

Colonial entanglements

Benin's cultural heritage and the Dresden royal collections

Von: Marissa Petrou

Over the past few years, State Art Collections of Dresden (SKD) has invited multiple Nigerian artists to engage with Saxony's ethnology collections of stolen Benin Bronzes. At the end of 2020, Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh organized a poster and billboard campaign in Dresden featuring five Benin Bronzes held by the State Art Collections of the city. Playing on the motifs of missing persons flyers and public service announcements, each poster announced that the depicted Bronze was "vermisst." The posters threw a spotlight on Dresden as a site of Nigeria's cultural heritage. While the presence of Benin Bronzes in Europe is usually associated with the British punitive expedition of 1897, Ogboh's work draws attention to the present-day actors who continue to hold on to Nigeria's ancestors almost 130 years later. In this poster campaign, it is the city of Dresden who has kidnapped Nigeria's ancestors. In 2022, Nigerian artist Enotie Ogbemor engaged with the SKD's Benin Bronze collection as part of a live painting and performance event to confront the representation of Benin ancestors as museum pieces in European museums.

The so-called Benin Bronzes were looted by British soldiers and sailors in 1897. These objects of historical, artistic, musical, literary, legal, religious, and social significance were cast by court artisans out of bronze, brass, or copper, or carved out of ivory. Their theft was part of the violent conquest of the Kingdom of Benin carried out by 1200 British soldiers who razed the court to the ground. The theft of an estimated 4000 artistic works was part of a much larger phenomenon of European travelers, missionaries, scientists, military officers and sailors who robbed graves, made purchases through threats of violence, or traded for indigenous ancestral remains and material culture to sell to European museums. The story of the Benin objects reveals not just the violent racism of colonialism but also the participation of museums and state ministries and councils in supporting the theft and relocation of cultural heritage to increase their economic and social capital.

Over the last thirteen years, European museums have engaged in a sustained dialogue around the past, present, and future of Nigeria's cultural heritage that is currently on display or in storage spaces of European cultural institutions. The Benin Dialogue Group, co-organized by Barbara Plankensteiner, Director of Hamburg's Museum am Rothenbaum. Kulturen und Künste der Welt, brings 11 European museums together with

three Nigerian Institutions: the Edo State government, the Royal Court of Benin and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. Enotie Ogbemor, mentioned above, is a member of this group as a representative of Benin artists. One outcome of this dialogue group is the financial investment of European institutions in the building of museums in Nigeria to house the returned Benin works. In recent months, the German government has committed to returning the looted objects to the Nigerian government.

In order to shed light on the current Raubkunst situation in Germany, I am taking a look back at the discussions that took place during their original acquisition by Dresden's ethnology collections. Over 1100 Benin bronzes ended up in German museums in part because the British government sought financial gain from their soldiers' looting and Britain did not have Germany's extensive landscape of state- and city- funded museums. The Dresden Ethnology Museum, which specialized in Southeast Asia and Oceania, acquired ca. 200 Benin Bronzes through donation and purchase between 1898 and 1903.¹ The overwhelming majority of the Dresden collection was made possible through the ethnologist Arthur Baessler, the wealthy heir to a textile magnate. Baessler also specialized in the South Seas and he had donated over 1100 objects from this region by the end of the nineteenth century, in addition to publishing two illustrated ethnographic travel books on the South Seas.

Ogboh's poster campaign draws our attention to the ongoing presence of stolen cultural heritage in state-funded German museums. A peek into the correspondence between state officials provides us with some insight into several of the participants in the cultural heritage landscape around 1900. In this blog post I will focus on what we can learn from the official correspondence between the Director of the Dresden Ethnology Museum, A. B. Meyer, and the General Direction of the Royal Collections for Art and Science in 1899. This committee, created by King Johann of Saxony, was an independent council made up of a state minister, a scholarship councilor, a privy councilor from the ministry of the royal house, and the finance minister. The General Direction provided oversight and budget approval for Saxony's royal museums. How did the museum director explain the importance of the Benin Bronzes and how did the funding and oversight committee respond? The official correspondence, held in the museum's records in the Saxon State Archives provide only one small part of the story.

