

OPINION by Yves Debie
 Requiem for a Museum

High Mass for restitution has been held. The head of the French state promised it, the National Assembly went ahead with it, and the law of December 24, 2020, ratified the presidential decree, causing vehement dissent in the Senate which, citing the “Prince’s Act,” had refused to reconsider a law that would validate the restitution of twenty-six artworks to Benin and a sword to Senegal. On November 10, 2021, these works, which had hitherto been deemed inalienable, definitively left France and the public collections they had been part of for 130 years. Forced to participate in its own dispossession, the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac actively hailed this departure with the sincere enthusiasm that any local civil service institution might be expected to show.

This fine museum is the first victim of this restitution that opens the door to many others, and several other African nations have responded to the call made by President Macron in Ouagadougou. And this despite of the fact that the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, which was envisioned by President Chirac as a place for cultural exchange, is certainly the best embassy in France for Africa and the genius and creativity of its artists. Founded in 2006 with the purpose of preserving and promoting knowledge, it is now required, like a common criminal, to return what has come to be seen as its stolen loot.

There is no more hierarchy between the arts than there is between peoples. This conviction, that of the equal dignity of all of the world’s cultures, is the foundation of the Musée du Quai Branly.¹

The beautiful dream of this president would last only fifteen years and would end with the imposition of a successor’s will. Certain “hierarchies” have difficult existences, seemingly being repeatedly reborn and, in doing so, making all traces of their former incarnations disappear. Our museums today have become places of propaganda—Paris restitutes, Brussels decolonizes and celebrates “Black civilizations” in Dakar. Universality has disappeared. Art belongs only to the place in which it was made and to the people who live there. Territorial rights have triumphed over intellectual ones.

This restitution to Benin that the Macron presidency sees as a historic moment and a resolutely positive step towards a future of cooperation between France and Africa is, in truth, no more than a dangerous attempt to absolve ourselves of our colonial past. The Senate, which agrees with this point, proposed in vain that the term



“return” be used, because words have meaning—“to retribute” means to give back what has been taken. The verb implies a disenfranchised owner, Africa, and an illegitimate one, France.

Although it disavows the idea, the presidential approach is anchored in a desire to make amends for and repair the “colonial crime.” The Savoy-Sarr report that President Macron commissioned, which takes a blanket view of colonization as an illegal action that necessarily makes the acquisition of any objects equally unlawful, is unequivocal in this respect. The verbiage that accompanied the return of the twenty-six objects from the former Kingdom of Dahomey to Benin is equally revealing. Without nuance or any elaboration of facts, repeated allusion is made to looting, war booty, and the sacking of the palace by French colonial troops as justification for restitution.

History is usually written by the victors in such a way as to promote their own glory, but, in this case, French colonial history now glosses over or just ignores the truth about General Dodds’ campaign. We will reiterate here what we have said before (*Tribal Art*, #89),² namely that it was in defense of the Kingdom of Porto-Novo and at the latter’s behest that, in 1892, the French army defeat-



LEFT: Installation view of the African art section dedicated to the arts of Abomey, July 2012.

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Art. 6 – The king exercises his authority over his subjects in conformity with the laws and customs of the land and commits to forbidding the slave trade and to abolishing all practices or customs that involve or result in human sacrifice.

This simple reading of Benin and France's common history demonstrate that it is possible to reflect together upon the question of mutual interest in and access to this cultural property, without impairing the universal nature of French museums and the principle of inalienability that has long protected them.

France has always been suspicious of its princes and has long imposed restrictions on them, at least since the Edict of Moulins in 1566, which required that the royal domain, which has since become the public domain, be maintained intact. This rule, today part of the code of cultural heritage, guarantees the right of ownership of this heritage to every French citizen. The principle of inalienability, as applied to museums, also helps eliminate "taste mistakes" that could result in collections disappearing that don't happen to be in fashion anymore or correspond to the values of a contemporary period.

Today, the African collections in museums, symbols of a revisited colonial past, must be restituted because that is President Macron's will. This logic cannot reasonably be assumed to be limited to the collections from former sub-Saharan colonies. Will the Egyptian or Oceanic collections be the next to be worthy of the president's generosity? Now that the principle of the inalienability of French museum collections is no longer set in stone, and that only the passage of a new law is needed to override it, how can one rule out that a future president, or perhaps even the same one, might decide to sell some of the works in the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay in order to cover social security budget shortfalls or the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic? Would those be less legitimate reasons for making exceptions to the principle?

Let there be no mistake about it. The process of restitution in which France has become involved goes far beyond questions of repentance or geopolitics. It is, above all, about putting an end to the inalienability of French museum collections. These treasured public domain objects can now become vulgar currency for diplomatic exchanges, be used as cheap remedies for a bad colonial conscience, or be treated as unexploited financial resources, all subject to the whims and will of the Prince.

NOTES

1. From President Jacques Chirac's speech at the inauguration of the Musée du Quai Branly in 2006.
2. "Restitution: The Tides of History or a Trend of the Times?" *Tribal Art*, #89, Autumn 2018, pp. 146ff.



ABOVE: Installation view of the exhibition *BÉNIN, la restitution de 26 œuvres des trésors royaux d'Abomey*, October 26–31, 2021.

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ed King Behanzin, leader of the Fon Kingdom that had enslaved the Yoruba for generations. The French victory was thus at least as significant to the kingdoms of Porto Novo and Kétou as it was to the French themselves, and the latter celebrated the centenary of King Behanzin's surrender with the dedication of a major public monument, the Place de la Renaissance.

Article 6 of the Protectorate Treaty of January 29, 1894, between France and Ago-li-Agbo, the new king of Dahomey, sheds clear light on the pressing need for putting a definitive end to the bloody practices of the former kingdom: