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With Promise It Is 'Committed to Repatriation,' Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art Takes Its Benin Bronzes Off View

The Washington, D.C. institution is researching dozens of works in its collection as it starts the process of returning them to Nigeria.

Taylor Dafoe (<https://news.artnet.com/about/taylor-dafoe-731>), November 5, 2021



A Benin plaque from the mid-16th to 17th centuries. Courtesy of the National Museum of African Art.

In a sign of changing priorities, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art (NMAFA) in Washington, D.C., has removed 10 Benin bronzes from public view as it looks into returning the objects to Nigeria.

The decision came directly from the museum's [newly-hired director \(https://africa.si.edu/pressrelease/smithsonian-names-ngaire-blankenberg-director-of-the-national-museum-of-african-art/\)](https://africa.si.edu/pressrelease/smithsonian-names-ngaire-blankenberg-director-of-the-national-museum-of-african-art/), Ngairé Blankenberg, late last month—just 11 days after she moved to Washington, D.C. for the post. The bronzes taken down from display are among 16 in the NMAFA collection confirmed to have been taken by British soldiers in an infamous raid of Benin's royal palace in 1897.

Now, in the glass case where the bronzes were previously on view, there is a sign explaining why they were removed.

"We are currently in discussion with Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments about the future of this collection," it reads. "The museum is proactively examining the circumstances and power dynamics that led to these artworks being in our collection, as well as our collecting practices to ascertain and implement the steps we need to take to ensure the museum is a trusted, welcoming place for all."



A Benin plaque from the mid-16th to 17th centuries. Courtesy of the National Museum of African Art.

However, that doesn't necessarily mean that restitution is imminent. A spokesperson for the Smithsonian clarified that while the museum "is committed to repatriation", the process—which would require the museum to research the provenance of the objects in question, have them appraised by outside experts, and negotiate a return—has only just begun.

"These Benin Bronzes are high-value objects and deaccessioning them will require approval from the Smithsonian Secretary and the Smithsonian's board of regents," the representative said. "When the process is complete, the Smithsonian will consider returning artifacts to their original home if requested."

"That does not mean we are not committed to fixing this," Blankenberg added in an email to Artnet News, "but rather that we need to make sure we have a thoughtful and effective process so that doing the right thing is an institutional, not individual practice."

"It is very important for us at NMAFA that the Benin Bronze process be seen within a much wider context and strategy," she continued. "Our process of trust-building with African and African diasporic peoples starts with decolonization—proactively evaluating the impact of unequal power relations in our sector, looking carefully and in many instances changing how we hire, document, conserve, interpret, program—and yes it may also include repatriation."



A Benin plaque from the mid-16th to 17th centuries. Courtesy of the National Museum of African Art.

This May, following Germany's [landmark announcement \(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/nigeria-germany-benin-bronzes-1963143\)](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/nigeria-germany-benin-bronzes-1963143) that it would begin to retribute Benin bronzes as soon as 2022, [Artnet reported \(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/benin-bronzes-in-museums-1967773?artnet-logout-redirect=1\)](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/benin-bronzes-in-museums-1967773?artnet-logout-redirect=1) that the NMAFA had no plans to return its collection of works from Benin.

"The museum has had a strong relationship with Oba and members of the royal court of Benin over the years," NMAFA deputy director Christine Kremer said at the time. "They are aware of the objects in our collection and appreciate that we continue to tell the story about how the kingdom's treasures were looted from the palace in 1897." A representative added that the museum had "not received a request for repatriation of objects."

In recent years, the Benin bronzes have emerged as a central symbol in the larger debate about the restitution of cultural heritage obtained during periods of colonization. An estimated 3,000 bronzes taken from Benin are currently dispersed among more than 160 museums around the world.

But those numbers are slowly starting to decrease as various institutions and governing bodies have either returned objects to Africa or pledged to do so soon.

Last month, for instance, the University of Aberdeen and Jesus College at the University of Cambridge [became the first two U.K. institutions to officially retribute bronzes \(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/uk-universities-restituted-benin-bronzes-2027670\)](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/uk-universities-restituted-benin-bronzes-2027670), while in June, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York announced its own plans to [return a pair of Benin plaques \(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/met-return-benin-bronzes-1978902\)](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/met-return-benin-bronzes-1978902).

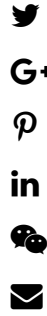
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