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Jürgen Zimmerer (Eds.)

# Historical Culture by Restitution?

A Debate on Art, Museums,  
and Justice





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A Debate on Art, Museums, and Justice

Translated from the German  
by Karin Hielscher

With a preface to the English edition  
by H. Glenn Penny

BÖHLAU VERLAG WIEN · KÖLN

This publication was kindly supported by the Humboldt-University of Berlin and the Collaborative Research Center “Practices of Comparing. Ordering and Changing the World” of the Bielefeld University.

HUMBOLDT-  
UNIVERSITÄT  
ZU BERLIN



**SFB 1288**  
PRACTICES OF  
COMPARING

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek:  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data available online: <https://dnb.de>.

© 2023 by Böhlau, Lindenstraße 14, D-50674 Cologne, Germany, an imprint of the Brill-Group

(Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands; Brill USA Inc., Boston MA, USA; Brill Asia Pte Ltd, Singapore; Brill Deutschland GmbH, Paderborn, Germany, Brill Österreich GmbH, Vienna, Austria)

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Originally published in German as “Geschichtskultur durch Restitution?

Ein Kunst-Historikerstreit”, Böhlau 2021, ISBN 978-3-412-51860-8.

Cover image: Door of the Royal Palace of Abomey. Atelier Sossa Dede/phot. Ji-Elle ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Porte\\_du\\_palais\\_royal\\_d'Abomey-N°\\_71.1893.45.4-Musée\\_du\\_Quai\\_Branly\\_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Porte_du_palais_royal_d'Abomey-N°_71.1893.45.4-Musée_du_Quai_Branly_(1).jpg)),

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Cover design: Guido Klütsch, Cologne

Typesetting: satz&sonders, Dülmen

Printed and bound: Hubert & Co, Göttingen

Printed in the EU

**Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage | [www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com](http://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com)**

ISBN 978-3-412-52781-5

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*H. Glenn Penny, University of California Los Angeles*

## Preface to the English Edition

While ethnological museums have been quietly returning small numbers of objects to their places of origin for quite some time, there is no question that the last decade saw a marked increase in the calls to decolonize museums and to return large numbers of objects. The breadth and depth of the discussions and debates that followed those calls took place on an increasingly global platform, and they have been remarkable, even transformative, on multiple intellectual and political levels. This book offers a useful introduction to a particularly German debate about that topic. It also throws a great deal of light on some critical shifts in German culture, society, and politics during that time. These insights should be of great interest to activists, curators, lawyers, politicians, scholars, students, and others outside of Germany who are concerned with broader questions of restitution and/or the future of ethnological museums.

When the German version of this volume appeared in 2021, the editors cast it as a book about “a battle among art historians,” and they placed an image of one of the famous Benin bronze castings on its cover. Both the image and phrase would have had great resonance for German readers. German-language newspapers had been awash for years in debates about Berlin’s Humboldt Forum, German colonialism, and restitution. During those debates, ethnological museums received unprecedented public and scholarly attention, and the Benin bronzes were almost always somewhere near the dynamic center. Those debates were, in fact, much further reaching than the book’s subtitle implied. As the editors note in the introduction to this English edition, the public debates in Germany were part of “an interdisciplinary discourse,” which included ethnologists, historians, lawyers, philosophers, not to mention European and non-European activists who spoke up at public rallies as well as scholarly meetings—ensuring that the debate would not be quelled or swept away.

The semiotics are instructive. During the last decade, the Benin bronzes became a poster child for the restitution debates in Germany and elsewhere. One is tempted to call them a leitmotif; but it was more than that. Many

believed that the British military's 1897 seizure of priceless cultural objects from the palace of Benin during an unequivocal act of colonial violence underscored the moral imperative of restitution. The Benin bronzes were undeniably high art, of incredible importance to Benin, and of unquestionable value to everyone's understanding of African cultures and histories. For it was these objects that forced Europeans and others to recognize soon after their capture that the technical skills of the Africans who had produced them centuries earlier were just as good if not better than their European counterparts. Moreover, it was while securing subsets of this horde of objects, which British forces sold on open markets, that the Berlin anthropologist Felix von Luschan and others fashioned many of their arguments against racist characterizations of Africa and Africans. The fact that Luschan championed Africans' humanity and denounced race theories while also remaining a strong (Austrian) advocate of German nationalism and imperialism is only one of the many ambivalences that strike many of us today as contradictions. Yet it is only through unpacking such contradictions that we can understand the histories that produced the collections that brought millions of such objects into German ethnological museums.

Historical understanding is worth pursuing, even if it requires us to engage disconcerting complexities. Too often the public debates that took shape in Germany and elsewhere over the last decade depended on arguments that flattened or reified the histories of the objects that flowed into European museums as well as the motivations and interests of the people driving that process. Complexity was often abandoned to polemics. The colonial history of the Benin bronzes, for example, did not start in 1897. In some ways, they were the product of European colonialism and imperialism. African artisans fashioned them from metals they acquired from Europeans during the Benin kingdom's long and active participation in the Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, while there is no question that colonial conquest brought them to Europe, neither German collectors, nor Imperial Germany, nor German colonial forces had anything to do with that. Those that ended up in Germany (as well as other locations beyond Great Britain) did so through a wide range of people's participation in an emerging international market in material culture that was part and parcel of European capitalism in an age of empire.

