

Assessing the
Return of Benin
Treasures: Matters
and Questions Arising

Peju Layiwola



Oba Ovonramwen, King of Benin being taken on exile to Calabar, 1897



British Soldiers sitting in the courtyard of the palace with some of their loot displayed on the ground







Oba Akenzua II's restitution requests



Fig. 1: Throne stool attributed to the Oba Eresoy (approx. 1735-1750). Inv.-No. III C 20295 (height 40 cm, Ø 40,5 cm)

Restitution requests are currently being discussed in the meetings and publications of the ethnological museums. While these discussions lead in some cases to cooperation projects, implementing many of the ideas remains difficult. This can be seen from the following example. In the National Archives¹ in London there are documents (Foreign Office and Foreign & Commonwealth Office Records, 1935-1943), which provide evidence of an early and



Fig. 3: Throne stool (Inv. No. III C 20295) – one of the objects looted in the 1897 war

very complex case from the year 1935.

It involves two throne stools from the kingdom of Benin that were taken out of the country as part of the war booty when it was overrun by a British punitive expedition in 1897 (fig. 3).

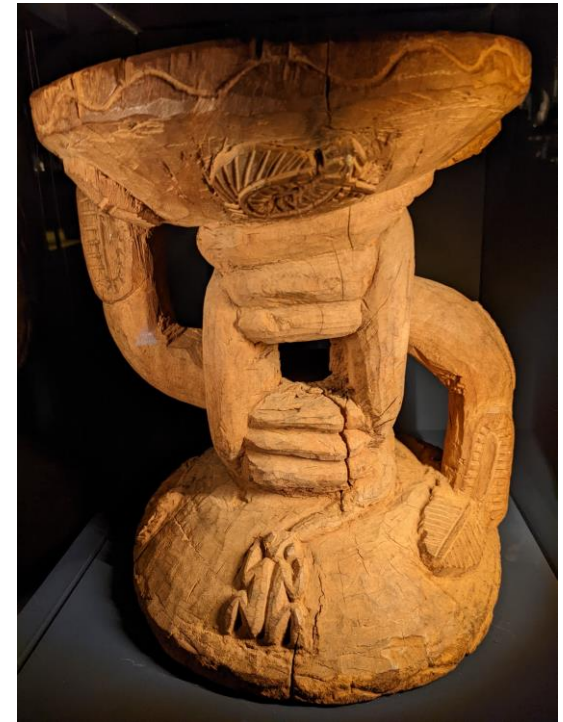
The two bronze stools (fig. 1, 2) are of similar sizes and constructed in almost the same way: the base and the seat are slightly rounded and held together by stylized snakes. Some motifs can be found on both stools, e.g. frog and a grimacing face. But one of them (fig. 1) is more ornately decorated than the other. The snakes' bodies in the central area have scales and the symbols are depicted as reliefs or engravings on the lower and upper sides of the seats and the pedestals. In his 1981 study on the two objects, Irwin Tunis describes their material origin and iconography in detail. Otto Werner (1970) also analysed the alloy used in the two throne stools (as well as 152 other bronze objects from Benin) in an article.

Oba Akenzua II and Lord Plymouth

The first documents in the archive (dated April 1935) refer to a meeting in February 1935, when Lord Plymouth, the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, came to the kingdom of Benin during an official visit to the British colony of Southern Nigeria. The king, Akenzua II (1899-1978), known as the Oba, ruled from 1932 until his death. He asked Lord Plymouth if he could help him recover two throne stools, which had been confiscated during the British punitive expedition.

