

# The British Museums

# The Brutish Museums

The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence  
and Cultural Restitution

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# Preface

In his manifesto for the ‘Dig Where You Stand’ movement, Sven Lindqvist wrote, typed out in all-caps:

FACTORY HISTORY COULD AND SHOULD BE WRITTEN  
FROM A FRESH POINT OF VIEW.

BY WORKERS INVESTIGATING THEIR OWN  
WORKPLACES.

In their workplaces, Lindqvist explained, people have ‘competence and know their jobs’; ‘their working experience is a platform’ from which they can see what is being done, and what is not being done.<sup>1</sup> The example that Lindqvist gave was the Swedish concrete industry, and this book too is about the building and anchoring of foundations, about composite and liquid forms, and about how such forms are reinforced and harden over time – but also about the degradation and fatigue of institutional constructions, their structural weaknesses and collapse, the dismantling and demolition of brutal façades – and how among the rubble a prone edifice might be repurposed as some kind of bridge.

My own workplace, which is the subject of this book, is the University of Oxford’s Museum of Anthropology and World Archaeology, where I am curator of ‘world archaeology’. In what follows, I have sought to follow Lindqvist’s invocations: to do research ‘on the job’, to dig into what we know, to use our specialist and sometimes esoteric technical knowledge to excavate new pasts and presents, perhaps even to seek to carve out better futures too. In the case of the Pitt Rivers Museum, this knowledge begins with what might be reasonably called a form of ‘Euro-pessimism’, by which I mean that the knowledge that Europeans can make with African objects in the anthropology

museum will be coterminous with knowledge of European colonialism, wholly dependent upon anti-black violence and dispossession, until such a time as these enduring processes are adequately revealed, studied, understood, and until the work of restitution – by which I mean the physical dismantling of the white infrastructure of every anthropology and ‘world culture’ museum – is begun.

It is thus a book written from Oxford, a self-consciously ‘anglocentric’ account,<sup>2</sup> written to address how ‘British imperial historiography has catered to British interests’, especially in the case of Benin,<sup>3</sup> with the conviction that European voices have a service to fulfil in the process of restitution: one of sharing knowledge of the process of cultural dispossession, and of facing up to the colonial ultraviolence, democide, and cultural destructions that characterised the British Empire in Africa during the three decades between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, an episode that I reframe here as ‘World War Zero’. One of my main aims in addressing this past is to help to catalyse a new acknowledgement of the scale and horror of British corporate-militarist colonialism, as has begun to happen in the sense of the colonial past in some other European nations, including Germany and Belgium. Anthropology museums represent crucial public spaces in which to undertake this social and political process, which is a necessary first step towards any prospect of the ‘decolonisation’ of knowledge in these collections. But this cannot be short-circuited by the mere re-writing of labels or shuffling around of stolen objects in new displays that re-tell the history of empire, no matter how ‘critically’ or self-consciously.

In light of the sheer brutishness of their continued displays of violently-taken loot, British museums need urgently to move beyond the dominant mode of ‘reflexivity’ and self-awareness in museum thinking, which often amounts to little more than a kind of self-regard, turning the focus back upon the anthropologist, curator, or museum as both object and subject of enquiry, performing dialogue with certain ‘source communities’. We need to open up and excavate our institutions, dig up our ongoing pasts, with all the archaeological tools that can be brought to hand, sometimes a teaspoon and tooth-