That broader context sometimes has made blame and responsibility difficult to assess, leading polemicists to fashion arguments that have ranged from an unwillingness to criticize anyone involved in these museum acquisitions to blanket condemnations of entire societies. Some of that material can be found in the annotations to the essays in this volume; but it is not particularly rewarding reading. More important have been the

discussions of to whom the Benin bronzes and other objects that found their way to German museums might be 'restored'. In many cases, the origins are unknown. Some may never be known. In other cases, where the origins are clear, the claimants may not exist; descendants of the people who produced the objects may not have an interest in them; or there may be many competing claimants. In that sense, the recent debates around the Benin bronzes have also been exemplary, for that putatively clear-cut case has proven to be more complex than many made it out to be, as multiple contributors to this volume explain.

Yet the stunning thing about the restitution story in contemporary Germany, particularly when viewed from the polemical outbursts that erupted in 2017, is that an incredibly diverse group of participants have negotiated many of these conundrums in a relatively short period of time. The Benin bronzes, for example, will be returned, and while that process continues to play out, we will continue to witness a new era of collaboration in which many Germans and German institutions have taken leading roles.

While reflecting on that fact, it is worth bearing in mind that when the German debates about restitution became particularly heated in 2017, the Federal Republic of Germany had nothing like the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (enacted in the USA in 1990). There were no clear guidelines for museum administrators to follow and no clear authority who might direct actions. Consequently, the rapid transition captured in this volume required some heavy lifting. To begin with, Germany's Federal Government cannot simply dictate policy to the governments and institutions in its sixteen member states when it comes to cultural affairs. Bringing together those cultural ministries, museum administrations, local authorities, and what some might term "stakeholders," required both a strength of vision and a force of will. Its success, which seems to have astonished many of the contributors to this volume as well as a good number of outside observers, speaks to the degree to which, despite all the polemics, consensus was being forged in Germany's public sphere. The critical debate, in other words, has been incredibly productive.

But there is more: if the German debates about the restitution of ethnological objects always took place against the backdrop of German efforts to come to terms with the crimes of National Socialism, which also included the restitution of objects in public museums to individuals and families, the place of German ideas about, and memories of, German colonialism and empire-building ultimately grew to overshadow those contexts. Initially, many pundits strove to link the two, giving the second more weight; but a judicious reading of the materials in this volume's annotations makes it clear that many participants in these German debates

found that increasingly unnecessary. As a wide range of people raised Germans' awareness of their country's colonial past, that history carried its own imperatives.

In short, the rapid shift in the official, private, and public discourse about restitution in Germany has been accompanied by, and to some degree driven by, the discursive shift in the place of German colonialism in German history and memory today. That has included the individual and intertwined histories of the sixteen federated states as well as the many cities, regions, and towns within them. Only a few decades ago, as Global Historian Sebastian Conrad recently remarked, little attention was paid to German colonialism, or to colonialism and imperialism more generally, at German universities. Today, however, most of the history departments across Germany offer courses in colonialism, and the number of PhDs produced at German universities on colonial topics has skyrocketed.<sup>1</sup> That shift in research includes the many museums spread across this polycentric institutional landscape, the vast majority of which have taken on topics that interrogate the role of colonialism and empire in shaping the German nation-state, one or more of the federal states, not to mention their own locations, their collections, and their local polities. Consequently, the once radical call to decolonize those museums became surprisingly mainstream in just a matter of years.

Much, however, remains to be done. As the contributions to this volume indicate, the lion's share of the attention in these debates has been directed toward stunning pieces of art akin to the Benin bronzes and a limited number of exceptional objects. That has been true even though most of the objects in German ethnological museums are quotidian things. Similarly, if Germany's ethnological museums are filled with items from all over the world, most of the debate, like most of the essays in this volume, has focused on Africa. Even there, Namibia holds the pride of place, while the other former German colonies, not to mention the rest of the continent, gain much less attention. Yet they were of no less interest to the people who created German ethnological museums or filled them with collections. Nor, for that matter, were the multiplicities of cultures in the rest of the world.

Most people who have followed the restitution debates in Germany would be hard-pressed to understand that, as Viola König remarks in this volume, the greatest concentration of material in Berlin's Ethnological Museum stems from the Americas. That is true even though this museum

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1 Sebastian Conrad: Colonizing the Nineteenth Century: Implications of a Paradigm Shift. In: *Central European History* 51 (2018), pp. 674–678.

had a monopoly on the acquisition of objects from the German colonies. Meanwhile, the collections from the Pacific, while they have been given some space in this volume, and in the debates more generally, hardly get the attention they deserve. In part, that is because political rather than intellectual agendas have driven so much of the discussions. One might hope that soon will change.

