

**THE RETURN OF THE BENIN BRONZES ARTEFACTS:
HISTORICAL, CULTURAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, ECONOMICAL, POLITICAL, AND
ARTISTIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN RESTITUTION**

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Abstract

The issue of the ancient Bini in terms of their guild in art practices in bronze casting which is referred to as the cult art is well known to the entire world. Their art work brought the kingdom into limelight in the historiography of art, as well as expose them into problem, which resulted to the European invasion in 1897 tagged Benin massacre. The objectives of the Benin kingdom were to generate a strong revenue based in the kingdom through the production of their bronze art works that was not known in the entire world of art. This spurred the Benin guild to produce court art with the sole authority and sponsorship of the monarch. The artistic resources of the Benin Kingdom were placed under the control of the monarch. To achieve this, the Oba of Benin established the guild of court artists, ensuring that all artistic production—especially bronze casting, ivory carving, and other sacred works—was supervised directly by the palace. The attraction of the bronze objects was when the Europeans visited Benin kingdom much earlier than the year 1897 with firearms. This development did not go well with the Europeans, as the eventual restitution of the looted bronze objects profoundly affected them sociologically, economically, artistically, and culturally, while also damaging their global image. These effects, which the Europeans found difficult to manage given the artistic implications within the global community and the shame associated with looting as a grave mistake on their part, eventually compelled them to heed the voices of various organizations calling for the restitution of the stolen bronze works from the Benin Kingdom.

Keywords: Europeans, Benin bronzes, Art work, Restitution, Return

Brief History of Ancient Benin Kingdom

The Benin kingdom is located in present day southern Nigeria. It was one of the most famous powerful pre-colonial state in West Africa. Its origin dates back to the 10th century A.D. when rulers known as the Ogisos governed the kingdom. The Ogiso dynasty collapsed in the 12th century after internal disputes, and leadership was sorted from the neighbouring Ife kingdom (Ogienakhi 2025) in (Bradbury 1956).

In 13th century, Prince Oranmiyan of Ife was invited to rule the kingdom, but later returned back home leaving his own son Eweka 1 to rule as the first Oba of Benin in (c. 1200-1235). His reign marked the beginning of the Oba dynasty that established a centralised monarchy (Egharevba, 1968) in (Ogieriakhi, 2025).

The kingdom experienced its golden age between the 15th and 17th centuries under the leadership of Oba Ewuare the Great (1440-1473) Benin expanded its territory, reorganized its political structure and transformed the kingdom into a highly fortified urban centre with walls and moats.

