

[For the MFA, Benin Bronzes are a troubling gift](#) [The Boston Globe](#)

By [Malcolm Gay](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 27, 2021, 2:33 p.m.



Portuguese Soldier from the 16th century in the Benin Kingdom Gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts. The museum must decide what to do with this collection, which was looted by British troops during a 19th century military expedition. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

Can a stolen object ever be ethically owned? Amid growing calls for restitution, museums mull consequences of keeping precious artifacts looted during a colonial era.

By [Malcolm Gay](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 27, 2021, 2:33 p.m.

In 2012, the Museum of Fine Arts received what seemed like an unimaginable promised gift: a trove of centuries-old masterworks from the Benin kingdom, located in present-day Nigeria.

The gift was not without its complications. Many of the 32 works, known as Benin Bronzes, had been among the estimated thousands forcibly seized by the British in 1897, when troops [captured Benin City and ransacked the royal palace](#).

The precious loot would be parceled out over time and scattered to various museums and private troves. More than a century later, intact collections of the Bronzes were not only rare, they were also controversial. But former MFA director Malcolm Rogers was determined to secure the collection for Boston, where the museum had only begun assembling its modest African holdings in 1991.

“This is the transformation of our collection,” Rogers said at the time. “It’s some of the greatest art ever produced in Africa.”

Today, the MFA finds itself at a crossroads as Bronzes around the world have become a central focus in the ongoing struggle over artifacts looted during that colonial era. The debate has intensified in recent months with a number of European museums moving to return the objects amid intensifying calls for restitution.

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Museums in the United States have been slower to respond, though that may be changing: Earlier this month, the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art removed its Bronzes from display, saying it plans to return them to Nigeria.

European museums have moved more quickly in part because they are state-run, said MFA director Matthew Teitelbaum.

“There’s reparations happening at the government level,” he said, noting some European governments were involved “in acts of looting themselves.” “American institutions have acquired their Benin collections in transactions in the marketplace.”

But that doesn’t change how the Bronzes left Africa to begin with, said Dan Hicks, a professor of contemporary archeology at the University of Oxford.

“The question for American institutions is: How many times does a stolen African object have to change hands between Europeans and Americans until it’s no longer stolen?” said Hicks, who is also a curator at Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum. “This is a conversation for Boston.”

As a measure of the MFA’s evolving response, the museum told the Globe in July it planned to move forward and accept the promised gift: To date, the museum owns five of the 32 Bronzes on display in its dedicated [Benin Kingdom Gallery](#). The donor, banking scion Robert Owen Lehman, owns the other 27, which he plans to transfer to the museum in the coming years.

After the Globe began asking questions about the collection, the museum shifted course, saying it was temporarily “pausing converting promised gifts to outright gifts.”

“It’s not the right time to start bringing things into the collection,” said Teitelbaum. “At the same time, we certainly don’t think we should encourage the return of the objects to the donor.”

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For centuries, the kingdom of Benin — not to be confused with the country of Benin, which borders Nigeria — was a major power in West Africa, where it derived a portion of its wealth from European trade in pepper, palm oil, and, at one point, enslaved people.

But by January 1897, tensions were high when a trade dispute prompted James Phillips, an official with England’s Niger Coast Protectorate, to defy the wishes of the oba, or king, and travel as an envoy to Benin City. An attack party ambushed Phillips’s group, killing seven British officials including Phillips along with an estimated 200 or more African carriers.

The attack inflamed colonial passions, and within weeks the British had launched a so-called punitive expedition, described by newspapers at the time as a “little war” to avenge the attack and “thrash the bloodthirsty savages.”

Traveling by foot and by boat, a large contingent of soldiers made their way inland that February, killing untold numbers as they machine-gunned their way toward the capital, ultimately capturing Benin City and ransacking the royal palace.



British soldiers surrounded by loot plundered from the royal palace during the 1897 expedition. The objects can now be found in an estimated 160 museums the world over. © THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

“They’re making these very precise inland attacks from the ships and then retreating back,” said Hicks, author of [“The British Museums,”](#) which reexamines the attack and the role museums played in the colonial enterprise. “Of course, that’s how you’re able to ship the cargo out. That’s how you can do so much looting.”

