

DIGITAL BENIN

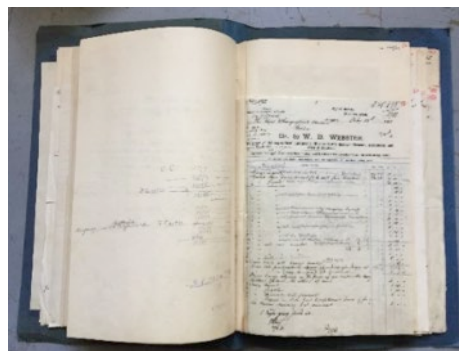
RECONNECTING ROYAL ART TREASURES



Relief plaque: King with two dignitaries

C2897; 16th/ 17th century

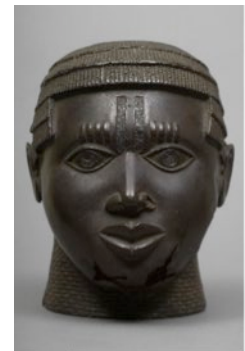
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Correspondence

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Ethnologisches Museum/ Jonathan Fine



Commemorative Head

15th-16th century

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for Museums and
Monuments Nigeria

Hamburg, April 16, 2020 - With the support of the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) in Hamburg is opening an international project office to digitally unite the globally dispersed works of art from the former Kingdom of Benin. As an unparalleled forum of knowledge, Digital Benin will, within the next two years, bring together object data and related documentation material from collections worldwide and provide the long-requested overview of the royal artworks looted in the 19th century. The aim is to create a well-founded and sustainable catalogue of the artworks and their history, cultural significance and provenance. The Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung finances the project of German, Nigerian, European and American experts with more than 1.2 million euros. The launch of the website is planned for 2022.

The colonial occupation of the Kingdom of Benin (now Edo State, Nigeria) by British troops in February 1897 led to a worldwide dispersal of an estimated 3000 to 5000 objects plundered from the Royal Palace and other ceremonial sites. These works of art made of bronze, ivory and wood, often referred to as „Benin bronzes“, are in the focus of public debate on the restitution of colonial heritage. Prospective restitutions can contribute to mitigate the tragic loss of local knowledge and cultural values, but there is also a need to make existing knowledge resources accessible. An overview of the once coherent complexes of objects and the information available to date, which is distributed across a multitude of institutions, will provide a more comprehensive picture of the significance of these outstanding art treasures.

The Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung is now funding the Digital Benin project with more than 1.2 million Euros. Under the leadership of Prof Barbara Plankensteiner (Director MARKK), a core team consisting of Dr Felicity Bodenstein (Lecturer in Heritage Studies, Sorbonne Université Paris), Dr Jonathan Fine (Head, Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz) and Dr Anne Luther (Expert for Digital Humanities) in cooperation with object specialists and scholars from Nigeria, Europe and the US, will create a digital platform within the next two years, which will bring together all Benin holdings worldwide, historical photographs, archival materials, eyewitness accounts, publications and oral traditions and create an internationally accessible information catalogue. The online presence is intended to link local knowledge with historical and recent research findings and include contemporary interpretations of ritual practice as well as artistic perspectives. Digital Benin will provide access to information on the history, cultural significance and provenance of the works not only for academic research purposes, but will also be available to the general public. It will play an important role in promoting further research, especially by Nigerian scholars, who have been disadvantaged because of the inaccessibility of the material in European and American museums and archives.

The online platform compiles data from the diverse national and international museum databases that currently hold Benin works in their collections. The different data and information are brought together through a user-friendly interface to illustrate and informatively present the textual and visual material. At the same time, the platform will offer specialists a digital tool. The technical team will use new digital methods and media approaches to develop a data feed for the platform, which can serve as a model for internationally networked cooperation in the museum sector and the digital merging of other collections in the future. The Royal Museum in Benin City, which is currently being founded, is to become the main provider of this online resource in the future. The language will be English, relevant terminology in the Edo language will be included.

