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*Impermanências* (photo by Alberto Mayer) | 2009 | [Cristina Ataíde](#) (courtesy of the artist)

## RESTITUTION IS EVERYWHERE

António Pinto Ribeiro

Some time ago a friend sent me a message: “this thing about the restitution of works of art suddenly seems to be everywhere. Or am I the only one who hadn’t noticed before? ... it’s even in a detective novel I’m reading” (1). It is indeed everywhere, and not all of a sudden. Indeed, demands for the restitution of works appropriated both during and the end of formal colonialism began to emerge in the eighteenth century (2). However, the scale of the international debate and discussion of how to implement restitution have taken on fresh impetus recently, in particular after French President Emmanuel Macron announced in a speech in Ouagadougou that the French State intended to return works expropriated from former French colonies held in the museums and archives of France (3). After this speech a report was commissioned, authored by Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese professor of economics, and a French art historian Bénédicte Savoy. This report, *Restituer le Patrimoine Africain* lays out the possible stages of the restitution process and gives an overview of the problems involved and putative solutions (4).

Noting that this subject is now everywhere is to suggest that it has transcended the politico-museological sphere to become part of the public and media space. This is relatively positive, particularly if it is accompanied by actual interventions and insightful debate. Yet the process, which was never going to be straightforward, has become more complex, and acquired new problematics. Given the heterogeneity of the positions of the States involved, approaches to dealing with the problem have needed to become more sophisticated. It is no coincidence that Alain Godinou, the director of the Museums Programme of the Benin Heritage Promotion Agency, [has insisted on the need for an international convention for the restitution of African art](#), such that all countries can establish frames of reference through which to manage the issue.

One of the consequences of the debate about restitution has been the re-opening of demands for the return of works not only between former colonial and colonized countries, but also in other contexts, such as the plundering undertaken during to past wars. For instance, Moscow has refused to return to Germany works taken in the final throes of the Second World War, and Greece have demanded the return of the part of the Parthenon held in the United Kingdom. However, these claims pale in comparison to the historical expropriation of African and Asian works. If the return of trophies of war would be a gesture that could lay to rest the historical humiliation of the defeated, the expropriation of African works was the expropriation of the memory itself of peoples, nations, and cultural identities.

To decolonize is a verb, not a phase. The return of works to descendants of those who were plundered has followed more a political than an ethical timetable. But at least it has begun. France is scheduled to return 26 works of art to Benin this summer, though it may be delayed by the possibility of thermal damage to the works. The British Museum, which has organized dozens of debates on this issue, without reaching any consensus, has pledged to return some works to Ethiopia, including a set of braids of Emperor Tewodros II considered to be a national treasure and stolen in the invasion of Ethiopia in 1868. The Historical Museum of Germany is going to return a Portuguese flag from the period of the ‘Discoveries’ to Namibia, where it was erected by Diogo Cão in 1486.

As all claims for restitution make clear, they are not confined to works of art and culture, but include archives, human remains and fossils. The most recent request for restitution, granted by France, was for part of a dinosaur skeleton of the Anhanguera species that was found in the Chapada do Araripe in the Northeast of Brazil. This fossil was part of a set of 45 exported illegally to France.

Resistance to the return of works has been justified through reference to legislation about national patrimony and national treasures drafted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by European politicians. It proceeded on the basis that what was found in the European colonies was, on principle, to be expropriated by the colonizing countries. Thus the *British Museum Act* of 1963 prohibits the institution from making the objects in its collection available except in special circumstances. Similarly, French law treats its museums’ collections as inalienable. It is, therefore, through a combination of cunning and illegality that the restitution of works is stalled, and strange solutions proposed, such as when the British Museum lent Benin bronzes in its possession to a Museum in Nigeria. But as Ikhuehi Omonkhua, the chief curator of the National Museum of Benin put it, “the bronzes are more than art. Keeping them out of the country is akin to holding our ancestors hostage” (5).

Recently, the newspaper *El País* (6) published an infographic with a map of all the countries who have demanded the return of objects, and those who have the objects in their possession. The map includes claims from governments or organizations on all continents. Such maps bring into view the shocking scale of expropriation. Nevertheless, no State has publically called for the emptying of European or North American museums. There are many reasons for this restraint, but two are particularly important, and display the ethics and justice of the claimants. One stems from a desire that a large part of humanity should be able to access these works of art, provided that they are put within their appropriate context,

and understood within a decolonized narrative. The other draws on the idea that the diasporas of the plundered countries should have access to the works that were taken hostage. Any international convention should deal with circulation in all senses and of all heritages.

We must be conscious that the process of return will be long, lasting many years. This is not only because of the diversity of the positions of the States involved, but also because of the new complexities that starting this process has already raised. It has become imperative to consider the very idea of heritage again, both in the light of decolonization, and in relation to the new origin narratives of descendants of colonized peoples. This revision of the concept of heritage requires us to know the biography of the object to be returned, the context in which it was taken and its symbolic mutation; some objects' ritualistic functions can no longer be justified, or can even inspire fear. All of these actions run alongside the need to make an inventory of the absences of other objects or documents which could establish a renewed narrative. This whole process constitutes a slow but necessary set of decisions and actions in the search for some kind of reconciliation that still might be possible.

In a similar vein, there are those acts which suggest recognition of those errors and crimes that the process of restitution has itself named. For instance, in the Belgian parliament on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2019 and in the presence of representatives of Afro-descendent people, the Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel issued an apology for racial segregation and the forced adoption of hundreds of children born in mixed marriages during the colonial period in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. The process of restitution requires taking positions and taking actions in the present, with an eye for the future. There is no hiding that what is at issue is the way in which we move forward on both an individual and a collective basis. As Eliane Brum has said, "the dispute is over pasts" (7).

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- (1) She's referring to *Le Denier Lapon*, de Olivier Truc. Paris, Éditions Métailié, 2012. In a small village in Lapland, two police detectives try to unravel the mystery of the robbery of a Sami drum from the local museum and the murder of its first owner.
- (2) See Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, "[On Reparations](#)", *Newsletter Memoirs*, 6.10.2018.
- (3) See António Pinto Ribeiro e Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, "[Restituting Artworks: A decisive step in the process of decolonization](#)", *Newsletter Memoirs*, 22.12.2018.
- (4) Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *Restituer le Patrimoine Africain*, Paris, Philippe Rey/ Seuil, 2018.
- (5) Cf. "[Art of the steal: European museums wrestle with returning African art](#)", *The Christian Science monitor*, 30.4.2019.
- (6) Cf. *El País*, "[O que aconteceria se os museus europeus tivessem de devolver a arte espoliada?](#)", 25.3.2019.
- (7) *El País*, 3rd April 2019, "[Cem dias sob o domínio dos perversos](#)".
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Translated by Archie Davies

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