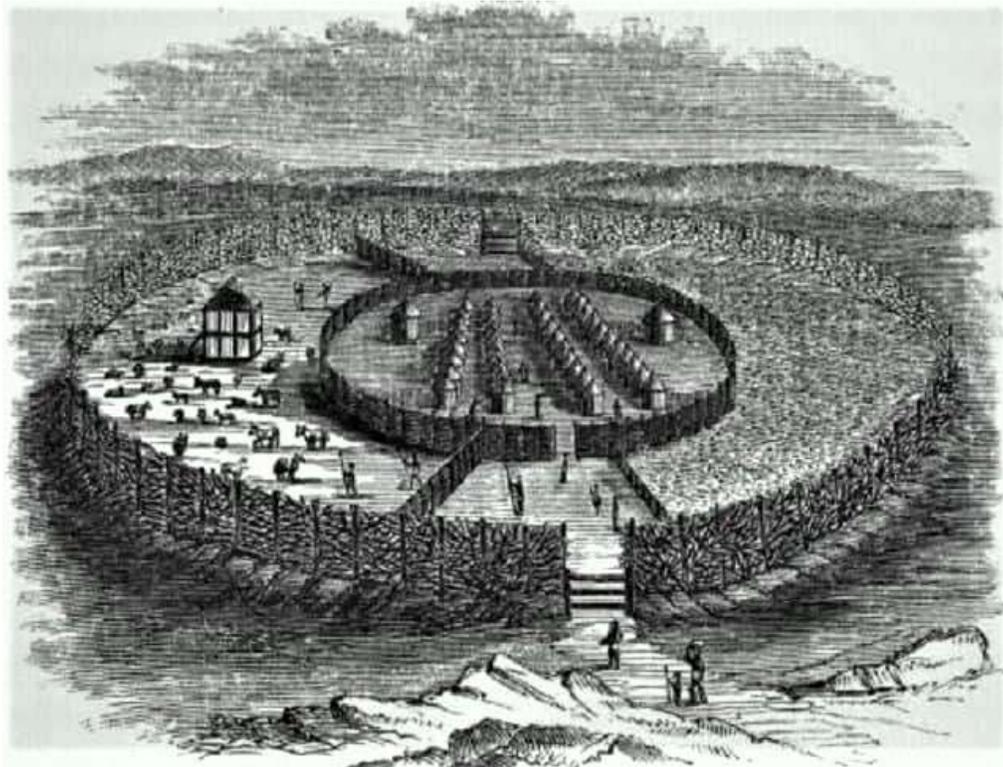


Fig. 1: The great Benin moat wall. Known to be about 16,000km in length

His successor, Oba Esigie (1504-1550) strengthened the kingdom through diplomatic and trade relation with the Portuguese who first made contact to the Benin kingdom (Ryder 1969). This exposure of Benin artefacts to Europeans fueled their desire to seize them by force, a process that culminated in the 1897 invasion, commonly referred to as the Benin Massacre. This period also saw the flourishing of Benin art works especially the bronze works which become globally renowned for their craftsmanship (Ryder, 1969).



Fig. 2: Bronze of Oba Ewuare I, the Great (1440–1473), flanked by guards

Benin economy was sustained by its control of trade in goods such as pepper, ivory, slaves exchanged with Europeans for fire arms, brass, coral beads, textile materials, books etc. (Roese, 2000). Albeit from the 18th century, the kingdom faced political decline due to internal crisis which weakened trade and increasing the western dominance to the great kingdom.

The 1897 Benin massacre by the British punitive expedition invaded Benin, burned down the city and exiled Oba Ovonranwen Nogbaisi in (1888-1914) and looted thousands of artworks including bronze works and taken away to Europe. This marked the political independence of the kingdom as it was incorporated into the British colony of southern Nigeria (Phillips, 1997) and (Ogieriakhi, 2025).



Fig. 3: Raided Benin artifacts by British forces. Soldiers posing with looted artifacts.
Picture taken in 1897.

Today the legacy of Benin kingdom endures through its artworks, culture and tradition which continues to define the Benin – Edo identity and inspire global recognition of African heritage has been brought back by the Europeans to the Oba of Benin palace, though not at the satisfaction of the people of the kingdom as much is still not returned compared to what was stolen at that time. An adage in my place says that a thief that has agreed that he stole only four tubers of yam from the rolls of yam on the barn no doubt means that he has stolen more than a roll of yam not just only four tuber of yam as he alleged, In light of the foregoing discussion, this paper will examine the restitution of the looted Benin artefacts by European forces and their eventual return to the Oba of Benin.

Art – Many people find it difficult to comprehend what art is. This is inspite of art having always been part of man (Diakparome, 2019). Art was man’s earliest reliable mode of expression of his thoughts within his surroundings. This may be why art is integral to the essence, aspiration, and

achievement of many societies, including those that are Nigerians. However, the artist will continue to be accused of misrepresentation, excessive exaggeration, vulgarism and even, engaging in soliloquy. (Diakparome, 2019). As societies developed overtime, the type of art produced changed, the mode of the consumption of the art also changes. These changes in types and consumption patterns are responsible for the characterization of modern art with individualism, and led to changes of elitism and obscurantism which are considered to be responsible for the aesthetic atrophy currently pervasive in contemporary Nigerian society (Diakparome, 2019).

According to Diakparome (2019) postulated that the mystery associated with art and the artist is traceable to the legend about two ancient Greek painters Parrhasius and Zeuxis and according to Diakparome (2019) and (Nina Tokhtamau Valetova, 2017) the legend surrounds a supposed contest between Parrhasius and Zeuxis in realism. According to Diakparome, (2019) in (Valetova, 2017) Zeuxis painted some grapes so believably that flocks of birds flew down to eat them. Parrhasius on his own, painted a curtain that appeared to be covering his (Zeuxis) painting, misleading Zeuxis who tried to draw it aside. According the legend, Zeuxis said and quote “I misled birds but Parrhasius misled Zeuxis”

Diakparome quotes

“The myths and legends about art and artists have continued to grow exponentially since the 20th century. These myths include the perception that to create good art, an artist must suffer; that is many artists are alcoholics, drug addicts and frivolous people who have no traditional family values and that most artist especially geniuses, suffer from mental illness, artist are lazy, that art is a poor profession whose works will be sold and have a high price tag only after death an artist can be recognized. (Diakparome, 2019)”

In the light of these multifarious myths about the artist their product art has been looked into by different scholars ranging from the artists themselves, philosophers, anthropologists, historians, ethnographers and art critics in different ways based on their personal experiences and on the various ways in which art manifests itself or act on the percipient. Thus, to some people art is the ability to draw, paint or produce craftwork or the ability to perform any of the three. For the purpose of this paper, art according to (Egonwa, 1988), Art is the product of human skill and creativity,

often exercised by a gifted individual to express an idea through a chosen medium. When considered apart from any practical function, its primary purpose is to provide a rewarding emotional experience. It follows, therefore, that as long as a human-made object is capable of evoking satisfaction or emotional response, it qualifies as a work of art. However, this satisfaction is not without limitation, for the value of art is shaped by cultural context, individual perception, and the boundaries of human creativity

What are Artifacts

These are valuable objects made or used by humans. It has cultural historical and scientific significance. It can provide valuable insights into past civilizations, culture or events. Artefacts includes ancient tools, pottery, jewelries, art works, such as sculptures or paintings, historical documents, archeological findings and traditional clothing.

