

British Museum Sold Benin Bronzes

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The British Museum (BM) has sold more than 30 Benin bronzes since World War II, according to a file that has been declassified at the request of The Art Newspaper. Most went to Nigeria and were bought for under £100, although fine examples currently fetch up to £100,000. The selloffs are now strongly regretted by BM curators.

The bronze plaques were seized during the British “punitive expedition” against the Benin ruler in 1897, and since Nigerian independence in 1960 there have been numerous calls for the return of the royal treasures. Last January the lower house of the Nigerian Parliament unanimously called on the federal government to submit an official request for the return of the Benin bronzes.

A newly declassified 1972 report to the BM trustees admits that the Benin bronzes were “booty” but were nevertheless legally acquired by the museum. It has been no secret that a few BM bronzes were sold in the 1950s, but for different reasons neither the museum nor the Nigerian authorities have been keen to draw attention to the sales. Only now has the full extent of the de-accessioning become apparent. It also comes as a surprise that two Benin plaques were disposed of as late as 1972.

The story of the selloffs began in 1950 when Keeper of Ethnography Hermann Braunholtz reported to BM trustees that of the 203 plaques acquired from the Foreign Office in 1898, “about 30 are to all intents and purposes duplicate specimens, and therefore surplus to the Museum’s requirements.” He proposed selling 10 for £1,500, since “there are hardly any in the country [Nigeria].” The proceeds were put toward the purchase of the important Oldman collection of African and American ethnography.

The selloff served two purposes. Plans were being made in Lagos, Nigeria, to establish a national museum, in what was then still a British colony. Curators in London altruistically wanted to see important examples of Benin culture on display in the Nigerian capital. But in addition, sales would be helpful in raising funds to enable the ethnography department to expand the range of its collection.

After the initial sale, the Nigerians were keen to purchase further plaques, but the BM was concerned about the difficulty in valuing them, since they rarely came onto the market. The solution adopted now seems bizarre: The BM decided to sell four bronzes to a London dealer as a “test.” As Braunholtz proposed to the trustees, “It would be desirable to ascertain their approximate present value in the open market. This could be done by offering a few typical pieces for the sale to a reliable dealer to sell them on commission.”

London dealer Sydney Burney was brought in, and he sold four BM plaques for £1,100, with the museum receiving £876 after deduction of commission. The following year a further 13 plaques (including two acquired after 1898) were sold to the Nigerian government for £1,050, with an average price of £75.

De-accessioning continued. In 1951 another plaque was exchanged with Nigeria, and a year later three bronzes, valued at £450, were given to New York dealer J.J. Klejman in partial exchange for an important Benin horseman. A further plaque was sold to Nigeria in 1953, and the following year another went to West Africa, although it is unclear whether it was to Nigeria or the Gold Coast.

In 1958 a BM bronze was sold to Klejman for £450. On June 27, 1960, a plaque depicting an oba, or king, was auctioned at Sotheby's, where it fetched £900 and was acquired by a Zurich collector. Nigeria became independent on Oct. 1, 1960, and after that only two further bronzes were de-acquisitioned.

In 1972 William Buller Fagg, who had become the BM's keeper of ethnography, proposed an exchange with Robin Lehman, the London-based son of New York banker Robert Lehman (an extremely generous donor to the Metropolitan Museum). Two plaques of mudfish and a crocodile were to be swapped for an important bronze horseman in Lehman's collection. Financially, it was advantageous for the museum, since the two plaques were then valued at £4,000-5,000 and the horseman at £8,000-10,000.

The decision to regard some of the bronzes as "duplicates" now seems astonishing. Even Fagg admitted that they were duplicates only "because the figures on them occurred, not necessarily in the same arrangement, on other plaques." In other words, if there were two bronzes with a profile of a leopard, one was deemed to be a "duplicate," even though they were individually modeled and cast. This is almost like suggesting that if a European sculptor had made a pair of figures of saints, one could be regarded as surplus.

Even if the 1950s de-accessioning was appropriate for its time, further questions remain about the 1972 swap with Lehman. Under the 1963 British Museum Act, the legal constraints on de-accessioning were tightened. Surprisingly, neither curators nor trustees seem to have inquired too closely into whether the plaques of a mudfish and a crocodile could really be classified as duplicates.

The selloffs and exchanges are now regarded as very unfortunate by museum staff. "From a curatorial point of view, it was a curse. The bronzes were cast in matching pairs, so it is difficult to exhibit them properly," BM African specialist Dr. Nigel Barley said last month. The plaques had decorated wooden columns that supported the roof of the oba's palace, and pairs of motifs had been displayed on opposite sides of the entrances.

In the BM's new Sainsbury African Galleries, opened last year beneath the Great Court, the 48 finest Benin Bronzes are displayed on a large, square-shaped metal frame. But unfortunately there are very few pairs left.

Despite Fagg's altruistic action in helping the fledgling Lagos museum, little of the Nigerian collection of Benin Bronzes is currently on display, and there are fears that some of it may have been misappropriated. Professor Frank Willett, formerly a curator in Nigeria and later director of the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, Scotland, alleges that "almost the entire reserve collection of Benin antiquities" was missing in Lagos in the early 1980s while a traveling exhibition of "Treasures of Ancient Nigeria" was abroad. Since only five plaques were in the "Treasures" show (three of which had originally been in the British Museum), this raises questions about the whereabouts of the 20 or so others that came from the BM and the dozens of others bought from other sources.

In spite of rumors about the National Museum's reserve collection, there has been no independent verification of what has happened to the bronzes. But although very few of the plaques have been seen in recent years at the Lagos museum, there is no evidence that its plaques have come onto the market. The hope, therefore, is that they are still in store.

However, the security situation at Nigerian museums does give ground for considerable concern. In this situation, there is unlikely to be much pressure on the BM to return more Benin Bronzes. In London the finest plaques are on display in an excellent new gallery, presented there in the context of world culture. The remaining plaques in the reserve collection are accessible to anyone with a serious interest.

Nevertheless, the fact that the BM was willing to de-accession until as recently as 1972 does provide a precedent—and this will be seized upon by those who believe that the Benin Bronzes should be returned to Nigeria.