

Benin Bronzes Aren't Safer in the West Than They Would Be in Nigeria, Academics Say

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A 2018 exhibition about the Benin Bronzes at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg in Germany.

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At a virtual conference held by [Columbia University](#)'s Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America on Friday, academics pushed against a number of myths surrounding the [Benin Bronzes](#), a controversial group of thousands of art objects looted from the Kingdom of Benin, in what is now Nigeria, in 1897 by British troops as part of a colonial conquest.

A repeated concern at the event was the idea that the sculptures, plaques, masks, tusks, and more would be safer at the institutions that currently hold

them in the U.S. and Europe than they would be in Nigeria, a country with a relatively small but growing museum ecosystem. The art historians and museum professionals who participated vigorously posed retorts to that notion, claiming that various forms of danger in the West have historically posed just as much as of a threat to the Benin Bronzes as a perceived lack of climatic control found at Nigerian museums.

“They have been equally unsafe in the hands of British, not least because of attack in 1897, which destroyed so much royal and sacred landscape,” said Dan Hicks, an archaeology professor at the University of Oxford in England who has written extensively on the Benin Bronzes. And, he added, many Benin Bronzes have headed to market in Europe, leaving their whereabouts and their safety uncertain. “The most important of the collections have been sold off in the West,” he continued.

[\[Why the Benin Bronzes continue to generate controversy.\]](#)

Thousands of Benin Bronzes are held outside Nigeria, with more than 900 residing at the British Museum in London and more than 500 held by Berlin's Ethnological Museum. A push to return the Benin Bronzes is snowballing in intensity, and the Humboldt Forum, whose displays include works from the Ethnological Museum, said in March that it is [pursuing plans to return its Benin Bronzes](#). Days later, the University of Aberdeen in Scotland became the first institution to [commit to repatriating a Benin Bronze](#).

When these objects return to Nigeria, some will go to the Edo Museum of West African Art, a new institution in Benin City slated to open in 2025. With a design by architect David Adjaye, it is set to have an infrastructure for storing and maintaining art objects similar to ones found in the West.

“Of course, we do have our problems, in term of the state of our museums in the country, but that will not remain as it is forever,” said Abba Isa Tijani, of Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments. “We have our plans to build more museums. That’s why the EMOWAA museum is a bold step.”

Phillip Inhenacho, a board member of the Legacy Trust in Lagos, which seeks to spur archaeological and art historical research throughout West Africa, said that such returns could ultimately prove generative for Western institutions. “We’re interested in having a dialogue, we’re not interested in having a fight,” he said. “We’re not the organization that’s going to burn down your university. We’re the organization that’s going to sit down with you and have conversation, because it’s not just about getting objects back.”

Below, a look at five more takeaways from the event.

After years of silence, Western museum professionals are beginning to speak up.

At the start of the conference, David Freedberg, a Columbia art history professor, said that he had invited curators to participate—but, because of “internal pressures,” many couldn’t make appearances. Still, however, there were several museum professionals at the conference, in a sign that, at long last, a new crop of directors and curators are ready to talk openly about returning the Benin Bronzes. “This new generation does not want to shelve the conversation,” said Barbara Plankensteiner, director of the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt in Hamburg, Germany. In 2019, Plankensteiner’s institution helped launch [Digital Benin](#), a project that aims to map who owns Benin Bronzes and initiate return processes.

Western institutions are changing the ways they talk about Benin Bronzes.

When it comes to the Benin Bronzes, some institutions have text—either within their galleries or on their websites—alluding to the means by which these objects entered their collections. The language used is often delicately phrased. On the British Museum’s website, for example, a text refers to the “brutal, violent colonial episode” that

led to hundreds of works entering its holdings and goes on to say that “no formal written request” has been submitted by the Benin Royal Court for the Benin Bronzes’ repatriation “in its entirety.”

Christine Mullen Kreamer, director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., which owns more than 40 Benin Bronzes, said that her institution is “thinking very carefully about the words that are used” when talking about the objects in its holdings. Recently, the museum made the decision to stop using the phrase “punitive expedition” when talking about the Benin Bronzes, instead relying on the word “raid” to discuss how the objects were plundered.

U.S. museums could have an easier time repatriating Benin Bronzes than European ones.

Why did a Scottish university with little international visibility lead the pack when it came to repatriating its Benin Bronze? Some participants at the conference suggested that this had a lot to do with the rules and regulations that guide certain institutions. The University of Aberdeen is held to fewer restrictions because it is private—its collection is not owned by the state. The opposite is the case at the Humboldt Forum, where a board that oversees the Prussian-owned holdings of the Ethnological Museum must ultimately make the call on whether its Benin Bronzes can go home. Because so few Benin Bronzes are state-owned in the U.S., Princeton University art history professor Chika Okeke-Agulu claimed that institutions in the country could effectively face fewer restrictions for repatriating objects from the group than European ones. “I have actually argued that it is easier for the American museums because they are owned by fewer people,” he said.

Digital technology has contributed to growing calls for the Benin Bronzes’ return.

Although many have been demanding the repatriation for the Benin Bronzes within Africa for decades, their calls have only grown louder and widespread in recent years—thanks, in part, to social media and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, some presenters suggested. “I think there’s always been a keen awareness that they’re abroad—at the British Museum, for example,” Felicity Bodenstern, a principal investigator with the Digital Benin project, said. “What people weren’t aware was the level of their dispersal.”

Not all Nigerians want the Benin Bronzes back, though the sentiment is growing.

Some within West Africa—including the current ruler of Benin, Oba Ewuare II—have labeled the Benin Bronzes situated abroad “cultural ambassadors,” or foreign emissaries of the region’s culture. Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, an academic at the University of Benin, said that, in 2010, she conducted a survey about the Benin Bronzes among those around her, and found at the time that the majority of respondents agreed with that logic. When she repeated the survey in 2021, her findings were entirely different—this time, 68 percent wanted the objects returned, believing that it was time for the ambassadors to come home.

The differences between the two surveys also revealed a growing awareness of the Benin Bronzes’ history. In 2010, only 53 percent knew of the British expedition to the Kingdom of Benin that resulted in the removal of the objects; in 2021, around 95 percent were aware of it. (In both cases, not all respondents believed that the expedition was related to colonialism.) According to Agbontaen-Eghafona, if Nigeria is to seek the repatriation of Benin Bronzes, its citizens must continue to be educated about what really happened in 1897. “The general populace must be carried along,” she said. “There is a need for people to feel they are carried along with this heritage.”