What remains to be seen, in fact, is what the future may bring after decolonizing is completed. The call to decolonize museums in Germany is, after all, a re-active response to revelations about the ways in which colonial contexts shaped the thinking about the museums' acquisitions as well as the acquisitions themselves. Decolonizing alone is not a proactive, or forward-thinking position, which might help us move toward harnessing the collections for knowledge production. Consequently, we cannot stop there.

As we move forward, the fate of the Benin bronzes likely will offer a kind of template for the fate of many other exceptional objects and collections. It remains to be seen, however if the people who have participated so actively in these debates will have the courage to not only support (financially as well as morally) the decolonization of museums but also endorse a move beyond colonial questions. Will curators and others be able to seize the moment to free all the objects in their collections? Will they be willing and able to not only delve into the origins and pasts of all the objects in the collections but also interrogate them about their futures?

There is no question that the many objects (and entities) in these collections have much to teach us about the complexities of human cultures and histories. To do that, however, we must not only rethink our research methods and transform the museum depots from sites of storage to places that care for collections and offer a small number of people research opportunities. We also must learn to interact with the objects in new ways. The question at hand is if the moment of great self-reflection articulated through the restitution debates will provide the support for museums to move beyond being places in which objects are used as illustrations for curatorial narratives. Will the museums be able to become institutions in which the objects act as interlocutors through juxtapositions? Might they become places where knowledge is produced and not merely disseminated? The history captured in this volume makes it clear that is possible; but it will require further strength of vision and conviction of purpose to realize.



Thomas Sandkühler, Angelika Eppe, Jürgen Zimmerer

## Restitution and Historical Culture in the (Post)Colonial Context. Facets of a Challenging Debate\*

### 1 Colonial Appropriation

On June 5, 1799, Alexander von Humboldt reached Venezuela on his voyage of discovery to South America. Ten years earlier, he had studied comparative anatomy with the famous Göttingen scientist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. Remaining loyal to his former mentor, he actively supported Blumenbach's ambitious project of collecting human skulls worldwide. Therefore, he contributed to the progress of this project when in Venezuela. Humboldt noted in his diary:

“We were looking for quite characteristic skulls for [Johann Friedrich] Blumenbach and therefore opened many mapires [baskets]. Poor people, they disturb your peace even in the graves! The Indians looked upon this operation with great displeasure, especially a few Indians [from] Guaicia, who had known white people for hardly more than four months. We collected skulls, a child's skeleton, and two adults' skeletons.”<sup>1</sup>

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\* This essay is the updated and expanded version of our introduction to the German edition of the present book (Thomas Sandkühler, Angelika Eppe, Jürgen Zimmerer (Eds.): *Geschichtskultur durch Restitution? Ein Kunst-Historikerstreit*, Cologne, Vienna, Weimar 2021 (*Beiträge zur Geschichtskultur*, Vol. 40), pp. 9–33). A note on citation: German terms and titles (in some contributions also foreign-language terms), as well as the names of daily and weekly newspapers, are given in italics in this book, as are emphases by the respective authors.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Margot Faak (Ed.): Alexander von Humboldt: *Reise durch Venezuela. Auswahl aus den amerikanischen Reisetagebüchern*. Berlin 2000, pp. 324 sq. The editor of this travel diary provides a chronology allowing to date Humboldt's theft of human remains to the end of May 1800. See <https://ed.-humboldt.de/chronologie/detail.xql?id=H0014909&l=de> (retrieved Jan. 5, 2023). Eight years later, Humboldt referred to the event and confirmed the transfer of a skull taken from Venezuela to Blumenbach's collection. He wrote: “We left the cave at nightfall, having collected several skulls and the complete skeleton of an aged man—to the greatest annoyance of our Indian guides. One of these skulls has been depicted by Mr. Blumenbach in his excellent craniological work.” Alexander von Humboldt: *Ansichten*



It is rare to find any passages in the texts of European world travelers that refer to Europeans as “white people.” In colonial contexts, color coding usually relates to people of other world regions. When Humboldt casts a glance at Europeans as foreign invaders, the momentary change of perspective flashes the irritating contradictions inherent in colonialism as a system founded on violence, oppression, and annihilation. Humboldt was a convinced abolitionist. At the same time, he was an actor within global power relations he helped to support in many ways.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of any legitimate moral doubts expressed in the quote above, Humboldt continues with the excavations. “Night fell while we were still digging among the bones.” With the help of a worldwide network—and thanks to the Royal Navy, which rather readily transported explorers and their finds<sup>3</sup>—Johann Friedrich Blumenbach assembled more than 200 human skulls for his Göttingen collection, regarded highly in the scholarly world of the time. Until today, one finds the skulls stored for research purposes in the Center for Anatomy of the Georg-August-University archives.

Change of scene: one hundred years after Humboldt’s voyages, another actor, a similar context. The influential director of the Africa and Oceania departments of the Berlin *Museum für Völkerkunde* (i.e., literally Museum for the Sciences of Peoples, the former German term for ethnology) Felix von Luschan works vigorously on building up “his” collections. To this end, he deliberately uses the means of the colonial state. After all, since 1884, the German Empire has formally reached colonial power status. As early as 1897, the physician Richard Kandt wrote to Luschan from the East African region, which had been placed under German “protection” a few years earlier: “In general, it is very difficult to obtain an object without using at least a little force.” Consequently, Kandt estimated: “I believe that half of your museum comprises stolen [goods].”<sup>4</sup>

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*der Natur mit wissenschaftlichen Erläuterungen [...]*. Vol. 1. [Pre-release in excerpts, part 2 of 2.] In: *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände* (1808), No. 50, pp. 197–199, p. 199. See *Deutsches Textarchiv*, [https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/view/humboldt\\_natur02\\_1808?p=3](https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/view/humboldt_natur02_1808?p=3) (retrieved Jan. 5, 2023).

2 See Angelika Eppe: Inventing White Beauty and Fighting Black Slavery. How Blumenbach, Humboldt, and Arango y Parreño Contributed to Cuban Race Comparisons in the Long Nineteenth Century. In: Angelika Eppe, Walter Erhart, Johannes Grave (Eds.): *Practices of Comparing. Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice*. Bielefeld 2020, pp. 295–328, <https://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-83765166-9/practices-of-comparing/?c=331021469> (retrieved Dec. 4, 2020).

3 See Julia Angster: *Erdbeeren und Piraten. Die Royal Navy und die Ordnung der Welt, 1770–1880*. Göttingen 2012.

4 Quoted from Regina Sarreiter: “*Ich glaube, dass die Hälfte ihres Museums gestohlen ist.*” In: Regina Sarreiter, Anette Hoffmann, Britta Lange: *Was Wir Sehen. Bilder, Stimmen, Rauschen. Zur Kritik anthropometrischen Sammelns*. Publication accompanying

When Luschan traveled to what was then British southern Africa in 1905, only three years after the end of the “Second Boer War,” he took the opportunity on the spot to “measure people and acquire objects for the Berlin Ethnological Museum.” As a matter of course, Luschan made use of the power of the competing colonial power. He conducted his research in police stations, passport offices, and prisons—places that left the colonized no way to escape “the humiliating practices of Luschan and other explorers who had preceded him or would follow.”<sup>5</sup>

Change of scene to 2011 in Cairo: Luschan’s Egyptian colleague Zahi Hawass, long-time director of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, the central administration of archaeological properties in Egypt, publicly demands the return of the bust of Nefertiti exhibited in the Berlin *Neues Museum*.<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Borchardt and his team had excavated the bust in Amarna in 1912 and brought it to Germany thanks to a so-called division of finds. There were concrete accusations of fraud in this division of archaeological finds as well as fundamental objections since Egypt was under British rule at the time and, on top, the French headed the Egyptian state administration of antiquities. Thus the Europeans, by personal union arrangement, had laid down the rules according to which they subsequently divided archaeological finds among themselves, so the reproach. Besides, there had already been demands for restitution immediately after the end of the First World War.

The *Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz* (i.e., Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), the current owner of the bust, refused.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Germany turned down requests from Egypt to send the iconic piece on loan to the Nile from sheer fear that Nefertiti would not return.

Change of scene to the *Humboldt Forum*: The recently completed reconstruction of the Hohenzollern Palace in the center of Berlin has taken over the collections of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art. Both state museums, previously located in Berlin-Dahlem, belong to

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the exhibition “*Was Wir Sehen*” in the Pergamon-Palais of the Berlin Humboldt-University, May 15-June 6, Berlin 2012. Basel 2012, pp. 43–58; quotes on pp. 53 and 56.

5 Ibid., p. 53.

6 See Gert von Paczensky, Herbert Ganslmayr: *Nofretete will nach Hause. Europa, Schatzhaus der “Dritten Welt.”* Munich 1984; Bénédicte Savoy (Ed.): *Nofretete. Eine deutsch-französische Affäre 1912–1931.* Cologne etc. 2011; Joyce Tyldesley: *Mythos Nofretete. Die Geschichte einer Ikone.* Stuttgart 2019; see also the following contributions by Mirjam Brusius, Viola König, Matthias Goldmann and Beatriz von Loebenstein, and Christoph Zuschlag.

7 See *Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz*, <http://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/meldung/article/2011/01/24/pressemeldung-zur-bueste-der-nofretete.html> (retrieved Dec. 21, 2020).

the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*. After all, the public saw a heated debate flare up about these museums' artworks and cultural treasures bearing the impress of colonial rule.

