



Media Release

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UZH Returns Benin Bronzes From Its Ethnographic Museum to Nigeria

The University of Zurich has decided to return 14 objects from its Ethnographic Museum to the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The objects originate from the Kingdom of Benin in what is now Nigeria and hold immense cultural and spiritual value for the people who live there.

In March 2024, Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) filed a formal restitution claim on behalf of the Nigerian government for 14 Benin artifacts held by the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (UZH). The University of Zurich has decided to honor this claim.

Responsible approach to objects with a colonial past

"As a university, we want to critically engage with the origin of cultural property in our collections, and deal with it in a responsible way," says Elisabeth Stark, Vice President Research at UZH. "The provenance research on the Benin Bronzes conducted at the Ethnographic Museum revealed that the majority of these objects had very likely been looted before we came to acquire them. This is why we are handing them back."

To this day, the artifacts in question hold great cultural and spiritual value to the people of Nigeria. NCMM Director General Olugbile Holloway welcomes the decision: "The restitution will go a long way to heal certain aspects of our colonial past. I have no doubt that the Benin Royal Palace, the people of Benin, and all Nigerians truly appreciate the symbolism of this significant return."

The Benin artifacts, which were on display as part of the Benin Dues exhibition at UZH's Ethnographic Museum until 8 March 2026, are currently undergoing comprehensive digitalization. Fourteen of the objects will be transferred to the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos this summer, where they will be handed over to the NCMM, on behalf of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Joint restitution with Museum Rietberg and the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève

Significant restitutions of Benin artefacts have been carried out in recent years. In 2022, German museums restituted some 1,100 artifacts to Nigeria, and last year, the Netherlands returned 119 objects. Earlier this year, the University of Cambridge announced that it was transferring ownership of 116 artifacts to Nigeria.

Alongside the UZH Ethnographic Museum, Museum Rietberg and the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (MEG) will also retribute looted works from the Kingdom of Benin to Nigeria. The directors of these three Swiss museums, Carine Ayélé Durand (MEG), Annette Bhagwati (Museum Rietberg) and Alice Hertzog (UZH Ethnographic Museum), have issued a joint statement:

"Through the Benin Initiative Switzerland, our museums have meticulously investigated the provenance of the works held from Benin, working in close cooperation with our partners in Nigeria.



The results leave no doubt: a number of objects reached our collections through the international art market following the British attack on and looting of the Kingdom of Benin in 1897.

Returning the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria makes it possible for the country to independently research, preserve and share its own history. We are responsible for this transfer of ownership as Swiss museums and institutions aware of our ethical responsibilities, actively seeking as we do a dialogue with the societies of origin. This represents a necessary stage in coming to terms with history and acts as a sign of respect, symbolizing international cooperation in action.”

On Friday, 20 March 2026, at 5 pm, the three museums will hold a joint media conference in Zurich announcing their decision to transfer ownership and restitute the Benin Bronzes in their collections.

Historical context

In 1897, British troops looted the royal palace in Benin (present-day Nigeria) and stole thousands of artifacts, including relief plaques, depictions of ancestors, and ritual objects. Dubbed the Benin Bronzes, these works were sold to museums and collections around the world via the international art market. Some of the bronze that served as the raw material originated in Europe and was exchanged as part of the transatlantic trade in which Africans were abducted and trafficked to be sold to European slave traders.

Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS)

Led by Museum Rietberg, eight Swiss museums came together in 2021 to research the provenance of the works they held from Benin, working in collaboration with partners from Nigeria. In total, 96 works are held by the eight participating museums in German and French-speaking Switzerland, including the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (nine), Museum Rietberg (16) and the Ethnographic Museum (18). The multi-year research carried out by BIS proved that 14 of the 18 works held by the Ethnographic Museum most likely had been looted and thus warrant restitution. Professor Alice Hertzog, the current director of the UZH Ethnographic Museum, played a key role in the provenance research conducted at all museums involved in the initiative (2021–2024). The research project was supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture.

All research findings are publicly accessible at: musethno.uzh.ch/en/bis

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