

# the guardian

## 'They fill me with emotion' ... Benin celebrates the return of its looted treasure

*Priceless treasures stolen by the French army over a century ago have finally been returned to the African nation. Our writer joins the emotional celebrations*



*Reunited ... a response to the return by Emo de Medeiros, entitled For the Secret Is to Flow into the Flux #024 Tenture.*

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Wed 23 Feb 2022

At first glance, it seems to be just another day in Cotonou, Benin's largest city. Motorbike-taxis are everywhere, filling the streets of the country's economic capital with dust and noise. But inside the swanky presidential palace, something seismic is

talking place: over a century after they were looted by the French army, 26 treasures that once belonged to the nation have gone on display to the public.

Art of Benin Yesterday and Today is more than just a stunning show of these ancient works, though. It segues from the looted 19th-century artefacts to work by 34 of the country's contemporary artists. "This is a form of regained dignity," says local art historian Didier Houénoudé, "and the culmination of a long fight started by African countries shortly before independence."

Fulfilling a pledge made by French president Emmanuel Macron in 2017, the stolen artefacts were returned to Benin last year, after being displayed one final time at Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. The collection – merely a fraction of the priceless Beninese possessions still held by France and other former colonial nations – includes royal thrones, statues and majestically carved doors.



*Supernatural powers ... a zoomorphic statue of the 19th-century King Glele.*

Beside the towering wooden throne of King Ghezo (who ruled what was then called the Dahomey kingdom from 1797 to 1818), the other great repatriated works are three bocios, or protective vodun figures. These lifesize statues, once held in Paris, depict Ghezo and his heirs Glele and Béhanzin. One features a man with the plumage of a bird, the next a lion's head on human legs, and the third a man with the body of a shark. These reflect the idea that these men were believed to have supernatural powers.

Among the regiments of Dahomey fighters who fought the French were female warriors called Amazons. Ishola Akpo, an emerging Benin artist, decided to recreate images of these soldiers and the queens who ruled over them, using women from northern Benin dressed in majestic clothing and holding weapons. “The project explores the memories of forgotten, neglected and erased pre-colonial African queens,” says Akpo. “I noticed their absence during my research, despite their political importance.”

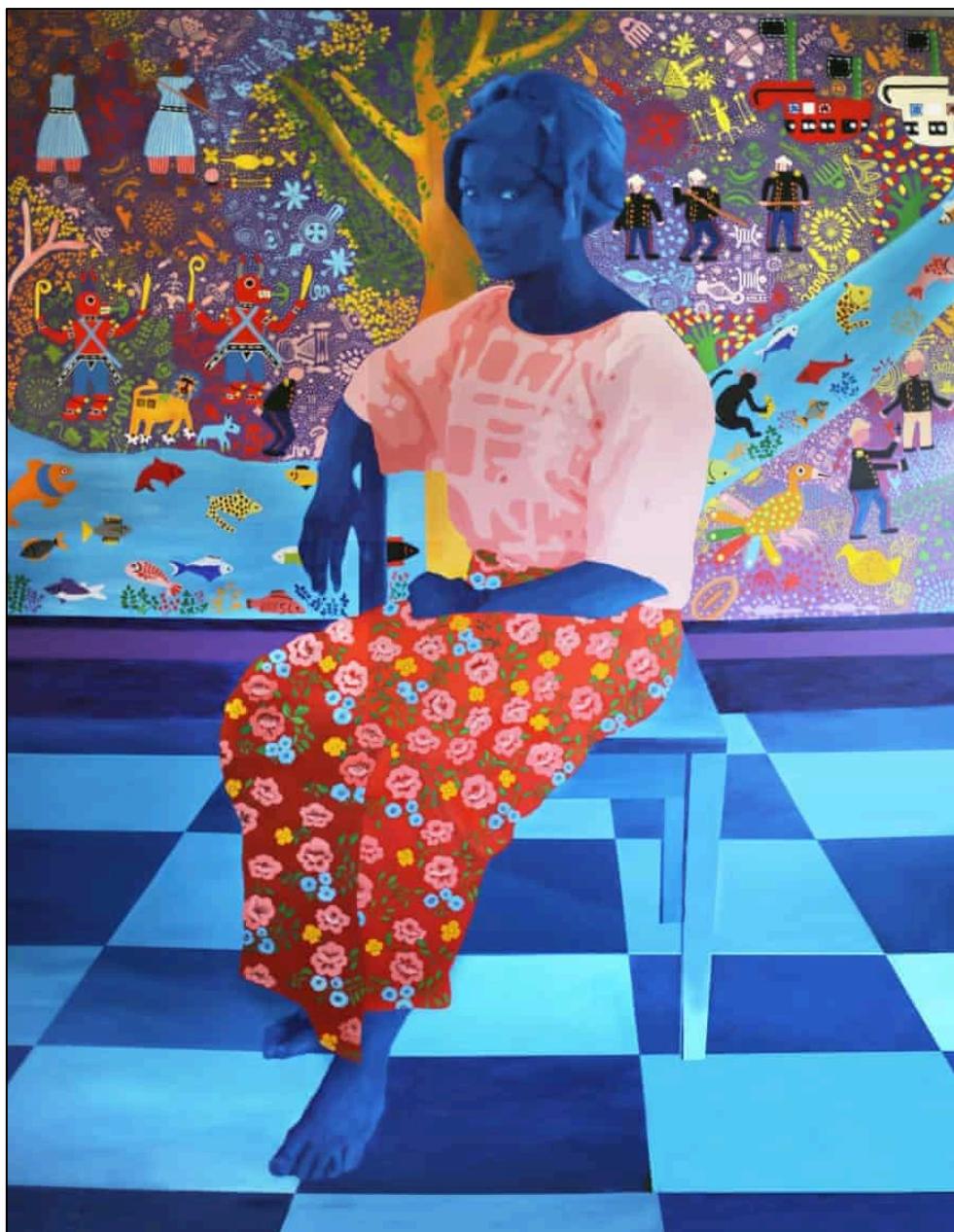
How exactly did this historic exhibition come together? Jean-Michel Abimbola, Benin’s minister of culture, says: “We worked every day – for two years I was the minister of restitution. We have taken up this challenge for Benin, the continent and the world.”

