



Announcement

Symposium: Exhibiting Difficult Histories: Benin Objects and their Potential for New Forms of Representation

Date: April 19, 2024, 11 AM – 6 PM CET

Location: *Klangwerkstatt* in the Humboldt Forum, Schloßplatz 1, 10178 Berlin

Subject Fields: Museum Studies, African Art History, African History/Studies, Black History/Studies, Colonialism/Decolonization

Abstract:

The recent dynamics around restitution and the transfer of ownership have resulted, and continue to result in new ways of presenting Benin works. On the occasion of launching a newly curated part of the Benin exhibition in the Humboldt Forum, this panel focuses on the display of Benin objects in current exhibitions and their potential for new forms of representation. We bring together case studies from different museums in Germany, Britain, the US and Nigeria, all of which deal with the objects they house from their very own situatedness.

Together with our guests, we investigate museum strategies of exhibiting: Which forms of representation do they adopt to historicize the collections? How do they aim to incorporate a polyphony of voices in their exhibitions? Which role does modern and contemporary art play in newly curated Benin exhibitions?

This event gives us the chance to deepen the connections between academia and museums on a national as well as international level. As a learning and process-oriented institution, we are interested to critically examine our own process of exhibiting and to do so together with our guests.

Friday, 19 April 2024

11:00 AM – 11:15 AM **Welcoming Remarks**

Prof. Dr. Lars-Christian Koch, Director of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin
Prof. Dr. Alexis von Poser, Deputy Director

11:15 AM – 11:30 AM **Introduction**

Dr. Verena Rodatus, Curator of the Collections West and Southern Africa
Maria Ellendorff M.A., Deputy Curator

11:30 AM – 12:30 PM **Annie Coombes: Engaging Histories, Envisaging Futures**

12:30 PM – 1:30 PM **Lunch Break**

1:30 PM – 2:30 PM **Staffan Lundén: On the 'Benin Bronzes', Hamilton's pajamas, Powis's mother and the Potentials for New Forms of Representation**



- 2:30 PM – 3:30 PM **Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona: Indigenous Exhibition of Benin Cultural Objects in Reviewing the Display of ‘Benin Bronzes’ in Nigeria, Europe, and America**
- 3:30 PM – 4:00 PM **Break and Refreshments**
- 4:00 PM – 5:00 PM **Tukufu Zuberi: Colonial, Neocolonial, & Decolonial Projects: African Material Culture**
- 5:00 PM – 6:00 PM **Wrap Up by the Discussant**
Jamie Dau M.A., Provenance Researcher at the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen

Moderators: Dr. Verena Rodatus, Maria Ellendorff, Dr. Gitti Salami
All 30-min lectures are followed by the discussant’s response and Q & A.

Invited Guests Lecturers:

Prof. Dr. Annie E. Coombes is Emerita Professor of Material and Visual Culture at Birkbeck, University of London and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. In 1994 Coombes wrote a first book (*Reinventing Africa*) to analyse the histories of the 1897 looting and subsequent sale and display of Edo material culture from Benin City. Her subsequent research focuses on colonial histories, their legacies in the present and the tensions involved in memorialising such violent histories in the public domain (in Britain, South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria). She writes about monuments, museums, processes and practices of memorialisation and about contemporary artists whose work expands our understanding of the affect, and the epistemic and actual violence of colonialism.

Her award-winning books include *Reinventing Africa: Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian Society* (Yale 1994) and *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Duke 2003). She is co-editor (with Ruth B. Phillips) of *Museum Transformations: Decolonization and Democratisation* (Blackwells 2019).

Dr. Staffan Lundén is a Research Associate at the Department of Conservation at the University of Gothenburg. His research focuses on how museums deal with objects of violent provenance. His doctoral dissertation *Displaying Loot: The Benin objects and the British Museum* (University of Gothenburg 2016) took as its point of departure the British Museum’s collection of objects looted in Benin City (present-day Nigeria) in 1897. He is currently working on the research project, *Dealing with Difficult Pasts: A Comparative Study of Benin Exhibitions in Britain, Germany, Nigeria, and the USA*.

His latest articles include “Looting and learning. Teaching about the illicit antiquities trade and professional responsibility in higher Education,” in *International Journal of Cultural Property* (2023) and “Ancestor Worship and War Booty at the British Museum,” in *Danske Museer* (2016).



Prof. Dr. Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona is a Professor of Anthropology at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the University of Benin. She is a graduate of the University of Benin, University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria at Nsukka and New York University. In her doctoral thesis *Curating Benin Cultural Materials: Towards Integrating Indigenous and Orthodox Methods* (University of Nigeria, 2001), she investigates and highlights the indigenous curatorial, conservation, and exhibition practices of the Benin people during the pre-colonial era, drawing out similarities with contemporary museum practices. She is a Principal Investigator of the Digital Benin Project and an academician in the Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences at the Vatican.

Agbontaen-Eghafona has published extensively on Benin culture and tradition. Her latest publications are: “From Oba Oranmiyan to Oba Ewuare II and The Guilds of Benin: Artefacts, Antiquities and Art,” both in *The Benin Monarchy: An Anthology of Benin History* (2018).

Prof. Dr. Tukufu Zuberi is the Lasry Family Professor of Race Relations, and Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He is dedicated to bringing topics of Race, African and African Diaspora populations to the public using various platforms such as guest lectures at universities, television programs, and interactive social media. He curated several exhibitions and created films about the major museums in the United States for the hit series *PBS History Detectives*. His latest exhibition was the redesign of the Penn Museum Africa Gallery *AFRICA GALLERIES: from MAKER TO MUSEUM* in 2019.

His publications include a wide range of articles, monographs and exhibition catalogues such as: *Africa Independence: How Africa Shapes the World* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2015), *Maker to Museum* (Penn Museum, forthcoming in December 2024).

Attendance:

Interested parties may follow online via the [meeting link](#) or attend in person.

The Symposium takes place in the *Klangwerkstatt* in the Humboldt Forum, which is (wheelchair) accessible via the *Schlüterhof*.

Registration:

To attend the symposium in person, please register for the event by sending an email to G.Salami@smb.spk-berlin.de and include the word “Symposium” in the subject field. Please note that seating is limited.