famously, they questioned the abundance of nude female bodies versus the female artists on view at the Met. Placing a gorilla mask on Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) they concluded that, “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” Revisiting the statistics in 2012, they found that little had improved: “Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 76 % of the nudes are female.”

As with the soup incident, it might be ridiculous to place a gorilla mask on *La Grande Odalisque* – an idealised nude not dissimilar from the *Rokeby Venus* slashed by Richardson – but by using an identifiable image, or something that is “beautiful and valued”, both were able to keep in the public’s mind and draw attention to, as Plummer said, “the questions that matter”.

More Links and Resources

- **An interactive report by *The Washington Post* on the Elgin Marbles**

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/22/elgin-marbles-british-museum-greece/>

- ***The Economist* calls for cultural artefacts to be repatriated when possible**

<https://www.economist.com/prospero/2016/02/23/where-it-is-safe-to-do-so-cultural-artefacts-should-be-repatriated>

- **A thorough survey on the (long?) way American museums have gone on diversity in the aftermath of the BLM movement**

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/05/25/exclusive-survey-what-progress-have-us-museums-made-on-diversity-after-a-year-of-racial-reckoning>

- **Bénédicte Savoy’s article : Accumulation primitive. La géographie du patrimoine artistique africain dans le monde aujourd’hui**

<https://www.icmigrations.cnrs.fr/2021/01/06/defacto-024-04/>

- **VIDEO Son cours au Collège de France : Présence africaine dans les musées d'Europe**

<https://www.college-de-france.fr/agenda/cours/presence-africaine-dans-les-musees-europe>

- **VIDEO Decolonising Cultural Spaces: the Living Cultures Project**

Decolonising Cultural Spaces is a full-length documentary; part of the Living Cultures project coordinated by InsightShare, Oltoilo la Maa (Voice of the Maasai) and Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford in partnership with MAA Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The documentary follows a delegation of seven Maasai representatives from Tanzania and Kenya spending two weeks in the UK working alongside British museums to decolonise cultural spaces by making them aware of their colonial history and how this can be addressed responsibly.

- **Examples of Women Artists whose works have been overlooked and only recently gained recognition**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/02/arts/design/michaelina-wautier-artist-boston.html>

https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2022/10/16/alice-neel-au-centre-pompidou-une-peintre-realiste-trop-longtemps-occulte_6146010_3246.html

<https://theconversation.com/no-woman-could-paint-the-story-of-art-without-men-corrects-nearly-600-years-of-male-focused-art-criticism-184458>

- **More from Katy Hessel**

Her fortnightly column in *The Guardian*: **The great women's art bulletin**

Each fortnight Katy Hessel discusses an artwork made by a woman which speaks to today's news agenda

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/series/the-great-women-s-art-bulletin>

Her Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/thegreatwomenartists/>

- **Alice Procter's website and podcasts**

<https://www.theexhibitionist.org/#tours>

- **In the world of music**

https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/oct/23/bbc-air-rediscovered-work-nathaniel-dett-composer-african-descent?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other

- **President Macron's speech in Ouagadougou on 28 November 2017**

<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/discours-demmanuel-macron-a-luniversite-de-ouagadougou>

Part three – A Few Examples(digital file only)

The Benin Bronzes

London museum to return 72 Benin treasures to Nigeria

Horniman museum is first government-funded institution to hand back artefacts looted by British forces in 1897

Josh Halliday

The Observer, Sun 7 Aug 2022

A London museum is to return 72 treasured artefacts, including its collection of Benin bronzes, to Nigeria in what experts described as an “immensely significant” moment.

The Horniman museum said it would transfer the ownership of the historic objects to the Nigerian government after an unanimous vote by its board of trustees.

It makes the Horniman, which won museum of the year in July, the first government-funded institution to hand back treasures looted by British forces from Benin city in 1897.

About 10,000 objects looted during the raid on Benin are held in 165 museums and many private collections across the world. The British Museum in London holds 900 objects, the largest collection in the world.

Oxford and Cambridge Universities announced last week that they would return more than 200 between them.

Eve Salomon, chair of the Horniman museum, said: “The evidence is very clear that these objects were acquired through force, and external consultation supported our view that it is both moral and appropriate to return their ownership to Nigeria.”

The decision by the museum’s board follows a consultation with London’s Nigerian community, launched in 2020, after activists added the Horniman to the “Topple the Racists” database of sites and monuments linked to colonialism. The Nigerian government made a request for the objects in January. The country is planning to house repatriated bronzes in the Edo Museum of West African Art, due to open in 2025.

The collection includes 12 ancient brass plaques, known as Benin bronzes. Other objects include a brass cockerel altar piece, ivory and brass ceremonial objects, brass bells, every day items such as fans and baskets, and a key “to the king’s palace”.

Prof Dan Hicks, professor of contemporary archaeology at the University of Oxford, described the announcement as “immensely significant”.

He said: “It comes hot on the heels of the announcement from Oxford and Cambridge. They were the largest commitment we’d seen from the UK so far.

“What’s important about the Horniman news is the nature of the museum – their relationship to [the government’s Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport] in terms of their funding arrangement [and] it’s a significant London museum.

“Up until now it had been individual objects one at a time, in stark contrast to the over 1,100 that have been committed to be returned by the German federal government.”

Hicks, who listed the 165 institutions that hold the Benin bronzes in his book British Museums, said the move would increase pressure on the British Museum to change its position on the return of artefacts.

The British Museum has resisted calls to return the 900 Benin items it holds, talking only of “research and cultural exchange initiatives” in Nigeria. But experts have questioned how long that line can hold.

Hicks said: “With every day of inaction and every day of seeking to hold on to these old arguments, they are just making themselves more and more irrelevant. Inaction, in this context, is an action – it’s a choice that they’re not able to tell us at the very least what they have.”

U.S. museums are trying to return hundreds of looted Benin treasures

A Post review finds that protests and policy changes have prompted at least 16 museums to begin repatriating their Benin artifacts. But the process isn't easy.



By Peggy McGlone

The Washington Post, May 12, 2022

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/05/11/benin-treasures-museum-returns/>



From left, “Fowl,” an 18th-century brass sculpture with cast-iron supports from the Royal Court of Benin; a leopard head hip ornament from the royal court; and the bronze head of a king (oba), thought to date to the 1700s. (From left: National Gallery of Art, Washington; Middlebury College Museum of Art; Erik Gould/former gift of Lucy T. Aldrich/RISD Museum)

PHILADELPHIA — One of the first displays in the Penn Museum’s Africa galleries features a red panel with the heading “The Oba’s Palace: Royal Objects Taken by Force.” Inside the glass case, an 18th-century carved ivory armband sits next to a 100-year-old letter written by the brother of a member of the British forces that attacked the palace in 1897, in what is now Nigeria. The letter offers to sell to the museum some of the objects looted in the violent siege.

Added when the decades-old exhibit was updated in 2019, the archival letter is essential to the new interpretation of the galleries, according to lead curator Tukufu Zuberi.

“We wanted to show that the archive was as important as the objects,” Zuberi said. “It is in the archive that we

can document the history of the object from its maker in Africa to the Penn Museum. This letter clearly shows the story of several objects that were stolen from the Benin palace during the British pillage.”

The exhibition showcases 73 Benin objects alongside contemporary art and pieces from 20 other African countries to explore not only beauty and creativity, but also colonialism and enslavement.

“Colonialism was necessarily a violent action, and these objects were used to justify enslavement, colonialism and other forms of racism,” Zuberi said.

But a little more than two years after they opened the Africa galleries, museum officials have decided that the display is not enough. They are now in the process of giving their priceless Benin treasures back.

“This is a watershed moment,” said Christopher Woods, director of Philadelphia’s University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, known as the Penn Museum. Despite receiving approval from Nigerian officials when developing the new galleries, Woods is ready to transfer legal ownership of any of the 196 works in the museum’s collection that are directly tied to the infamous 1897 attack.

“If we can emerge from this having done the right thing, with collaborations that are mutually beneficial, it is a win for everybody,” he said.

The Penn Museum’s shift reveals the speed of change around the repatriation of colonial-era African art. Fueled by the racial reckoning that swept the country in 2020, and helped by pandemic closures that provided time for introspection, several American museums are working to repatriate their holdings of Benin art to Nigeria. The Washington Post surveyed 70 large and small institutions to determine how many Benin Kingdom Court Style artworks they hold and whether they are taking steps to return them. Of the 56 museums with Benin pieces in their collections, 16 said they are engaged in the repatriating process and five more would be willing to do so if requested.

Many of the efforts precede those of the Smithsonian, which garnered international praise in March for its plan to repatriate several dozen Benin works in its collection. The Post survey found that at least six museums are at the same point in the multistep process as the Smithsonian and that several are ahead. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York reached an agreement with Nigerian officials in November that included the return of three pieces and formalized a shared commitment to future exchanges of expertise and art.

The board of the National Gallery of Art voted to deaccession its bronze fowl in May 2020 and is still working to complete the process. The Rhode Island School of Design Museum deaccessioned a bronze head, its only Benin piece, in September 2020. It is still on view as the museum works out the details with Nigerian officials. The Smithsonian Board of Regents is expected to approve the deaccessioning of its works at its June 13 meeting.

“We’re making history as a field. Museums are changing. This is great,” said Dan Hicks, a professor and curator at the University of Oxford in England and the author of “The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution,” a 2020 book that prompted many museums to investigate their holdings.

As the repatriations accelerate, they are creating a backlog. Nigerian agencies authorized to accept the priceless works can’t keep up with the flood of requests. The National Gallery and RISD are among the institutions waiting to complete the process. Nigerian officials are prioritizing the most prominent collections. It’s a lesson in hubris for a field that is used to calling the shots.

“These objects are with us because of lack of care and lack of listening. It’s time for us to wait, to listen,” said Sarah Ganz Blythe, interim director of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. “You realize there’s a wrong, you want to right the wrong. And maybe it’s just not that easy.”

Hicks is more direct.

“We’re the supply side and this is a demand-led process. Agency, crucially, has to be with our Nigerian colleagues,” he said. “If we’re not giving up control of the process, then we are not understanding what restitution is about.”

‘Trying to heal the wounds’

Colonial-era acquisitions have been in the spotlight for many years. In Europe, calls for repatriation gained traction in 2018, after a report commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron recommended the permanent return of works taken from African countries without consent. Benin bronzes, a descriptor that includes ornately carved ivory, wood and bronze objects from the Kingdom of Benin, became the symbol of the movement.

Experts estimate that at least 3,000 and as many as 10,000 pieces that were stolen by British forces have found their way into museums and private collections around the world. Not all the pieces are connected to the 1897 raid by the British on the Benin palace. Some were made for commercial trade, and some were crafted later than the period of violence. But many lack documentation, known as provenance, tracing their histories from creation to current owner. As a result, the exact number of looted items might never be known.

The Post survey found as many as 1,200 Benin Kingdom Court Style pieces are held by 56 museums in the United States, including 18 associated with colleges and universities. The Penn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Field Museum in Chicago account for almost two-thirds of the total, with the majority of museums holding fewer than 10.

After the Met, the National Gallery and RISD Museum — the museums that have made the most progress — is the Middlebury College Museum of Art, which has its president’s permission to return its single Benin piece. The Smithsonian, the de Young Museum in San Francisco, the Denver Art Museum, the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College and the Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont are in the process of deaccessioning.

Seven more museums report that they are in discussions with Nigerian colleagues about repatriation and collaboration: the Penn Museum, the Field Museum, the

Stanley Museum at the University of Iowa, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the New Orleans Museum of Art, Newfields in Indianapolis and the Toledo Art Museum. Five more — in Virginia, California and Wisconsin — say they are willing to repatriate their pieces if Nigerian officials request.