No one knows for certain how many objects the British plundered. It’s believed there are more than 3,000 Benin artifacts, though some estimate the real figure is closer to 10,000.

The Benin Bronzes — a catch-all term that includes cast metal heads, figures, and relief plaques as well as other materials such as carved ivory and wood that date from at least the 16th century onward — played an integral role in the life of the kingdom, commemorating past rulers and offering an idealized history of dynastic life.

In London, their beauty and technical bravura were recognized almost instantly. One museum curator hailed them as a “new ‘Codex Africanus,’ not written

on fragile papyrus but in ivory and imperishable brass”; his European counterpart compared them favorably to the work of renaissance sculptor Benvenuto Cellini.

Some of the choicest works, including a pair of ivory leopards, went to Queen Victoria. The British Museum now has more than 900 objects, including many plaques that once ornamented

the palace. Some of the works were sold by dealers; others were retained by expedition members as spoils of war. Many more were dispersed around the world.

Today, Hicks estimates that more than 160 institutions possess items from the raid, including American museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Chicago's Field Museum, and Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

Precious few of the Bronzes, however, are in Nigeria.

"When you ask questions, they tell you, 'Oh, you can come see it in our museum, we have kept it well,'" said Victor Ehikhamenor, an artist who has long advocated the Bronzes' return. "At some point, humanity has to prevail."

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Lehman, who declined an interview request through a museum spokesperson, assembled his collection over the course of decades, often purchasing from dealers. And while the MFA declined to estimate the collection's overall value, individual Bronzes can fetch millions even as their sale stirs outrage: Just two years before Lehman's promised gift, Sotheby's withdrew an ivory mask estimated at \$7 million after the Nigerians denounced the sale.

In Boston, it took less than a month after the announcement of Lehman's gift for Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments to cry foul, sending a letter in July 2012 demanding the MFA "return these works to their home."

But former director Rogers held firm.

"We have every right in the world to own these beautiful pieces and make them available for the world public," he told the Globe at the time. "It's one of the most special things that museums do. We move objects into the public domain."

The commission's director-general, Yusuf Abdallah Usman, fired back: "If these works of art . . . are so wonderful to move into the public domain in the US, would it not be more appropriate if they are first returned to their home?" he told The Art Newspaper. "We demand the return of these looted works."

Oba Erediauwa, whom Rogers approached separately, eventually sanctioned the display, sending a delegation to attend the 2013 gallery opening. The oba, who died in 2016, also instructed Bostonians from Nigeria's Edo State, whose capital is Benin City, to work with the museum to help interpret the works.

"He did not make a statement about long-term ownership issues," Teitelbaum said. "But he did express pleasure that there was going to be this platform for understanding what these objects meant."

Rogers, who retired from the MFA in 2015, declined an interview request.

In the years since, the MFA has continued to engage the Edo diaspora, with free museum admission, youth symposia, family events, and language lessons. Teitelbaum added that there's

a strong argument for exhibiting the works at the MFA, which normally hosts around 1.2 million visitors annually.

“There is real value in the representation of culture in international museums like the MFA,” said Teitelbaum. “There’s real value in having those objects here for teaching, and for helping push museums to be more transparent and accountable.”

To that end, the museum was among the first to explicitly describe the forceful removal of the Bronzes in its gallery labels, a practice since replicated by other institutions.

“The recognition of that history is in itself progress,” said Chika Okeke-Agulu, who directs the African studies program at Princeton University. Even so, he said, “those objects belong to Nigeria.”

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A growing number of European institutions have reached the same conclusion.

Germany, whose combined state museums house roughly 1,100 Bronzes, signed [a preliminary agreement](#) with Nigeria last month paving the way to return a substantial number of Bronzes beginning next year.

Barbara Plankensteiner, director of Hamburg’s Museum am Rothenbaum, called the decision “a moral obligation.”