The Digital Benin project is being developed in close cooperation with the Benin Dialogue Group, which includes the Royal Court of Benin, the Edo State Government, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria and all European museums with important Benin collections. The project application was preceded by a two-day workshop in October 2019. A group of 18 international experts from Nigeria, the UK, the US, Sweden, the Netherlands, France and Germany discussed the project's development and challenges at the Museum am Rothenbaum in Hamburg. In a first step, the partner institutions of the Benin Dialogue Group will provide data on their Benin holdings. This material of an estimated 2000 objects will provide a solid foundation for the further expansion of the platform by integrating additional data from American and other collections.



Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Preußischer Kulturbesitz



The project is supported by the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung



DIGITAL BENIN

Facts & Figures

Project Name	DIGITAL BENIN – Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures
Preparatory Phase	Since Autumn 2018
Project Start	Autumn 2020
Website	www.digitalbenin.org
Project Duration	Two Years
Project Objective	Digital consolidation of Benin's worldwide scattered holdings on one website with data sets and interaction possibilities.
Project Phases	
Phase 1:	Data collection, creation of an institution catalogue, typology of digital availability
Phase 2:	Development of prototypes for data merging and interface
Phase 3:	Beta testing focus group, documentation code and development, release
Funding	Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung with more than 1.2 million Euros
Core Team	Prof Barbara Plankensteiner, Director Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg Dr Jonathan Fine, Head, Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz Dr Felicity Bodenstern, Lecturer in Heritage Studies Sorbonne Université Paris Dr Anne Luther, Information Technology Consultant
Project Partners	Prof Kokunre Agbontaen Eghafona, University Benin City Members of the Steering Committee of the Benin Dialogue Group: HRH Prince Gregory, Enogie of Evbobanosa The British Museum, London National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria and all further members of the Benin Dialogue Group
Development and Design of the online platform	Behavior/time (behaviorvertime.org)
Staff	1 research assistant and 1 developer in Hamburg 2 research assistants in Benin City 1 Information Technology Consultant, 2 Developer/Designer in USA
Methods	Semi-automated data aggregation through APIs and manual data collection. For the first time, data from Benin's collections will be collected and merged directly from museum databases.
Central Coordination	Museum am Rothenbaum - Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Hamburg
Future Main Carrier	Royal Museum, Benin City (in formation)

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Statements on the Project



Benin Dialogue Group meeting in Benin City, Edo State, 9 July 2019

Edo State Governor, Mr. Godwin Obaseki (middle, front row); Commissioner for Justice and Attorney General, Prof Yinka Omorogbe (3rd left, front row), with members of the Benin Dialogue Group, stakeholders and officials of the state government



HRH Prince Gregory, Enogie of Evbobanosa:

“Digital Benin is in my view a welcome initiative and we must commend the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung for the support. For decades we have asked to receive an overview over the scattered Benin holdings worldwide. Finally this is going to happen. The Digital Benin online platform will be a huge asset for all Edo people interested in their history and heritage. Particularly the vision to tie it to the future Royal Museum in Benin City will enhance that unique project internationally.”



Martin Hoernes, Secretary General Ernst von Kunststiftung

„The Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung has long supported the creation of museum collection catalogues. This project is more ambitious than any of its predecessors, since the unique holdings are distributed among numerous museums, many of them in Germany. The funding is intended to provide the long-missed overview of Benin’s art scattered in 1897, to make the beauty and quality of the works accessible to all interested parties, including those from Nigeria, and to facilitate international research. My wish is that this project adds a more factual focus to the discussions about restitution, in providing a reliable basis for the assessment of the holdings, and promotes a non-confrontational exchange and cooperation among all colleagues interested in Benin’s art - an approach that is also cultivated in the Benin Dialogue Group.”



Carsten Brosda, Minister of Culture and Media Hamburg

„With the agreement for dealing with collection objects from colonial contexts, the Federal Government, the Länder and the local authorities in Germany have faced up to their responsibility and created a basis for the future handling and return of cultural objects. Dialogue and transparency are the prerequisites for the responsible handling of collection items from colonial contexts. As an internationally networked platform, Digital Benin will represent a milestone in the digital reappraisal of globally interwoven colonial history. I am pleased that the project is being coordinated from Hamburg until the Royal Museum in Benin City, which is currently being founded, can take over the main sponsorship of the project.“



