

THE ART NEWSPAPER

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RACE AGAINST TIME
Istanbul's heritage is at risk as seismologists predict catastrophic earthquake



PICTURE OF BRITAIN
London's reopened National Portrait Gallery puts diversity at its heart



JOE TILSON
We ask the Pop artist how he feels about being admired by Boris Johnson



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Benin bronzes: whose restitution is this, anyway?



Layiwola Mohammed (left), Nigeria's culture minister and Annalena Baerbock, the German foreign minister, sign an agreement of intent to return Benin Bronzes to the West African country. Germany was the first country to hand back artefacts looted by the British in 1897

Phillip Ihenacho, director of Edo Museum of West African Art, in Nigeria, calls for a new focus, based on realities on the ground rather than romantic notions of the West



To date, accounts of cultural restitution have predominantly been a story about Western institutions, told from the West's perspective. The protagonists are benevolent European and North American organisations, whose virtue is manifest in their return of colonial looted objects "for free". The focus of Western media on this "decolonisation" has given rise to a growing set of photo opportunities, accompanied by lengthy interviews with Western curators, followed by a few words of gratitude from "representatives of Nigeria".

When the same media lens momentarily shifts to Nigeria, it does so only to find inadequacy. "Chaos" and "fiasco" are among the milder word choices. To these commentators, it seems fine for the West to take more than a hundred years to begin to act on restitution, but unforgivable that Nigeria does not resolve complex domestic and

historical issues instantaneously.

Objects were taken from a kingdom that is now part of a state and a country that did not exist at the time they were removed. Government agencies have been established and regulation adopted concerning artefacts of national importance. There are delicate balances and overlapping responsibilities between federal, state and community leadership that need to be managed, and are far more nuanced than the Western press reports. There should be debate and disagreement about what is the most appropriate outcome. This is only natural and will take time to fully resolve.

From the viewpoint of the institution we are developing in Nigeria, the Museum of West African Art in Edo State, there is a vital need for the narrative of the restitution of the Benin bronzes to be told from the perspective of Africans, based on the realities on the ground. Yes, Nigerians are grateful for the West's finally considering the return of objects, and in particular for the considerable courage shown by the German government. But we have lost much more than artworks and artefacts.

In 1897, when the British razed Benin City and carried off thousands of Benin bronzes, Nigeria was deprived of a great collection of objects with religious,

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'Easily recognisable fakes' repatriated to Italy

RESTITUTION

By Gareth Harris

PISA. An Italian archaeologist and antiquities expert says that a "substantial portion" of looted items returned to Italy earlier this year from the US are forgeries. Gianfranco Adornato, a professor of Greek and Roman art and archaeology at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, says that a high percentage of the 60 works, valued

collectively at more than \$20m, is "made up of easily recognisable fakes... these supposed works will hopefully never be exhibited in Italian museums".

The 60 archaeological artefacts reportedly looted from sites around Italy – including a fresco taken from Herculaneum and bronze busts – were repatriated in January with much fanfare. Some of the objects were purchased by the billionaire collector Michael Steinhardt, while more than 20 items were also in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in

New York, including a marble Head of Athena, dating from 200BC.

The objects, handed over by US officials to their Italian colleagues in New York in September last year, were repatriated thanks to an international trafficking investigation led by the Manhattan District Attorney's Office and the cultural patrimony unit of the Carabinieri, Italy's national police.

"This unit has been particularly effective; remarkable objects and monuments, part of Italy's cultural heritage, have been recovered from major

international museums, especially in the United States," writes Adornato in our sister paper, *Il Giornale dell'Arte*.

Most of the works have gone on show in Rome's Museum of Rescued Art (Museo dell'Arte Salvata) which opened last year in a space at the ancient Baths of Diocletian. Adornato says, however, that several items may be forgeries, including an amphora from the Greek Nicosthenic workshop (530-500BC) and an "eye cup" with a mask of Dionysus in the centre (500BC).

"We can note that the eye cup features a strange pattern of the eyes; it is devoid

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Objects returned to Italy include a Greek dinos mixing bowl, featuring exaggerations that suggest a forgery



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The first journal dedicated to Francis Bacon

Issue no. 1 is available to pre-order from our distributor Antenne Books. Once published, on 6 June, it will be available from a number of stockists in London and across Europe, as well as from our Francis Bacon Shop.

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