Most museums are collaborating with the Digital Benin Project, an international effort that began two years ago to create an online catalogue of the treasures. Led by the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARCK) in Hamburg, a small team is building a database of some 5,000 pieces owned by more than 125 museums around the world. Expected to debut later this year, it will be searchable by type of object, provenance, iconography and more, explained Barbara Plankensteiner, the MARRK's director. For research purposes, the database will include works from as recently as the 1930s.

The project emerged from the Benin Dialogue Group, a collaboration that began in 2007 and includes representatives of the Royal Court of Benin; the Edo state and Nigerian governments; Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments; and museums in Europe with significant Benin holdings.

"It is a help for researchers because you can very easily see comparable objects. It is for Nigeria and the Edo people, to know what is out there in the world," Plankensteiner said. "It does not relate to restitution. It is research and knowledge-sharing."

The Smithsonian is changing its approach to collecting, starting with its Benin artifacts

The international effort is crucial to many — especially small — American museums that lack the expertise to properly study the pieces. Museums in Wisconsin, New York, Florida and Michigan report that their collaborations with the project are helping to uncover the histories and significance of their holdings.

The digital research project spotlights an embarrassing fact of museum operations: Many museums don't know what they own or how some objects came into their collections. Researching these questions takes expertise and time, resources that often are in short supply. Three-quarters of the 1,200 Benins in American museum collections are in storage, making them even less of a priority.

While the Digital Benin Project has helped museums answer the first question in the process — "What do we own?" — it is not involved in the second question — "Whom should we return it to?" Nigeria and its government didn't exist at the time of the looting, and museum officials say members of the Benin royal

family have not always been responsive or aligned with other officials.

Only recently have all parties agreed that Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) is the entity that will negotiate for the art's return, said Phillip Ihenacho of the Legacy Restoration Trust, which is building Nigeria's museum infrastructure, including the planned David Adjaye-designed Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin City. Construction is still many years in the future.

The NCMM is expecting thousands of objects to be repatriated by museums from around the world, Abba Isa Tijani, the commission's director general, said in an interview in March. Some will be displayed in Nigeria, others will be part of a traveling exhibition and more will remain where they are, on long-term loan.

"They will be our ambassadors outside Nigeria," Tijani said. "We are trying to heal the wounds. We are willing to loan them, and we are finding ways to collaborate and ways to continue to display them."

Nigeria is focused on major collections because it doesn't have the capacity to consider a piece here and another there, Ihenacho said. In addition, there are practical issues to be considered, such as the cost of shipping, storing and caring for these works, he said.

"We are aware of the deficiency [in Nigeria's system] and how expensive it is to store and protect [them]," he said of the works being offered for return. "The first step is a change in legal title, so that Nigeria is recognized as the owner. I don't think the end goal should be every single object that exists outside of Africa should be in Nigeria. Some may remain abroad as cultural ambassadors."

But Nigeria should decide, Ihenacho emphasized.

"We are establishing public spaces not just as a receptacle for the return of the Benin bronzes, but for contemporary and modern art as well," he said. "Getting the objects back is not the end goal. The end goal is using history to help people shape their future, and to give hope to young people. That's much harder to do."

Embracing transparency

Richard Saunders, director of the Middlebury College Museum of Art, purchased the liberal arts college's lone Benin piece — a five-inch bronze leopard hip ornament — in 1997 for \$25,000 and it has been on display in the rural Vermont museum ever since. Saunders described it as a beautiful object that "is very small but it has an enormous presence."

"We know its history, and narratives are great for students, an easy way to connect the dots," Saunders

said, noting that its display has always included that it was stolen during the violent raid in 1897.

The racial reckoning and the focus on colonialism continues, Saunders said, and that has led to new answers to old questions. Acknowledging that it was looted is no longer enough.

“We should return it,” Saunders said. Museum officials first contacted the Legacy Restoration Trust in 2020; the institution plans to continue to display the work until its return.

The Benin movement has led to increased openness in the museum world, another change that many hope will be lasting. The Rhode Island School of Design has grappled with repatriation of its Benin bronze head since 2017, but it wasn’t until student protests the next year that museum leaders took the conversation public.

“Once it became external knowledge, then there was this call to action,” said Blythe, the RISD Museum director. “This made us realize that we should make our work more public, our internal discussions and the research that has been going on. We’re taking the idea of transparency really to heart.”

The University of Michigan Museum of Art has created a public website for its investigation into the histories of the 11 works of African art, including three Benins, in its collection. The research has shown that the works are not connected to the 1897 raid but are most likely more recent copies.

University museums seem more willing to embrace such openness, probably because they are used to students holding them to account, said Woods, the Penn Museum director.

“The work that has been done was started before students asked. I’m glad they ask. I want to tell them what we’re doing,” he said.

Not everyone is embracing such transparency. The Association of Art Museum Directors, the premier art museum membership organization, created an African Art Working Group in 2019 but declined a request by The Post to discuss its work.

Changing attitudes

It will probably be years before many of the planned repatriations are completed and the global partnerships become reality. But the push to return works has dramatically changed the field by developing technology, fostering collaboration and educating a new generation of museum leaders who are less authoritarian and more open to community involvement, experts say. A prime example is the Smithsonian’s recent revision to its collection policy, which calls for shared ownership and the ethical return of works that may have been stolen or removed from their origin communities without consent.

The Digital Benin Project, for example, has developed technology that merges many types of museum collection data into one platform, creating a model for virtual catalogues. Similarly, the possible return of the Benin works has helped to form new internal processes that are fashioned after the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), the U.S. law that outlines the proper return of Native American remains and sacred and funereal objects.

Most significantly, the lessons of the Benins have changed museums’ attitudes toward repatriation, making it less contentious and more commonplace. And that will be its lasting contribution to the field, experts say.

“These are low-hanging fruit. This is a clear-cut case of these objects must be returned,” RISD Museum chief curator Gina Borrromeo said of the Benin bronzes. “There are more complicated issues that need to be addressed in African art, and really in art created in the Global South. It is important that we continue to think about these issues and keep shining a light on them.

“It is probably never going to be resolved 100 percent to everyone’s satisfaction, but if we make incremental steps to correcting mistakes of the past, then perhaps we won’t make them in the future.”

The Parthenon Marbles

Greece in 'preliminary' talks with British Museum about Parthenon marbles

Officials say they have met with George Osborne, and are keen to see the masterpieces back in Athens



Some of the Parthenon marbles on display at the British Museum in London. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

Helena Smith in Athens, **The Guardian**, Sat 3 Dec 2022

Senior Greek officials have been in “preliminary” talks with the British Museum in what could amount to a tectonic shift in resolving the world’s longest-running cultural dispute: the repatriation of the 5th-century BC Parthenon marbles to Athens.

Revelations about the negotiations were first reported on Saturday by Ta Nea, which said that officials including the Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, had met George Osborne, the chair of the British Museum, in a five-star London hotel as recently as Monday.

Insiders in Athens described the report, which gave a blow-by-blow account of where the talks had been conducted, as “not only credible but very exciting”. “It is true there is a dialogue between the Greek government and the British Museum,” the country’s minister of state Giorgos Gerapetritis told the Guardian. “Right now, they are preliminary talks and, yes, I have met the British Museum’s chair, George Osborne” [to discuss the issue].

The news came five days after Mitsotakis told an audience at the London School of Economics that he “sensed” headway was being made on the issue and that a “win-win solution” was possible.

“We have seen progress,” said the Greek leader, who has made reunification of the classical statuary with

the carvings that have remained in Athens a cultural priority. “I do sense a momentum.”

The row over the marbles – removed in contentious circumstances by Lord Elgin, who was ambassador at the time to the Ottoman empire of which present-day Greece was then a part – has raged for more than 200 years.

The British Museum acquired the antiquities, which include 75 metres of the Parthenon’s original 160-metre-long frieze, in 1816 when, bankrupt, despondent and racked by syphilis, the diplomat was forced to part with them.

Elgin, who had initially hoped to adorn his Scottish estate with the treasures, maintained he had been granted a “firman” by Ottoman authorities that permitted his agents in Athens to dismantle the pieces. It has since come to light that much of the statuary was violently detached, with slabs now in the British Museum’s possession hacked from the monument with the use of saws.

Ta Nea reported that the first of several behind-the-scenes meetings had taken place in London between Osborne and Mitsotakis in 2021 when the Greek premier made the marbles the centrepiece of Downing Street talks with his then counterpart Boris Johnson.

The former chancellor had then followed up with further discussions, meeting Gerapetritis and the Greek foreign minister Nikos Dendias in London.

“At least two of those meetings were held at the Greek ambassador’s residence in Mayfair. Another one was held as recently as this week at a hotel in Knightsbridge,” wrote the paper’s London correspondent, Yannis Andritsopoulos.

“The discussions have been kept out of the public eye. The chair of London’s largest museum first visited the [Greek] ambassador’s residence, at 51 Upper Brook Street, in mid-November 2021, to hold ‘exploratory talks’ with Mitsotakis about the fate of the 2,500-year-old sculptures.”

Negotiations, it said, further evolved this week when Osborne visited the Berkeley hotel in Knightsbridge to meet the Greek premier “a year after their first secret encounter”.

The dispute over ownership of the sculptures has descended into acrimony, with the Greek culture minister accusing Elgin of committing a “blatant act of serial theft”.

As the rhetoric has intensified, campaigners, backed by growing support among Britons for their return, have piled the pressure on London’s premier cultural institution to alter its stance.

“Clever politicians listen to their people,” said Nikos Stampolidis, the Greek academic who heads the Acropolis Museum at the foot of the Periclean site. “If there were a solution, Britain could be the protagonists of an ethical empire because this transcends our countries. If the marbles were reunited here in Athens, within view of the greatest symbol of democracy, it would be a great act for humanity.”

Gerapetritis conceded that the talks were aimed as much at “establishing principles” [of discussion] as ameliorating the increasingly toxic atmosphere that had arisen on the issue. Both sides, he said, were aware of their “red lines” and a deal was far from close.

“Although there is a common understanding, a lot of details have yet to be worked out,” added the minister,

who described Mitsotakis as giving him a mandate to pursue further talks.

Asked about his face-to-face talks with Osborne, he insisted: “The discussions are not very specific. Rather, we are trying to establish a good channel of dialogue.”

In August, the British Museum’s deputy director, Jonathan Williams, announced that the institution was eager to “change the temperature of the debate” after Unesco ruled it imperative that the affair was discussed at an inter-government level.

“There is space for a really dynamic and positive conversation with which new ways of working together can be found,” Williams told the Sunday Times.

A statement issued by the British Museum said the talks were part of efforts to create “a new Parthenon partnership with Greece”.

“We’ll talk to anyone, including the Greek government, about how to take that forward. We operate within the law and we’re not going to dismantle our great collection as it tells a unique story of our common humanity. But we are seeking new positive, long-term partnerships with countries and communities around the world, and that of course includes Greece.”

In the past Mitsotakis’s centre-right government has proposed giving the UK a rotating exhibition of antiquities never before shown outside Greece in return for the Parthenon sculptures.

“There are a lot of red lines: the 1963 deaccession act for the British Museum, acknowledgment of British ownership [of the marbles] for us,” said the politician, explaining that Athens would never accept repatriation of the masterpieces as a loan.

“There is still a long way to go but we will go on with our discussions. It’s very good that we are now trying to establish a much broader cooperation with the British Museum, one that not only involves classical antiquities but Byzantine treasures that we would be willing to send.”

