

British museum agrees to return looted Benin Bronzes to Nigeria



A Benin copper alloy plaque representing an encounter between Benin Chief Uwangué, and Portuguese traders that will be returned from the Horniman Museum to Nigeria.

By Danica Kirka
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London: A London museum has agreed to return a collection of Benin Bronzes looted in the late 19th century from what is now Nigeria as cultural institutions throughout Britain come under pressure to repatriate artefacts acquired during the colonial era. The Horniman Museum and Gardens in south-east London said it would transfer a collection of 72 items to the Nigerian government. The decision comes after Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments formally asked for the artefacts to be returned earlier this year and following consultation with community members, artists and schoolchildren in Nigeria and Britain, the museum said.

“The evidence is very clear that these objects were acquired through force, and external consultation supported our view that it is both moral and appropriate to return their ownership to Nigeria,” Eve Salomon, chair of the museum's board of trustees, said in a statement. “The Horniman is pleased to be able to take this step, and we look forward to working with the NCMM to secure longer-term care for these precious artefacts.”

The Horniman's collection is a small part of the 3000 to 5000 artefacts taken from the Kingdom of Benin in 1897 when British soldiers attacked and occupied Benin City as

Britain expanded its political and commercial influence in West Africa. The British Museum alone holds more than 900 objects from Benin, and National Museums Scotland has another 74. Others were distributed to museums around the world.

The artefacts include plaques, animal and human figures, and items of royal regalia made from brass and bronze by artists working for the royal court of Benin. The general term Benin Bronzes is sometimes applied to items made from ivory, coral, wood and other materials as well as the metal sculptures.

Countries including Nigeria, Egypt and Greece, as well indigenous peoples from North America to [Australia](#), are increasingly demanding the return of artefacts and human remains amid a global reassessment of colonialism and the exploitation of local populations.



A brass plaque depicting a war chief and a royal military priest carrying a leather gift box that will be returned by London's Horniman Museum.

Nigeria and Germany recently signed a deal for the return of hundreds of Benin Bronzes. That followed French President Emmanuel Macron's decision last year to sign over 26 pieces known as the Abomey Treasures, priceless artworks of the 19th century Dahomey kingdom in present-day Benin, a small country that sits just west of Nigeria.

But British institutions have been slower to respond.

Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Information and Culture formally asked the British Museum to return its Benin Bronzes in October of last year.

The museum said it was working with a number of partners in Nigeria and was committed to a "thorough and open investigation" of the history of the Benin artefacts and the looting of Benin City.

"The museum is committed to active engagement with Nigerian institutions concerning the Benin Bronzes, including pursuing and supporting new initiatives

developed in collaboration with Nigerian partners and colleagues,” the British Museum says on its website.

The Horniman Museum also traces its roots to the Age of Empire.

The museum opened in 1890, when tea merchant Frederick Horniman opened his collection of artefacts from around the world for public viewing.

Amid the Black Lives Matter movement, the museum embarked on a “reset agenda,” that sought to “address long-standing issues of racism and discrimination within our history and collections, and a determination to set ourselves on a more sustainable course for the future.”

The museum’s website acknowledges that Frederick Horniman’s involvement in the Chinese tea trade meant he benefitted from low prices due to Britain’s sale of opium in China and the use of poorly compensated and sometimes forced labor.

The Horniman also recognises that it holds items “obtained through colonial violence”.

These include the Horniman’s collection of Benin Bronzes, comprising 12 brass plaques, as well as a brass cockerel altar piece, ivory and brass ceremonial objects, brass bells and a key to the king’s palace. The bronzes are currently displayed along with information acknowledging their forced removal from Benin City and their contested status.

“We recognise that we are at the beginning of a journey to be more inclusive in our stories and our practices, and there is much more we need to do,” the museum says on its website. “This includes reviewing the future of collections that were taken by force or in unequal transactions.”