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## Patient Long Enough: The Benin Bronzes and the Repatriation of Looted Art and Artifacts

Donald "Donnie" Allen Copeland Jr.  
*Ouachita Baptist University*, [copelandd@obu.edu](mailto:copelandd@obu.edu)

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## Patient Long Enough: The Benin Bronzes and the Repatriation of Looted Art and Artifacts

Donnie Copeland

**T**he modern West African nation of Nigeria is a bustling, thriving cultural power that has made a lasting mark on literature, cinema, and the arts for many decades now. The country also has a rich history of art and culture making dating back centuries. Though its time as a colonial subject of the British Empire, independence from Britain, followed by civil war and economic turmoil may have diminished its shine on the global stage, the nation today offers more and more to contemporary world culture than ever before. However, Nigerians also want their historical treasures back, the art taken by their colonial masters more than a century ago. The call to return African works that have been enjoyed now for generations in major and minor collections throughout the West is growing ever louder, and it is my hope that this return of cultural treasures will be delayed no longer.

I had the pleasure of growing up in Nigeria and lived there on and off over 16 years between 1980 and 1996. The last time I visited was in 1998. To say the least, that was a long time ago, yet those years have shaped much of who I am and how I think about much of life. I was there as a child, my parents were teachers and professors at a seminary in Ogbomoso, Oyo State, in the southwest part of the country. This is Yorubaland, not too far from Lagos, the largest city in Africa and one of the largest on the globe. Later on, I went to school in Jos, Plateau State, among the Hausa and many other cultures, in north-central Nigeria.

At the time we moved to Nigeria in 1980, the country was experiencing an oil boom (Onuoha and Elegbede 2017). That money never really made it around to improve roads and infrastructure in Ogbomoso or really any other cities and towns

outside of the capital city of Lagos. The inability of the military government to convert its oil wealth to improve the lives of the citizens of Nigeria is the central, dominant story of my time living there. We often say of such countries that they are emerging economies, building and growing, becoming important. People used to say such places were part of the Third World, now we say the Global South. Of course, much has changed for Nigeria; the new capital city of Abuja is developing into a western, suburban style city in the heart of Nigeria.

Nigeria was then and has become prominent in terms of global culture with artistic, musical, and literary accomplishments to be noted (Falola 2022). There is also a dynamic diaspora of Nigerian culture embedded throughout the globe. In the time I lived in the country, I didn't experience Nigeria as an actor on the global stage. Some of that can be attributed to being a child, sure. I learned later on, after having returned to the United States, that El Anatsui, a prominent, globally important artist, was at work in his studio just an hour drive from where I lived in Oyo state, a missed opportunity for myself as an aspiring artist. Rather, I experienced the material culture of Nigeria at the market, observing goods such as woven blankets and other textiles. There were carvings and batiks, leather working and metal working. There was a bronze working tradition and a strong ceramic tradition which dated back centuries. We had a variety of these sorts of goods in our home.

To say the least, there is much more to the art of Nigeria. It turns out that those bronze and ceramics traditions are major contributors to global culture and heritage. However, much of what I experienced was informed by the tourism industry as goods generally made to sell to expatriates. While much of the work may have been really excellent, was it really representative of the artistic soul of the country? There is a long history of artmaking in different regions of what is now called Nigeria; the Nok, Ife and Benin cultures all occurred within its modern-day borders. I only became aware of these details after I lived in Nigeria as I was studying art in college. As I became aware of these historical examples, much of the art I observed in books was not artwork housed in Africa. These works, though African in origin, were housed in European and other museums around the globe. I learned about how these works made their way from places like the Kingdom of Benin to museums in London, Paris and elsewhere. Even the Kimbell Museum of Art in Fort Worth has on display a wonderful royal Yoruba portrait made of terracotta; it is excellent.

Part of the legacy of colonialism is that people around the globe, though mostly Europeans, have had the privilege of enjoying these works for themselves in places like the British Museum, which has approximately 6 million visitors per year (British Museum 2021). Even major 20th century artists like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse are indebted to learning from examples of African art in the museums and cafes of Paris. And now, as many readers will know, there is a great push to return many of these works to their countries of origin. Many believe doing so would be good. Critics of this movement maintain that most places, like Nigeria and other former colonial subjects, are not ready for these works to be returned. Critics say that the works are best cared for in European institutions, often implying a sort of benevolent relationship to the objects and the locations from where they came. And sometimes this point of view may have some good support - look no farther than the recent destruction of Assyrian monuments and art in modern-day Iraq, now lost forever (Shaheen 2015). The most famous examples of this question of repatriation of artworks are probably the marbles at the British Museum from the Parthenon in Athens, the Elgin Marbles; and from Nigeria, the famous Benin Bronzes (and others from Ife), which are on display in many institutions throughout Europe. Please note that at the time of the looting of these works by the British in 1897, photos of the works made by British soldiers were labeled as pictures of "loot" (Marshall 2020). You can look these photos up online for yourselves. One does not call a gift from a friend, or something rightfully purchased, "loot".

There is no question of who the artworks belong to in most of these disputes. The works belong to the cultures and countries of origin. Yet the question remains, should the works be returned? If ownership is not a question, they why not return the work to their rightful owners? In fact, many institutions like London's Horniman Museum are taking steps to return the works to their owners (Katz 2022).

So why not? Wouldn't repatriation of artworks would be of real benefit to countries like Nigeria and its citizens? European governments should do all they can to return looted works. To not do so is to continue to act as colonial master. The first benefit of doing so would be to those Nigerians who do not have the privilege of travelling to Europe in order to see the artifacts of their ancestry. Having the works in Nigeria would allow the citizens of Nigeria to enjoy their own history and boost their travel industries. Undoubtedly, returning works would improve visibility of these locations and make them destinations. Important to note is the development of a new

museum to be built in Benin City. The Edo Museum of West African Art would house any returned works returned the kingdom from western institutions and will incorporate the ruins of the old Benin City (Gershon 2020). Infrastructure and payment systems in places like Nigeria need major investment and the challenge of getting around may deter some who would want to visit, however many tourists are more and more likely to travel to Nigeria, as they have to the UK, to enjoy this cultural heritage (Ward, n.d.).

Above all, the best reason to return the artworks to their original context would be just that, to return the work to their original owners and witness the power that context gives to the works. This is akin to seeing a great cathedral as a whole, having travelled many miles to get there, as a pilgrim would have centuries ago, rather than seeing a piece of a cathedral scattered here and there throughout a museum. A random stained-glass window or sculpture of a gargoyle is not sufficient to convey what visiting an intact gothic cathedral is actually like, how beautiful and emotionally engaging such a place can be. Seeing the Benin Bronzes as a complete group, as they once were in the Oba's Palace at Benin City, would be just such an experience.

Returning these and other artworks to their original owners would have benefits and be a righting of a long-standing wrong that would serve all of us well. For those who hold out and maintain that the works should remain in their current situation, the main reason to resist returning the works must lie in the fact that an immense transfer of wealth would occur that most institutions have not yet come to terms with, and their hesitation and realization of what a great loss such a transfer would be simply underscores the real value of the works, to all of us, as part of our shared history, but most especially to those who would see their treasures returned.

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**About the Author**

Donnie Copeland is a faculty member in the School of Fine Arts at Ouachita Baptist University. He is chair of the school's Rosemary Adams Department of Art and Design.