

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Long History of Claims for the Return of Cultural Heritage from Colonial Contexts

2021 Virtual conference of the *German Lost Art Foundation*
in cooperation with *The Research Center for Material Culture*
of the National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands

November 17–19, 2021

Conference Topic

Since November 2018, when the "Report on the restitution of African cultural heritage" by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy appeared, the debate on how to deal with collections from colonial contexts in European museums and heritage institutions has focused strongly on the issue of restitution. Undoubtedly, the number of objects returned from European museums to their countries of origin in recent decades has been small¹ – which is why demands for return may appear comparatively novel. However, issues of provenance and restitution were already hotly discussed in the 1970s and 1980s in Germany, Europe and internationally.² Pivotal in this regard was the *UN Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* that was signed in 1970 in order to put an end to the plunder of cultural heritage in newly independent nation states. Importantly, the non-retroactivity of the Convention was contested by these very states.

The current debate, therefore, has a much longer history: Local objections to the removal and theft of individual belongings, collective property, or human remains have existed since the beginning of the colonial expansion. The same goes for successful and unsuccessful claims for the return of cultural heritage, or for compensation for its removal, as well as for attempts to resist, prevent and publicly condemn colonial looting. Claims for return, repatriation and restitution have long been articulated by individuals, communities and governments towards colonial actors and colonial institutions, drawing on local ontologies and moralities and thereby fundamentally challenging and critiquing European colonial practices and (mis-)conceptions.

¹ Beurden, Jos van 2017: *Treasures in Trusted Hands. Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects*. Leiden; Greenfield, Jeanette 2007: *The Return of Cultural Treasures*. Third Edition. Cambridge; Vrodljak, Ana Filipa 2008: *International Law, Museums and the Return of Cultural Objects*. Cambridge.

² Eyo, Ekpo 1994: *Repatriation of Cultural Heritage: The African Experience*. In: *Museum and the Making of 'Ourselves'. The Role of Objects in National Identity*. Ed. Flora Kaplan. London, pp. 330-350; Fitschen, Thomas 2004: *30 Jahre ‚Rückführung von Kulturgut‘. Wie der Generalversammlung ihr Gegenstand abhandeln kam*. In: *Vereinte Nationen 2*, pp.46-51; Paczensky, Gert von/Ganslmayr, Herbert 1984: *Nofretete will nach Hause. Europa. Schatzhaus der ‚Dritten Welt‘*. München; Sarr, Felwine/Savoy, Bénédicte 2018: *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*: <http://restitutionreport2018.com>.

However, these early histories have barely been systematically investigated and publicly debated³ – not least because they were not documented in sufficient detail in colonial archives or rather were transmitted orally. Their close reading reveals important aspects of local agency that seem forgotten in the current debate – at least in Europe. Nevertheless, they continue to inform current restitution claims and underline their urgency.

The conference strives to shed light on the ‘long history’ of resistance against colonial dispossession and expropriation through the articulation of claims for the return of cultural heritage. By historicising and grounding the current debate, the conference aims to explore new avenues for research and future options for action.

Submissions

We welcome contributions that focus on and discuss the following topics:

- local forms of contemporary protest against the removal of objects and evidence thereof in the ‘colonial archive’ and in local oral records;
- early criticism of European colonial practices of dispossession, expropriation and looting in colonised societies;
- (local) ontologies and moralities underpinning demands for return, restitution and repatriation;
- early (successful and unsuccessful) restitution claims, arguments and rhetoric utilised in these claims, reactions to them;
- (public) restitution debates in the run-up to decolonisation and independence, as well as during the negotiations about the 1970 UN Convention;
- pre-1970 attempts at lobbying for and codifying the right of access to, and return of, cultural heritage translocated in the colonial era;
- reflections on when and why pre-1970 restitution claims were answered, accommodated, rejected, re-activated or forgotten over the course of history and how this can inform the current debate.

³ Some rare examples of more detailed case studies are: Beurden, Sarah van 2015: Restitution or Cooperation? Competing Visions of Post-Colonial Cultural Development in Africa. *Global Cooperation Research Papers 12*: https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/uepublico_mods_00040602; Henrichsen, Dag 2020: Demands for restitution – a recent phenomenon? Early histories of human remains violations in Namibia. In: *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* 7/1, pp.38-46: <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/contjas/article/view/200576>; Mariam, Haile 2009: The cultural benefits of the return of Axum Obelisk. In: *Museum International* 61/1–2, pp. 48-51, pp.48–51; Scott, Cynthia 2020: Cultural Diplomacy and the Heritage of Empire. *Negotiating Post-Colonial Returns*. New York; Turnbull, Paul 2017: Museums, Science and Collecting the Indigenous Dead in Colonial Australia. Cham, Chapter 11.

The conference aims to present:

- cases from diverse geographical-cultural, disciplinary, and historical contexts focusing on artifacts, archives, specimens, but also human remains;
- comprehensive analyses of historical processes and discourses;
- conceptual and theoretical papers on the above issues.

The organising committee would like to invite submissions of abstracts for panel presentations as well as poster presentations:

- panel presentations are intended to last about 15–20 minutes followed by Q&A;
- posters need to be made available to conference participants two weeks before the conference starts and will be discussed between authors and interested parties in 5–10 min Q&A sessions; in particular, posters can also present experimental, artistic, activist and/or curatorial approaches to the topic.

Please submit an abstract of 500 words max. and a biographical note of 300 words max. including your institutional affiliation, academic experience and relevant publications to conference@kulturgutverluste.de by March 14, 2021. Please send all relevant parts of your submission in one document. The format of the conference will be entirely virtual. For any questions, please contact conference@kulturgutverluste.de.

The conference programme will comprise selected submissions as well as lectures by invitation. A selection of papers will be published in the conference proceedings.

The German Lost Art Foundation is a central point of contact, nationally and internationally, for all matters pertaining to cultural goods and collections from colonial contexts in German collecting institutions. It supports provenance research through research grants and fosters international exchange on the issue. The main activities of the Foundation focus on cultural assets seized by the National Socialists through persecution, particularly from Jewish owners (so-called “Nazi-confiscated art”). The Foundation also supports the investigation into war-related removal or relocation of cultural assets (so-called “booty art”) as well as the loss of cultural assets under Soviet occupation and in the GDR.

The Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC) is a flagship research institute within the Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), Museum Volkenkunde (Leiden), the Afrika Museum (Berg en Dal) and the Wereldmuseum (Rotterdam) that serves as a focal point for research on ethnographic collections in the Netherlands. It fosters interdisciplinary research, focused on the internationally renowned collections, which comprise over 376.000 objects and almost 1.000.000 photographs cataloguing the diversity of world cultures. Its research projects and programs address the historical and contemporary meanings of these collections, the national and global histories of which they are a part, and the contemporary societal questions around issues of heritage, cultural identity and belonging that these objects raise.