Several British institutions have also initiated returns. In late October, Jesus College at the University of Cambridge returned a bronze cockerel; the next day, the University of Aberdeen in Scotland returned a commemorative bronze head of an oba that it purchased in the 1950s.

In a statement before the transfer ceremony at Aberdeen, Oba Ewuare II said he hoped other institutions would take note and “see the injustice when they insist on holding on to items,” adding, the “return of stolen art is the right thing to do.”

Meanwhile, Abba Isa Tijani, director general of Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments, said in a statement at Jesus College that “we would like other museums and institutions across the world to take this opportunity and follow suit.”

The returns follow years of work by the Benin Dialogue Group, an international consortium of European museum heads and Nigerian leaders that has been discussing the Bronzes for more



Mounted ruler (so-called Horseman) from the 16th century. The work is one of thousands taken by British forces during the 1897 attack. It is now on display at the MFA as part of a promised gift from Robert Owen Lehman. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

than a decade. They also coincide with plans to build the Edo Museum of West African Art, which is being designed by the Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye to display Bronzes and other works.

Restitution efforts are slowly gaining momentum in the United States, where a few museums have approached Nigerian officials about returning the objects. The Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art announced earlier this month it had identified 16 pilfered Bronzes in its collection that the museum would seek to return.

"It's clear the objects were looted," director Ngairé Blankenberg told the Globe before the announcement. "They were stolen."

Ehikhamenor, who is also a member of [the nonprofit trust](#) that is spearheading the new museum, attributed the restitution movement's current strength in part to a [groundbreaking 2018 report](#) commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron that urged the permanent return of objects looted from Africa.

"He really set fire at a lot of institutions," said Ehikhamenor. "Other presidents have no choice but to listen. Other institutions now know that they really don't have any more moral ground to stand on."



Master of Jesus College Sonita Alleyne (left) and Abba Isa Tijani, director general of Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments, spoke before a transfer ceremony for the looted bronze cockerel, known as the Okukur, to Nigeria. JOE GIDDENS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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The MFA, which has grown in recent years to become a leader in restitution matters, garnered praise in 2014 when it [returned eight items to Nigeria](#) that were likely trafficked in the preceding decades.

Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch, the museum's chair and curator of African and Oceanic art, emphasized that the Lehman collection places the museum in an unusual position: Although all 32 Bronzes are promised to the MFA, the collector still owns most of the works on display.

"This sounds duplicitous, but it is something seriously to consider: You can only return something if you own it," said Gunsch, who specializes in the art of the Benin kingdom. "And you can only return something once."

Gunsch, who is also the MFA's director of collections, added that despite Usman's 2012 demand, it remains unclear who has proper standing to make a restitution claim: Is it the oba? Edo State? Or is it Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments?

"It is not for art museums to adjudicate which claimant is the right claimant" said Gunsch, who added there has been recent division among the parties. "You have to wait and see how it sorts out. That's true anytime there's a claim for our works."

Enotie Ogbebor, an artist and authority on the Bronzes, bristled at the notion that the Nigerians lack a proper claimant, noting the MFA's European counterparts have proceeded with restitutions.

"All other issues about ownership are issues that will be resolved internally," said Ogbebor. "You cannot pretend to be an ostrich."



The Benin Kingdom Gallery at the MFA, Boston. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

The Benin Kingdom Gallery at the MFA, Boston. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

So far, the Nigerians haven't submitted a renewed claim to the MFA. Teitelbaum said that while the museum has been in contact with "a number of interested parties," he has not had direct contact with Oba Ewuare II. He added that whatever the museum ultimately decides, the process should be transparent.

This decision "will come out of conversations with representatives in Nigeria and in the palace," he said, noting that "you want to track how the issue moves. . . . Having an active dialogue helps us understand when that tipping point moves, and if it does, we will do the right thing."

In the meantime, Ehikhamenor said, he's hopeful more Bronzes will return to Nigeria.

"The children of the colonized are getting a bit wiser," he said, noting that Nigeria didn't gain independence until 1960. "The entanglements of colonialism took hundreds of years — to begin to unwind that is not going to be an overnight thing."

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