History of the throne stools

The two throne stools are attributed to Akenzua's predecessors Oba Eresoyen (approx. 1735-1750) and Oba Esigie (approx. 1504-1550) respectively². Under Oba Esigie who spoke fluent Portuguese, there were regular trade relations with Portugal. The correspondence files of the National Archives mention that a throne stool was made by the Portuguese as a gift for a predecessor of the Oba: "The Stool, which I understand is said to have been presented to one of the Oba's ancestors by the Portuguese is one of those illustrated on page 112 of H. Ling Roth's book 'Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors'"³. Reid and Dalton (1899: 6) report on Esigie's reign: "When the white men came, in the time when Esigie [sic] was king, a man named Abammangwa came with them. He made



A similar wooden stool in the
RJ Museum, Köln







Fig. 6: Oba A
coral regalia
Ovonramwe
British priv:
Photo: S.O.
(© Flora Ed

Fig. 7: Ac
History.
Photo: A

vestment procedures were forgotten. They were useful to resolve the controversy over where to place an item of regalia during the coronation of Oba Erediyinwa I (Akanmu 2006: 6)

Reflections on this Latest Return

The song of victory Oba Akenzua II sang when Items of regalia were returned to him from a private collection in Britain in 1935

1897- 1935- 2022- 2024 Dates stolen- date of request by the grandson of Oba Ovoranmwun exiled to Calabar – 2022- Return of the Objects by the German Government- 2024 objects brought to the Oba by the new DG,NCMM, Mr Olugbile Holloway

The contentious relationship between the meaning of an object as art or sacred /religious objects. Kept in pristine states in museums, protected and held under controlled climates. And how these same objects are viewed and consumed or appreciated within their own cultural context.

Use of chalk- Symbolism of white chalk. As an expression of extreme joy and for purification.

The tangible evokes the intangible. Songs, chants, praises, are performed, recited during such occasions like during festivals . On the occasion of the return of the cock from Cambridge and the ancestral head from the University of Aberdeen the king took the two pieces back to the ancestral shrine to rededicate the items. This become historical markers as architectural spaces are also activated during this sort of encounter.



The Return of Looted Benin treasures
to the Oba of Benin, February 19, 2022









Adrian Walker presenting the bronzes to HRM Oba Erediauwa II at the Oba's palace in Benin, 2014



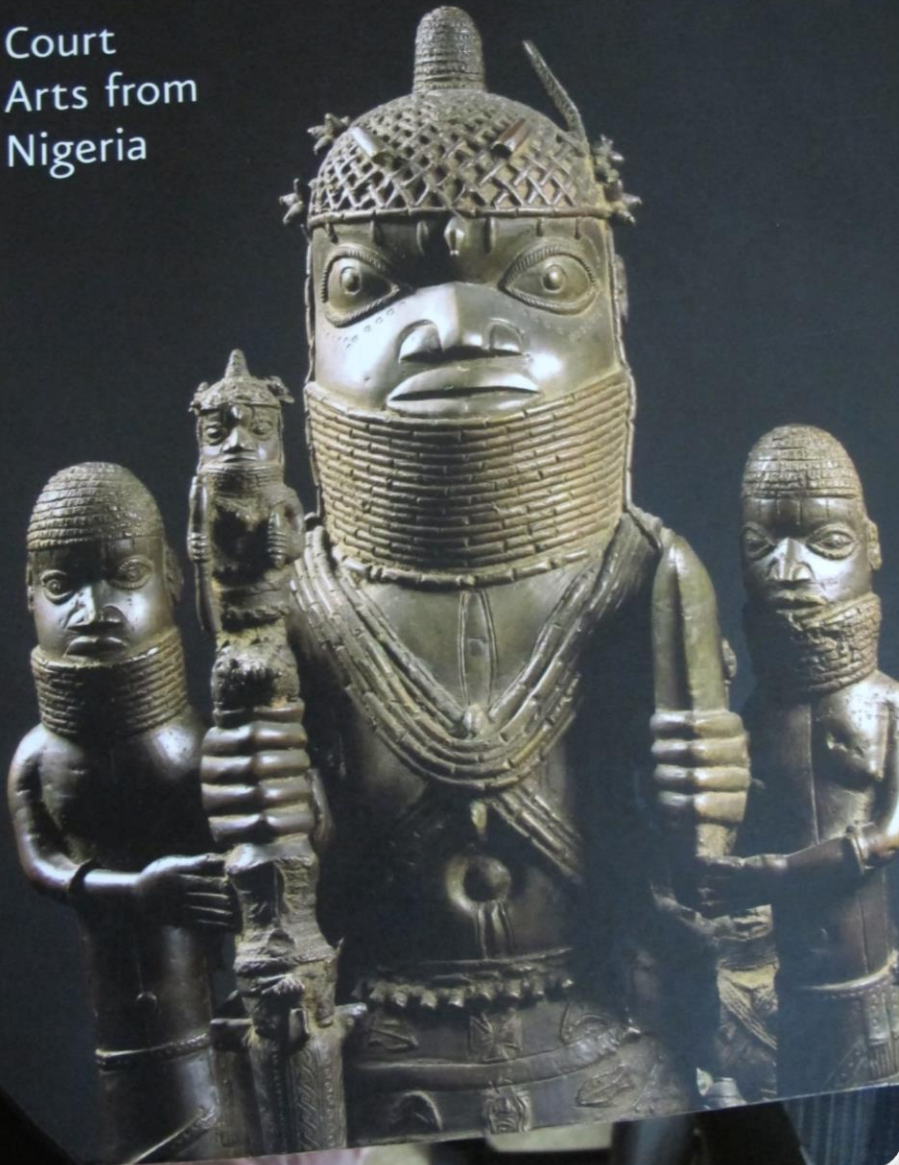
Returned Items by Adrian Walker

Diary

- 16th Jan. Sailed from Liverpool. Had a roughish passage as far as Las Palmas. Called at Sierra Leone, Cape Coast Castle, Accra & Lagos.
- 8th Feb. Arrived Forcados River.
- 9th " Transferred to S. Y. "Ivy". Had the honour of dining with the Admiral.
- 10th " Landed at Warrigi, in the Benue River. Marched in charge of small party of carriers to Ceni, with O'Shee, Koe & Phibbs. Eight miles in the middle of the day. Awful heat. Koe knocked up. Reported to Col. Hamilton & have been put in command of "C" Company, N. C. P. F.

Benin Kings and Rituals

Court
Arts from
Nigeria



'It is our prayer that the people and the government of Austria will show humaneness and magnanimity and return to us some of these objects which found their way to your country'

HRM., Oba Erediauwa of Benin



Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette

No. 57 Lagos - 28th March, 2023 Vol. 110

Government Notice No. 25

The following is published as supplement to this *Gazette* :

<i>Order.</i>	<i>Short Title</i>	<i>Page</i>
1	Notice of Presidential Declaration — On the Recognition of Ownership, and an Order Vesting Custody and Management of Repatriated Looted Benin Artefacts in the Oba of Benin Kingdom	A245-247



- Why the need for an Executive Order?
- According to Dr Afolasade Adewumi in a recent conference at the Wereldmuseum in Leiden she affirmed that the Gazette states the obvious. Already the Customary laws of Nigeria has long recognized the Oba as the custodian of cultural relics having ancestral connection to the people including communal land and cultural properties. So, in summary the oba is holding the artifacts in trust for the people.



Benin Bronzes in German Museums

Ethnology Museum
in Berlin

516

Saxony

263

MARKK, Hamburg

175

Rautenstrauch Joest
Koeln
96

Linden Museum,
Stuttgart

75

indicated by [Nigeria]. The transfer of risk takes place when the objects are handed over to the transport company at the seat of the Foundation. The Foundation shall not be liable for loss or damage to the objects incurred during transportation. Nigeria confirms that the entry of the objects into Nigeria shall not be liable to customs duty. In the case that (Nigeria) decides that the objects should not be transported directly to Nigeria but to another location (e.g. travelling exhibitions), the Foundation shall not bear the cost of packing and shipping.

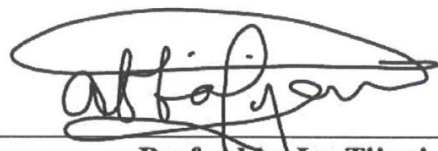
(4) Both sides agree to cooperate on a travelling exhibition under the authority of the NCMM. The Foundation will endeavour to secure financial and logistical support for this exhibition.

(5) If any provision of this Agreement is invalid, the validity of the remaining provisions shall remain unaffected. The Parties undertake to replace the invalid provision with valid wording that best reflects the object and purpose of the invalid provision. The same applies to any omissions in the Agreement.

(6) The Appendices 1-2 constitute an integral part of this Agreement.

