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*Benin Bronze, Head of an Oba (King) 16th C*



## Repatriation of Cultural Heritage

*Philipp Grieb*

Efforts to return looted art and property to the victims of the Nazi regime in Europe have led Western democracies to reflect on historical injustice in general.

In recent years, an international debate has emerged on the return of looted or unjustly removed cultural property in former colonies, indigenous communities or archeological sites. Demands for restitution have become increasingly vocal. There was a growing sense that fair solutions and respect for the cultural autonomy and

identity of affected communities were necessary for long-term peaceful order and cooperation. In general, no laws apply. The path to good solutions involves complex legal, ethical and logistical challenges that require dialogue, goodwill and dip-lomacy, as the following examples illustrate.

### Benin Bronzes

The Benin Bronzes are more than 5,000 works of art, reliefs and sculptures in bronze or brass, as well as works in ivory, coral and wood, that decorated

the royal palace of Benin City in present-day Nigeria since the 16th century. These important works of art from Africa even influenced classical modern painting in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. In addition to their art-historical significance, they are also emblematic of the international debate on the repatriation of colonial cultural assets. During the colonisation of Africa, Benin City was looted by British troops in 1897. The looted artefacts were later sold to Europe and the United States. More than 1000 objects ended up in German museums. Since the 1970s, there have been claims for restitution from Nigeria.

In 2010, the initiative was taken by the Benin Dialogue Group. Museum representatives from Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden work together with Nigerian partners and representatives of the Royal Court of Benin to find solutions for worldwide access to information about collections from the Kingdom of Benin and to discuss the conditions for restitution.

Germany and Nigeria signed an agreement on the return of the bronzes in July 2022, under



*Greek Stamps Reunite Parthenon (2022)*





*Amaravati Stupa relief Guntur 1st C. BCE*

which around two thirds of the artworks will be returned to the Nigerian state. One third will remain in German museums on loan. In December 2022, the German Foreign Minister handed over the bronzes at an official state ceremony in the Nigerian capital, Abuja. However, the Nigerian president duped the German government when he declared shortly afterwards that the Benin bronzes would not be national property but the private property of the current head of the royal family. Human rights activists criticize: The royal family's history is tainted by slave hunting and the slave trade, which paid the raw material for many of the Benin bronzes.

In the United Kingdom, a

college of Cambridge University returned a bronze to a Nigerian delegation for the first time in October 2021. At the same time, the British Museum received a written request from the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Information and Culture for the restitution of the "Nigerian antiquities." The British Museum undertook to work actively with Nigerian institutions in relation to the Benin bronzes, with the aim of fully researching, documenting and presenting the objects - including in Nigeria - and their history. So far there has been no talk of restitution.

Austria does not have a colonial past. Nevertheless, the World Museum in Vienna is affected. Its holdings are based on the

collections of the scientifically interested Habsburg's, which consist of acquisitions. Provenance research is incomplete. At least the exhibits in the redesigned World Museum are no longer presented as exotic objects, but in the context of the documentation and discussion of colonial history. Instead of final restitution, Austria prefers a "shared heritage" solution, a combination of the resources and interests of both sides in storage, conservation, research and presentation in the other country.

### Parthenon sculptures

The collections of the British Museum include the marble decorations of the 2500-year-old Temple of Athena (Parthenon) on the Acropolis in Athens: 15 metopes (sculpted relief panels), 17 pediment figures and 75 meters of the original frieze with representations of ancient mythologies.

The Ottomans ruled Athens from 1456 to 1832. In 1801, the British ambassador Lord Elgin acquired permission from the Sultan in Constantinople to make drawings and casts on the Acropolis and to remove sculptures. He subsequently went on to grab all the remaining decorative sculptures





long. The British Empire was the greatest colonial power of its time and India its largest colony, the crown jewel of the Empire, such as the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond that adorns the Queen Mum's crown. Among its many treasures were 120 Amaravati reliefs from Guntur and precious pieces belonging to Tipu Sultan. Indian activists have repeatedly and unsuccessfully demanded the return of the heritage, but the British government stoically points to the British Museums Act, which it refuses to amend.

The British Telegraph reported in May 2023 that the Indian government was planning a major "repatriation campaign". The Indian government immediately backtracked, calling the report "overstated" and "misleading." It seems to be waiting for a more opportune moment. The Indian treasures - those in public museums - are in safe custody. Much of the loot, however, is in the hands of the heirs of the British conquerors and is disappearing piece by piece into anonymous private collections.

*Tiger head from the estate of Tipu Sultan 18th C*

from the ruins of the Parthenon, as well as parts of the Erechtheion, the Temple of Nike, and the Propylaea. He had all his prey shipped to Great Britain. His actions were investigated by a parliamentary committee in 1816 and found legal by parliament before the sculptures were admitted to the collection of the British Museum.

Greece first made a formal request for the permanent return of all the Elgin Marbles in 1983. Since then there have been various meetings and

discussions. The Greeks do not recognize British ownership of the Elgin Marbles. A series of stamps with the words "Reunite Parthenon" were issued by the Greek Post Office in May 2022 to emphasize the Greek demand.

Restitution is not yet in sight. Several museums in Germany, Italy and the Vatican have accepted the Greeks' demands and returned ancient works.

### Indian cultural heritage

The list of Indian cultural artefacts brought to England is