

## **Restitution, Repair, and the Decolonial Turn in Contemporary Museums**

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### **Abstract**

*Between June 2025 and June 2026 the Netherlands handed back 119 Benin Bronzes, the University of Cambridge transferred legal title to 116 more, and three Swiss institutions returned 18. Taken together these movements represent the largest concentrated transfer of contested African material since the objects were seized in the British punitive expedition of 1897. This article treats the current restitution wave as a test of whether the museum can be reformed or whether its founding logic makes reform impossible. It works through four positions: the universal museum defence articulated in the 2002 declaration signed by eighteen major institutions, the relational ethics proposed in the Sarr and Savoy report of 2018, the argument from colonial violence developed by Hicks, and the practice of source community curation that has developed largely outside the debate. The article argues that restitution has been misdescribed on both sides. It is not the emptying of museums, since the numbers involved are small against total holdings. Nor is it a settlement, since transferring title while retaining custody, as several recent agreements do, reproduces the asymmetry it claims to end. What restitution actually forces is a change in who narrates, and that change has barely begun.*

**Keywords:** - Restitution, Benin Bronzes, Museum Studies, Decolonisation, Cultural Heritage, Provenance.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In February 1897 a British force of roughly twelve hundred men entered Benin City, burned it, deposed and exiled the Oba, and removed several thousand brass plaques, ivories and carvings. The objects were auctioned in London to defray the cost of the expedition. They entered collections across Europe and North America, where their technical sophistication was used to argue that Africans could not have made them. That argument has been abandoned. The objects have not.

The last eighteen months have altered the picture more than the preceding century did. On 21 June 2025 the Netherlands transferred 119 Benin Bronzes at a ceremony at the National Museum in Lagos, the largest single return since the looting (NPR, 2025). In February 2026 the University of Cambridge transferred legal ownership of 116 objects to Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments, with physical movement still to be arranged. In June 2026 eighteen pieces left Swiss collections, fourteen from the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich and two each from Museum Rietberg and the Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève, under an agreement signed that March covering twenty eight objects in total (Euronews, 2026).

Germany had moved earlier, signing an agreement with Nigeria in 2022 covering 1,130 objects, and the pattern since has been for each announcement to make the next one easier. The British Museum, which holds roughly nine hundred Benin objects, remains outside the process. It is barred from deaccessioning by the British Museum Act of 1963, a constraint that is real and that the institution has also found convenient.

This article asks what restitution is actually for. The question sounds naive and is not. Advocates and opponents both tend to argue as though the issue were the location of objects, when the deeper matter is authority over meaning. A bronze plaque in Lagos labelled by Nigerian curators is a different object from the same plaque in Zurich labelled by Swiss ones, and neither is what it was when it hung on a palace pillar in the sixteenth century.

## II. THE MUSEUM AS COLONIAL FORM

Bennett (1995) traced the public museum to a nineteenth century project of civic instruction, in which arranging objects in evolutionary sequence taught visitors their place within a progressive order. The ethnographic gallery was the sharp end of this. Coombes (1994) showed in detail how late Victorian display of African material worked to naturalise imperial rule, with the Benin objects presenting a particular difficulty precisely because their quality resisted the framework built to contain them.

The critique matured through the nineteen nineties. Karp and Lavine (1991) assembled the arguments about the poetics and politics of display, establishing that arrangement is never neutral. Clifford (1997) proposed the museum as a contact zone, a site of ongoing and unequal relation rather than a repository, which shifted attention from what museums held to how they related to the communities whose material they held. Simpson (1996) surveyed early attempts at postcolonial museum practice and found most of them cosmetic.

Azoulay (2019) makes the strongest version of the case, arguing that the museum's basic operations, extracting objects from their conditions of use and reconstituting them as art or specimen, are themselves imperial acts that cannot be undone by better labels. On this view restitution is not a reform of the museum but a partial dismantling of it. Mbembe (2001) supplies the wider frame, describing the postcolony as a condition in which the forms of colonial power persist after its formal end.

