

# Out of Edo

The ongoing conflict over African artefacts in European hands

**ADAM KUPER**

**LOOT**

Britain and the Benin Bronzes

**BARNABY PHILLIPS**

400pp. Oneworld. £20.

**THE BRITISH MUSEUMS**

The Benin Bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution

**DAN HICKS**

336pp. Pluto. £20.

ON A STATE VISIT to Burkina Faso in November 2017, President Macron tweeted: “African heritage cannot be held prisoner by European museums”. Museum directors were put on notice. In Britain, a spotlight turned on the “Benin Bronzes” looted by a punitive expedition in the Niger Delta in 1897. British officers plundered memorial brass busts from the shrines of dead kings, carried away brass plaques depicting life at court from the palace stores, scooped up intricately carved ivories, wooden sculptures and ceramics, some dating back to the fifteenth century, others perhaps even older, and all the products of craft guilds operating under the patronage of a divine king, the Oba of Edo. (The British called Edo “Benin”.) There is no way of knowing how many objects were seized, but there were certainly several thousand. The British Museum alone holds around 950, of which a hundred or so are on display.

These two books cover the pillage of the Edo palace, the dispersal of the spoils, and current controversies about restitution. For *Loot*, Barnaby Phillips, a journalist who specializes in African affairs, interviews a range of experts and interested parties. He delivers a balanced reconstruction of the Benin saga and probes the difficult choices facing European - and Nigerian - museums. Dan Hicks, curator of world archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, makes the case for the prosecution. *The British Museums*, he says, is “about sovereignty and violence, about how museums were co-opted into the nascent project of proto-fascism through the looting of African sovereignty, and about how museums can resist that racist legacy today”.

Portuguese merchants made contact with Edo in the late fifteenth century. Dutch, Danish and British trading companies moved in as the slave trade expanded, and began to export ivory, wild peppers and palm oil. Benin’s craftsmen were soon tailoring products to European markets, including such very particular items as ivory salt cellars featuring Portuguese knights and sailors. In return, the Oba was supplied with guns and with boatloads of copper and brass bracelets that served as currency or were melted down and reworked by the guilds. Following the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, which divvied up spheres of influence between European powers, Britain established a “Protectorate” in the Niger Delta. In late 1896 the local British consul reported to London that the Oba had “placed a Juju on (Palm) Kernels, the most profitable product of the country, and the penalty for trading in this produce is death”.



A mission set off to negotiate. It was ambushed. Seven British officials and perhaps 200 African porters were killed or taken prisoner. A few weeks later, in February 1897, a punitive expedition was sent in under the command of Rear Admiral Harry Rawson of the Cape Town squadron of the Royal Navy. The Oba knew what to expect - the British had recently deposed several uncooperative chiefs. He took the precaution of sacrificing hundreds of slaves and captives to his family gods. To no avail: the British easily took the town. Battle-hardened military men were appalled by what they found, though Hicks suggests that they piled on the horror stories for propaganda purposes. In a letter to the First Sea Lord, Rawson wrote: “this place reeks of sacrifices and human blood, bodies in every state of decay, wells full of newly killed, crucified men on the fetish trees (which we have blown up), one sees men retching everywhere”.

The British set up a makeshift headquarters and hospital in the Oba’s palace. A golf course was laid out. (“The chief drawback”, an officer reported to *Golf Magazine*, “was the huge quantity of human skulls and bones which littered the course.”) Meanwhile, Ralph Moor, Consul-General of the Niger Coast protectorate, struggled to keep control of the looting. Stacks of elephant tusks and hundreds of brass plaques were set aside to cover the costs of the sortie. Two ivory statues of leopards were reserved for Queen Victoria. Officers then had their pick but, Phillips points out, even lowly seamen came away with valuable bits and pieces. The distribution was briefly interrupted by a fire (accidental, according to Phillips; deliberate, Hicks insists) that consumed most of the palace buildings. Back in England, the authorities deposited brass heads and plaques in the British Museum and auctioned off most of the ivory, which commanded higher prices. Officers sold their booty to London dealers. Among the buyers were the Pitt Rivers, as well as museums of ethnography in Berlin, Leipzig and Vienna.

Phillips excels at tracing the roundabout ways in which objects could find their way into museums. Moor kept for himself an ivory box decorated with an image of two Portuguese men trying to throttle one another beside a tethered pangolin; two ivory amulets; and a pair of sixteenth-century ivory masks, both 23cm long, representing a striking woman identified as Idia, the mother of a famous Oba. The extraordinary detailing in Idia’s necklace and tiara includes miniature carved heads of Portuguese men. The masks were bought by Charles Seligman, profes-

**Queen Mother Pendant Mask, representing Idia, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art**

sor of ethnology at the London School of Economics. He sold one to the British Museum at a knock-down price. His widow sold the other to Nelson Rockefeller in 1958 for £20,000. The proceeds went to the Royal Anthropological Institute, which put an image of the mask on its Christmas card. William Fagg, curator of African ethnography in the British Museum, described the mask at the time as “the finest and most valuable Benin - or indeed West African antiquity - still in private hands in the world”. It is now in New York’s Metropolitan Museum.

When Nigeria hosted the World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture in 1977, the image of Idia was chosen as its official symbol. The Foreign Office tried to persuade the British Museum to lend its mask for the occasion, but the Museum declined on the grounds that the ivory was cracked and might not withstand the move and exposure to heat. The Nigerian press judged this excuse disingenuous, insulting and ironic. Privately, Phillips is told, museum officials were not confident that the mask would be returned. After all, three bronze plaques sent to Lagos in 1950 by the British Museum had somehow ended up in American collections.

There are around 500 Benin Bronzes in Nigerian museums, most of which were acquired by colonial curators in the 1950s and 60s. In 1980, during a brief oil boom, the Nigerian government bought expensive brass heads at auction, some of which reappeared on the international market. Meanwhile, Nigeria’s museums suffered chronic neglect. Phillips reports that the National Museum in Lagos can only exhibit some 300 objects, while tens of thousands are in storage, “poorly labelled and often chaotically crammed together”. The curator, Mrs Omotayo Adebayo, tells him that the museum averages only about thirty visitors a day, mainly school parties. Security is lax, thefts not uncommon. Nigerian Presidents go there to choose gifts for foreign leaders. (A Benin head was taken from the National Museum and given to Queen Elizabeth in 1973.) “We are losing our cultural heritage at such an alarming rate”, the Nigerian Minister of Culture, Walter Ofonagoro, warned in 1996, that “we may have no cultural artefacts to bequeath to our progeny.” In 2000, John Picton, an authority on Nigerian antiquities, wrote in the *Journal of Museum Ethnography* that recent thefts from Nigerian museums and excavations “constitute at least as serious a tragedy as the looting of the art of Benin City by British forces in 1897”.

Hicks waves away all this talk about security problems as so much imperialist, even racist disinformation. He demands that European museums atone for their colonial past, transform themselves “into sites of conscience” and “take action to make the 2020s a decade of restitution”. What chance is there of that? In November 2020, the French Senate approved the return of twenty-seven artefacts looted by French troops from the palace of Abomey in West Africa in 1892. President Macron is not insisting on a wholesale return of African artefacts, however. The Museum of the Quai Branly in Paris plans a satellite in West Africa, on the model of the Louvre Abu Dhabi: it will mount temporary displays of African masterpieces from French collections. European museums might be more generous with loans: their storerooms are overflowing. The “Benin Dialogue Group” of European and Nigerian curators was set up in 2007 after an exhibition of Benin Bronzes toured Europe and the United States but missed out Nigeria. They are discussing a system of rotating loans to the Edo Museum of West African Art that is slated to open in Benin City next year.

At the same time, the great metropolitan museums are in a defensive crouch. Not long ago, exhibitions at the Quai Branly and the Met registered the debt of European modernists to classical African art. An exhibition of Benin arts and crafts might trace connections between Edo and other West African traditions, and examine the response of local craft guilds to European markets, materials, techniques and forms. Cosmopolitan museums should be out there, playing to their strengths, offering a global perspective. ■

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