

Germany Sets Out Plans to Return Benin Bronzes

The government, regional legislators and major museums said they would make “substantial” returns of the famous West African artifacts starting next year.



By Alex Marshall

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Germany will begin returning a “substantial” number of the priceless artifacts known as the Benin Bronzes from its museums to Nigeria next year, its culture ministry said on Thursday night.

The artifacts, which the British army looted in an 1897 raid on Benin City in what is now Nigeria, are scattered through museums and private collections around the world. Germany’s announcement, the first by a national government with a timetable attached, comes as momentum is growing on both sides of the Atlantic to return the stolen objects.

An online meeting of government officials, regional legislators and museum administrators reached an agreement that German institutions — which own hundreds of the bronzes — would step up talks with Nigerian partners and strive to make the first returns next year.

“We are facing the historical and moral responsibility to bring Germany’s colonial past to light and to come to terms with it,” Monika Grütters, Germany’s culture minister, said in a news release. “Dealing with the Benin Bronzes is a touchstone,” she added.

The bronzes (which, despite the name, include items made from ivory, brass and wood) will likely be housed in the planned Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin City, which the architect David Adjaye is designing on behalf of the Legacy Restoration Trust — a group that represents Nigeria’s government, regional authorities and the royal court of Benin.

The trust hopes to open the museum in 2025, although the timeline has already been pushed back several times.

Victor Ehikhamenor, a trustee, welcomed the German announcement. “If this works, it will create a blueprint for others,” he said in a telephone interview.

Germany will publish an inventory of all the Benin Bronzes in its museums by June 15, according to a declaration signed at Thursday’s meeting. Details of those items’ provenance, including if they were looted, will be made available by the end of the year. The declaration stresses, however, that Germany hopes some

bronzes will remain in the country.

Ehikhamenor said he had no problem with items being on display in Germany, as long as their legal ownership was transferred to the museum in Benin City. “We want to have a global conversation, but it has to be an equitable one,” Ehikhamenor said. “We can no longer be in a colonial hierarchy anymore.”

Germans have long struggled to atone for the country’s Nazi past, but in recent years, the public debate has also shifted to examine Germany’s role as a colonial power in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. In 2019, Germany’s 16 regions, which are responsible for cultural policy, signed an agreement saying they would work toward returning artifacts taken from former colonies.

Benin Bronzes on display at the British Museum in London. Lauren Fleishman for The New York Times

In Britain, whose army carried out the 1897 raid, steps toward returning the bronzes are being taken by the institutions that hold them, rather than by the government. In March, the Horniman Museum, in London, which owns 49 items from Benin City, published a policy document that said it would consider the “possible return” of any item in its collection that was taken by force or theft. Days later, the University of Aberdeen in Scotland said it would return a sculpture of an oba, or ruler, of the Kingdom of Benin, which was stolen in the 1897 raid.

Yet some of the country’s largest museums — such as the British Museum, which owns more than 900 of the items, including arguably some of the finest — are regulated by Parliament and cannot permanently return items from their collections without a change in the law. Britain’s culture ministry did not reply to a request for comment on Friday.

The British Museum is a member of the Benin Dialogue Group, a network of European Museums which has been meeting with Nigerian representatives for more than a decade to discuss what to do about the bronzes. The group is also helping to develop the Edo Museum of West African Art, and to finance and staff

archaeological work on the museum site, scheduled to start this fall.

Ehikhamenor likened the British Museum's involvement in restitution talks to a McDonald's worker who refuses to make burgers. "Their presence there has not led to the kind of conversations we are hearing from other museums in Europe," he said. But he added that he hoped Germany's announcement would change things. "If Germany is finding ways to have this conversation with us, I think the British should begin to find a way," he said.

A British Museum spokeswoman acknowledged in a statement that the bronzes were taken in circumstances of "devastation and plunder" and said that this was "explained in gallery panels and on the museum's website."

While Europe's museums have had discussions with Nigeria for years, American institutions have only recently begun to act on the bronzes in their collections. The Fowler Museum, part of the University of California, has contacted Nigerian officials about the future of 18 Benin Bronzes it holds, said Marla C. Berns, the museum's director.



The 16th-century "Queen Mother Pendant Mask" from Benin City, on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

The Smithsonian has convened a working group to develop a policy around the colonial and looted art in its collection, said Christine Kreamer, deputy director of the National Museum of African Art. Her museum has 42 Benin Bronzes — though not all of them were looted — and other Smithsonian museums like the National Museum of Natural History also have some, she said. The group's first meeting is next week, Kreamer added.

"U.S. museums have been a little slow to move forward on this," Kreamer said, attributing this to their lack of involvement in colonialism. "The time is now beyond right," she added.

The Metropolitan Museum, which has some 160 items from Benin City, including a renowned ivory mask, has not made any announcements about restitution. Those works “were largely given to the institution in the 1970s and 1990s by individuals who acquired them on the art market,” a spokesman said in a statement on Thursday, adding that the museum was aware of Germany’s new plan.

Ehikhamenor said the Met was “dancing around these objects,” much like the British Museum. But, he added, “American institutions’ time will come.”

Philip Ihenacho, a financier who is leading the fund-raising drive for the Edo Museum of West African Art, said in a telephone interview that the newfound willingness of some governments and museums to talk about returning the Benin Bronzes was a game changer. “With the momentum that seems to be behind some of the discussions, we feel more and more confident that the challenge is no longer going to be persuading people to give objects back.”

“The challenge,” he added, “is going to be how to build an institution that is worthy of receiving the objects.”

Christopher F. Schuetze contributed reporting.