A few days in advance of the Humboldt Forum's opening, the Nigerian ambassador to Germany reactivated his demand for the return of the Benin bronzes—a request, he had already handed over to the German government in 2019.<sup>8</sup> The art objects from the former Kingdom of Benin, now Nigeria, were part of the booty British troops looted during an invasion justified as “punitive action” in 1897. Meanwhile, the bronzes got scattered among various museums worldwide.<sup>9</sup> The most extensive holdings are in the British Museum in London and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. According to information provided by the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in 2018/19, 440 of the 580 bronzes housed in the German capital on the eve of the First World War were still in the foundation's possession. In August 2022, however, the *Stiftung*, probably after a more thorough search, transferred the property rights of 512 existing Benin objects to the Nigerian government.<sup>10</sup>

In more ways than one, the Benin bronzes have become emblematic of looted art from colonial times. On the one hand, they were probably among the first African objects to be recognized as art in Europe, thus changing the—racist—view of Africa, whose inhabitants had, until then, at best, been considered capable of artsy crafts. On the other hand, the bronzes became iconic for the topic of colonial looted goods; there had

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- 8 See Paul Starzmann: *Raubkunst-Streit überschattet Eröffnung des Humboldt-Forums*. In: *Tagesspiegel*, Dec. 11, 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/nigeria-willbenin-bronzen-zurueck-raubkunst-streit-ueberschattet-eroeffnung-des-humboldtforums/26707296.html> (retrieved Jan. 3, 2021).
- 9 See the contribution by Osarhieme Osadolor to this volume. The Nigerian professor of History and International Studies was a member of the now concluded German-Nigerian research project “The Benin Bronzes. The Globalization of Colonial Art Theft.” The Gerda Henkel Foundation provided the funding for the project; Jürgen Zimmerer was the project lead. See “*Die Benin-Bronzen. Die Globalisierung des kolonialen Kunstraubs*,” [https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/benin-bronzen?nav\\_id=9412](https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/benin-bronzen?nav_id=9412) (retrieved Dec. 10, 2020).
- 10 See Felix von Luschan und die Benin-Sammlung. In: *Freunde des Ethnologischen Museums e. V.*, Jan. 17, 2018 (<http://www.ethnofreunde-berlin.de/felix-von-luschan-und-diebenin-sammlung/>) (retrieved Dec. 10, 2020). See additionally the Federal Government's answer of Sept. 12, 2019, to the officially submitted Small Inquiry of Aug. 22, 2019; the parliamentary group *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* requested information on the topic of the “Benin Bronzes” housed by federally funded cultural property preserving institutions. [https://kappertgonther.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/RS\\_KleineAnfrage-19\\_12576.pdf](https://kappertgonther.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/RS_KleineAnfrage-19_12576.pdf) (retrieved Dec. 10, 2020), p. 2; press release of the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, Aug. 25, 2022, <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/pressemitteilung/artikel/2022/08/25/rueckgabe-der-berliner-benin-bronzen.html> (retrieved Jan. 5, 2023).

already been demands for the return of the bronze objects since the—at least ceremonial—reinstatement of the Oba of Benin after the First World War. The first demands for restitution made it to Germany as early as 1972.<sup>11</sup> Nothing came of it.

## 2 Traditions of the Restitution Debate

The debate on restituting African art treasures had yet to get off the ground in public perception. There is no doubt that it marked a turning point when French President Emmanuel Macron held his Ouagadougou speech and commissioned the expert opinion from scholars Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy. However, the debate about the return of objects that Europeans had appropriated under colonial conditions is as old as the appropriations themselves. Europe was aware of the demands for restitution and, indeed, debated the issue for much longer than one may believe nowadays.

As early as 1972, the Nigerian Department of Antiquities director approached the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, referring to related advice from the International Association of Museums. In brief, the archaeologist Ekpo Eyo asked for permanent loans of objects he planned to showcase in the museums of the Nigerian state, which had become independent in 1960.<sup>12</sup> Despite initial support from the German Foreign Office, the attempt failed, likely due to resistance from the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. The broader debate, once announced, was never held.

The decolonization of large parts of the world, leading to the independence of 17 states in 1960 alone, also raised questions on the ownership of art objects anew. At the UN General Assembly in 1973, for example, Zaire's president, Mobutu Sese Seko, advocated a UN resolution on restitution.

“During the colonial period we suffered not only from colonialism, slavery, economic exploitation, but also and above all from the barbarous, systematic pillaging of all our works of art. In this way the rich countries appropriated our best, our unique works of art, and we are therefore poor not only economically but also culturally. [...] I would also ask this General Assembly to adopt a resolution requesting the rich Powers which possess works of art of the poor

11 See Bénédicte Savoy: *Ein Fall von Verschleppung*. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Dec. 15, 2020, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/verschleppungbenedicte-savoy-zur-rueckgabe-der-benin-bronzen-17101862.html> (retrieved Dec. 20, 2020).