First Nations' history and art

How three Canadian museums are reckoning with their past mishandlings of Indigenous history

MARSHA LEDERMAN

THE GLOBE AND MAIL, FEBRUARY 4, 2022

The closed-down galleries on the Royal BC Museum's third floor tell a story. Gone is the First Peoples Gallery, with its Indigenous artifacts lifeless behind glass. Gone is *Our Living Languages: First Peoples' Voices in BC*, a newer exhibition that served as something of a corrective. Gone is *Becoming BC* – including *Old Town*, a folksy walk through British Columbia's history.

These were the core galleries of the museum; the kind of exhibitions people remember visiting as kids – or with their own children. The RBCM's November announcement that it would be dismantling these galleries and decolonizing the museum was a surprise. It was also vague about future plans, which some British Columbians found alarming.

Melanie Mark, the minister of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, recently felt compelled to address the concerns with a written piece explaining why action is needed now: the facilities are at the end of their useful life and a new and modern museum is long overdue, not just to keep the items safe – but to rethink the treatment the pieces deserve.

The unspecified transformation comes at an already rocky time for the museum. The previous CEO left last year, following internal problems that became public after a highly respected Indigenous curator quit, citing systemic racism. They have not yet hired a new CEO.

These demoralizing HR issues and the demolition of the third floor are not unrelated. That folksy walk through BC's history was criticized as being selective and segregated – history not just from a white settler perspective, but entirely separate from Indigenous history. At the same time, the First Peoples galleries contained distasteful displays.

In her piece, published last week, Mark wrote that the Royal BC Museum “has a duty to curate the past with an equal responsibility to accurately reflect a timeline of our shared history.”

Among the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action in its final 2015 report was a national review, in collaboration with Indigenous peoples, of museum policies and best practices to determine the level of compliance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. UNDRIP states Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.



An exhibit from the third floor of B.C. Royal Museum is pictured in Victoria, Wednesday, December 29, 2021. The museum announced that it will be closing the third floor including parts of the First Peoples Gallery in an effort to decolonize the institution.

THE CANADIAN PRESS/Jonathan Hayward
JONATHAN HAYWARD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

These are guidelines that Mark, who is Nisga'a, Gitksan, Cree and Ojibway, takes very seriously. Many museums are taking it seriously too. From the grand RBCM, to smaller exhibit halls around the province, museums are working toward a more authentic, inclusive, truthful way to reflect history.

An essential element is that the process involves – and is guided by – Indigenous people.

“What I think is interesting is the timing of this happening at this moment in time when I'm the first and only First Nations woman to serve in cabinet,” Mark says. “What I hope to bring to the table is my own cultural lens and that commitment to share the values, the principles of ‘nothing about us without us.’”

The man behind the glass was labelled, simply, “The Chief.” No name, no Nation. His neck ring and dance apron were Gitksan, the robe, leggings and rattle Nisga'a. A mishmash described as “Chief's ensemble.” An amalgam, not a person. This is one of the former displays in the RBCM's First Peoples' Gallery.

“That isn't a fulsome story,” Mark says in an interview this week. “That's just an image with a one-plaque description. We demand more. We want to know more.” While the Royal BC Museum, funded by provincial tax dollars, declined to speak to *The Globe and Mail* for this story, Mark, in the interview, explained that her government was reviewing a business case to

modernize the museum. It's a massive proposition, she says, and includes plans to increase access through digitization and travelling pop-up exhibitions.

Mark meets every other week with its acting CEO, who is also board chair, and promises to disclose information about budget and scope when it's available.

Her opinion piece, she says, was meant as a reassurance.

"There's a concern that we are going to wipe out history, that we're going to erase history, that we're hiding history, and that's furthest from the truth," she says.

"But," she adds, "we all agree that it's time to reimagine what those exhibits look like."

The Royal BC Museum's troubles go beyond outdated exhibits. Allegations of a toxic, racist work environment were on display for all to see, after the 2020 resignation of Lucy Bell as head of the First Nations Department and Repatriation program. The disturbing experiences she shared prompted investigations, and the CEO's departure.

"The minute that strong allegations come forward about people not feeling heard or safe, I have a duty to take those concerns seriously," Mark says. "And my expectation is that things are going to change."

Bell was engaged in a key aspect of museum decolonization – repatriation of Indigenous ancestors and items. As Troy Sebastian, a former curator of the museum's Indigenous collection, writes this week in *The Globe and Mail*, when it comes to the museum's efforts at repatriation, "First Nations are growing increasingly frustrated by the repeated appeals for patience."

The behind-the-scenes workplace and public-facing exhibition issues are connected. This credo of "not about us without us" – and the degree to which it has (or hasn't) been respected – permeates both.

"Indigenous people haven't always played a role in museums that curate the artifacts, specimens, etc.," Mark says. The more Indigenous people inhabit that role, the more influence they will have in how stories are told, she says. "And that's why diversity at museums – the people that work there – is incredibly important."

And leads to a better museum. Where visitors can learn about a real Chief from a specific Nation, what he really did, and wore. Where they can do more than gawk at a totem pole, but also learn where it came from, how it was engineered. Where visitors can learn about residential schools, not just be presented with a passing nod to the catastrophe.

Monova

The day before the Museum of North Vancouver opened its doors to the public in December, Monova officials signed a Memorandum of Understanding and Protocol Agreement with the Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish Nations.

After the signing, participants walked out to the lobby for the unveiling of Squamish carver Wade Baker's Ch'ich'iyúy Elxwíkn: The Twin Sisters, and rubbed it with cedar branches.

"We say that's awakening their spirit," Sheryl Rivers of the Squamish Nation says. "They're like our ancestors, so we cherish them and respect them and look upon them for prayers and strength."

Rivers is a founding member of Monova's Indigenous Voices Advisory Committee. The memorandum sets out a roadmap for that collaboration. "It was not just a photo op," museum director Wesley Wenhardt says.

After walking through a forest-like tunnel to the main exhibition space, visitors encounter an Indigenous welcome circle, front and centre.

"One thing that came from Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish is they wanted our presence to be seen," Rivers says.

The circle's acoustics create a quiet experience, making it a place to reflect, or have a conversation. Nearby in another sheltered area, visitors learn about residential schools from recordings of survivors.

In this permanent exhibition, Indigenous history is part of everything – the timeline, displays about shipbuilding, mountaineering, arts and culture.

"What I love about this is that we're integrated throughout the museum," Rivers says. "This is the first time we're not behind a glass case and 'This is Squamish nation, how they lived here. This is Salish and how they lived here. This is the city of North Van and how they lived here' – so segregated. In today's world, we're all interconnected. We're all woven together."

"We will start with the stories of the Fraser from our perspective and grow it from there. What kind of stories do our neighbours have?" Charles says. The stories, he says, will not come from the "white guy anthropological perspective. The stories will come from the heart."

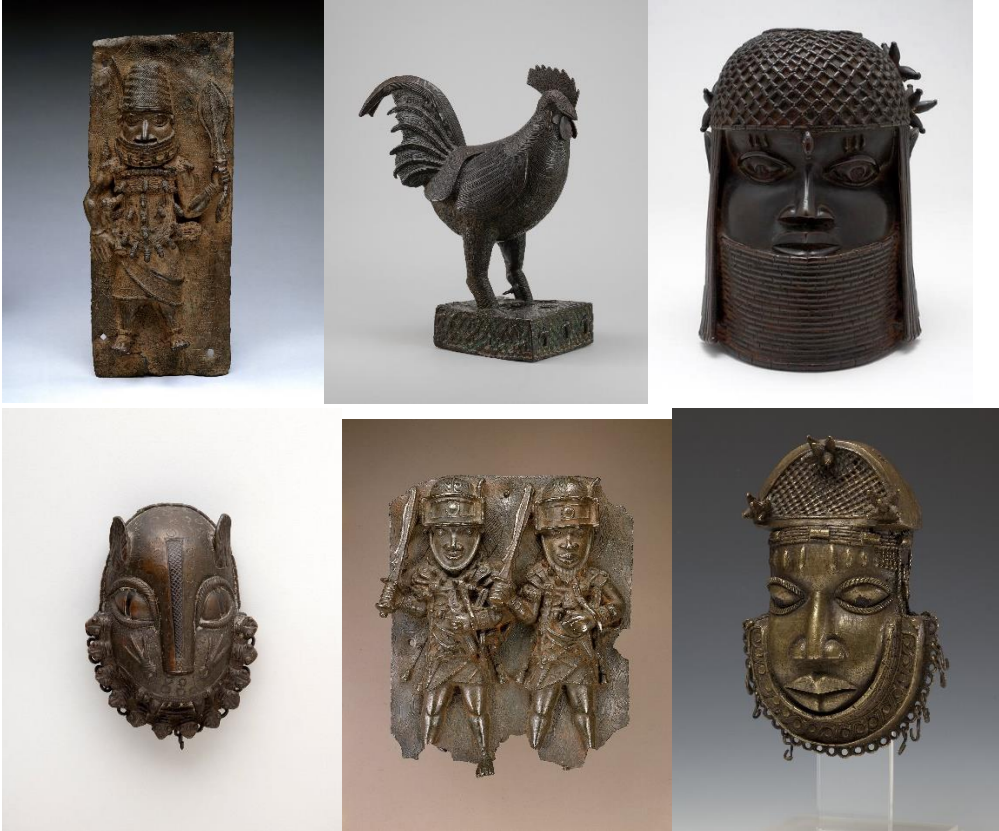
They're looking for stories and other collaborators in what will be a massive change. "I keep saying, in cultural context, FRDC got the log, Musqueam carved the canoe," Charles says. "We're on the beach, we're getting ready to launch this canoe. We have extra paddles. Who wants to get in and paddle with us?"

The Long Read (digital version of the file only)

For U.S. Museums With Looted Art, the Indiana Jones Era Is Over

Prodded by law enforcement, and pushed by foreign governments, American museums are increasingly returning artifacts to countries of origin, but critics wonder at what cost.

By Graham Bowley, *The New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2022



Benin Bronzes from six U.S. museums that have been returned, or have been designated to be returned. The artifacts were originally seized by British soldiers in 1897. Credit...Clockwise from top left: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington; via the RISD Museum; Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth; National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution; Middlebury College Museum of Art

For decades, there was a swashbuckling aspect to collecting by American museums. In the 1960s, for example, some museum curators embraced the chase for prized artifacts as if it were big game hunting. Thomas Hoving, a Metropolitan Museum of Art curator who later became its director, took particular pride in his ability to outsmart rivals in the global pursuit of masterpieces. In one instance he recalled spiriting a Romanesque relief from a Florentine church out of Italy with the help of a dealer who, Hoving said, often stashed objects under a mattress in his station wagon. “My collecting style was pure piracy,” he boasted, “and I got a reputation as a shark.” Today many U.S. museums are facing a reckoning for their aggressive tactics of the past. Attitudes have shifted, the Indiana Jones era is over, and there is tremendous pressure on museums to return any looted works acquired during the days when collecting could be careless and trophies at times trumped scruples.

Though the tide turned more than a decade ago, the pace of repatriations has only accelerated in recent years. In just the last few months, museums across America have returned dozens of antiquities to the countries from which they were taken. The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles returned three precious terra cotta figures to Italy. The Denver Art Museum shipped four antiquities back to Cambodia. The Smithsonian Institution returned 29 Benin bronzes to Nigeria. And the Manhattan district attorney’s office seized 27 looted artifacts from the Met, which are headed back to Italy and Egypt. “I do have sympathy,” said Elizabeth Marlowe, director of the museum studies program at Colgate University, “for museum directors and curators who were trained under different ethical norms and now find themselves in a situation where they very publicly have to rethink the ethical norms they are operating under. That said, ‘It’s time to step up, gentlemen.’ It’s a different landscape.”