The counter-position was set out in the declaration on the importance and value of universal museums issued in 2002 and signed by eighteen major institutions. Cuno (2008) developed it at length. The argument holds that encyclopaedic collections serve a cosmopolitan good by allowing cultures to be seen in relation, that nation states are poor custodians of a shared human heritage, and that present institutions should not be held liable for historical acquisitions made under different norms. Each of these claims has force. The declaration's weakness was that every signatory happened to be in Europe or North America, which made the universal look distinctly located.

## III. SARR, SAVOY, AND THE TURN TO RELATIONAL ETHICS

The current wave has a documentary origin. In November 2018 Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy delivered a report commissioned by the French president recommending the permanent return of African cultural objects acquired without consent, unless a museum could show legitimate acquisition (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). The report inverted the standard burden of proof, and that inversion did most of the work. It also estimated that between ninety and ninety five per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's material heritage sits outside the continent.

The response was disproportionate to the report's formal status, which was advisory and confined to French collections. German institutions moved first and furthest. The Humboldt Forum, opening into this argument with an awkward combination of a reconstructed Prussian palace and a large ethnographic collection, became the most visible European test case.

Savoy (2022) later published the archival history that explains why the debate felt so sudden. African governments had requested returns consistently from the nineteen sixties onward, and European museums had developed a repertoire of delay: the request is premature, the climate is unsuitable, the security is inadequate, the legal position is unclear. The requests were not new. The willingness to hear them was.

Hicks (2020) shifted the register from ethics to violence. His argument is that the Benin objects are not merely misplaced property but evidence of a massacre, and that displaying them without saying so makes the museum a participant rather than a custodian. The book is polemical and its factual core has held up: the punitive expedition was punitive, the auction was explicitly to fund it, and the institutional record shows curators who knew this at the time. Procter (2020) made a parallel argument for a general readership and helped move the discussion out of the sector.

## IV. WHAT THE RECENT RETURNS ACTUALLY DO

Attending to the mechanics of the recent transfers is more revealing than attending to the rhetoric. Three patterns stand out and none of them is straightforward.

Title and custody have been separated. Cambridge transferred legal ownership of 116 objects in February 2026 while the physical transfer remained to be arranged, and several German agreements did the same, with objects remaining on loan to the returning institution. This can be sensible, since Nigeria's museum infrastructure has real capacity limits and the Edo Museum of West African Art is still under construction. It can also function as restitution in name with possession unchanged, and the difference between the two depends on who controls the loan terms.

Recipient authority has been contested. Nigeria's 2023 presidential declaration vesting ownership of returned Benin material in the Oba of Benin rather than the national museums commission caused genuine unease among European partners who had negotiated with the federal government. Some of that unease was legitimate concern about public access. Some of it was a reluctance to accept that the point of return is that the recipient decides, including deciding in ways the returning institution dislikes. The second is not an argument against restitution.

Digital surrogacy has emerged as both remedy and evasion. Digital Benin, launched in 2022, assembled records of more than five thousand objects held across some twenty countries into a single catalogue with Edo language terms

and oral history (Digital Benin, 2022). This is genuine scholarship and it made the scale of dispersal legible for the first time. It is also, in some institutional hands, a way of offering access without offering objects, and the distinction is worth keeping in view.

## V. THE QUESTION OF CAPACITY

Every argument against return eventually arrives at capacity. The receiving country lacks climate control, or trained conservators, or security, or the funds to maintain any of these. The claim is sometimes accurate. It is also the oldest item in the delaying repertoire, and it has a circular quality that its users rarely acknowledge, since the institutions raising it are frequently the ones that declined to fund the capacity they now find wanting.

Nigeria's situation carries both halves. The national museums are underfunded, some collections are poorly stored, and there have been documented thefts from Nigerian institutions. Against this, the Edo Museum of West African Art was designed by David Adjaye with archaeological work beginning in 2021, and Benin City retains a living brass casting guild whose members have worked continuously since before the punitive expedition. The guild's economics are precarious, which is a capacity problem of a different order and one that returns could help solve rather than worsen (Al Jazeera, 2026).

A category error sits underneath the standard formulation. Capacity is being measured against one conservation philosophy, developed in European museums, which treats the arrest of material change as the goal. Many source communities hold objects meant to be used, worn, fed, danced or allowed to decay. By that second standard a bronze sealed in a nitrogen case in Zurich is not conserved. It is suspended.