12 See *ibid.*

countries to restore some of them so that we can teach our children and our grandchildren the history of their countries.”<sup>13</sup>

Especially since the resolution implied a (general) duty of reparation on the part of the (former) colonial powers, it met with resistance. The voices of dissent watered it down further and further in the years that followed. Finally, the assembly reached a consensus only when the resolution had become substantially meaningless.<sup>14</sup> In Germany, the parties concerned certainly felt international pressure mounting as well. In the early 1980s, for example, Hildegard Hamm-Brücher, then Vice Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, expressed understanding “for the desire of many Third World countries to regain cultural assets that are important for their national identity.”<sup>15</sup>

The forces of persistence were stronger. They relied on a line of argumentation that had remained relatively unchanged over the last forty years: There was no historical obligation to restitute. The objects belonged to the world heritage and should not serve the nationalism of postcolonial states. Moreover, the museums of the Global North had “saved” the objects from otherwise threatening destruction.

For example, in the late 1970s, Stephan Waetzoldt, general director of the National Museums in Berlin, emphasized that it was “irresponsible to give in to the nationalism of the developing countries, on the chance of possible short-term political success.”<sup>16</sup>

The director of the Hamburg Museum of Ethnology, Jürgen Zwerne-  
mann, justified this position by saying: “Much of what is preserved today in the museums of Europe and North America would have long since fallen into disrepair in its countries of origin.”<sup>17</sup>

Hermann Parzinger, president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, also argued in this tradition on the Nefertiti discovery’s centenary in 2012: “For me, the crucial thing is that these things happened completely

13 Quoted from the authorized English translation of Mobutu’s speech, originally held in French, General Assembly, 28th session: 2140th plenary meeting, Oct. 4, 1973, [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/749800/files/A\\_PV-2140-EN.pdf?ln=en](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/749800/files/A_PV-2140-EN.pdf?ln=en) (retrieved Jan. 6, 2023). See also Bénédicte Savoy: *Africa’s Struggle for Its Art. History of a Postcolonial Defeat*. Princeton 2022, pp. 29 sq. In Savoy’s view, this address was the starting point, a kind of “year zero,” of the futile fight for restitution.

14 See Thomas Fitschen: *30 Jahre “Rückführung von Kulturgut.” Wie der Generalversammlung ihr Gegenstand abhanden kam*. In: *Vereinte Nationen. Zeitschrift für die Vereinten Nationen und ihre Sonderorganisationen* (2004) No. 2, pp. 46–51.

15 Hildegard Hamm-Brücher, Aug. 11, 1982, quoted from Moritz Holfelder: *Unser Raubgut. Eine Streitschrift zur kolonialen Debatte*. Berlin 2019, p. 51.

16 Quoted from “Eingepackt – und ab in den Louvre.” In: *Spiegel*, Dec. 3, 1979, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-39867543.html> (retrieved Dec. 28, 2020).

17 Quoted from *ibid.*

legally according to the laws of the time.” Furthermore, he noted: “Nefertiti is part of the cultural heritage of humankind. Basically, I don’t think a return just out of magnanimity is justifiable [...]”<sup>18</sup>

In recent years, however, voices of dissent have become louder in the public debate. For example, the German Museums Association dedicated its 2015 annual conference to the topic of colonial provenances from the ground up. Conference participants pointed out the generally unjust character of the colonial situation; even the demand for a reverse burden of proof at the expense of the museums in the Global North got voiced.<sup>19</sup>

The 1970s accusation that the demand for restitution was aimed solely at “short-term political success” resurfaced when French President Emmanuel Macron clarified his position. In the capital of the West African country Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, Macron declared on November 28, 2017, the eve of the Africa-Europe Summit at the University of Ouagadougou:

“I refuse to [...] refer back to [always] the same perceptions of the past. [...] I am from a generation of French people for whom the crimes of European colonization cannot be disputed and are part of our history. [...] The first remedy is culture. In this area, I cannot accept that a large share of several African countries’ cultural heritage [is] kept in France. [...] African heritage cannot solely exist in private collections and European museums. [...] Within five years, I want the conditions to exist for temporary or permanent returns of African heritage to Africa.”<sup>20</sup>

Notwithstanding the other political goals Macron may have had in mind, the president pushed open the door to a new and intensified debate. Moreover, he continued to do so when he refrained from appointing a government commission or mandating museum curators but entrusted two intellectuals and scholars with the next step. He designated Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese economist and artist, and art historian Bénédicte Savoy, to prepare a report on the looted property stored in France and the possibilities for its return. Savoy had initially served on the Humboldt Forum’s expert advisory board. In July 2017, she resigned from the panel,

18 Hermann Parzinger interviewed by Marco Evers and Ulrike Knöfel: “*Wir verschweigen nichts.*” In: *Spiegel*, Dec. 3, 2012, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d89932590.html> (retrieved Dec. 29, 2020).

19 See *Die Biografie der Objekte. Provenienzforschung weiter denken. Jahrestagung des Deutschen Museumsbundes*, Essen May 3–June 6, 2015; see for the aforementioned demand Jürgen Zimmerer: *Kulturgut aus der Kolonialzeit. Ein schwieriges Erbe?* In: *Museumskunde* 80 (2015) No. 2, pp. 22–25.