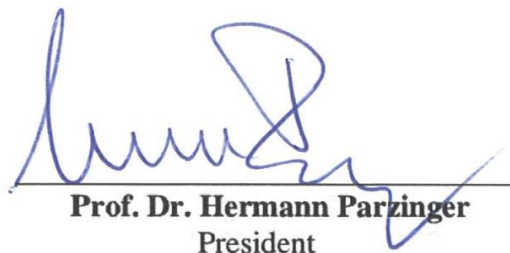
Abuja, 25.08.2022

Berlin, 25.08.2022



Prof. Abba Isa Tijani
Director-General

National Commission for Museums and Monuments



Prof. Dr. Hermann Parzinger
President

Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz

(4) The Foundation may make individual objects available to other public institutions as sub-loans. The Foundation will ensure that the same conditions that apply to this loan also apply to the sub-loan. In each case, Nigeria must be informed of the loan.

(5) The Foundation may produce images and other reproductions of the objects and make use of these images and other reproductions non-commercially in the same way that it makes use of images of its own collections, i.e. for purposes of education, research, promoting exhibitions, exhibition catalogues etc. free of charge. Insofar as images of the objects already exist, it may continue to use these images in the same way. On request, the Foundation will make images of the objects that it has produced available to [Nigeria] free of charge.

(6) The Foundation should disclose digital assets and share them. They should share all profits derived from these if commercially used.

(7) Whenever the objects are displayed or published, the Foundation will use the following credit line:

German: Diese Ausstellung zeigt Leihgaben der National Commission for Museums and Monuments Nigeria.

English: This exhibition displays loans from the National Commission for Museums and Monuments Nigeria.

Benin 1897.com

Art and The Restitution Question

BENIN 1897.COM:

Showing:

8, April-30 May, 2010

University of Lagos

**20 August – 10 October,
2010**

University of Ibadan



Benin1897.com
Art and the Restitution Question

The title is significant to us in Benin. The year 1897 means much to me and my people; it was the year the British invaded our land and forcefully removed thousands of our bronze and ivory works from my great grandfather, Oba Ovonramwen's Palace.

**HRH The Oba of Benin,
Solomon Erediauwa**

The production of this book equally represents a very significant move to challenge the orchestrated design to perpetually distort African history and appropriate African creativity, ingenuity, craftsmanship and industry as well as misrepresent the historic legacies of our forefathers. The wide range of issues and themes covered in the volume marks it out as an invaluable material in the study and understanding of African art, culture and history. I unreservedly recommend the volume to students, readers and whosoever may find it relevant in his or her professional and intellectual pursuit.

Professor Tunde Babawale
Director, Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation (CBAAC)

A contemporary Nigerian artist and art historian, a teacher in both formal and informal institutions, Peju Layiwola combines these and many more attributes and talents to make her stand tall as a role model to her generation.

Bruce Onobrakpeya

Art and the Restitution Question

Benin1897.com



Benin1897.com
Art and the Restitution Question



An Art Exhibition by Peju Layiwola

- CONTRIBUTORS
- Freida High
- Benson Eluma
- Victor Osaro Edo
- Akin Onipede
- Mabel Ewrierhoma
- Sylvester Ogbechie
- Folarin Shyllon
- Kwame Opoku
- Peju Layiwola
- A foreword written by His royal Highness Oba Erediauwa I, Oba of Benin.
- Appendix comprising copies of letters of requests made over time for Benin objects.



1897.com, Installation, Terracotta, wire, metal foil, Cow horns, paper, 2010





WHOSE CENTENARY?

IGUN STREET

BENIN CITY

6-7.12. 2014

FREE EVENT

STARTS >11AM

We are delighted to invite you to the 1st ART EVENT of the project *WHOSE CENTENARY?* in Benin City (Nigeria).

A collaborative project curated by Inês Valle with Peju Layiwola (initiator of the project), Jude Anogwih, Jelili Atiku, Victor Ehikhamenor, Andrew Esiebo, Taiye Idahor, Elizabeth Olowu, Wura-Natasha Ogunji, George Osodi and Jumoke Verissimo.

INVITATION

**ART EXHIBITION
LIVE PERFORMANCES
COMMUNITY ART PROJECTS
FREE ART WORKSHOPS**

Copyright © 2014 Project *Whose centenary?*
All rights reserved.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT
WHOSE.CENTENARY.PROJECT@GMAIL.COM
[+234] 803 439 2413 / [+234] 802 323 6410
FB [whosecentenary proj](#)
Twitter [@whosecentenary](#)
WWW.BENIN1897.COM

Whose Centenary?, 2014

This project brought together 11 artists from within Nigeria and the African diaspora

- a. Wura-Natasia Ogunji, African American Performer
- b. Ines Valle, Photographer, Portuguese artist
- c. Andrew Eseibo, Photographer
- d. Jumoke Verissimmo, Poet
- e. Taye Idahor, Sculptor/ painter
- f. Elizabeth Olowu, Costume designer/ Performer
- g. Jude Anogwih, Video artist
- h. George Oshodi, Photographer
- i. Peju Layiwola, artist
- j. Burns Effiom, Performer
- k. Victor Ehikhamenor, Painter

The amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorate of Nigeria was done in 1914. The Nigerian government celebrated in a grand style the unifying of both regions. As artists we sort to interrogate this commemoration which we thought was like celebrating slavery. The two regions were merged without recourse to the 'Nigerians' that were to be governed. Whose Centenary? opens with a rhetorical Question.



SIGNOR
NAME: D.P.P.T.
DESIGN/NO.: 2
BALENO: 45

CAO
NAME: S.P.P.T.
DESIGN/NO.: 2
BALENO: 45

SIGNOR



Jelili Atiku, Holy Ovoranmwen's Cathedral, Whose Centenary? 2014, Benin City



Elizabeth Olowu and Wura Natasha-Ogunji in Performance, Whose Centenary, 2014





Victor Ehikhamenor, Painting Installation,
Ine of Igun's palace, Benin City.

Whose Centenary? Victor Ehikhamenor
making an on-site painting Installation,
Igun Street, Benin City.







Collaborative work, Peju Layiwola and members of the Igun caster's guild, Igun Street, Benin City, 2014







RAW Residencies for Artists and Writers

presents a collaborative seminar featuring

Artist Prof. Adepeju Layiwola

&

Writer Dr Patrick Oloko

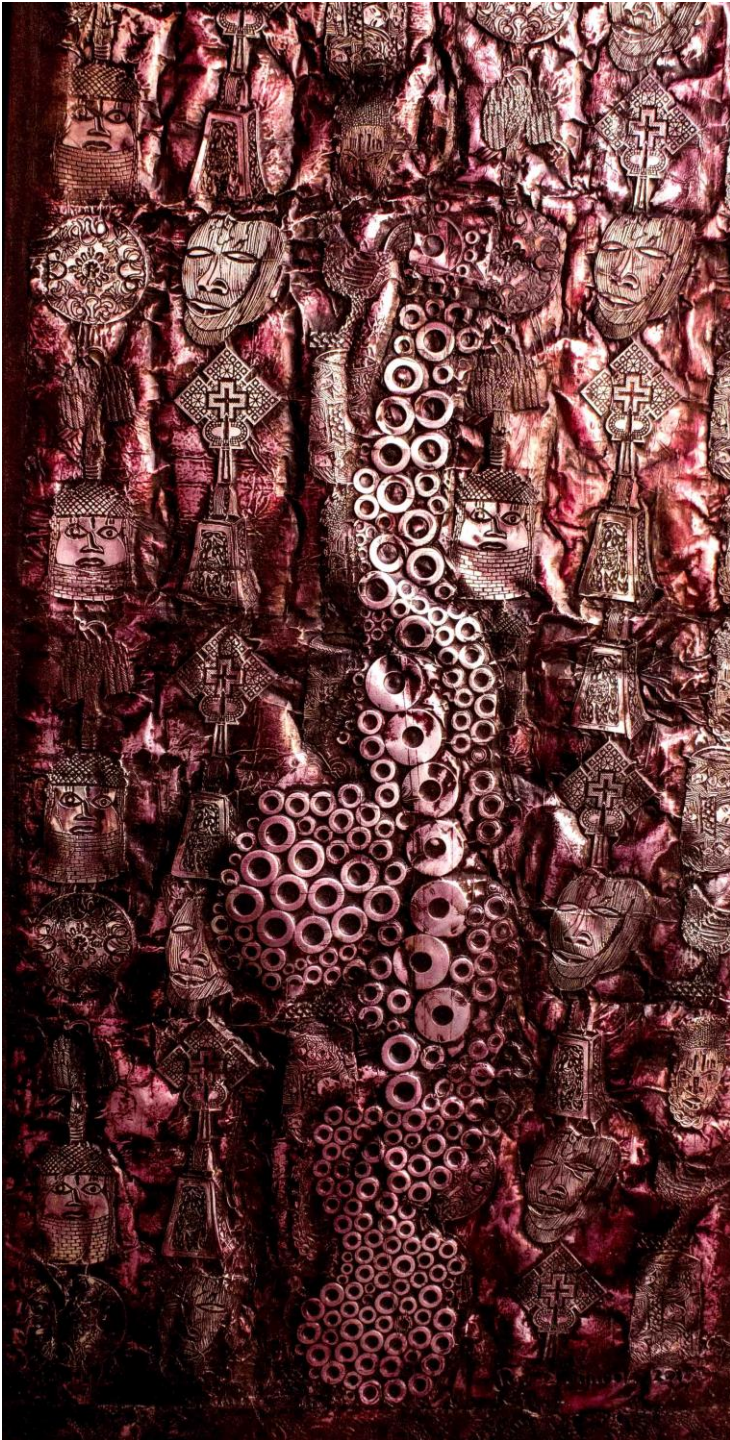
from Lagos University

**“Reclaiming Memories: Towards the Visual Recording
of Layered African Histories”**

Friday 25 May 2018, 2.00pm - 4.00pm

Fine Art Department Seminar Room, Somerset St.

Refreshments will be served



Sarah Baartman



Dialoguing Sarahs, Four Piece panel, Patinated metal, 125cm by 60 cm, 2018
Return (2018) Arts of Africa and the Global South Research,
Rhodes University, Grahamstown, SA.



Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum
cultures of the world

[Visit](#) [exhibitions](#) [program](#) [museum](#)



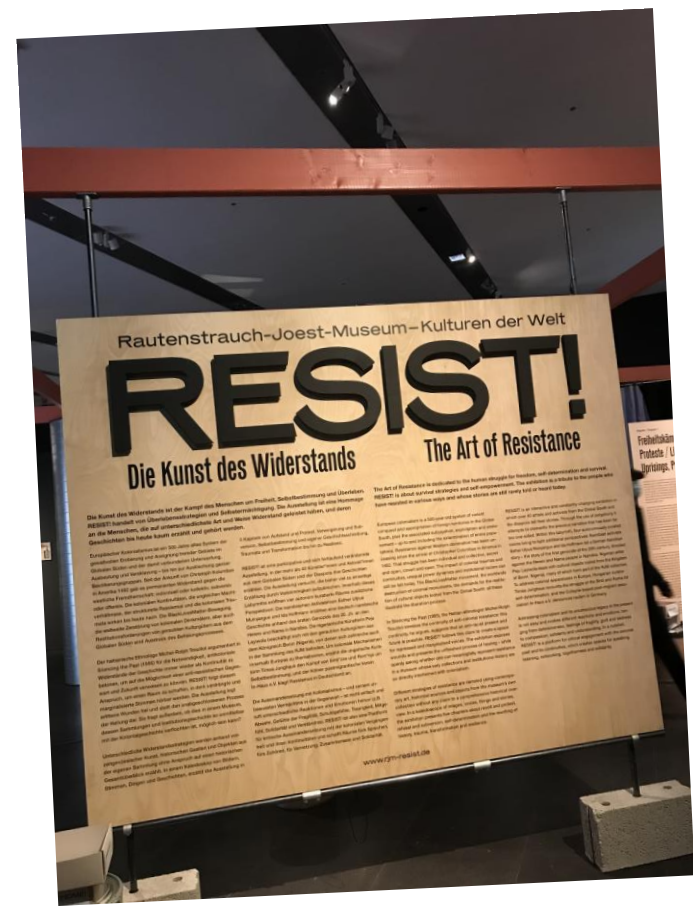
Kurator*innen autonome Räume „It's Yours!“ / Curators of the Autonomous Spaces "It's Yours!"
Esther Utjua Muinjangué & Ida Hoffmann, Peju Layiwola, Timea Junghaus,
Integrationshaus (In-Haus e.V.) Cologne-Kalk mit Elizaveta Khan, Mona Leitmeier,
Sae Yun Jung, Salman Abdo und Rita Bomkamp.