Barbara Plankensteiner, Director MARKK

„The Hamburg Museum am Rothenbaum is the ideal location for this project. Hamburg's world port was an important nodal point for the transfer of a large number of Benin objects to Germany and continental Europe. In the aftermath of the British invasion, commercial agents from Hamburg and German emissaries played a major role in the distribution of the precious works. The research interests of Hamburg museum scholars in turn sparked the collecting mania in Germany. It is therefore consequential to launch a collaborative online resource here for a new culture of cooperation and knowledge generation.“



Anne Luther, Information Technology Consultant

„Bringing together information on Benin works that have been scattered internationally is a challenge on the digital level, as each museum has developed its own strategies and methods for collecting and providing information. This means that there is no uniform data structure, work description, visual material and/or publicly accessible provenance of the objects. The international technical team will take up this complex challenge and develop an applicable method to link international museum data. Only in the last few years museums started to publish their data and at this time there is no comparable online platform that collects museum data directly from museum databases through data interfaces (APIs). The technical team will specialize in the new possibilities and work closely with museums to generate a robust data feed that will set an example for international, data-based projects in the museum context in the future. Digital Benin is at the forefront of digital museum collaboration and linking, both on the content level and on the technical level.“



Felicity Bodenstein, Lecturer in Heritage Studies, Sorbonne Université Paris

„The Digital Benin project will be important in fostering much needed new methodologies and networks of expertise for provenance research on colonial collections. Their histories offer very different challenges in terms of sources and documentation in comparison to what has long been practiced in the field of provenance work on the Second World War and which, due to lack of means, has long tended to be carried out on a case by case basis only in the context of specific institutions. The uniqueness of the project will be to undertake provenance research across ethnographic museums at an international scale that is unprecedented. Also, it is key to note that the need to trace object trajectories and the desire to recreate a Benin collection digitally is not intended as a means of glossing over what was lost but will on the contrary be used to evaluate the extent of that loss: in terms of both the objects and the knowledge related to them.“

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Jonathan Fine, Head, Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz

„Digital Benin shows an exciting new way in which different actors and institutions - including MARKK, various partner institutions in Nigeria, the Benin Dialogue Group and the Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin - can bring their expertise together. For the first time ever, this groundbreaking project enables an understanding of the immense treasures that were scattered around the world as a result of the plundering of Benin in 1897, in their overall context. On the one hand, lost knowledge about the artifacts from Benin can be rediscovered, and on the other, completely new insights into these extraordinary works of art can be gained.“



Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, Professor of Cultural Anthropology, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

„Digital Benin is a commendable, timely, impressive and most welcome project which offers the Benin/Edo and Nigerian people the access to their looted heritage. For researchers working on Benin studies and material culture, the project opens new and multiple vistas for research ideas, connections and collaborations by providing an exclusive and sustainable source of the Benin collections in different museums.“



Edith Ekunke, Director of Museums for the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria

„I am very much looking forward to the realization of Digital Benin, which will finally bring together all Benin collections and provide the much needed overview worldwide and allow for museum professionals in Nigeria to do the relevant research. The Benin works of art is an integral exceptional part of Africa’s cultural heritage and we have long demanded a more direct online access to these collections. Digital Benin is a meaningful tool to gain new insights and broaden our knowledge of the missing fragments of this great heritage.“



Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum

„Digital Benin is an exciting project and the British Museum is delighted to be involved. Objects and archival material from the Benin collections are available via the Museum’s online database but this project will allow all Benin collections across museums in Nigeria, Europe and the US to be accessed and searched centrally. This collaboration will not only enable us all to learn more about these important collections but will also provide an important forum for further dialogue and exchange around these collections.“



Stijn Schoonderwoerd, Executive Director National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden

„As a museum actively committed to the consideration of questions of return of cultural objects, we support this initiative. It will deepen our understanding of how the looted collections from Benin City were distributed throughout European museum collections. This allows us to take our responsibility for our part in this shared difficult past further and will help us to work on possible future developments in our co-operation with Nigerian colleagues. We are confident that it will show the great potential of digital databases as a means to inform questions of ownership and return through commitment to access, combining expertise, knowledge and experience from a variety of sources.“

We will gladly arrange interviews with the project partners.

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