

Smithsonian to Return Most of Its Benin Bronze Collection to Nigeria

The Smithsonian has 39 of the West African artifacts in its possession. The move comes as the museum is reviewing its collection practices.



By Matt Stevens

March 8, 2022

The Smithsonian Institution, one of the world's largest cultural organizations, said on Tuesday that it planned to return most of its collection of Benin Bronzes to Nigeria, a sweeping move that would punctuate a monthslong institutional review of its collection practices and the ethics behind them.

The Smithsonian has a collection of 39 Benin Bronzes, a name that is used to cover a variety of artifacts ranging from brass plaques, carved elephant tusks, ivory leopard statues and wooden heads. Many were stolen from what is now Nigeria during the British Army's 1897 raid on the ancient Kingdom of Benin.

A spokeswoman for the Smithsonian, Linda St. Thomas, said most of the 39 pieces would be returned. But she said it was not clear exactly how many of the bronzes were linked to the 1897 raid and that it was possible some pieces in the museum's collection had different ownership histories.

The announcement comes five months after the head of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, Ngairé Blankenberg, said that she had removed its Benin Bronzes — more formally known as Benin Kingdom Court

Style artworks — from display at the museum.

Officials cautioned that the Smithsonian Board of Regents must approve the deaccessioning of any objects before they can be sent away.

The Smithsonian's plans were first reported by The Washington Post.

“The wonderful thing about this kind of work is it's not about a transaction, it's about a relationship,” said Kevin Gover, the under secretary for museums and culture at the Smithsonian, highlighting the collaboration between the institution and the Nigerian government.

The case of the Benin Bronzes, Gover said, is “the most visible example of the kinds of situations where we should consider the return of these items.”

The Smithsonian has legal title to own the items, which officials said had come into the Smithsonian's collection mostly through donations over many years. It plans to give up ownership of the items and ship the pieces to Nigeria at the Smithsonian's expense.

At least some of the artworks may eventually be displayed at a museum in Benin City, Gover said. But some of the works are likely to return to or remain in Washington on a long-term loan from Nigeria, St. Thomas said.

The repatriation of the artworks is part of a broader agreement between Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments and the Smithsonian. Under the agreement, St. Thomas said, the cultural institutions would share exhibitions and work together on education programs in Nigeria.

Nigeria's National Commission for Museums did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The return of the bronzes is also the first planned repatriation under what Smithsonian officials say will be its new policy of ethical returns. Officials said that for about a year, a working group had sought to reassess how the

Smithsonian thought about which artworks should be part of its collections and which should not. An updated collections policy is expected to be released in April.

“The museum field has been moving in this direction,” Gover said, of “considering our responsibilities for these collections but also our responsibilities to the communities where they originate.”

“We’ve long been entirely comfortable that if we had legal title to an object, then certainly we were entitled to keep it and care for it,” he said. But now, he added, “we’re going beyond legal title and asking, should we own this, knowing the circumstances under which it came into our ownership?”

A figure of a king from the 18th to 19th century that is part of the Smithsonian collection. Franko Khoury/National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution

Since the 1897 raid, thousands of items have been scattered through museums and private collections around the world. And Nigeria's artists, historians, activists and royals have been seeking for decades to get the pieces back.

But there has, at times, been resistance from institutions that have variously insisted that they were either not empowered to return artworks or that maintaining their global collections is in the best interest of wide audiences.

Momentum to return the Benin Bronzes has gained steam in recent years as conversations about racism and the legacy of colonialism have proliferated.

Last April, Germany said it would return a "substantial" number of Benin Bronzes. Two months later, the Metropolitan Museum of Art announced that it would return two brass plaques from its collection and that it had brokered the return of a third object that had been offered to the museum for sale.

Alex Marshall and Sarah Bahr contributed reporting.