The practical answer is not to resolve the philosophical dispute but to stop treating capacity as a precondition set unilaterally by the holding institution. Where genuine infrastructure gaps exist, funding them is cheaper than a single major acquisition and considerably cheaper than another decade of litigation.

## VI. BEYOND AFRICA: NAGPRA AND THE WIDER FIELD

Restitution is often discussed as a European problem with African objects, which understates the field considerably. The United States has had a statutory framework since the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, and revised regulations that took effect in January 2024 sharply tightened museum obligations, requiring consultation with descendant communities before displaying or researching covered material (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023).

The practical result was abrupt. The American Museum of Natural History closed major halls in early 2024, and comparable closures followed elsewhere. Reaction split predictably between those who saw overdue compliance and those who saw the loss of public education. The more interesting response came from institutions that used the closure to rebuild galleries with tribal historians as co-authors rather than consultants.

Phillips (2011) had documented this longer trajectory in Canadian practice, where collaborative curation with First Nations communities developed from the nineteen eighties onward and produced a workable if imperfect model. The lesson from that history is that co-curation changes exhibitions in ways that ownership transfer alone does not. Objects go back and the interpretive frame stays colonial unless someone deliberately rebuilds it.

Greece and the Parthenon marbles remain the case everyone cites and the least representative one, since it involves two European states, a dispute over legality rather than violence, and an institution with the same statutory constraint. Its prominence has arguably distorted the wider debate by making restitution look like a diplomatic quarrel between equals rather than an aftermath of conquest.

## VII. WHAT ARTISTS HAVE MADE OF IT

Contemporary artists reached the restitution question well before museum boards did, and their treatments have been more inventive than the policy literature. Kader Attia's installation for documenta in 2012 set repaired African objects beside photographs of facially reconstructed soldiers from the First World War, proposing repair rather than restoration as the operative concept. The visible seam is the point. A repaired object carries its injury in a way a restored one does not.

Victor Ehikhamenor's work for the Nigerian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017 addressed the Benin material directly, and his public objection that year to a British artist's gilded head modelled on an Ife bronze put the question of who may cite whose forms into the commercial art press rather than the seminar room. The argument was not about ownership of objects but about the asymmetry of quotation, which is the same asymmetry restitution debates circle without naming.

This work matters to the policy question in a specific way. It shows that the objects are not inert heritage awaiting correct placement but live material within an ongoing practice, and that the communities from which they came have artists making arguments about them now. Museums that consult only governments and academics miss this constituency entirely.

It also complicates the return narrative in a useful direction. Several Nigerian artists have said that they want the bronzes back and expect them to remain, in some measure, contested once home, since the Oba's court, the state, the museums commission and the casters' guild do not agree about what the objects are for. That disagreement is the ordinary condition of a living heritage. Its absence in European display was never neutrality. It was distance.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Restitution will not empty the museums. The numbers make this clear enough. Even the largest recent transfers involve hundreds of objects against holdings counted in millions, and the encyclopaedic collections will remain encyclopaedic. The anxiety that returns will hollow out European institutions has been repeated for fifty years without becoming true, and it functions mainly to postpone decisions.

Nor is restitution a settlement. Transferring title while keeping custody, celebrating a handover and then declining to fund the receiving institution, or publishing a digital catalogue in place of a transfer are all moves that preserve the underlying relation. The question Sarr and Savoy actually posed was about relations rather than property, and it is the relational part that institutions have found easiest to leave undone.

What follows from taking the argument seriously is unglamorous. Provenance research needs funding at a scale no museum currently commits, since most collections do not know what they hold or how it arrived. Legal frameworks need amendment, and the British Museum Act is the obvious candidate, since a statute passed in 1963 should not be treated as a natural fact. Source community curators need salaried positions rather than consultation fees. And returning institutions need to accept that they do not get to approve what happens next.

The deepest change would be to the museum's account of itself. An institution that presents its collection as a neutral inheritance cannot explain how it came to hold a plaque from a burned palace. One that tells that story becomes something else, less authoritative and more interesting, a place where the history of how things were gathered is part of what is on display. A few institutions have begun this. Most have preferred to negotiate object by object, which is slower, and which leaves the founding narrative intact.

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