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Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI):

**Swiss Benin Forum: Handover of the SBI research report to the Nigerian delegation and Joint Declaration regarding the future of the collections and the further steps in the collaboration between Nigeria and Switzerland.**

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In connection with today's Swiss Benin Forum, the SBI team – Swiss Benin Initiative – will present their research report to the general public and hand it over to a delegation of ten representatives from Nigeria. All partners involved have also agreed in a Joint Declaration of the Swiss Benin Forum – on the future of the Benin collections held in Swiss museums and on the planned further collaboration. In June 2021, a joint SBI research project funded by Switzerland's Federal Office of Culture (FOC) was launched in which eight Swiss museums joined forces under the lead of the Museum Rietberg Zurich. In addition to creating an effective network among the participant museums, primary focus was on the collaboration and exchange of information with Nigeria for the purpose of investigating the provenances of the collections from the Kingdom of Benin held by the said museums in Switzerland.

The Kingdom of Benin in modern-day Nigeria looks back on a long history of entanglement with the Global North, reaching back to the 15th century. While in the early contact years, the emphasis was on cultural exchange and trade (among other things, brass items), the colonial expansion and conquest of the African continent culminated in a military operation carried out by the British army against the capital of Benin City in 1897. In the course of the action, the palace was burnt to the ground and the king (Oba) exiled. Roughly 10,000 items made of bronze, ivory, and wood were looted. The items, which became known as the "Benin Bronzes", found their way into private and public collections across the world through the art trade – among others into Swiss museums.

**Collaborative provenance research** was at the heart of the SBI research project from the start. The goal was to shed light on the contexts of the acquisitions back in the colonial days and to understand how Switzerland became involved in the trade with looted art from Benin City. What was new about this approach was that the project not only relied on Western archives and records, but equally incorporated the Nigerian perspective regarding the history and the present status of the Benin objects. For this purpose, the SBI team and the anthropologist Dr Alice Hertzog worked closely with the Nigerian historian Dr Enibokun Uzébu-Imarghiabge, who looked into the oral history side of the objects in question and conducted interviews with local experts from academia, museums, palace associations, and artisan guilds.

**Key findings from the report**

In the eight Swiss museum under inspection, a total of 96 objects were identified as originating in the Kingdom of Benin, with the number ranging from 3 pieces (Schlossmuseum Burgdorf) to 21

works (Museum der Kulturen Basel). The research team developed four categories according to which the Benin objects were classified:

- Categories 1 (looted and 2 (probably looted)): All in all, 21 objects belong to category 1 which corresponds to 22% of the Swiss Benin holdings. In these cases, records in writing or circumstantial evidence such as burn marks provide a direct link to the fateful events of 1897. Category 2 includes a total of 32 Benin objects (34%). In these cases, we have no written evidence to link them directly to 1897. However, since we are dealing here with court, or royal, artworks, which until well into the 19th century were exclusively produced for the palace and kept there, we may assume with considerable certainty that they were violently appropriated in 1897 when the palace was occupied and sacked by the British troops.
  - In view of the discussions with the Nigerian delegation regarding the future of the Swiss Benin collections, categories 1 and 2 play an important part.
- Categories 3 (probably not looted) and 4 (not looted): Research showed that the remaining 16 and 27 objects, respectively (16% and 28%) probably or, in the other case, certainly do not stand in connection with the military operation of 1897. They include objects that are in no way related to the practice of courtly art or they were produced and traded later in the colonial period or even in the post-colonial era.
  - These objects are not part of the talks. However, they are still of significance because they point to the ruptures and continuities of artistic production after 1897 (Neo-Benin) and the emergence of a local art trade in Nigeria.

The research results show that only eight objects were acquired by the Basel Museum der Kulturen immediately after 1897, while the majority of items entered Swiss museums later over a longer period of time until 2022. In this context, private collectors along with the international and Swiss art markets played a pivotal role.

## **Joint Declaration of the Swiss Benin Forum**

Switzerland never owned any colonies and was not involved in the looting of the palace in Benin City in any way. Nor have any Swiss museums faced restitution claims from Nigeria so far. Still, the Swiss Benin Initiative offers an important opportunity for museums in Switzerland to engage with their colonial collections in a responsible and proactive manner. The main focus is on dialogue with the partners in Nigeria and the African diaspora as well as on promoting transparency and openness to the best of ability. Together, the Nigerian delegation and the members of SBI have drafted a joint statement concerning the future of the Swiss Benin collections and the possibilities of forthcoming collaboration which will be announced on 2 February in connection with the Benin Forum. In the document, the museums concerned express their openness to a transfer of ownership of the looted and probably looted objects (categories 1 and 2); this could involve a repatriation of the works, a circulation or loans to Swiss Museums. Both the Nigerian and Swiss sides are in agreement on the importance of future cooperation at the museum, scientific as well as artistic levels. The declaration was signed by all museums involved in the SBI, palace representatives, the Director General of the National Commission on

Museums and Monuments, members of the Nigerian embassy in Switzerland as well as by Nigerian scholars and artists.

## **Outlook and further procedure**

In December 2022, Switzerland's Federal Office of Culture (FOC) issued its decision to financially support the Swiss Benin Initiative for a further year. Three objectives have been specified for this second project phase starting in February 2023 and ending in February 2024: The first goal aims at jointly developing new ways and forms of conveying what we have learnt about the provenances of the Benin collections to the general public as well as within specialist circles. Secondly, together with our Nigerian project partners, we hope to shed more light on the contexts within which the Swiss Benin pieces were acquired – from the way they were produced and used to how and when they were traded. The third goal is to jointly develop new methods of collaboration between museums regarding controversial collections and problematic provenances. Several satellite exhibitions are planned for 2024 in various SBI museums in collaboration with our Nigerian colleagues, with the intention of sharing the findings of the research with a wider audience and highlighting the process of negotiating the handling of the shared heritage.

## **Members of the Nigerian delegation to the Swiss Benin Forum:**

National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM):

- Prof Dr Abba Tijani, Director General NCMM
- Theophilus Umogbai, Director of Research, Planning and Publications, NCMM

Royal Palace

- His Royal Highness Prince Aghatise Erediauwa on behalf of his Majesty the Oba of Benin
- Dr Charles Uwensuyi Edosomwan, Chief Obasuyi of Benin
- Patrick Oronsaye, artist, art historian, member of Ekaiwe Royal Society

Science

- Dr Enibokun Uzébu Imarghiagbe, historian at the University of Benin, SBI researcher
- Prof Dr Kokunre Eghafona, Professor of Anthropology, University of Benin
- Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhatator Obogie, scholar at the Benin Studies Institute

Artists

- Phil Omodamwen, bronze caster in the sixth generation
- Samson Ogiamien, artist, Graz

## **Links**

- more on the **Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI)** at [rietberg.ch/bis\\_en](https://rietberg.ch/bis_en)
- To the **official SBI report**: [rietberg.ch/bis\\_en#report](https://rietberg.ch/bis_en#report)
- **Joint Declaration** as well as short **bios** and **statements** of members of the **Nigerian delegation** at [rietberg.ch/bis\\_en#swissbeninforum](https://rietberg.ch/bis_en#swissbeninforum)

**Media contacts**

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**Elena DelCarlo**

Head of Marketing & Communications

Tel. +41 44 415 31 27

[elena.delcarlo@zuerich.ch](mailto:elena.delcarlo@zuerich.ch)

**Alain Suter**

Communications und Cooperations

Tel. +41 44 415 31 34

[alain.suter@zuerich.ch](mailto:alain.suter@zuerich.ch)

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