As German museums and private citizens clamored for the Benin artworks, the director of the Dresden Museum anxiously requested funds from the government to catch up to its sister institutions in Hamburg, Leipzig, Munich and Berlin. The violent origin story of how the bronzes ended up on the European market was mentioned in Meyer's description of the bronzes and their value. The story of the British soldiers' actions made the Bronzes famous and Meyer invoked their fame in hopes of inspiring state funding to purchase them. In his retelling, the British soldiers became "discoverers" of a "surprisingly" high culture that existed over three hundred years ago. This discovery included the "surviving remains" of a distinct and rich art, in the form of bronze objects such as plates with relief figures of groups, human heads, masks, free standing sculptures, bracelets, richly carved elephant tusks and wooden sculptures.² The

director's narrative diminished the horror of the British soldiers' actions by referring to the Benin works as remains of a past high culture, rather than as a significant part of the contemporary Kingdom of Benin that had just been conquered and looted.

The ethnology museum, part of a larger museum for zoology, anthropology and ethnology, was often referred to by the ministry of culture as the zoology museum. And its funding was roughly one-fourth that of the Picture Gallery, an art museum in the same building. The director of the committee on arts and sciences was also an art historian. Over the years, Director Meyer had consistently emphasized that ethnographic scholarship, including its objects of study and publications on these objects also had artistic value. Meyer appealed to the state's overwhelming preference for the arts over the sciences in this funding request as well, arguing that the Benin bronzes had scholarly value for art historians for their outstanding importance in technical production and representation: "for they are most surprisingly fine and aptly executed and are worth comparing to European works of art."³

Meyer also hoped that the creation of the Bronzes by a "Black kingdom" in Africa would be of interest to the government. This was a period in which German scientists were studying whether Blackness was unique to Africa or whether there were numerous "Black races" of distinct origins across large parts of the globe.⁴ The Saxon monarchs also had a long-standing interest in African kingdoms, the evidence of which could be found in various museums of nineteenth Dresden. Augustus the Strong (1670-1733), who commissioned the building in which many of Dresden's public collections were held, had commissioned a colonial expedition to Africa in the eighteenth century. He even dressed up as the King of Africa for one of his festivals celebrating the four corners of the world. For this same festival, a triumphal arch depicting African royalty was made in honor of the Danish king's 1709 visit to Saxony. The Green Vault held a heavily gilded and bejeweled "Moor with emerald plate," one of multiple creations of the Dinglinger goldsmith workshop depicting wealthy absolutist rulers from outside Europe.⁵ Clothing, weapons, and instruments from ancient African cultures had already been part of Dresden's history museum well before an ethnology museum existed in the city.

The museum director highlighted two particular lines of scholarly inquiry that could be studied through the artifacts: 1) the cultural possessions of "blacks" and their development in ancient times, and their connection to the already known African and extra-African cultures, and 2) African religious studies. British accounts of the Benin kingdom at the time of the massacre legitimated the conquest by depicting the kingdom as defined by enslavement and human sacrifice.⁶ Meyer alludes to this account in his description of the objects as representations of a religious cult of human sacrifice. It is the bronzes' supposed connection to human sacrifice that makes them scientifically valuable for African religious studies. Here we see how Meyer draws on general tropes that supported racialized arguments which divided the "peoples of culture" from the "peoples of nature." His reference to the Benin Kingdom as "Black" and "old" imitates the same language used by the British to justify their conquest.⁷ The Benin bronzes are described as the product of a high culture, representative of skills and technologies

equal to that of Europe, and also the product of human sacrifice, and therefore worthy of being conquered and looted by European forces. “In them, in a strange way, important ethno-religious, historical and artistic moments are combined. It is therefore justifiable that the most diverse museums have made it their business to acquire as many objects of this unique culture as possible.”⁸ The fact that Germany had recently colonized several regions of Africa was not at all mentioned. This is surprising given the increased popular interest in Africa and in the increase in representations of Africans circulated by ethnographic shows and colonial societies.