To Marlowe and others, the surge in museum repatriations is a just response to more than a century of treasure-hunting that they say took advantage of societies made vulnerable by poverty, war or political instability.

For some, though, the number of restitutions has become unsettling. Museums, like public libraries, have long enjoyed an exalted status as places that promote erudition by permanently preserving and displaying the significant objects that define human history and culture.

But now curators are regularly watching ancient works long on display head out the door in shipping crates. Collecting practices embraced for decades have been recast as villainous.

“We have moved the goal posts,” said Kate Fitz Gibbon, executive director of the think tank Committee for Cultural Policy.

Consider, for example, the mounting pressure on the British Museum to return the Elgin marbles that once graced the Parthenon. They were acquired at the dawn of the 19th century when the Ottoman Empire ruled Greece. The British view the sculptures and bas-reliefs as legitimately transferred by the Ottoman authorities. The Greeks argue that the Turks, as occupiers, lacked the moral authority to dispense with their history.

This fall Egyptian archaeologists renewed calls for the return of the Rosetta Stone by the British Museum, which has taken steps to distance itself from its colonialist past. Two years ago, the museum relocated a bust of its founder, Hans Sloane, a slaveholder, to a vitrine exploring Britain and slavery.

In America, critics of the surge in returns worry that museum collections built over time by scholars and imbued by a sense of context are being randomly depleted. Should U.S. audiences, they ask, be deprived access to iconic objects that they suggest belong, not to individual nations, but to humankind?

Leila A. Amineddoleh, an art and cultural heritage lawyer, has suggested that such thinking is outdated.

“Arguments against repatriation are sometimes supported by paternalistic and patronizing arguments,” she wrote, “asserting that western collectors and archaeologists ‘discovered’ these objects and have superior knowledge of them.”

Experts say a significant change in attitudes about collecting dates to 1970 when nations began ratifying a UNESCO treaty to stem the trade in illicit artifacts. Awareness of the problem expanded further 20 years ago when antiquities looting during the Iraq war made clear the scope of that black market.

More recently, foreign governments like Cambodia have shown a greater interest in claiming their national heritage — their tracking aided by the transparency afforded by the internet and online databases.

But most significantly, U.S. authorities, both local and federal, have made the return of looted cultural heritage more of a diplomatic and law enforcement priority. U.S. Homeland Security Investigations reports returning more than 20,000 items since 2007, largely seized from dealers and collectors, but also found in many of America’s most prestigious museums.

“There has been a broad agreement for decades that objects that were stolen in violation of law should be returned, but what has changed is the amount of time

and focus spent on this kind of crime and the political will to pursue it,” said Donna Yates, associate professor, criminal law and criminology at Maastricht University in the Netherlands.

A Coffin and a Kardashian



Kim Kardashian poses next to the coffin of Nefertiti, high-ranking priest of the ram-headed god Heryshef of Herakleopolis, at the 2018 Met Gala in New York. Credit...Landon Nordeman for The New York Times

The dealer seemed to have the correct paperwork. The laws of Egypt appeared to countenance its sale. So it was with considerable enthusiasm in 2017 that the Metropolitan Museum of Art paid nearly \$4 million for a gold-plated coffin dating back to the 1st century B.C. It had been created to bury Nefertiti, a high-ranking priest of the ram-headed god Heryshef of Herakleopolis.

Then, during the 2018 Met Gala, Kim Kardashian posed next to it, sheathed in a gold dress that shimmered like the coffin itself.

Her image circled the globe and was spotted by the Jordanian smuggler who had taken the coffin and tipped the high priest’s mummy into the Nile. He complained to another smuggler that he had never been paid for his efforts. As it turned out, his confidant was an informant for the Manhattan district attorney’s office.

The investigators found the export license had been forged. The coffin had not, as the permit stated, left Egypt in 1971. It had been illegally excavated in 2011, smuggled to Dubai, then Germany and Paris. When the coffin arrived at the Met, one of the high priest’s finger bones was still attached inside, according to investigators.

Only two years after buying the coffin, the Met agreed to return it to Egypt.

“After we learned that the museum was a victim of fraud,” the Met’s president, Daniel H. Weiss, said, “and unwittingly participated in the illegal trade of antiquities, we worked with the DA’s office for its return to Egypt.”

Returned Under Pressure



“Orpheus and the Sirens,” life-size terra-cotta figures dating to 300 B.C., were a signature piece of the Getty Villa Museum. They were seized by the Manhattan district attorney’s office earlier this year and returned to Italy. Credit...The J. Paul Getty Museum/The J. Paul Getty Museum, via Associated Press

Museums do show a heightened sensitivity to the integrity of their collections and have returned illicit objects based on their own research. But experts say most museum repatriations of recent years have been sparked by government claims or U.S. law enforcement efforts. “There is a sense that the U.S. should not be the repository of the world’s stolen property,” said Stefan D. Cassella, a former federal prosecutor.

The office of Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg has a dedicated unit that focuses on restitution. Since 2011, the office says it has recovered nearly 4,500 antiquities from collectors and dealers and, in several cases, from museums. Last summer, the unit served a search warrant on the Getty regarding the three major terra cottas, “Orpheus and the Sirens” — mainstays of the museum’s collection. It cited the New York State penal code, in particular a section that prohibits the possession of stolen property and is typically used in more prosaic settings to recover things like stolen cars.

Matthew Bogdanos, the assistant district attorney who leads the unit, said it had overwhelming evidence. “The Getty gulped,” Bogdanos recalled, “and said, ‘Yes, you are right, it’s stolen,’ and returned it.”

In fact, the Getty decided, based on its own and independent research, to return additional items to Italy.

“Getty has been conducting vigorous provenance research for years and we return items based on evidence of illegal excavation,” said Lisa Lapin, a Getty spokesperson. “I do give them credit,” Bogdanos said of museums that cooperate. “But I don’t think anyone should think we walk in the door, and it’s, ‘Glad you are here.’ That does not happen.”

The Impact of a Treaty

Experts say the 1970 UNESCO convention helped redefine acceptable behavior when it came to antiquities. Nations pledged to cooperate and follow best practices to curb the import of stolen items.

Though the treaty governed the conduct of nations, not institutions, museums began to set guidelines that aligned in spirit with its principles. Many agreed, for example, not to acquire an artifact without clear, documented evidence that it had left its country of origin before 1970, or had been legally exported after 1970.

“It has reset the range of acceptable behavior,” said Nicholas M. O’Donnell, a lawyer who specializes in art matters. Still, the ethos of collecting hardly changed overnight.

“When I first entered the world of curators, it was the Wild West, ‘1970’ notwithstanding,” said Gary Vikan, who was a curator in the 1980s and later became director of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. “Curators and museum directors wanted to get important works. You wanted to be the one that gets that icon, that sculpture, that bronze.”

While the 1970 cutoff date reduces the risk of acquiring a stolen object, it does not inoculate museums from claims. Countries can, and do, make demands for objects acquired earlier based on their own national ownership laws that define when an artifact became state property, and thus illegal to be exported without an official license. Italy, for example, has had one on the books since 1909.

U.S. investigators often cite such ownership laws when pressing museums to return items that left that country after such a law was in place. To succeed, they must show that the law was clear and unambiguous, that the archaeological artifact is truly from that country and that it was still there when the law was enacted.

Investigators will also point to other violations of customs law, such as when smugglers mislabel an item on shipping forms. The Egyptian coffin seized from the Met, for example, was described as a “gypsum Wooden Box and lid” on documents presented to German officials, according to investigators.

The fact that a museum acquired an antiquity in good faith does not matter, even if the seller or donor was not aware an item was looted. Under U.S. law, one can never acquire good title to stolen property.

Steps Forward by Museums



In October, the official return of the Smithsonian bronzes featured a ceremony where Dr. Abba Isa Tijani, the director general of Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments, left, and Lonnie Bunch, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, signed the transfer documents. Credit...Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for The Washington Post, via Getty Images

The Smithsonian Institution this year adopted an ethical returns policy that holds that issues of fairness could trump any legal title it might possess. Put forward as Exhibit A of its new seriousness was an announcement that it would return 29 Benin Bronzes to Nigeria.

The bronzes, which carry that name even though they were often made from brass, ivory or wood, are not being given back as a matter of law, but, experts say, as a matter of morality. The Kingdom of Benin, in what is now southern Nigeria, had no heritage law in place in 1897 when British soldiers seized thousands of them as trophies.

The bronzes have become a focal point for the repatriation debate. At least 50 American museums hold at least one Benin bronze and there are a total of roughly 1,100 in the U.S. So far, at least 10 museums have returned bronzes or are planning to.

Critics complain that, among other things, such returns take treasures that showcase a country's artistic brilliance from an international capital like Washington, where they are much seen, and send them to remote, uncertain settings.

One organization, the Restitution Study Group, has sued to block the Smithsonian's transfers. Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, executive director of the group, said her ancestors were traded as slaves from ports controlled by the Kingdom of Benin, where colonial-era rulers participated in the slave trade. She views the artifacts, some of which are said to have been created from the very metal that was exchanged for slaves, as part of her heritage and often took her daughter to see them at museums.

"If they go back, what then is left for us," she said in an interview.



An early Byzantine bracelet, with a cameo of Medusa, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Credit...Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

More debates of this sort are likely as museums grapple with increased scrutiny. Some have already chosen to respond with measures like the appointment in 2010 of Victoria Reed by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston as its curator of provenance. Her job includes identifying looted objects in its collection.

She recently called attention to a new wall label for an ancient bracelet purchased by the museum in 2008. The label acknowledges that the museum no longer believes the account of the seller.

"We now believe the information is untrue, probably fabricated and used repeatedly by the seller to disguise instances of archaeological looting," the panel says.

The Met and other museums have also entered into loan agreements that return ownership of artifacts to the country of origin but permit their continued display by the institution.

"Museums don't need to OWN objects to share them with the public," said Yates, of the University of Maastricht, in an email.

Questioning Their Commitment

Some art world experts are not convinced that U.S. museums have fully embraced a new ethos of transparency and internal scrutiny.

They point to what they consider to be loopholes in the Association of Art Museum Directors guidelines on the acquisition of artifacts. The association, which serves as the industry's ethical compass, discourages the acquisition of any object without a documented provenance before 1970, unless it has an official export permit. But the guidelines allow museums to accept such an artifact if they list it on an online registry where they report whatever provenance information they do have and a justification for taking it in. To date, museums have posted 1,754 objects on the exception registry.

The association has spoken of how seriously it and its member organizations view the issues of looting and cultural heritage. But Patty Gerstenblith, the director of the Center for Art, Museum and Cultural Heritage Law at DePaul University, called the registry's standard "very, very loose." "It looks like a fig leaf," she said.

Marlowe, the Colgate professor, said she too is skeptical that all museums are serious about scrutinizing their collections. "The strategy museums have adopted is to pretend that these objects materialized out of nowhere," she said. "But we are learning more and more they know exactly where these pieces came from and they are effectively lying in their labels."

Vikan, the former museum director, said that while he fully endorses repatriation efforts, the cost for museums goes beyond the loss of artifacts already in a collection. Given their limited acquisition budgets, American museums have relied on donated antiquities and now donors who lack full paperwork can be reluctant to make gifts, and museums are reluctant to accept them.

But he does not worry that large museums, which typically display only a fraction of their holdings, will be significantly hurt by more robust repatriation efforts.

