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Authors of “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage” report discuss the return of African objects to their native countries at symposium

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ELISABETH MCLAUGHLIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Crowds gathered in the lobby of Columbia’s Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America for the international conference.

The ornate ceiling and dramatic red curtains framed the auditorium screen that displayed the return of the Obelisk of Axum to Ethiopia. Museum of Modern Art curator Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi spoke of the importance of the obelisk’s physical return, as well as its cultural implications, while the audience watched the airplane to Ethiopia take off onscreen.

On Friday morning, crowds gathered in the lobby of Columbia’s Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America for an international conference titled “The Restitution Debate: African Art in a Global Society,” an event centered around scholars Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy’s November 2018 report for French president Emmanuel Macron, “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage.”

The conference was hosted by the Italian Academy’s International Observatory for Cultural Heritage in partnership with the Institute of African Studies and the art history department. In an interview with Spectator, David Freedberg, the Pierre Matisse Professor of the History of Art and director of the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies, discussed the program’s origins.

“Four years ago, my colleagues and I here at the Italian Academy decided that the question of the status of cultural heritage across the world was critical, it was debated, it was fraught with

assumptions. ... To whom do works of art belong? And, above all, how should works of art and culture, in general, be best preserved?" said Freedberg.

In that vein, Freedberg and his colleagues established the International Observatory of Cultural Heritage in an effort to promote awareness of the meaning of cultural objects on both a global scale and within their respective cultures.

Restitution is the return of something taken or stolen to its original owner. At Friday's event, Freedberg stressed the significance of this practice in the art world.

"The value of restitution is enormously important, not only because of the right of people to have the highest objects of their individual cultures back with them, but also ... these were objects that were often taken against their will. Even in the case of the objects that were taken without resistance ... they are such symbols of national pride, and so important, especially to nations of the south," Freedberg said.

Freedberg also addressed the ongoing controversy surrounding restitution, and why this conference was termed a "debate."

"I think it would be very difficult to be against restitution in any way. Clearly one of the problems will be ... can we be sure that these objects will be as well-kept and preserved as well as they are in first-world countries? We have to respect the claims of those people to whom the objects originally belonged. But that's the dilemma," Freedberg said.

Savoy and Sarr discussed their findings and the far-reaching impacts of their report, with the mission of their investigation detailed in its opening lines.

"Behind the mask of beauty, the question of restitution invites us to go right to the heart of a system of appropriation and alienation, the colonial system, of which some European museums are today, in their own right, public archives," the report says.

At Friday's conference, Sarr spoke first, addressing the "lost history" that young Africans inherit today as a result of the absence of these objects from their native countries. He stressed the necessity of reappropriating and resocializing these objects, which have acquired layers of meaning in European contexts, into African cultures.

To many African societies, objects are not stationary entities but considered living mediators between the earthly and the divine, active forces that are an eternal form of Africa's history, Sarr said. He also noted that some objects have become mediators between cultures due to the layers of meaning that they have acquired throughout colonial history.

Savoy, who delivered her speech in French and provided an English translation in the event program, reminded the audience that the restitution debate has happened before and is gaining urgency in this cultural moment, likening its immediacy to the debate over climate change.

In their report, Savoy and Sarr address the importance of conferences like these that contribute to the international conversation on restitution.

"To openly speak of restitutions is to speak of justice, or a re-balancing, recognition, of restoration and repatriation, but above all: it's a way to open a pathway toward establishing new cultural relations based on a newly reflected upon ethical relation," the report says.