Finally, after highlighting all of the different scholarly researches that would benefit from the Benin collection, Meyer attended to regional competition and financial value. He argued that Dresden should invest in the bronzes just as other governments and museums have, for such antiquities become increasingly valuable over time. In particular he emphasized that Dresden needed to demonstrate comparable financial support for ethnology. The great cultural history collection of Gustav Klemm, Director of the Royal Library in Dresden, had become the basis of Leipzig’s Museum für Völkerkunde because Dresden had refused to buy his collection at the time. Meyer reminded the committee that this had been a huge missed opportunity for the court city of Saxony and had resulted in an ongoing rivalry between the two museums.⁹ Finally, the commitment of resources from other museums to building collections of Benin Bronzes made it also Dresden’s “duty to worthily demonstrate the great past civilization of Benin.”¹⁰

Saxony’s committee on arts and sciences was not swayed enough by these arguments to supply the requested 10-20000 Deutsche Mark to purchase Benin bronzes. It responded to A. B. Meyer’s follow-up letters saying that the state would not have the funds for the Benin antiquities until 1900 and even then could only promise 4000 Deutsche Mark.¹¹ In the margins however, we can see the budget calculations of the General Direction: the finance minister has marked that 10,000 Deutsche Mark would be available starting in 1900. This is where Arthur Baessler entered in to the picture. Already a longtime donor to the museum, Baessler provided the requested funds in under two months and donated his own purchases of 156 Benin artworks to the museum.¹² For his generosity, the Saxon king granted him the title of professor.¹³ During a period described by historian Rainer Buschmann as the decoration flood, where donors to museums received royal medals of honor, a professor title was unusual. Even after receiving this shiny new title, Baessler continued to donate ethnographic collections from Benin, New Zealand, China, Indonesia, and other parts of the South Seas. In 1904 he received another decoration for his donations, the King Albert Order, Second Class.

At the time that the German government announced plans to return the Benin bronzes in its museums to the Nigerian government, the SKD had already removed the bronzes from display, encouraging museum visitors to reflect on the objects’ presence in Europe and its connection to colonialism.¹⁴ In order to effectively reflect in the location of stolen cultural heritage, it is helpful to understand the original arguments for the presence of

these objects in European cultural institutions. Looking back at the discussions that took place around Dresden's acquisition of these artworks over one hundred years ago, sheds light on the origins of the current Raubkunst situation in Germany. This story provides some insight into how entangled Germany was in colonialism, even beyond its own colonies. Meyer's reasoning shows us the different factors that played into the appeal of the Benin bronzes for the broader public and the scholarly community around 1900, in contrast to the goals of today's SKD.

References

1. By 1907 there were 187 Benin Bronzes on display, across four display cases in the museum. Today, the Saxon Ethnology Collections hold 262 Benin artworks.
2. A. B. Meyer to General Direction of Arts and Sciences, 25 May 1899, Saechsische Hauptstaatsarchive Dresden, 19308
3. Ibid.
4. This is the subject of my book project, "Mapping Blackness in Southeast Asia and Oceania: European Anthropology c. 1900."
5. Syndram, Dirk, Jutta Kappel et al. (2007): *Das historische Grüne Gewölbe zu Dresden: die barocke Schatzkammer*. München, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag.
6. Coombes, Annie E. (1996): Ethnography, Popular Culture, and Institutional Power: Narratives of Benin Culture in the British Museum, 1897–1992, in: *Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 47, pp. 142-157. [http://\[www.jstor.org/stable/42622122\]](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622122) (Last Access 28.02.2023).
7. Ibid.
8. Meyer, 25 May 1899.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. General Direction to A. B. Meyer, 17 July 1899, Sächsische Hauptstaatsarchive Dresden, 19306. We also learn that the annual budget of the Zoology, Anthropology and Ethnology Museum was 23,400 Deutsche Mark, while the annual budget for the Gemäldegalerie was 87,000 DM.
12. <https://digitalbenin.org/institutions/47?page=2&filter=provenance-479> (Last Access: 24.03.2023).
13. General Direction to A. B. Meyer, 17 July 1899, Saechsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 19308
14. Friedrich von Bose: "'Nicht-Restitution ist kein neutraler Akt.' Über die Wichtigkeit, als Museen Position zu beziehen" (presentation). RES(T)ITUIEREN: Provenienz, Sammlung, Verantwortung lecture series of the Kunstgeschichtliches Institut der Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany, 8 February 2023.

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