

Dear cultural heritage...

...I realize you and we, meaning humankind, did not have the easiest relationship. You have been there since the beginning of humankind and are a testament to our artistic and crafty nature. You not only reflect human nature or social constructs but also historical events. You were often taken away from your original setting, amassed and displayed without a second thought.

Today in a postcolonial world, we are faced with your history, more precisely your provenance. Not only is your presence, but also your presentation in Western museums a precedent to humankind's flawed history. Objects gained new connotations through their "classification, conservation and representation" in a museum's collection.¹ In 1897, the British ransacked Benin City, taking with them thousands of Benin Bronzes.² Today many of those looted Bronzes are spread across the world. Their presence does not represent a lively exchange between Europe and Africa but instead, shows the cruel actions of the British empire. We are in a neo-colonial world where the effects of colonialism are still visible, like in museums. Like wounds that are not healed, do the Bronzes look back at the visitors in a museum. Not all objects reminding us of Colonialism stem from such a violent history, but their display still says a lot about it. Their display, classification and conservation conceal the object's original relationship and instead, replace "them with systematic references to other objects within the collection".³ Examples include the fetishizing of native Americans in the shape of dioramas or portraits (cf. Karl Bodmer or Rudolf Friedrich Kurz) perpetrating the idea of the "noble savage".⁴ Another example of concealing an object's provenance concerns completely overlooking its provenance. The restitution and repatriation of such objects is both a long-awaited discussion with our colonial past as well as a strengthening of identity for affected communities.

Repatriation is used as an "umbrella term" for different actions a museum can take regarding such objects like "restoring, returning, repairing, replacing and renewing" them "as well as the relationships that compose them."⁵ Provenance research is a big part of this process.

¹ Bouquet, 152.

² For further reading on the Benin Bronzes, I suggest Staffan Lundén's *Displaying Loot. The Benin Objects and the British Museum* or Dan Hicks' *The British Museums: the Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*.

³ Bouquet, 152.

⁴ cf. Noémie Étienne's dissertation *The Art of the Anthropological Diorama – Franz Boas, Arthur C. Parker, and Constructing Authenticity* goes into detail about dioramas and their problematic nature.

⁵ Ibid., 152.

The provenance of an object encompasses its history, from its production to usage and selling or unfortunately, robbery. This research forms the bases of a restitution case. The interest in such research arose from Germany's efforts of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* after the Second World War.⁶ But it took almost 50 years to introduce the "Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art" and only in the last ten years has provenance research really picked up. Some museums in Switzerland, like the Rietberg or the Musée cantonal d'archéologie et d'histoire de Lausanne have employed researchers specifically for provenance research. The Federal Office of Culture in Switzerland supports and approves of such efforts.⁷ The university of Berne offers an interdisciplinary master's program for provenance research. There were or currently are exhibitions attributed to the provenance of objects.⁸ There is not only a shift in Switzerland, but other countries like in France or Germany. In 2018 the Senegalese writer Felwine Sarr and French art historian Bénédicte Savoy drafted a report on behalf of the French president Emmanuel Macron called "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics."⁹ Today the report is a blueprint and inspiration for anyone concerned with provenance research. Only this month, Germany has made a huge step towards restitution promises towards Nigeria: they have handed over two Benin bronzes as well as transferred over one thousand other objects in Nigeria's ownership.¹⁰ All these examples should make you, dear cultural heritage, feel optimistic, no? I still fear we have a long way to go.

One promising project the Federal Office of Culture in Switzerland supports is the *Swiss Benin Initiative*. Unfortunately, the project only ran for a year and is ending this month. The goal was to investigate the provenance of Benin objects in Swiss museums and make their provenance transparent.¹¹ Part of the project was also the exchange and dialogue with researchers from Nigeria. During the conference "Ready for the Past? On the State of Decolonisation in Swiss Museums", Esther Tisa presented some of the results.¹² At that time, they did not find a continuous provenance for around 55% of the investigated objects. Rather

⁶ cf. Fuhrmeister, Hopp, 213-216.

⁷ To get further information on how the BAK supports provenance research in Switzerland one can confer their website: <https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/kulturerbe/raubkunst/provenienzforschung-in-der-schweiz.html>.

⁸ The exhibition "Retracer la provenance" in the Musée cantonal d'archéologie et d'histoire in Lausanne was from 12.10.2021 to 08.05.2022. There is currently a provenance exhibition in the Rietberg called "Wege der Kunst – Wie die Objekte ins Museum kommen".

⁹ The full report is available online: http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf.

¹⁰ Oltermann.

¹¹ s.n.

¹² The particular panel I refer to is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEiQ-9DaJJQ>.

than assuming a questionable provenance they are focusing on their uncertain origin and resign to a neutral standpoint. Attitudes toward provenance research fluctuate between uncertainty and overcompensation. Evidence of this overcompensation is how in debates surrounding provenance and restitution Western researchers and scholars fail to include voices from source communities or other viewpoints in general. The Nigerian artist Enotie Ogbebor clarified that the Benin bronzes were objects holding information, whereas European establishments turned them into objects of admiration.¹³ There needs to be a shift in how we approach such discussions not only in regards of the Benin Bronzes, but Native American or Oceanic objects.¹⁴ Another obstacle in provenance research and restitution is the need to confront our horrible past either during colonial times or the Second World War. This is especially tangible in political debates. Conservative right-wing voices consider Switzerland's role both in the Second World War and Colonialism one of neutrality. Therefore, making it obsolete to tackle questions of restitution and thus provenance research.

This strategy of turning a blind eye on such topics is ignorant. Switzerland has not played an active role in Colonialism like the British Empire, but Swiss society been involved in colonies or behaved opportunistically during WWII.¹⁵ We need to face such stories not to be ashamed but to make peace with our past. It is not an easy feat and we do not need to do it on our own. There is a need to open a dialogue and involve varied voices. Dear cultural heritage do not give up on us, our generation wants change, further provenance research and restitution.

¹³ Maclean/Marshall.

¹⁴ To get a new perspective on ethnographic methods regarding material culture I suggest looking into *Thinking Through Things*. The following sentence stuck with me: "If we are to take others seriously, instead of reducing their articulations to mere 'cultural perspectives' or 'beliefs' (ie 'worldviews'), we can conceive them as enunciations of different 'worlds' or 'natures', without having to concede that this is just shorthand for 'worldviews'." Henare/Holbraad/Wastell, 12.

¹⁵ It would be too extensive to go into further detail but the debate surrounding the Bührle collection in the Kunsthaus Zurich perfectly outlines how Swiss politics behave plus Bührle was a perfect example of opportunist during WWII.

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Additional Readings

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