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‘She Comes Back to Where She Belongs’

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By Serge Schmemann
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Back in 1995, Russia’s two major art museums, in St. Petersburg and Moscow, mounted exhibitions a month apart that attracted considerable attention. Not so much because of the art, although much of it was spectacular, but because Russia openly identified it as art looted from Nazi Germany at the end of World War II.

The theme was not remorse, nor restitution. On the contrary, the Russian view was that the Nazis had destroyed or looted vast quantities of art during their invasion of the Soviet Union, including the fabled “amber room” from Catherine the Great’s summer palace. The Moscow exhibition was blatantly titled “Twice Saved,” and it was dedicated to the Soviet victory over Nazism. This was payback booty.

I think back on those exhibitions whenever discussions or debates arise over this or that treasure seized over the centuries as war booty, plunder or outright theft. Last month, those “twice saved” treasures came to mind with the news that a German government delegation had traveled to Nigeria to return 20 precious artifacts, a tiny portion of the vast trove of what are known as Benin Bronzes plundered by British colonial soldiers from the former West African kingdom of Benin. (The kingdom is now part of Nigeria; modern Benin is a separate, neighboring state.)

Debates about returning art looted over the centuries, and especially the Benin Bronzes, have roiled for decades. Several museums had already agreed to return bronzes they were holding. In October, for example, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art transferred ownership of 29 Benin bronzes to Nigeria under its new ethical returns policy.

But Germany was the first to actually send a delegation to physically hand over artifacts. The move by Germany’s foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, was viewed as something of a breakthrough after years in which Germany agreed on restitution in principle but did little in fact. Ms. Baerbock, a member of the Greens party who became foreign minister in Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s coalition government a year ago, broke the ice, formally transferring 1,100 bronzes to Nigeria last summer and then flying a selection of them to the capital city of Abuja last month.

The foreign ministers of Germany and Nigeria, Annalena Baerbock and Geoffrey Onyeama, in Abuja, Nigeria, last month. Kola Sulaimon/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“She comes back to where she belongs,” Ms. Baerbock said as she handed a miniature mask of a queen mother to Nigeria’s foreign minister, Geoffrey Onyeama.

“Twenty years ago, even 10 years ago, nobody could have anticipated these bronzes returning to Nigeria, because the obstacles to achieving repatriation were seemingly insurmountable,” Nigeria’s culture minister, Lai Mohammed, declared. But he also used the occasion to take a swipe at Britain, whose British Museum holds the largest collection of bronzes but has resisted turning them over.

Back when they plundered the bronzes, the British, too, claimed that their looting was somehow justified. Members of an unarmed British delegation had been killed on their way to Benin City, so the British launched a retaliatory raid in 1897 that laid waste to the city, and they scooped up thousands of sculptures made not only of bronze but also of brass, ivory and other materials for the royal court of the Oba, or king. The Benin Bronzes ended up dispersed among dozens of museums and collections all over Europe and the United States. A new online database maintained by the Museum am Rothenbaum in Hamburg has identified more than 5,000 looted objects housed at more than 100 museums worldwide, with the lion's share, more than 900, at the British Museum.

For decades, nobody questioned whether this should be so. Looting has been the right of the victorious and powerful from time immemorial. Victory parades in ancient Rome, the ritual "triumph" accorded great commanders, proudly displayed captives and spoils. Closer to our times, Napoleon's armies liberally helped themselves to the art of conquered lands, European included, justifying the looting as a "liberation" of art by the "homeland of liberty and sacred equality," as one officer put it to the National Assembly. Among their trophies, many of which they were compelled to return when Napoleon was defeated, were the four bronze horses known as the Triumphal Quadriga, now back in the San Marco Basilica in Venice. They had been seized by the Venetians six centuries earlier when the Venetians sacked Constantinople.