Benin now has ambitious aims, backed by funding from public and private sources. Several museums are planned to open within years and Cotonou sees itself as a new rival to Lagos, Dakar and Abidjan as a centre of the African art scene. Abimbola had discussions with the curator Jean-Luc Martinez, who set up the Louvre Abu Dhabi. “I told him we had ambitions for a Louvre-Cotonou project.”

Right now, seeing the cultural development in the city, such grand aspirations feel attainable. But at a press conference, the minister spoke of obstacles still faced at a legal, political, and security level. The old condescension of Europe has not entirely abated either. For decades, discussions about the return of African art stumbled not only on laws preventing their return – such as Napoleonic-era legislation guaranteeing the inalienability of France’s possessions, even spoils of war – but on the idea that African countries wouldn’t look after these artefacts as well as their European counterparts, an idea Abimbola describes as “ridiculous”. He says: “It reminds me of when people questioned if black people had a soul.”

Houénoudé adds: “We do not know exactly how many objects are in French or European museums. This is why we are very interested in inventories.” He mentions one report, by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, that suggests there are more than 3,700 objects from Benin in the Musée du Quai Branly. Jacques Chirac’s gift to France, this museum on the banks of the Seine holds around 70,000 pieces of African cultural heritage.

When President Talon opened the Cotonou exhibition on 19 February, it was attended by kings of various tribes giving their seal of approval. The artists, too, feel honoured. Ludovic Faidaro, one of Benin art’s elder statesmen, said that without Dahomey’s past masters, his own work would not exist. Another, Julien Sinzogan, said he felt small in front of these looted works, while Dominique Zinkpè – whose work channels Francis Bacon, Egon Schiele and Jean-Michel Basquiat – considered it a great honour to be exhibited alongside the works.



Tassi Hangbé by Moufouli Bello. Photograph: © Moufouli Bello, 2021

When the palace doors opened to the public the next day, more than 1,000 people attended, eager to see the objects back home for the first time in living memory. Some were overwhelmed. “I’m so proud,” said student Gloria Tokoudabga. “If the means exist to bring the rest back, then bring them back.” Narcisse Ore, a 30-year-old hotel worker, came from central Benin to see the show. “I can identify with these objects,” he said. “They fill me with emotion. This is a revolution – for the good of generations to come.”