Artists in Residence / Artists in Residency

Rokia Bamba (Music), Bahar Gökten und Daniela Rodriguez Romero (Urban Dance),
Kiri Dalena (Colonial Photography), Francis Oghuma (Real Time Documentary).

Beteiligte Künstler*innen / Participating Artists

Christie Akumabor, Osaze Amadasun, Kader Attia, Belkis Ayon, Omar Victor Diop,
Nwakuso Edozien, Robert Gabris, Compagnie GAKOEKOE (Florisse Adjanohoun,
Roger Atikpo, Marcel Djondo, Anani Gbeteglo, Eustache Kamouna, Gaëtan Noussougo),
Jimoh Ganiyu, Ayrson Heráclito, indieguerillas, Patricia Kaersenhout, Grada Kilomba,
Mohammed Laouli, Alao Lukman, Peter Magubane, Dhuwarrwarr Marika, Tshibumba
Kanda Matulu, Medu Art Ensemble, Luiza Prado de O. Martins, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas,
Keviselie/Hans Ragnar Mathisen, Monday Midnite, Franky Mindja, Lapiztola,
Nura Qureshi, Emília Rigova, Mamadou Sall, Juan Manuel Sandoval, Diego Sandoval Avila,
Selma Selman, The Singh Twins, Alfred Ullrich, Huỳnh Văn Thuận, Kara Walker,
Wantok Musik Foundation, Tania Willard, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Ernesto Yerena.

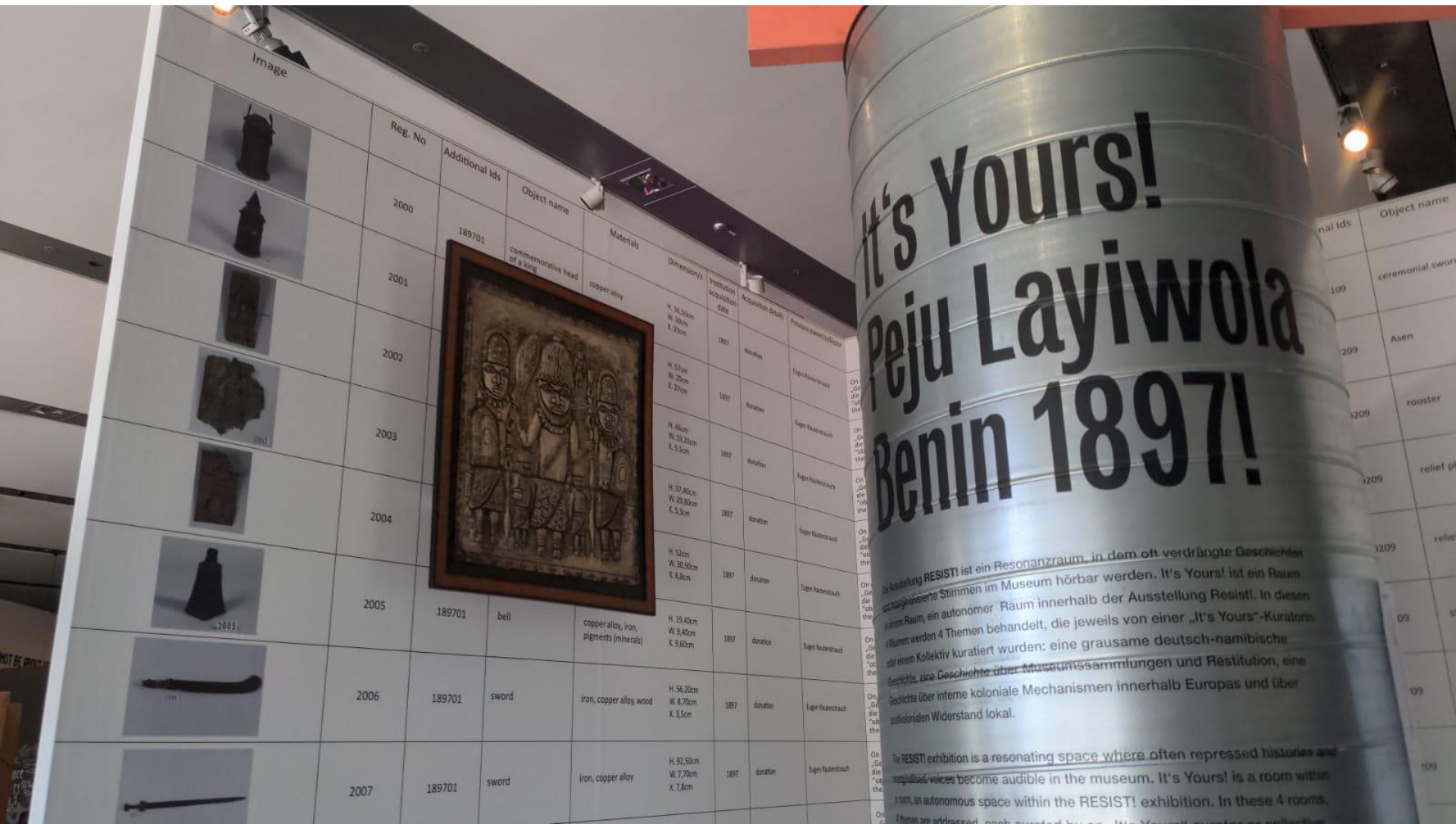


Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum - Kulturen der Welt
RESIST!
 Die Kunst des Widerstands **The Art of Resistance**

Die Kunst des Widerstands ist der Kampf des Menschen um Freiheit, Selbstbestimmung und Überleben. RESIST! handelt von Überlebensstrategien und Widerstandstaktiken. Die Ausstellung ist eine Hommage an die Menschen, die auf unheimlich gefährliche Art und Weise Widerstand geleistet haben, und deren Geschichten die heute kaum erzählt und gehört werden.

RESIST! ist ein Ausstellungskonzept, das die Kunst des Widerstands in der Gegenwart und Zukunft zeigt. Die Ausstellung ist eine Hommage an die Menschen, die auf unheimlich gefährliche Art und Weise Widerstand geleistet haben, und deren Geschichten die heute kaum erzählt und gehört werden.

RESIST! ist ein Ausstellungskonzept, das die Kunst des Widerstands in der Gegenwart und Zukunft zeigt. Die Ausstellung ist eine Hommage an die Menschen, die auf unheimlich gefährliche Art und Weise Widerstand geleistet haben, und deren Geschichten die heute kaum erzählt und gehört werden.



The Art of Resistance, Rautenstrauch Joest Museum, Cologne, 2021-2022



47317

Amring
5203

Amring
5204

Amring
5205

Amring
5206

Amring
5207

Amring
5208

Amring
5209

Amring
5210

Amring
5211

Amring
5212

Amring
5213

Amring
5214

Amring
5215







Stadt Köln

Henriette Rek

* Many more works will be returned in the coming months to the Oba. Indeed, many museums had requested from the Federal government representatives some letter of authority before dealing with them.

- The Oba has set up the the Benin Royal Museum Trustees to handle the return of Benin artifacts and to establish the Royal Museum which had been in the pipeline since the reign of Oba Erediauwa.

Questions arising

1. Who decides what remains in the Western and what comes back to Nigeria
2. Who are the experts employed on the Nigerian team to make these decisions
3. The agreement signed by the Germans and the Former Director General of the NCMM is predicated on two appendices which are not available in public domain. It therefore remains unclear the number of Benin Objects that may never return to Nigeria