What is Restoration

This refers to the act of returning or compensating for something that was lost, stolen, or damaged, often in a historical or cultural perspective, it includes the returning of cultural artefacts or art works to their countries of origin or providing financial compensation for past injustices or losses. Restitution according to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, International Students' Edition sees restoration as aims to address historical wrongs, promote justice and restore dignity.

The Benin bronzes looted by British soldiers during the 1897 invasion serve as a quintessential example of restitution, illustrating the ongoing efforts to return some of these stolen bronze sculptures to their rightful custodians in Benin.

Below are some of the restitution made by British government to the great Benin kingdom.

Looting Incident

In 1897, the British forces invaded Benin City, Nigeria and seized thousands of artifacts in the kingdom including bronze plaques, statues, ceremonial objects such as beads, anklets, crown, stool and spoil staff of office etc. These objects were taken as spoils of war and later sold to different museums and private collectors in Europe and beyond.

Current Restitution Status

Germany has formally committed to returning hundreds of Benin bronzes, with the Humboldt Forum in Berlin playing a leading role in this restitution process. Ownership of many pieces has already been transferred to Nigeria, marking a significant step in correcting the injustices of the 1897 looting.

University of Aberdeen's return: The University of Aberdeen in Scotland returned the sculpture of Oba of Benin in the year 2012, and they acknowledge that the acquisition of the work (Oba Portraits) was forbidden by their custom. (**CONFIRM THE CERTAINTY OF THIS STATEMENT**)

The British Museum continues to hold one of the largest collections of Benin bronzes, but it has refused to return them, drawing widespread criticism. The debate over their repatriation remains ongoing, with mounting pressure from Nigeria and the international community.

Challenges and progress

The repatriation efforts are driven by activists, government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and cultural institutions. There are legal and logistical challenges, some museums are resisting restitution, citing laws that govern the disposal of objects in their collection.

New Home for the Benin Bronzes Repatriated – Nigeria government is setting up museums to house the returned artefacts, including the Royal Benin MUSEUM and the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA). These institutions will undoubtedly provide a safe and culturally relevant environment for the Benin bronzes, ensuring their preservation for future generations. In this light, the return of the Benin bronzes is profoundly significant for Nigeria and, in particular, the people of Benin (Edo). It represents not only a step toward cultural healing but also a recognition of the dignity and heritage of the Nigerian nation and the Edo people within the global community.

Sociological, Economic, Political and Artistic implication of the return of the Benin art works by the Europeans.

The return of Benin art work by European has far reaching implications across various sub heading:

Sociological Implication

Cultural healing and Identity – The return of the Benin bronzes is a step towards cultural healing and recognition for the Edo people, allowing them to reclaim their heritage and restore dignity.

Community Empowerment – The repatriation efforts have empowered local communities to take control of their cultural narrative and historical legacy.

Global Cultural Exchange – The return facilitates international collaboration and dialogue, promoting cross cultural understanding and respect.

Economic Implications

Cultural Tourism -The return of the artefacts has boosted cultural tourism, generating revenue and promoting economic development in the region concerned.

Art market Impact

The repatriation of Benin bronzes has influenced the global art market, thereby potentially affecting the value and trade of similar African art pieces.

Investment in Cultural Infrastructure

The construction of museums like the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) demonstrates investment in cultural infrastructure creating opportunities for local artists and artisans.

Political Implication

Decolonization and Restitution – the returns reflect a shift towards decolonization, acknowledging historical injustices and promoting restitution as a means of redress.

International Cooperation

Repatriation effort involve government-to-government cooperation fostering diplomatic relations and cultural exchange.

Policy Reforms – The returns may prompt policy reforms in museums and cultural institutions, prioritizing transparency, accountability, and cultural sensitivity.

Artist Implication

Artist Heritage Preservation – The return of Benin bronzes ensures the preservation of artist heritage, allowing future generations to appreciate and learn from these masterpieces.

Inspiration and Creativity

The bronzes serve as a source of inspiration for artists, influencing contemporary art and promoting cultural continuity global Appreciation

The returns of the art pieces have highlighted the significance of African art, promoting global appreciation and recognition of its value and importance.

Cultural Implications of the Returns

The returns of the Benin bronzes has profound cultural implications, symbolizing a significant step towards cultural healing recognition and restoration of dignity for the Edo people. These artefacts are deeply connected to the identity, history and spiritual beliefs of the Edo community and their return helps restore a sense of justice and pride.

1. Reclaiming Heritage – the Benin bronzes are a vital part of Edo cultural heritage, representing a link to the kingdom's traditions of craftsmanship, government and artistic achievement.
2. Cultural Revival – The return of these artefacts revitalizes cultures suppressed or displaced by colonialism, providing a direct link to lost tradition and histories.
3. Educational Opportunities the restitution after a unique chance to integrate the artefacts into Nigeria's educational fabric, allowing schools and universities to study and reinterpret African history.

Social Implication of the Return of the Benin Bronze Works by the Europeans

1. It shows the superiority of the Benin bronze works over that of the Europeans.
2. It is an act of stealing that has been established and documented all over the globe.

The Europeans have utilized the looting as an avenue to copy the styles, medium and techniques of the Benin bronze works production. It is on record that through this means, African style and techniques of art production infiltrated into European art. It also shows the superiority of the bronze medium over the Europeans.

The act has reduced the acclaimed superiority of the western world art over the Black race (Benin kingdom) the Edo people in the sub-Sahara Africa region.

This has reduced the European reputation worldwide.

Findings

The repatriation of Benin bronzes has gained momentum globally, with several countries returning looted artifacts to Nigeria. Countries like Germany has returned over 1000 Benin bronzes. While Ireland, Scotland, and the United States have also returned individual art pieces. Netherland recently returned 119 Benin bronze works to Nigeria.

The return of the Benin bronze is a significant step towards cultural restitution, healing historical wounds and restoring cultural identity.

The museum has played a crucial role in the repatriation efforts together with some institutions like the University of Aberdeen and University of Cambridge setting precedence by returning the Benin bronze works.

Conclusion

The repatriation of the Benin bronzes underscores the urgent need for greater cooperation between museums, governments, and cultural institutions worldwide in addressing the enduring legacy of colonialism and cultural theft. Such collaboration is essential not only for the restitution of looted artefacts but also for fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and mutual respect among nations. By returning these cultural treasures to their rightful custodians, the global community takes a significant step toward redressing historical injustices and promoting a more equitable framework for the preservation and celebration of cultural heritage.

The need for policy reforms should be strengthened, as existing laws and conventions governing repatriation—such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention—may require revision or expansion in order to effectively address the complexities of cultural restitution.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and conclusions, recommendations for future repatriation effects should include, the increase in international cooperation. This will make museums, government and cultural institutions to work together for a common goal to address the legacy of colonialism and cultural theft.

The support for repatriation by the governments and institutions should provide financial and logistical support for repatriation; including costs associated with transportation and preservation.

The paper also recommends the continued support for the communities' involvement in the repatriation processes as they are also stake holder in the business.

The existing laws and policies governing repatriation should be sustained and if possible, be expanded to address the complexities in cultural restitution to provide clearer guidelines for repatriation efforts initiated without stress.

References

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- Abimbola, W. (2018). *The Benin Bronzes: A Cultural and Historical Perspective.* *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 30 (1), 1-15
- Coombes, A.E. (1994). *Reinventing African Museums, Material Culture, and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England.* Yale University Press.

Online Resources.

Various news articles and reports from reputable sources like BBC News, The Guardian Newspaper and Al Jazeera

Institutional Sources

- The British museum
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art
- National Museum of African Art

Government Reports

Official statements and reports from governments involved in repatriation efforts, such as the Nigerian government or the German government

Other Sources

- Interviews and lectures
- Quotes or insight from experts, curators or community members involved in repatriation efforts.

Primary Sources

Historical documents, letters or other archival material related to the Benin bronze and their acquisition by European museums.

KEY:

The highlighted portions represent the reviewer's corrections compared to the author's original copy.

COMMENT

Your paper introduces an important topic and provides a clear overview. However, *I noticed that your paper states the University of Aberdeen returned the sculpture of the Oba of Benin in 2012. However, the correct year is 2021. The university acknowledged that its acquisition of the piece in 1957 was "extremely immoral" and became the first UK institution to unconditionally repatriate a Benin bronze.* I recommend updating this section to reflect the accurate date and context so the paper remains historically precise.

Your paper would benefit from reducing the repetition of similar sentences and improving punctuation use. Streamlining your phrasing and applying consistent punctuation will make your arguments clearer and more persuasive.