"If anyone tells me that sending the Elgin marbles back to Greece, that somehow the British Museum will be empty, it's nonsense," he said.

Bogdanos, the assistant district attorney, agreed.

"I don't want to denude New York of its extensive cultural treasures," he said. "I just want people to walk into museums, even other people's apartments, and see an antiquity and know, 'I bet you it's OK, it's legal, because here in New York they take that seriously.'"

Alain Delaquerière contributed research.

The Fine Arts & Exhibits Special Section in the NY Times

- **Bigger and Better:** While the Covid-19 pandemic forced museums to close for months, cut staff and reduce expenses, several of them have nevertheless moved forward on [ambitious renovations or new buildings](#).
- **A Tribute to Black Artists:** Four museums across the country are featuring exhibitions this fall that recognize the work of [African and African American artists](#), signaling a change in attitude — and priorities.
- **New and Old:** In California, museums are celebrating and [embracing Latino and Chicano art and artists](#). And the [La Brea Tar Pits & Museum](#) is working to engage visitors about the realities of climate change.
- **A Cultural Correction:** After removing all references to Columbus from its collections the [Denver Art Museum](#) has embraced a new exhibition on Latin American art.
- **More From the Special Section:** Museums, galleries and auction houses are opening their doors wider than ever to [new artists, new concepts and new traditions](#).

Bénédicte Savoy : « Les restitutions d'œuvres d'art seront l'un des grands enjeux du XXI^e siècle entre l'Europe et l'Afrique »

Le Bénin a obtenu, en 2021, la restitution de 26 œuvres d'art pillées durant la colonisation française et qu'il réclamait depuis longtemps. Un rééquilibrage nécessaire, selon l'historienne de l'art Bénédicte Savoy, coautrice, avec le Sénégalais Felwine Sarr, d'un rapport commandé par la France sur ce sujet.

BORIS THIOLAY *Grand entretien paru dans le magazine GEO d'août 2022 (n° 522, Bretagne).*

La France est le premier pays occidental à avoir engagé un processus de restitution d'objets d'art africains à leurs pays d'origine. S'agit-il de réparer les pillages perpétrés durant la colonisation ?

Les démarches de restitution ne s'inscrivent plus dans le contexte de la **décolonisation**, mais dans une logique globale de justice sociale et patrimoniale, d'égalité et de lutte contre le racisme. Il s'agit de réajuster un déséquilibre criant : la quasi-totalité du patrimoine matériel africain ancien se trouve en Europe, dans des musées. En Afrique, les deux plus grands musées sont à Kinshasa [République démocratique du Congo] et à Lagos [Nigeria] : ils possèdent 40 000 pièces chacun. Mais si vous additionnez les inventaires des grandes collections publiques en Europe, vous arrivez à un total de 500 000 pièces : 69 000 à Paris, au musée du Quai Branly, 75 000 à Berlin, 69 000 à Londres, 140 000 à Bruxelles... Sans compter les **collections du Vatican**, dont on ignore l'étendue. Presque tous les objets d'art africains sont conservés en Europe, et seule une infime partie est montrée. Mais il ne faut pas se placer uniquement dans une logique de réparation comptable : la restitution implique de regarder l'histoire, de soupeser le passé, et d'affirmer que ce qui est arrivé aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles n'est plus supportable

aujourd'hui. La violence coloniale a débouché sur une « extraction culturelle » massive de pièces de natures très différentes. Des objets de pouvoirs – trônes, couronnes, armes d'apparat –, autant de butins de guerre constitués lors de la conquête coloniale. Il y a aussi les pièces rapportées par des expéditions scientifiques. La mission Dakar-Djibouti (1931-1933), par exemple, qui se déplaçait avec des camions et raflait le maximum d'objets, souvent de manière brutale, ou par la menace. L'objectif était de mieux connaître le mode de vie des populations, mais cela dans le but de les maîtriser et de leur faire payer l'impôt. Enfin, les missionnaires se faisaient remettre les objets rituels pour prouver leur réussite dans la conversion des populations au christianisme. Ils en faisaient d'ailleurs un commerce.

Pourquoi ces demandes ont-elles mis aussi longtemps à aboutir ?

En fait, ce débat a déjà eu lieu dans les années 1970-1980, à la demande des pays africains. Dès les indépendances, des intellectuels, poètes, cinéastes, journalistes, ont réclamé le retour de ces **œuvres**. En 1965, Bingo, un magazine édité à **Dakar**, a publié un texte intitulé : *Rendez-nous l'art nègre !*. Ce texte affirmait en substance : nous sommes des pays autonomes. Pour construire notre avenir, nous devons reconnecter à notre patrimoine matériel et immatériel, à nos langues, nos religions... Ce débat a été porté au Conseil international des musées [une ONG créée en 1946 et qui siège à Paris], à l'Unesco, dans les médias... Mais les grands musées européens ont élaboré des stratégies de défense avec, en outre, un sentiment de supériorité non formulé : ces collections ne pouvaient être bien conservées qu'en Occident... En

France, le terme « inaliénabilité » – l'impossibilité de céder des oeuvres appartenant au patrimoine public – a longtemps servi de formule magique pour bloquer tout débat. Pourtant, en décembre 2020, quand il a été décidé d'adopter une loi d'exception pour autoriser les premières restitutions au **Bénin** et au Sénégal, l'Assemblée l'a adoptée à l'unanimité. Les mentalités ont évolué et nous assistons à un retour de boomerang : le débat étouffé il y a quarante ans revient avec d'autant plus de force...

L'objectif n'est pas de vider les musées européens de l'ensemble de leurs collections africaines...

Absolument pas. Dans le rapport remis au Président Macron, nous avons préconisé de répondre favorablement aux demandes. Il faut donc qu'il existe une démarche préalable. Il n'est pas question de rapporter dans les ports de Cotonou, de Douala ou d'**Abidjan** des objets que personne n'aurait réclamés... Il faut noter que les premières demandes portent sur les objets de pouvoir, pris lors de razzias militaires restées dans la mémoire collective comme des épisodes de grande violence et de perte de souveraineté. Le Bénin, «petit» pays d'Afrique, a ainsi été le premier à obtenir, en novembre dernier, une restitution majeure : 26 objets, statues, trônes, portes monumentales sculptées, pesant au total 2,5 tonnes. Ces pièces proviennent du pillage du palais royal d'Abomey, en 1892. De plus, les musées ne se vident jamais. En 1815, la France a dû rendre tout ce que la **Révolution française** et **Napoléon** avaient raflé lors de leurs campagnes européennes, cela n'a pas ruiné le Louvre... Les musées disposent de réserves, ils font de nouvelles acquisitions, montrent d'autres objets. Certaines collections africaines en Europe seront peut-être très réduites dans cent cinquante ans, mais ceci ne doit pas entraver le processus. Quand, dans un musée, vous découvrez un objet précieux, unique, qui vous procure un plaisir esthétique, vous apporte de la connaissance, il faut toujours avoir à l'esprit que cette pièce n'est pas visible ailleurs. Personne ne peut l'admirer dans son pays d'origine, parce qu'elle y a été confisquée il y a cent trente ans.

À qui faut-il rendre ces objets d'art ?

Aux États, à des communautés ? Cette question doit être résolue par les pays qui demandent le retour. Le patrimoine n'est pas une chose figée, que l'on déplace d'un point à un autre. Au Bénin comme au Nigeria, c'est seulement à partir du moment où l'on a su que les objets allaient revenir que des débats se sont

enclenchés : est-ce que telle pièce prise à un roi au XIXe siècle appartient à ses descendants, à la ville où il régnait, ou à la nation ? Un objet religieux volé à une communauté particulière doit-il forcément lui être rendu ? À Cotonou [Bénin], en février dernier, dans son discours d'inauguration de l'exposition des 26 pièces restituées, le Président Patrice Talon a expliqué que les objets avaient bien été pris dans le palais du roi Behanzin, à Abomey, mais que tout ceci appartenait aujourd'hui à la **république du Bénin**. On « républicanise » un patrimoine précolonial : cela semble compliqué, mais les gens le comprennent très bien. Chaque pays va trouver sa voie. Au Cameroun, où il existe de nombreux royaumes, il faudra probablement restituer des pièces à **des chefferies traditionnelles**.

Les restitutions ne se limitent pas au retour physique des oeuvres. Elles comportent aussi des enjeux culturels et sociaux...

Avec le retour des objets, on restitue le savoir qu'ils renferment. On rend aussi des inventaires, des photos, mais on réveille surtout des potentiels. Dans les musées européens, ces pièces, qui sont les témoins matériels de cultures spécifiques, ont été privées de leur pouvoir agissant, de leur fonction esthétique, pratique ou rituelle, de leur capacité à faire germer des idées. Certains de ces potentiels peuvent à nouveau se libérer, sans que l'on puisse prévoir sous quelle forme : c'est stimulant ! Les pièces restituées ont un tel pouvoir d'évocation que ce sont elles qui vont désormais susciter des créations. L'exemple récent de Cotonou en apporte une preuve extraordinaire. Les 26 pièces rendues ont été exposées cette année [entre février et mai] en combinaison avec 130 oeuvres d'art contemporain, et cela a donné un résultat incroyable. Dans la partie « historique », on a vu de jeunes enfants, accompagnés de leurs parents et grands-parents, découvrir des statues anciennes et poser des questions sur leur origine, leur signification. Dans la partie contemporaine, des chefs traditionnels, en tenue d'apparat, se sont confrontés à des œuvres afrofuturistes. Cela a créé des rencontres, des chocs de temporalité très riches. En trois mois d'exposition gratuite, 175 000 visiteurs ont afflué. À l'échelle du pays [13 millions d'habitants], c'est énorme ! Et tout ceci a engendré de nouveaux projets, des dynamiques inattendues : le Bénin souhaite désormais avoir un pavillon à la prochaine biennale de **Venise** [2024] et l'État a créé une collection publique d'art contemporain.

Les habitants redécouvrent avant tout leur culture, leur passé...

Oui, bien sûr. Les gens se réapproprient l'histoire de leur pays et sa chronologie. Les objets restitués datent majoritairement de la période précoloniale, qui est aujourd'hui souvent mal connue sur place. Des régions entières ont été coupées de leurs racines. Dans l'exposition de Cotonou, des cartes d'anciens royaumes ouest-africains étaient affichées. Ainsi, les visiteurs peuvent-ils se reconnecter avec cette période de leur histoire. Ils renouent aussi avec la fonction originelle des objets. En novembre 2021, alors que les pièces restituées étaient encore entreposées dans des caisses, des collègues béninois nous ont dit : « Nous ignorons dans quelle langue nous devons parler à ces statues. » Là, il ne s'agissait pas d'une question abstraite. Quelles langues étaient utilisées autrefois pour s'adresser à ces objets ? Est-ce qu'elles existent encore ? Du coup, des universitaires béninois, autour de Didier Houénoudé, veulent lancer un travail de recherche pour recenser les **langues** parlées dans tel ou tel royaume à l'époque.

Quel rôle joue ce patrimoine dans des sociétés où domine la culture orale ?

Ces pièces raniment des savoirs et agissent aussi sur le plan émotionnel. Lors d'une récente exposition au musée de Cologne, la conservatrice Nanette Snoep a permis à des artistes et des intellectuels nigériens de toucher des oeuvres provenant du pillage de Benin City, au Nigeria, en 1897. La professeure d'histoire de l'art Peju Layiwola, de l'université de **Lagos**, raconte qu'elle a fondu en larmes au contact d'une des pièces, et que cette sensation lui a aussitôt inspiré un poème. Dans les sociétés de tradition orale, certaines oeuvres sont des supports destinés à enseigner l'histoire, comme des bandes dessinées. Les bronzes de Benin City, dont des centaines d'éléments se trouvent au British Museum, à **Londres**, racontent l'épopée de l'ancien royaume d'Edo. Ailleurs, des défenses sculptées d'éléphant retracent des victoires militaires, à la façon de notre colonne Vendôme. Quand un support iconographique n'est plus disponible, son récit n'est plus transmis, et peut être oublié. Au Cameroun, la chercheuse Yrène Matchinda se rend avec d'anciennes photos dans des villages reculés pour recueillir la mémoire liée à des objets « disparus ». Elle n'obtient parfois que d'infimes détails mais, à partir de cela, elle parvient à reconstituer leur histoire et leur usage. Et ce sont bien les objets qui réveillent la mémoire.

Ces restitutions concernent aussi la jeunesse franco-africaine, et les diasporas installées en Europe...

C'est un point primordial. Les jeunes générations de binationaux ou originaires d'Afrique voient un changement majeur s'opérer ici et peuvent en mesurer les effets là-bas. L'exposition de Cotonou a été rouverte jusqu'à la fin août pour permettre à la diaspora qui vient en vacances de découvrir ces oeuvres sur place. Cela donne au visiteur une conscience de soi, une valeur à sa culture d'origine. C'est une source de fierté. À la dernière biennale de **Dakar**, en mai et juin derniers, la question des restitutions était sur toutes les lèvres. Les artistes contemporains, chorégraphes, cinéastes, designers, montrent une réceptivité et un attachement évident à ce patrimoine ancien. Or, faute de visas et de moyens économiques, ces générations n'ont quasiment pas accès aux collections montrées en Europe. Il est d'autant plus important que ces œuvres puissent assurer un lien entre les deux continents.

La conception de l'art est très différente en Europe et en Afrique. Certains objets pourraient-ils revenir à leur emplacement initial, ou retrouver leur ancienne fonction ?

C'est aux pays concernés d'en décider souverainement. Si on considère que telle œuvre doit retrouver son village d'origine, c'est très bien ainsi. Des objets peuvent aussi circuler en procession, dans le cadre d'une fête, d'une cérémonie... Un exemple : le musée national du Mali, à **Bamako**, prête certaines pièces à des communautés villageoises, le temps d'un rituel. Elles retrouvent ensuite leur place dans les collections. Les communautés savent qu'elles y sont bien conservées, en sécurité.

L'opération réalisée au Bénin sera-telle reproduite ailleurs ?

Chaque pays représente un cas particulier. Mais, ce qui s'est passé à Cotonou est, du point de vue des relations culturelles Nord-Sud, l'équivalent de la chute du mur de Berlin au niveau géopolitique. Fin 2018, au moment de la remise de notre rapport, le ministre béninois de la Culture ne croyait toujours pas au retour des pièces demandées. Tout en reconnaissant que, si cela se concrétisait, la donne serait définitivement changée. Le geste de la France, la restitution d'objets qui étaient exposés en permanence dans un grand musée, a fait irrémédiablement bouger les lignes. L'**Allemagne** s'apprête à rendre au Nigeria des objets résultant du pillage de Benin City. Le mouvement

s'étend à la Belgique, aux Pays-Bas, à **la Suisse** et au Royaume-Uni, avec les collections universitaires de **Cambridge** et d'Aberdeen. Les restitutions vont représenter l'un des grands enjeux du XXI^e siècle entre l'Europe et l'Afrique. Cela va devenir une question globale avec l'entrée dans le processus des États-Unis, qui n'ont pas de passé colonial : la Smithsonian Institution [une fédération de 19 musées et neuf centres de recherches] a récemment annoncé qu'elle allait rendre certains « bronzes du Bénin » à l'État nigérian.

Cela peut-il engendrer un nouveau type de relations entre l'Afrique et l'Europe, en particulier la France ?

Ce processus montre que la période de défiance et de déni est terminée. Cela suffira-t-il à restaurer l'image de la France en Afrique de l'Ouest ? Difficile à dire. Mais il faut reconnaître que, cette fois, la promesse a été tenue. Ces restitutions doivent fonder une nouvelle éthique relationnelle entre l'Afrique et l'Occident. D'ici quelques années, nous verrons le Bénin, le Nigeria, **l'Égypte**, et d'autres pays, proposer des prêts d'œuvres africaines en échange de telle création européenne majeure, ou d'une contribution financière. Déjà, les pays qui ont obtenu les premières restitutions sont

disposés à faire circuler ces objets. Il faut d'abord leur laisser le temps de se les réapproprier et comprendre qu'ils les prêteront en fonction de leurs propres priorités. Au Bénin, terre d'origine du vaudou, des conservateurs envisagent de montrer certaines collections aux **Caraïbes**, où ce culte est pratiqué. L'universalisme prôné par l'Occident peut être impulsé depuis d'autres régions de la planète.

Le mouvement peut-il s'étendre à d'autres continents, ou concerner des périodes plus anciennes ?

Oui, il faut souhaiter que des pays et des régions qui ont été coupés de leur histoire et de leur patrimoine dans un contexte de violence et de domination coloniale puissent, s'ils le souhaitent, récupérer des pièces importantes. Dans les années 1970, le Sri Lanka a fait des démarches auprès de musées britanniques et allemands. L'Inde réclame de nombreux objets au Royaume-Uni, **l'Indonésie** a obtenu des restitutions de la part des Pays-Bas. **L'Irak** réclame, par exemple, le code de Hammurabi [XVIII^e siècle avant J.-C.], qui se trouve au Louvre. En ce qui concerne **l'Antiquité**, les pillages d'objets remontent souvent à la période coloniale. Les œuvres réclamées pourraient donc être restituées de la même façon.

Only a handful of works returned

Number of works and objects held in European public collections

- 1 (red diamond) which have been the subject of an official request for restitution
- 1 (grey diamond) which have been the subject of restitution plans
- 1 (green diamond) which have been returned



The sword of El Hadj Omar Tall, who resisted colonisation, was in the Paris army museum until it was returned to Dakar in December 2020

In August 2019, Dakar requested that Segou's spoils of war, which were being kept in three French museums, be returned



Djidji Ayokwe, the speaking drum of the Ebrîés



France will return 26 works of art in early November to Benin that had been looted during the sacking of the **Abomey palace** in the 19th century and kept at Quai Branly

Germany has promised to return by the end of 2022 1,100 bronzes looted by the British during the punitive expedition of the **Benin Kingdom's royal palace (Edo)** by the end of 2022



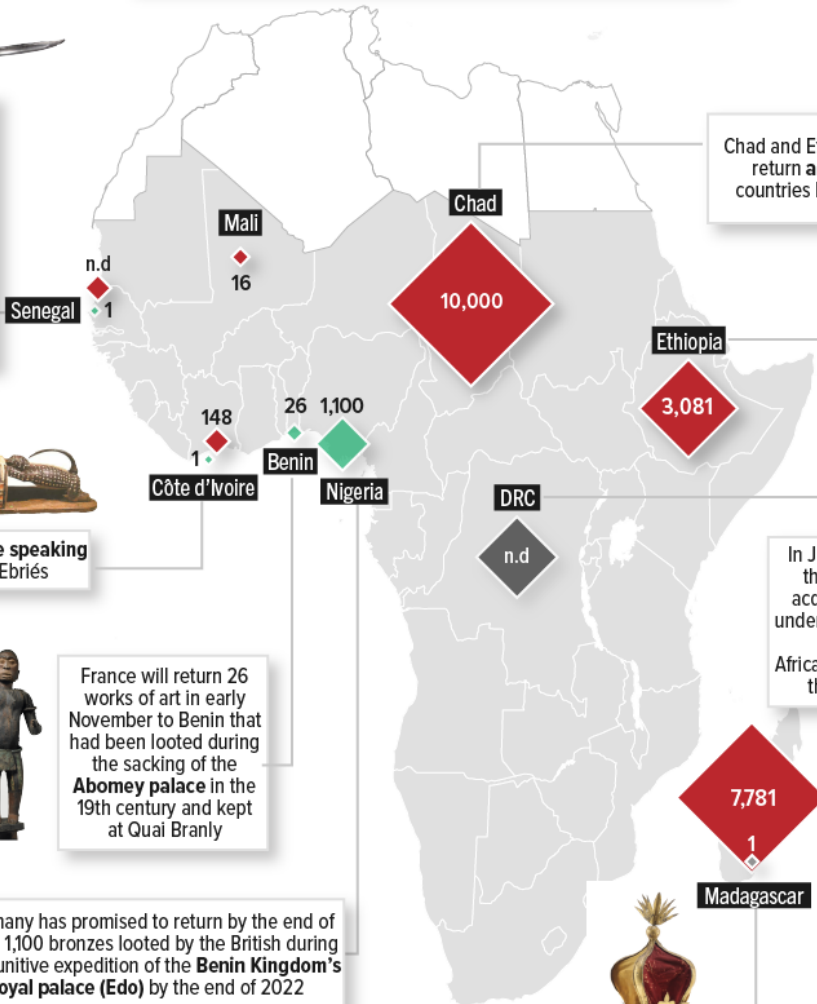
Commemorative head of a king

Madagascar has asked that France return all of its cultural artefacts

In November 2020, Paris returned to Antananarivo a crown belonging to **Queen Ravalona III** that had been kept in the army museum since 1910



Belgian trader Alexandre Delcommune looted the **Nkisi Nkonde** Statue during a punitive expedition at the end of 1878, thereby making it eligible for restitution



Chad and Ethiopia asked France to return **all objects** from their countries housed at Quai Branly