brush, other times a pick-axe or a jack-hammer. Any museum object has a double historicity, of course – its existence before and after the act of accession. But in the case of what loot became under the intellectual regime of ‘race science’ in the late 19th century and early 20th century, in the museum, the second, most recent of these two layers is dominant. Far from any normal history of collecting or ‘provenance’, which could co-exist alongside studies of the lives of these objects before that act of taking, under the ultraviolet conditions of military looting through the sheer intensity of the violence witnessed under corporate colonialism, which took the form of an incendiary shattering of the bombs scattering loot from the event of 18 February 1897 to hundreds of museums across the western world – the damage is renewed every day that the museum doors are unlocked and these trophies are displayed to the public. The ongoing British/brutish histories of ‘acquisition’ must be reconciled before African pasts, presents and futures can be meaningfully understood from the standpoint of any Euro-American museum collection. The primary task for anthropology museums must therefore be, I suggest here, to invert the familiar model of the life-history of an object as it moves between social contexts, new layers of meaning and significance added with each new phase of its biography, sovereignty, of the attempted destruction of cultural significance, to write action-oriented ‘necroographies’ – death-histories, histories of loss – of the ‘primitive accumulation’ of museums, in order to inform the ongoing, urgent task of African cultural restitution, intervening through new kinds of co-operation and partnership between Europe and Africa, in which the museum will variously dismantle, repurpose, disperse, return, re-imagine, and rebuild itself. Excavating the knowledge of where Benin loot is located today, and urging each of the hundreds of institutions, individuals, and families that hold it today – universities, museums, charitable trusts, local government, nation states, descendants of the soldiers who did the looting, private collectors – to take meaningful action towards cultural restitution, informed by the understanding that the violence is not some past act, to be judged by the supposed standards of the past, but an ongoing event, is a big task. At the end of this book



is a first provisional attempt to list where the Benin loot taken in 1897 is today – please help to correct and expand this knowledge, so that in a revised edition of this book we can update the list, and can start to count up the returns.

I am indebted to the generosity and friendship of many people who have helped me in writing this book. A seed of this book began two decades ago in conversations with David Van Reybrouck, whose key work *Congo: the epic history of a people* (2014) has been an ongoing inspiration, renewed in Berlin in summer 2017. Through my participation on behalf of the Pitt Rivers Museum in the Benin Dialogue Group, it has been an immense privilege to meet colleagues from Nigeria, Germany, and the UK who are so knowledgeable about Benin art and history, and who come together in such mutually respectful ways to discuss what some call ‘difficult’ histories, and others, myself included, see as quite straightforward, enduring pasts. Within the Group, special thanks are due to Enotie Ogbemor, Barbara Plankenstein, Jonathan Fine, Henrietta Lidchi, and Lissant Bolton.

The arguments in this book were developed during lectures and public dialogues at a range of venues, including the Berlin International Literature Festival, CARMAH at Humboldt University Berlin, the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, MARKK Museum am Rothenbaum in Hamburg, the Edinburgh Centre for Global History, the Anthropology Department of the University of St Andrews, the University of Nanterre, Free University Amsterdam, Tübingen University, and the musée du quai Branly.

I have also learned an immense amount from an amazing community of scholars, activists and thinkers over Twitter, not least in the #BeninDisplays thread in June–July 2019, without which the analysis in Chapter 16 would have been impossible. Thank you to everyone who has helped me form the ideas for this book through that platform, especially members of @MuseumDetox, @KimAWagner, @SFKassim, @littlegaudy, @waji35, @CirajRassool, @NatHistGirl, @JuergenZimmerer, and colleagues at other British non-national museums, including Manchester, Liverpool, the Horniman, Brighton, Cambridge, Bristol, Exeter, and beyond.

Many of the ideas developed here were first explored in a series of lectures given during my Visiting Professorship at the musée du quai Branly in 2017–18, and I am grateful to the students, researchers and colleagues from whom I learned so much during that year. The opportunity of sharing platforms with Clémentine Deliss at Humboldt University in Berlin, with Hamady Bocoum and Marie-Cécile Zinsou at the Collège de France in Paris, with Kokunre Agbontaen Eghafona at Technische University in Berlin, and with Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, have all represented important opportunities to shape the ideas presented here, and I am grateful to all those who made these events possible, including Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy.

Special thanks must go to the leading scholars of Benin 1897, Felicity Bodenstein in Paris and Staffan Lundén in Stockholm, for their help and encouragement. Special thanks are also due to Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Michael Barrett, Ines de Castro, Philippe Charlier, Victor Ehikhamenor, Mark Elliott, Sandra Ferracutti, Monica Hanna, Frédéric Keck, Anne Luther, Sharon Macdonald, Sarah Mallet, Nick Mirzoeff, Wayne Modest, Chris Morton, Ciraj Rassool, Anthony Richter, Mike Rowlands, Bénédicte Savoy, Olivia Smith, Adrelele Sonariwo, Carole Souter, Jonas Tinius, Laura Van Broekhoven, Onyekachi Wambu and William Whyte, and very many more who have helped to shape this book in different ways.

