

Displaying Loot

The Benin Objects and the British Museum

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Abstract

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Displaying Loot. The Benin Objects and the British Museum

This study deals with the objects, now in the British Museum, that were looted from Benin City, present-day Nigeria, in 1897. It looks at how the museum represents the Benin objects, the Edo/African, the British/Western, and the British Museum. According to the museum, the Benin objects provide the “key argument” against the return of objects in its collections. The study pays particular attention to how the museum’s representations relate to its retentionist argument.

The museum maintains that it was founded to foster tolerance, dissent, and respect for difference, and that it today shows many different cultures without privileging any of them. The museum’s benevolent impact is exemplified by the Benin objects whose arrival in the West has led to the shattering of European derogatory stereotypes of Africans, thanks to British Museum scholars.

The study examines these claims and finds that they rest on flimsy or no evidence. The museum misrepresents and glorifies its own past and exaggerates its own contribution to Benin scholarship and the European view of Africans. The museum has shown cultures, not as equal, but as placed in a hierarchy, and in the early 20th century its scholars gave scientific legitimization to the stock stereotypes of Africans, such as the likening of Blacks to apes.

The analysis of the museum’s contemporary exhibition and accompanying publications show that the museum – still – represents self and other as different: the Edo/African is portrayed as traditional while the Westerner is portrayed as progressive.

The study concludes that, despite the museum’s claim to universality, its representations are deeply enmeshed in, and shaped by, British (museum) traditions and cultural assumptions. Paradoxically, while the statement of objectivity and impartiality is central to the museum’s defense against claims, it seems that the ownership issue strongly contributes to the biases in its representations.

Keywords: Benin, Benin bronzes, Benin objects, Britain, British Museum, colonialism, cultural property, Edo, heritage, loot, museums, museum studies, Nigeria, racism, repatriation, representation, restitution, war booty, Westernness.