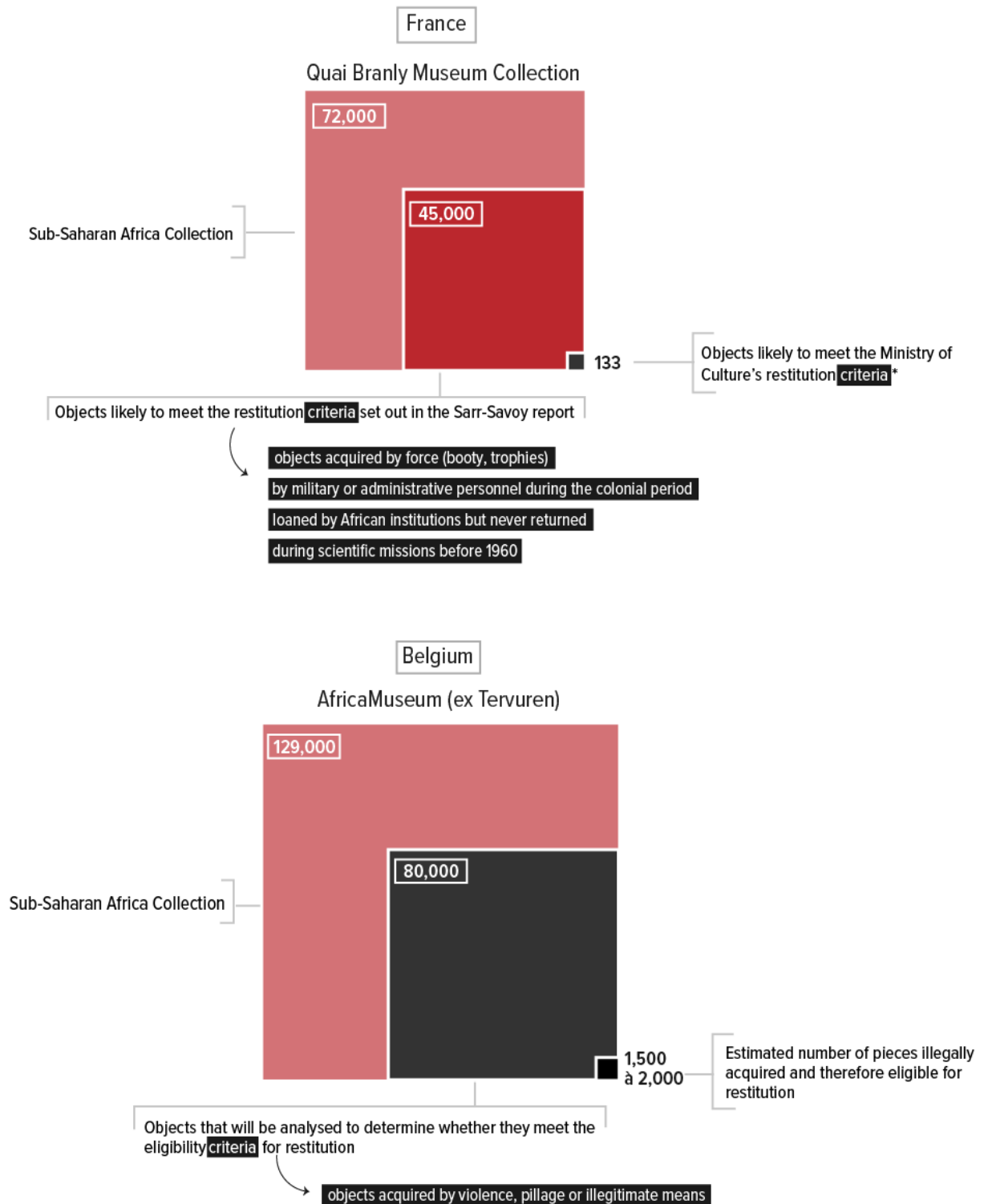
In July 2021, Brussels announced that everything that had been acquired "by force and violence, under illegitimate conditions" will be **returned by 2024**. The AfricaMuseum is planning to analyse the origins of 80,000 works.

Source: German Foreign Office, AfricaMuseum, Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum, Belgian Minister for Scientific Policy, French Senate © Guillaume Goursat/CC BY-SA 4.0, Catalogue Grand Palais, 1989, Patrick Gries/Quai Branly museum, Pauline Guyon/Quai Branly museum, Thierry Ollivier, Michel Urtado/Quai Branly museum, Daniel Bockwoldt/AP/SIPA, Emile Cambier/RMN-GP, J.- M. Vandyck/RMAC Tervuren

In search of origins

Restitution criteria: a comparison between France and Belgium

Once the criteria has been met, analyses to determine the origin of the works is carried out. In Belgium, the museum estimates that of the 80,000 artefacts that could meet the criteria, more than half lack sufficient information and will be subject to in-depth analysis on a case-by-case basis, including fieldwork.



According to Emmanuel Kasarhérou's findings during his intervention during the Day of study "Inventory, documentation, origins research..."; on 7 October 2019

https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/11/27/les-defis-poses-par-la-restitution-a-l-afrique-des-biens-culturels-pilles-durant-la-colonisation_6151888_3210.html

Article Interactif

<https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2020/08/BAQUE/62067>

Polémique sur la restitution des objets d'art africains

Voilà près de trois ans que le président Emmanuel Macron s'est engagé à restituer les biens culturels africains pillés pendant la colonisation. Depuis, la promesse est prise dans un parcours d'obstacles. Tandis que les collectionneurs et musées européens freinent des quatre fers, les pays spoliés peinent à réunir les conditions nécessaires pour la réception et la conservation de ces œuvres.

PAR PHILIPPE BAQUE, LE MONDE DIPLOMATIQUE, AOUT 2020



Tenture, don du roi Ghézo à Napoléon III, Abomey, vers 1850

Photographie : Michel Urtado - Thierry Ollivier - Musée Du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac - RMN-Grand Palais

Ce 23 mars 2019, trois cents armes et œuvres rituelles provenant du continent africain sont mises aux enchères dans une salle de Nantes. « Vous obtiendrez un reçu pour votre achat, mais les fabricants de ces objets, eux, n'ont reçu que la mort », lance M. Thomas Bouli, le porte-parole de l'association Afrique Loire, qui interrompt la séance. La France vient d'émettre le principe d'une restitution des biens culturels africains pillés et mal acquis. Les objets qui nous sont présentés ici en font partie. » Le commissaire-priseur annonce alors que, à la demande du ministère de la culture, une trentaine de pièces originaires du Bénin sont retirées du catalogue. Le gouvernement de Porto Novo avait été le seul à demander une telle restitution après avoir été alerté par les militants nantais.

« Ces gens-là sont la honte de la cause qu'ils défendent, si toutefois il y a une cause à défendre », s'emporte M. Yves-Bernard Debie, avocat du Collectif des antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Au-delà du dépit d'avoir raté un achat, le juriste s'oppose vigoureusement à la notion même de « restitution », car cela revient, selon lui, à effectuer « un

partage clivant : d'un côté, des possesseurs illégitimes; de l'autre, des populations spoliées». Une dichotomie que conteste fermement ce spécialiste du commerce de l'art.

Un an et demi plus tôt, le 28 novembre 2017, lors d'un discours à l'université de Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), M. Emmanuel Macron avait évoqué, à la surprise générale, ce sujet polémique. « *Je ne peux pas accepter qu'une large part du patrimoine culturel de plusieurs pays africains soit en France, précisait alors le président français. Il y a des explications historiques à cela, mais il n'y a pas de justification valable, durable et inconditionnelle, le patrimoine africain ne peut pas être uniquement dans des collections privées et des musées européens. (...) Je veux que d'ici cinq ans les conditions soient réunies pour des restitutions temporaires ou définitives du patrimoine africain en Afrique.* » M. Macron levait ainsi un tabou. En juillet 2016, M. Jean-Marc Ayrault, alors ministre des affaires étrangères, avait opposé, au nom de l'inaliénabilité du patrimoine, un refus cinglant au président béninois Patrice Talon, dont la demande visait les objets d'art royaux « collectés » durant l'expédition militaire du général Alfred Amédée Dodds au Dahomey entre 1892 et 1894 et conservés à Paris, au Musée du quai Branly.

« Un moment d'extrême désinhibition »

Dans la foulée de son discours, M. Macron commande un rapport à Bénédicte Savoy, professeure d'histoire de l'art à l'Université technique de Berlin, et Felwine Sarr, professeur d'économie à l'université Gaston-Berger au Sénégal. En novembre 2018, le résultat de leurs travaux est publié sous le titre *Restituer le patrimoine africain* (1). Les deux chercheurs mettent en balance les centaines de milliers d'objets détenus en Occident — dont 88 000 dans les collections publiques françaises — avec les quelques milliers répertoriés dans les musées du continent noir. Pour Savoy et Sarr, la période coloniale a correspondu pour la France « *à un moment d'extrême désinhibition en matière d'« approvisionnement » patrimonial dans ses propres colonies, de boulimies d'objets* ». Les rapports de domination de l'époque invitent, selon eux, à postuler l'« *absence de consentement des populations locales lors de l'extraction des objets* » et à considérer que les acquisitions ont été obtenues « *par la violence, la ruse ou dans des conditions iniques* ». En conséquence, ils préconisent la restitution des pièces saisies lors de conquêtes militaires, mais aussi celles collectées durant les missions scientifiques ou par des agents de l'administration coloniale. Ils demandent également le retour des biens acquis illégalement après 1960 grâce au trafic illicite d'œuvres d'art. Pour lever l'obstacle juridique, les deux chercheurs proposent une modification du code du patrimoine français, qui fixe les principes d'inaliénabilité et d'imprescriptibilité des biens culturels appartenant à des collections publiques.



Récade (bâton de commandement) de prêtre du tonnerre, avant 1934

Photographie : Patrick Gries - Musée Du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac- RMN-Grand Palais

Dès la remise du rapport, M. Macron s'engage à restituer vingt-six pièces au Bénin, correspondant en partie aux objets réclamés en 2016 par ce pays : des trônes, des statues, des portes sculptées, des reliquaires et des *regalia* (attributs symboliques monarchiques) ayant appartenu aux rois du Dahomey. Cette orientation soulève l'hostilité d'une grande partie des conservateurs. « *Les musées ne doivent pas être otages de l'histoire douloureuse du colonialisme* », dénonce ainsi M. Stéphane Martin, ancien président du Musée du quai Branly, tandis que son confrère Julien Volper, conservateur du Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, à Tervuren, près de Bruxelles, l'une des plus importantes collections européennes d'art africain, s'alarme du préjudice pour les collections nationales (2). Bien que le rapport Savoy-Sarr ne concerne que les établissements publics, les marchands d'art et les collectionneurs privés sonnent la charge. « *Comme la France a perdu toute forme de prédominance en Afrique, le président a proposé les restitutions aux dirigeants africains pour conserver des marchés face à la Chine, s'empare ainsi M. Bernard*

Dulon, président du Collectif des antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Prés, qui regroupe la majorité des spécialistes de ce marché. *Ces œuvres d'art qui appartiennent au patrimoine de l'humanité, à qui vont-elles être restituées? Est-ce que les gouvernements africains ont la même notion que nous de la conservation d'un patrimoine? Auront-ils le droit de les revendre tout de suite?»* L'annonce des restitutions n'a eu que peu d'effets sur le volume des ventes, mais M. Réginald Groux s'inquiète déjà des conséquences à plus ou moins long terme de ce mouvement. *« Sans les collectionneurs, explique ce marchand d'art, 99% des objets qui se trouvent en Europe auraient presque tous disparu, victimes de l'ignorance, des termites, des autodafés des religieux de tous bords (3). »* Des amateurs ont certes sauvé des objets, mais certains ont aussi profité des crises, guerres ou famines pour s'approprier, via des intermédiaires, des biens culturels ou archéologiques.



Sceptre en forme d'avant-bras sculpté, Allada (ancien royaume situé dans l'actuel Bénin), avant 1930
Photographie : Michel Urtado -Thierryollivier - Musée Du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac - RMN-Grand Palais

Loin de ces polémiques, Bénédicte Savoy déplore que son rapport ait été mieux accueilli en Allemagne qu'en France et regrette que la plupart des conservateurs français ne mesurent pas l'enjeu. *« Tous les interlocuteurs que nous avons rencontrés en Afrique nous ont dit qu'il ne s'agissait pas de tout reprendre aux musées français, car certaines pièces sont d'excellentes ambassadrices de la culture de leurs pays. Mais ils demandent qu'une partie significative de ce patrimoine soit accessible aux jeunes générations africaines, qui ne peuvent pas venir en Europe, pour qu'elles puissent se ressourcer, s'inspirer et se référer à la créativité des générations précédentes. »*

Historienne de l'art, Mme Marie-Cécile Zinsou — fille de M. Lionel Zinsou, banquier d'affaires et ancien premier ministre du Bénin, proche de M. Macron — a créé un musée d'art contemporain à Ouidah, ville côtière du sud du pays, important centre de trafic d'esclaves à l'époque du commerce triangulaire. Le décor épuré de l'établissement, une villa coloniale de style afro-brésilien, accueille régulièrement les œuvres d'artistes contemporains africains, dont beaucoup font désormais partie de ses collections familiales. *« Le retour de ces œuvres marque une dignité et une fierté retrouvées »,* se réjouit la jeune femme. En 2006, la Fondation Zinsou, qu'elle préside, avait organisé à Cotonou une exposition consacrée au roi Béhanzin en collaboration avec le Musée du quai Branly. Celle-ci avait attiré 275 000 personnes en trois mois. *« Un réel succès, mais nombre de Béninois n'ont pas compris pourquoi les objets de leur patrimoine devaient retourner en France à la fin de l'exposition »,* constate Mme Zinsou.