The opportunity to contribute to the Symposium on Art, Law and Politics at King's College, Cambridge in March 2019, at the kind invitation of Sarah Rabinowe, Mary-Ann Middelkoop, Luise Scheidt, Honor May, and Freya Sackville-West, was also an important milestone in the development of the book.

The research for this book was supported by an Art Fund Headley Fellowship.

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A note on the black-and-white photographs interspersed in this text is necessary. They are from the album-diary of Captain Herbert Sutherland Walker (1864–1932) of the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles),

who was a Special Service Officer in the Benin Expedition. A recent accession to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, these photographs are offered without captions and copyright-free, as a reminder of the commonalities between two mnemonic regimes of taking and visuality: the taking of objects and the putting of some of these on display in museums, and the taking of photographs. This book seeks to intervene with these modes of appearance, in which taking is turned from a moment in time into an ongoing duration. The aim is to bring British colonial violence and present into view and into focus, so that we can begin the process of cultural restitution. By digging where we stand.



# 1

## The Gun That Shoots Twice



The seven-pounders are most excellent guns, as they are made to stand any amount of knocking about, and also to be mounted and dismounted in a very short space of time. They are much disliked by the natives of the country, who call them 'them gun that shoot twice' – referring to the explosion of the shells, which they consider distinctly unfair, taking place as it does so far away from the gun, and mostly unpleasantly close to themselves, when they are, as they fondly imagine, out of range.

Captain Alan Boisragon, Commandant  
of Niger Coast Protectorate Force (1897)<sup>1</sup>

Along the Niger River since 1894 Alan Boisragon had seen scores of military ‘punitive expeditions’ in the bush, with warships, Maxim machine guns, rocket launchers and Martini-Henry rifles. In the passage above, he is describing the rifled muzzle-loading mounted carriage field gun, known as a ‘seven-pounder’ because of the weight of the shell that it fired (about 3.2 kilograms), in his popular account of the military attack on Ubini<sup>2</sup> (Benin City) by Niger Coast Protectorate and Admiralty forces in February 1897. Boisragon does not record the number of casualties from the shelling of the city, of scores of surrounding town and villages, of incessant firing of machine guns and rockets into the bush, during this 18-day attack. He does not take stock of the numbers of killed and wounded soldiers and displaced people in the many, many previous ‘expeditions’ and attacks, or reflect on the extent of death and injury in the many as yet unplanned expeditions of the coming months and years, as yet unnamed: Opobo, Qua, Aro, Cross River, Niger Rivers, Patani, Kano, ‘opening up new territories’, ‘journeying into the interior’, ‘pacifications’, exacting punishment for supposed offences against civilisation.

Undetained by any question of African deaths, this description in fact came from an autobiographical adventure story, in which Alan Boisragon told of his own escape in the face of attack, one of just two survivors of the earlier supposedly peaceful expedition to the City in January 1897, during which perhaps seven (or perhaps five) Englishmen were killed, and how he and his comrade had to walk through the jungle for five days before finally returning to safety and civilisation – ready to exact a brutal revenge on his ‘barbaric’ attackers and the heart of their ‘uncivilised’ power – the so-called city of blood.<sup>3</sup>

*The Daily Mail* and *The Times* led the newspaper coverage of this *Boys’ Own* yarn of ‘massacre’ and heroism and to which the February ‘punitive expedition’ was the necessary response. A year later, the War Office was issuing medals commending soldiers described as members of ‘the squadron sent to punish the King of Benin for the massacre of the political expedition’.

This is a book about that violent sacking by British troops of the City of Benin in February 1897. It rethinks the enduring effects of this destruction in Britain today, taking stock of its place in a wider military campaign of regime change, underscoring its status as the pivotal moment in the formation of Nigeria as a British protectorate and British colony, exposing how the many ‘punitive expeditions’ were never acts of retaliation, and trying to perceive the meaning and enduring effects of the public display of royal artworks and other sacred objects looted by marines and soldiers from the Royal Court now dispersed across more than 150 known museums and galleries, plus perhaps half as many again unknown public and private collections globally – from the Met in New York to the British Museum, from Toronto to Glasgow, from Berlin to Moscow, Los Angeles, Abu Dhabi, Lagos, Adelaide, Bristol and beyond. Some of these objects have a truly immense monetary value on the open market today, selling for millions of dollars.