20 Emmanuel Macron: Speech at the University of Ouagadougou, Nov. 28, 2017. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-the-university-of-ouagadougou> (retrieved Sept. 2, 2022).

comparing the planned museum to the Chornobyl disaster and the aftermath of colonial looting practices to nuclear radiation.<sup>21</sup>

Sarr and Savoy presented their report in November 2018 and called the elephant in the room by its name.<sup>22</sup> The figures alone were shocking. According to the authors, 95 percent of all African cultural objects are located in Europe or, more generally, in the Global North. Individual museums hoard enormous amounts of things they never exhibit. To the surprise of many in Germany, the relevant Berlin museums, housing 75,000 collectibles of colonial provenance, rank in the top group. The museums in Paris and London also stand out: the Musée du Quai Branly features 70,000, the British Museum stores 69,000 items. Finally, the Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika (i.e., Royal Museum of Central Africa) houses no fewer than 180,000 assets from Belgian colonial times in Tervuren near Brussels.<sup>23</sup> The report did not aim for completeness. In Germany, many cities apart from Berlin are home to relevant museums, some of which have substantial colonial collections, for example, Hamburg, Leipzig, Cologne, and Munich.

Sarr and Savoy emphasized that not merely were the circumstances of the acquisitions morally questionable, but culturally relevant objects are available in Africa only in fractions of the quantity showcased in European collections. Africans can only marvel at significant objects and study their own culture and history in the museums of the Global North.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the authors call for a new ethic in dealing with Africa in general and the collections.

The report attracted worldwide attention and increased pressure, especially in Germany, where the issue of dealing with the colonial legacy took on an urgency previously unknown. On the one hand, previous debates had already prepared the historical-political ground. The controversies dealt with Nazi plunder—triggered for the most part by the “Gurlitt case”—and the asserted continuity between the German colonial genocide against the Herero and Nama and the Nazi genocides. Besides, Germany

21 See Bénédicte Savoy: “Das Humboldt-Forum ist wie Tschernobyl.” In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/benedicte-savoy-ueber-dashumboldt-forum-das-humboldt-forum-ist-wie-tschernobyl-1.3596423?reduced=true> (retrieved Dec. 12, 2020); see also Viola König’s contribution to this volume.

22 See Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy: *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*. Paris 2018; Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy: *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*. Paris 2018 ([http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf), retrieved Dec. 12, 2020); see for the moderately abridged German edition Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy: *Zurückgeben. Über die Restitution afrikanischer Kulturgüter*. Berlin 2019.

23 See Sarr, Savoy, *Restitution* (note 22), p. 15.

24 In addition, traveling expenses and visa regulations limit people’s access possibilities.

has been officially negotiating with Namibia on compensation payments and an apology for German crimes since 2015.

On the other hand, Sarr and Savoy's report intensified the long-running debate on the Humboldt Forum's colonial legacy and the inherent thematic complexes of "looted art" and colonial mass crimes. The sheer size and symbolic political significance of the Humboldt Forum led to a "perfect storm" blowing from the direction of the public and the media, which shook the foundations of the rebuilt Hohenzollern Palace or at least could have done so.

A few weeks before Macron's speech, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation had initially dismissed criticism regarding the colonial provenance of exhibits at the future Humboldt Forum as "the silly season topic of 2017."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the German government responded proactively to the upcoming publication of the Sarr-Savoy report. In 2017, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, had assigned the German Museums Association to prepare a detailed handout on how to deal with collections from colonial contexts.<sup>26</sup> Now, in May 2018, she invited an informal group of experts to the Federal Chancellery to discuss, among other things, the Macron initiative. Eventually, the group zeroed in on bureaucratizing the issue by narrowly interpreting restitution as equaling lengthy provenance research instead of seizing the opportunity of a symbolic commitment to returns.<sup>27</sup>

The Humboldt Forum's partial opening on December 16, 2020, nothing but contributed to the vague and ambiguous picture. The failure of those politically responsible for settling the question of how to deal with looted objects from colonial contexts in principle before the opening event

25 Savoy (note 21); see additionally Jürgen Zimmerer: *Der Kolonialismus ist kein Spiel. Die Verantwortlichen für das Humboldt-Forum haben noch nicht verstanden, welche Objekte sie zeigen wollen.* In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Aug. 16, 2017, [https://kolonialismus.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/wp-content/uploads/170809\\_faz\\_FD1201708095199377-1.pdf](https://kolonialismus.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/wp-content/uploads/170809_faz_FD1201708095199377-1.pdf) (retrieved Dec. 12, 2020); Invitation of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation of Aug. 25, 2017, to a debate on provenance research: "Gehört Provenienzforschung zur DNA des Humboldt Forums?" (i.e., "Is Provenance Research Part of the DNA of the Humboldt Forum?"), quoted from Bénédicte Savoy: *Der Savoy-Sarr-Restitutions-Report zur kolonialen Raubkunst: ein Jahr danach*, lecture delivered at the Hamburg University, Jan. 8, 2020 (min. 26:20), <https://lecture2go.uni-hamburg.de/l2go/-/get/1/5179/> (retrieved Jan. 11, 2021).

26 See Deutscher Museumsbund (Ed.): *Leitfaden zum Umgang mit Sammlungsgut aus kolonialen Kontexten*; see for the different versions produced in a consultative process <https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/leitfaden-zum-umgang-mit-sammlungsgut-aus-kolonialen-kontexten/> (retrieved Jan. 3, 2021).

27 See Jürgen Zimmerer: *Die größte Identitätsdebatte unserer Zeit.* In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Febr. 20, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/kolonialismus-postkolonialismushumboldt-forum-raubkunst-1.4334846> (retrieved Jan. 3, 2021).



resulted in the public's preoccupation with the question of restituting colonial artifacts during the opening week.<sup>28</sup> However, given the programmatic imprecision that had prevailed in the preceding months and years, one could expect nothing more than lip service to dialogue on equal terms and the promise not to shirk challenging issues such as the colonial legacy. According to her opening speech, State Minister Grütters saw the Humboldt Forum all set for becoming a hub "in the spirit of Enlightenment, cosmopolitanism, and tolerance."

"It says a lot about Germany's self-image in the 21st century that we do not focus on ourselves here but offer the stage to the cultures of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania—and their different world views. In Germany, the Humboldt Forum should be a benchmark and a model for handling cultural assets from colonial contexts—presenting the stories of origin, giving access to objects, and cooperating in the reappraisal of collections."<sup>29</sup>

Grütters carefully avoided the delicate topic of restitution. The announcement created a stir that an exhibition of collectibles from the Ethnological Museum would open its doors in September 2021, which actually happened. Current events determine what conclusions were drawn from what the Commissioner for Culture and the Media had said at the end of 2020—and which answers to the pending questions on dealing with controversial objects have been found in the meantime—more on this in the final section of this introduction.

### 3 Restitution and Historical Culture

What does the discussion about African art and its possible restitution have to do with the topic of historical culture? Suppose we understand historical culture as the "practically effective articulation of historical consciousness in the life of a society." In that case, according to historical theorist Jörn Rüsen, we must differentiate between historical culture's cognitive-scientific, political, and aesthetic dimensions.<sup>30</sup> When Rüsen presented his concept in 1994, however, there was no talk of returning

28 See Starzmann (note 8).

29 Monika Grütters's speech on the completion and opening of the Humboldt Forum on Dec. 16, 2020, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/rede-von-kulturstaatsministerin-gruetters-anlaesslich-der-fertigstellung-und-eroeffnung-des-humboldt-forums-1829224> (retrieved Jan. 3, 2021).

30 See Jörn Rüsen: *Was ist Geschichtskultur? Überlegungen zu einer neuen Art, über Geschichte nachzudenken*. In: Klaus Fießmann, Heinrich Theodor Grütter, Jörn Rüsen (Eds.): *Historische Faszination. Geschichtskultur heute*. Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 1994, pp. 3–26.

colonial collection objects, at least neither in Germany nor in the museological context the author sought to address. At the time, Rüsen considered how historical culture would take shape in intertwined societies, in glocal (both local and global) or transnational contexts—and historical culture research has not yet caught up on the question.

Suppose we can interpret the historical culture of a society as an expression of interweaving relationships and a way of dealing with such interdependencies. In that case, the concept of historical culture may contribute productively to the restitution debate in several respects. The art historian Christoph Zuschlag has pointed out, for example:

“Both—the research on object biographies in the course of provenance research and the restitution that may follow as a consequence—form an essential and integral part of a society’s historical and commemorative culture.”<sup>31</sup>

Still, we must supplement Zuschlag’s assumption when it comes to global history: The perspective’s horizon would have to encompass at least two societies, the “society of origin” and the society that currently holds the collectibles in question. However, in most cases, it is a matter of several social entities since colonialism rested upon manifold interconnected relationships between colonial powers and colonized societies. Additionally, the artifacts often traveled a long and tortuous path before ending up in a museum of the Global North.

More generally, the discussion about restituting objects with a history of colonial appropriation pertains to all dimensions of historical culture. During the debate, it becomes apparent how a society’s historical culture is grounded in its (historical and current) interactions with other societies. And in the controversies about the shared histories of these societies surfaces a historical culture that has a global impact. However, such a historical culture is not necessarily mutually agreed upon. Rather, the historical cultures of different societies influence and shape each other, and this may (or may not) involve mutual understanding and reciprocal recognition.

Evidence of global impacts is certainly easiest to provide for the scientific dimension. According to its claim, science always involves worldwide discussions. However, the global impact is also evident concerning the political dimension, e.g., when it comes to the question of restitution, and not least the aesthetic dimension, e.g., when it comes to classifying artifacts as “art” or as “everyday objects.”

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31 See Christoph Zuschlag’s contribution to this volume.