« Dépôt ou prêt, à moyen terme ou à long terme, nous ne pouvons qu'attendre passivement la décision de la France, déplore, à Cotonou, M. Alain Godonou, vice-président du comité chargé de la coopération muséale et patrimoniale entre la France et le Bénin. Mais pour nous, ce qui demeure fondamental, c'est que le Bénin récupère un jour le droit à la propriété de ces objets. Une fois revenus officiellement dans le patrimoine du Bénin, qu'ils se trouvent à Paris, à Abomey ou à Dakar, ils continueront à voyager et à être présentés dans des expositions. Mais c'est nous qui déciderons de ce qu'ils deviendront. » En attendant la restitution des objets, il faut trancher la question des

lieux destinés à les accueillir. Dans beaucoup de pays africains, les musées hérités de la colonisation, notamment ceux créés par l'Institut français d'Afrique noire (IFAN), n'ont pas été entretenus et ont même souvent été pillés. En 2016, Romuald Hazoumé, artiste béninois, dressait un bilan accablant de l'état des établissements de son pays et dénonçait les nombreux vols qu'ils avaient subis. « *Cela fait cinquante ans que notre culture est à l'abandon* », s'offusquait-il (4). Pour lui, la restitution des vingt-six objets royaux du Bénin est « *une fausse bonne idée* » : « *Je n'ai pas envie de perdre ces pièces une seconde fois.* » La destination tout indiquée pour eux aurait dû être le Musée historique d'Abomey, qui occupe les deux seuls bâtiments ouverts au public du vaste site des palais royaux d'Abomey, construits entre les XVIIe et XIXe siècles par douze rois successifs. Début 2020, après une restauration rapide des lieux, une partie des objets royaux y ont été de nouveau exposés, mais une grande vitrine demeure désespérément vide : celle qui abritait le grand sabre sacré, symbole du pouvoir magique des rois durant les guerres, volé en 2001 et jamais retrouvé. Ayant subi de très nombreux vols et plusieurs incendies, sans personnel qualifié, cette institution présente peu de garanties. C'est un autre établissement, qui devrait s'élever sur le même site, qui héritera des vingt-six objets : le Musée de l'épopée des amazones et des rois du Dahomey, financé en partie par un prêt de 12 millions d'euros de l'Agence française de développement (AFD), mais dont les travaux n'ont toujours pas débuté.

« *Nous avons été pris de court par la décision d'Emmanuel Macron, qui proposait de nous les rendre tout de suite*, avoue M. José Pliya, directeur de programme à l'Agence nationale de promotion des patrimoines et de développement du tourisme (ANPT). *Le président Talon se montre extrêmement clair : au-delà du symbole de la réparation et de la mémoire retrouvée, c'est la dimension économique de ces objets qui nous importe. Ils doivent contribuer à l'économie de notre pays par le biais du développement d'un tourisme ambitieux.* » Pour encourager ce secteur encore marginal, le chef de l'État l'a intégré dans un vaste plan d'investissements intitulé « Bénin révélé », qui inclut, entre autres, la valorisation du patrimoine naturel, le développement de sites balnéaires du type Club Med, des safaris dans les parcs animaliers (5) et la création d'au moins quatre musées. Mais les ressources financières limitées de l'État et la diminution de la fréquentation touristique à la suite de l'enlèvement de deux Français ont poussé le gouvernement à revoir à la baisse ses ambitions et à abandonner deux projets de collections publiques. Ce mélange des genres étonne Didier Houénou, le directeur de l'Institut national des métiers d'art, d'archéologie et de la culture à l'université d'Abomey-Calavi : « *Le pouvoir a réclamé la restitution de ces objets pour développer un tourisme de masse*, explique-t-il. *Or ils risquent d'être mis au service d'un projet purement mercantile.* »

Maître de conférences en archéologie et préhistoire, Didier N'Dah a découvert sur le site des palais royaux de très anciens ateliers de taille de cauris, la monnaie de l'époque. Des vestiges uniques dans leur genre. Il souhaite que « *la restitution des objets monarchiques profite aussi à la recherche et à l'enseignement supérieur, qui pourraient les replacer dans leur contexte historique* », et regrette que les politiques ne prennent pas en compte l'avis des chercheurs. Dans son bureau exigü et encombré de l'université d'Abomey-Calavi, il évoque avec passion les fouilles qu'il mène dans le pays en dépit du manque de moyens. L'archéologie préventive faisant défaut, plusieurs sites ont été détruits lors de grands travaux financés par la Banque mondiale ; d'autres sont menacés par un projet d'oléoduc mené par la Chine, sans que les archéologues aient été associés aux études préalables. Ses déplacements lui ont permis de se rendre compte de la richesse du patrimoine des populations rurales. Celles-ci conservent des objets cultuels, sacrés ou profanes, vieux parfois de plusieurs siècles, dont les anciens connaissent encore l'histoire. « *Un programme devrait permettre de révéler toute la culture qui demeure autour de ces objets endogènes*, estime Didier N'Dah. *Avant de développer un tourisme à grande échelle, il faut sensibiliser les populations à la valeur culturelle et patrimoniale de leurs biens, sinon elles vont les vendre.* » Aujourd'hui encore, beaucoup de pièces archéologiques et cultuelles sont achetées ou volées via des réseaux de « rabatteurs » au service d'antiquaires locaux qui les revendent ensuite à des collectionneurs étrangers. Le patrimoine n'en finit pas de quitter le pays, victime du trafic illicite (6). Parmi les plus prisés se trouvent les objets vaudous, une religion animiste très répandue au Bénin.



Représentation de l'élément masculin de deux sculptures anthropomorphes formant le dossier d'un trône (détail), Cameroun.

Photographie : Patrick Gries - Musée Du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac - RMN-Grand Palais

Pour Dominique Zinkpè, une figure de l'art contemporain du Bénin, la responsabilité des amateurs occidentaux, qui séjournent ou vivent dans le pays, est engagée. *« Les œuvres qu'ils convoitent ne se trouvent pas dans les centres artisanaux mais dans les villages, et ils savent qu'il faut payer quelqu'un pour les voler. Les gens ont faim ; certains sont prêts à vendre des pièces très importantes qui se trouvent dans la cour de leurs grands-parents. »* Et le plasticien de marteler : *« Et s'il y a vol, c'est qu'il y a un client. Les collectionneurs ne recherchent que des objets sacrés, qui participent à des cultes. C'est criminel de leur part, car ils font partie intégrante de notre religion. »* Des intermédiaires usent de l'influence de l'islam et des Églises évangéliques, qui poussent leurs fidèles à se débarrasser des accessoires vaudous jugés démoniaques. *« Nous savons à peu près combien de nos objets sont exposés dans les musées français, mais nous ne savons rien de tout ce qui est sorti et continue de sortir avec les antiquaires et les collectionneurs privés, »* déplore M. Franck Ogou, directeur de l'École du patrimoine africain (EPA) de Porto Novo. *« Les frontières sont poreuses et le contrôle est difficile. »* En principe, seules des copies peuvent quitter le Bénin, moyennant un certificat délivré par les services du patrimoine. *« Malheureusement, les collectionneurs profitent de ces documents pour remplacer les copies par les originaux, »* constate Didier N'Dah. *« Il faudrait former des douaniers et affirmer une réelle volonté de lutter contre le trafic. »*

Le 17 janvier 2020, dans la banlieue de Cotonou, capitale économique du Bénin, le Petit Musée de la Récade accueille une cérémonie inhabituelle : l'ambassadeur de France, un représentant du ministre de la culture béninois, des membres de la famille royale d'Abomey, le Collectif des antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Prés et une petite foule d'artistes et d'étudiants assistent à l'arrivée d'une trentaine d'objets ayant appartenu aux rois d'Abomey, dont une majorité de récades, bâtons de commandement typiques de l'ancien royaume du Dahomey. L'établissement fut créé en 2015 par le marchand d'art français Robert Vallois, grand collectionneur d'œuvres contemporaines béninoises, avec le soutien des antiquaires germanopratin. Le musée comprenait déjà une quarantaine de pièces, mais ce nouvel arrivage lui valait consécration. *« Pour nous, la restitution des œuvres, c'est du concret !, »* s'exclame M. Vallois. *« J'ai créé ce musée pour le donner au Bénin garni d'objets du Bénin. »* Cependant, pour M. Debie, *« c'est un musée franco-français qui a reçu un don franco-français »*.

Avec cette opération très médiatisée (7), les opposants à la restitution démontrent leur efficacité. Ils adressent un pied de nez au ministère de la culture français : la trentaine d'objets réceptionnés sont ceux dont la vente avait été suspendue en mars 2019, à Nantes. Le Bénin ne les ayant finalement pas achetés, le Collectif des antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Prés les a acquis, comme prévu, pour 24 000 euros. *« L'État béninois aurait pu en devenir propriétaire. Que représente cette somme pour lui ?, »* s'indigne M. Bouli. *« Nous commençons à douter de la volonté des États africains de sauvegarder leur patrimoine. »* Le militant rappelle que le Sénégal, qui a hérité de milliers d'objets provenant de l'ancienne Afrique-Occidentale française et toujours stockés dans les locaux de l'IFAN à Dakar, n'a jamais songé à les restituer aux pays dont ils proviennent.

Trois ans après le discours de M. Macron à Ouagadougou, aucun inventaire des biens à restituer, pas de révision du code du patrimoine, pas de restitution effective... Le 17 novembre 2019, avant de signer un important contrat de

vente d'armes, le premier ministre Édouard Philippe remettait au président sénégalais Macky Sall le sabre d'El Hadj Oumar Tall, un résistant à la colonisation, sous forme de prêt de cinq ans au Musée des civilisations noires de Dakar. À la mi-juillet 2020, le nouveau gouvernement a examiné un projet de loi permettant un éventuel transfert de propriété du sabre et des vingt-six objets béninois. Comment réagira le lobby des marchands d'art ? En 2002, il avait réussi à empêcher la ratification par la France d'une convention visant à lutter contre le trafic illicite. Après avoir suscité beaucoup de bruits, et au-delà de la stratégie de communication, le « Je veux » présidentiel risque de demeurer un vœu pieux.

PHILIPPE BAQUE

Journaliste, auteur d'*Un nouvel or noir, pillage des œuvres d'art en Afrique* (réédité en 2021 par Agone).

(1) Felwine Sarr et Bénédicte Savoy, *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, Philippe Rey - Seuil, Paris, 2018.

(2) Nicolas Truong, « Restitutions d'art africain : "Au nom de la repentance coloniale, des musées pourraient se retrouver vidés" », *Le Monde*, 28 novembre 2018.

(3) Réginald Groux, « Restitutions : et si on faisait un peu d'histoire... », *La Tribune de l'art*, 4 décembre 2018.

(4) « Romuald Hazoumé : "Cela fait cinquante ans que la culture béninoise est à l'abandon" », *Télérama*, Paris, 17 septembre 2016.

(5) Lire Jean-Christophe Servant, « Protection de la nature, safaris et bonnes affaires », *Le Monde diplomatique*, février 2020.

(6) Lire « 1181 », *Le Monde diplomatique*, janvier 2005.

(7) Cf. « Retour au Bénin de vingt-huit objets appartenant aux anciens rois d'Abomey », *Le Monde*, 18 janvier 2020.