Objects looted from the City of Benin are on display in an estimated 161 museums and galleries in Europe and North America. Let us begin with this question: *What does it mean that, in scores of museums across the western world, a specially written museum interpretation board tells the visitor the story of the Benin Punitive Expedition?*

One of the largest of these collections of violently stolen objects, trophies of this colonial victory, is the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum – where I am Curator of World Archaeology. Are museums like the Pitt Rivers just neutral containers, custodians of a universal heritage, displaying a common global cultural patrimony to an international public of millions each year, celebrations of African creativity that radically lift up African art alongside European sculpture and painting as a universal heritage? The point of departure for this book is the idea that, for as long as they continue to display sacred and royal objects looted during colonial massacres, they will remain the very inverse of all this: hundreds of monuments to the violent propaganda of western superiority above African civilisations erected in the name of ‘race science’, littered across Europe and North America like war memorials to gain rather than to loss, devices for the construction

of the Global South as backward, institutions complicit in a prolongation of extreme violence and cultural destruction, indexes of mass atrocity and iconoclasm and ongoing degradation, legacies of when the ideology of cultural evolution, which was an ideology of white supremacy, used the museum as a tool for the production of alterity: tools still operating, hiding in plain sight.

And so this is a book about sovereignty and violence, about how museums were co-opted into the nascent project of proto-fascism through the looting of African sovereignty, and about how museums can resist that racist legacy today. It is at the same time a kind of defence of the importance of anthropology museums, as places that decentre European culture, world-views and prejudices – but only if such museums transform themselves by facing up to the enduring presence of empire, including through acts of cultural restitution and reparations, and for the transformation of a central part of the purpose of these spaces into sites of conscience. It is therefore a book about a wider British reckoning with the brutishness of our Victorian colonial history, to which museums represent a unique index, and important spaces in which to make those pasts visible.

The Pitt Rivers Museum is not a national museum, but it is a brutish museum. Along with other anthropology museums, it allowed itself to become a vehicle for a militarist vision of white supremacy through the display of the loot of so-called ‘small wars’ in Africa. The purpose of this book is to change the course of these brutish museums, to redefine them as public spaces, sites of conscience, in which to face up to the ultraviolence of Britain’s colonial past in Africa, and its enduring nature, and in which to begin practical steps towards African cultural restitution.

\* \* \*

Stand in the Court of the Pitt Rivers Museum and go up to the Lower Gallery. Walk with me to the east wall and stop in the still, dark space; the vast silent expanse of the museum is behind us and before us is a cabinet of sacred and royal objects, dimly lit, returning our gaze. Let



us step before the glass ‘in order to soak up the fugitive breath that this event has left behind’.<sup>4</sup>

Hold your phone up against the plate glass of the triple vitrine. The silence and stillness are not natural conditions for the displaced objects on display here. They are the effect of a stilling, as when detention interrupts transit, and of a fracturing, as when a shrapnel shell explodes at its target, and of a silencing, as when a gun is silenced.

The Victorian wooden case is nine feet high. There are more than a hundred objects contained within: bronze and wooden heads, brass plaques, ceremonial swords, armllets and headgear, boxes and carved ivory tusks, one burned in the fire of the sacking. The title reads: ‘Court Art of Benin’, and then an interpretation panel states:

Benin is a kingdom in Nigeria, West Africa. It has been ruled by a succession of kings known as Obas since the fourteenth century. Benin is famous for its rich artistic traditions, especially in brass-casting. In January 1897 a small party of British officials and traders on its way to Benin was ambushed. In retaliation a British military force attacked the city and the Oba was exiled. Members of the expedition brought thousands of objects back to Britain. The Oba returned to the throne in 1914 and court life began again. The artists of Benin continue to make objects for the Oba and the court, and rituals and ceremonies are still performed. The objects displayed here were made between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.

How little has changed over the decades since February 1899 when Charles Hercules Read and Ormonde Maddock Dalton, the Keeper and Senior Assistant respectively in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum introduced their catalogue *Antiquities from the City of Benin* by telling the same story of ambush and retaliation – ‘objects obtained by the recent successful expedition sent to Benin to punish the natives of that city for a treacherous massacre of a peaceful English mission’<sup>5</sup> – with the following note of explanation: