

HYPERALLERGIC

IN BRIEF

French President Takes Next Step Toward Repatriating African Artifacts

Emmanuel Macron appointed a Senegalese economist and French art historian to study the repatriation of African artifacts held in museum collections in France.

Benjamin Sutton
March 7, 2018



Patrice Talon, President of Benin (left), and Emmanuel Macron, President of France (right), hold a press conference in Paris on March 5, 2018.

Emmanuel Macron's pledge to repatriate African artifacts held in French museums to their countries of origin has taken a significant step forward.

On Monday, following a meeting with Patrice Talon, the President of Benin, the French President named two experts who will spend the next several months investigating the issue: the Senegalese author and economist Felwine Sarr and the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy. Sarr, who is also a novelist and musician, teaches at the Université Gaston-Berger in Saint Louis, the capital of Senegal; Savoy is the head of the modern art history program at Technische Universität Berlin and

her areas of focus include looted art, theft, and museum collection history in 18th- and 19th-century Europe.

“I decided to ask two indisputable figures who I know are intellectually engaged in these questions to do the work of reflection and consultation in order to make concrete propositions between now and November,” Macron said at a press conference on Monday with President Talon. “It is evident to all those who have admired the artworks of the kingdom of Dahomey that your country is especially concerned by this initiative.”

According to Irénée Zevounou, Benin’s Ambassador to the United Nations, “between 4,500 and 6,000 objects [from Benin] are in France, including in private collections,” *Le Monde* reported. Many belonged to the Dahomey kingdom, which occupied a large section of what today is southern Benin from the early 17th century up until the French invasion in 1892.

In 2016, Benin made a formal request that artifacts taken during France’s invasion and subsequent colonial occupation of the country be returned. Many of the objects in question — which include royal thrones and scepters, doors taken from the Royal Palaces of Abomey (a UNESCO World Heritage site), and statues — are in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac. In 2016, the government of then French President François Hollande declined Benin’s request for repatriation, claiming that under current legislation, they are protected property of the French state.

Now, Macron seems prepared to revise French legislation to allow for temporary and permanent repatriation of African artifacts in French collections. Late last year, during a visit to Burkina Faso, he announced that, “In the next five years, I want the conditions to be created for the temporary or permanent restitution of African patrimony to Africa.” At Monday’s press conference, he noted that the director of the Musée du Quai Branly, Stéphane Martin, will travel to Bénin to meet with cultural workers there in the coming weeks.

Before she was appointed, in a January op-ed in *Le Monde*, Bénédicte Savoy applauded Macron’s stance on repatriation while stressing the logistical complexity of the issue.

“The story of African collections is a shared European history, a family affair if you will, where aesthetic curiosity, scientific interests, military expeditions, networks of commerce, and ‘opportunities’ of all sorts contributed to feed logics of domination, affirmation, and national rivalries,” she wrote, after enumerating the African holdings of major museums in other European countries. “The museums of our capitals are the brilliant conservators of human creativity. They are also, despite themselves, repositories of a darker history that’s too rarely told.”