Preparing for A105: The British Museum and the Benin ‘antiquities’

From Book 3, *Cultural Encounters*, Chapter 2 The art of Benin: changing relations between Europe and Africa II, pp. 45-76.

From sections 2.1 The Art of Benin in Britain and 2.2 The Benin bronzes and modern art

This section picks up the story, introduced in Chapter 1, of Benin, through the artefacts that were discovered by the British on their arrival there. These artworks and objects were confiscated by the British forces and brought to Britain where they were sold, in part, to pay for the expedition. Museums, private collectors, art historians and scholars in America and Europe were quick to realise the significance of the Benin artworks and competed to acquire the best pieces. One such collector, Felix von Luschan (1854–1924), made a careful account of where the looted Benin works ended up. According to von Luschan, 2,400 objects arrived in Europe after the punitive expedition. The largest collection of 580 was acquired, with von Luschan’s help, by the Royal Museum for Ethnography in Berlin, where he worked as a curator and ethnographer (Völger, 2007, p. 217). Other works were sold to museums and private collectors around the world. Some were bought by Liverpool’s Mayer Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and London’s Horniman Free Museum. This section will focus in particular on the British Museum’s treatment of the Benin sculptures ....

The artworks were removed from Benin with little attention given to the nature of the objects or the way that they had been displayed and used there. In an atmosphere of intense rivalry between museums and collectors across Europe, they were separated out and sold. But, given the interest across Europe in the history of humankind, they were soon subjected to more sophisticated analysis, and were used to inform debates about race and culture. German and British ethnographers and art historians were anxious to acquire the finest pieces: for such collectors, the Benin ‘war booty’ consisted of objects and artworks that could afford valuable insight into the ‘artistic life of the Negro’ ...

When the Benin bronzes entered museum collections at the end of the nineteenth century, the anthropologists and museum curators who tried to explain them had to square a bizarre circle. On the one hand they had been taken from people who were demonised as barbarous and bloodthirsty –the epitome of the ‘primitive’–and as such, justification for the civilising mission of empire. Yet on the other hand the bronzes themselves were extolled as comparable in technical mastery to the sculpture of the Italian Renaissance, that cornerstone of western civilisation itself (see, for example, Read and Dalton, 1899b, p. 372; Reading 2.6). The disparity between the avant-garde’s ‘translation’of the artworks into the discourse of ‘the primitive’–when they were mentioned at all –and the more conservative/academic comparison with the products of the Renaissance, is symptomatic of the problems they caused for western artistic categories of all kinds ... .

The Benin bronzes, along with the ‘Elgin marbles’ from ancient Greece, are embroiled in the argument about the legitimacy of their holdings into which all major western museums are now plunged. The many-sided debate about ‘cultural patrimony’ (about who rightfully ‘owns’ the arts of the past or of the non-western world), about the pros and cons of returning objects to their place of origin, about the status of the ‘global’ museum claiming to hold objects in trust for the whole of humanity: this is where the bronzes have their resonance now. To that extent, their significance, their meanings, are as contested, and as open, as ever.