Examples abound in every era, on every continent. Colonial powers never felt they needed a reason to harvest sacred, traditional or magic artifacts from the people they subjugated, which they felt served, among other things, as evidence of their superiority over the people they were "civilizing." The Times report in 1897 on the British raid on Benin City left no doubt who The Times felt was in the right, with a somewhat convoluted subhead reading, "Story of the Massacre to Avenge Which the Expedition Was Sent."

In the time between the sack of Benin City and the ceremony last month, the Benin Bronzes have become a symbol of sub-Saharan Africa's longing to reclaim cultural treasures appropriated by colonial powers. They have become totemic items of resistance, much as the Elgin Marbles (now more often referred to as the Parthenon Marbles) became the banner of Greece's struggle to reclaim what it perceived as its patrimony. Nigeria has been actively seeking the return of the Benin Bronzes since the 1960s.

For Europe, and America, the Benin Bronzes became part of broader historical examinations. For Europe, it was the dark side of its colonial history; for America, it was the legacy of racism and slavery. For nations whose art was looted, the issue became one of national identity and culture. The Benin Bronzes offered evidence that sub-Saharan Africans, depicted by colonialists as primitive, in fact had a long history of powerful kingdoms and a rich tradition of art.

As the debates on restitution and provenance gathered steam, President Emmanuel Macron of France provided a powerful catalyst. In a speech in 2017 he declared that Africa's cultural treasures "cannot solely exist in private collections and European museums." Mr. Macron said he wanted to see those treasures "in Dakar, Lagos and Cotonou," and not just in Paris. That led to the formation of a commission led by Bénédicte Savoy, a French expert on the provenance of art, and Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese academic, which included recommendations on how the African art could be returned.

Mr. Macron's speech, Ms. Savoy said in an interview, came at a time when Europe was "witnessing a psychoanalysis of its relationship to former colonies," and also had a political need to counter the growing influence of China in Africa. Ms. Savoy is now working on treasures taken from Cameroon, one of the few African colonies once held by Germany.

"Nobody knew Germany has so many objects," she said. "There are 50,000 to 60,000 of them, a huge variety, many belonging to religions and rituals no longer in existence and so critical for people to understand where they come from."

The arguments used by museums and governments against returning their treasures have been systematically discredited, Ms. Savoy said. In 2002, the directors of 18 European and American museums issued a declaration that, in effect, offered a justification for holding on to their objects. The times in which they were collected, the statement said, were "not comparable with current ones," and however the objects were acquired, they shaped the "universal admiration" for ancient civilizations.

The notion of museums being emptied out, Ms. Savoy said, has been used only to avoid discussion. France's Musée du Quai Branly, which focuses on Indigenous art from around the world, she noted, has more than 60,000 items, of which only about a thousand are on display. The Africans do not seek to have it all back, but only those items that are historically or culturally important.

Another common argument is that African museums do not have the facilities to properly care for their treasures. In 2026, however, Nigeria, plans to open a new museum of West African art in Benin City, designed by the British-Ghanaian architect David Adjaye, built expressly for Benin Bronzes.

A Benin Bronze sculpture on display in Berlin in September. Jens Schlueter/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Transferring ownership, moreover, does not necessarily mean shipping back the artifacts. Last month, in an arrangement that has become increasingly common as museums begin to return their collections to rightful owners, the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne, Germany, transferred ownership of 92 works to Nigeria, but it will retain 37 on long-term loan.

Still, the debates continue. A group of Black Americans, for example, have filed a lawsuit to stop the return of select Benin Bronzes from the Smithsonian to Nigeria, arguing that the artifacts are also part of their heritage as descendants of enslaved people.

To Ms. Savoy, this is good and necessary, just as the Black Lives Matter movement or the re-examination of colonial history are critical in shaping how we move forward. “These debates are all part of the discussion of the past, of where we come from, of who owns art and how it should be displayed. I’m very happy to hear them. Culture is not immobile. We in France, Germany, Italy, we are always thinking about our heritage, and that becomes part of our culture.”

Serge Schmemann is a member of the Times editorial board.