

Presseinformation

Museum am Rothenbaum

Rothenbaumchaussee 64 | 20148 Hamburg
Germany | markk-hamburg.de

Benin. Looted History

From December 17, 2021

Press viewing (mostly in German) December 16, 2021 | 11 am, Registration:

presse@markk-hamburg.de

Opening: December 16, 2021 | 7 pm



Commemorative Head of an Oba uhunmwun elao

Unknown workshop of the Igun Eronmwon bronze foundry guild, Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, 19th century, brass

Coll. Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg, C2340 © MARKK

In the exhibition, *Benin. Looted History*, the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) honours its Benin collection and makes the collection, in its entirety, accessible to the public. The presentation allows visitors to participate in the ongoing process of returning the artefacts and sheds light on both the history of origin and the outstanding artistic quality of the works, as well as their significance in African art and cultural history. In particular, it traces the collection's connection to Hamburg's trade networks.

Colonial History & Restitution

The violent colonial subjugation of the Kingdom of Benin (now Edo State, Nigeria) by British troops in February 1897 marked the end of one of the most powerful West African kingdoms. One of the consequences was the worldwide distribution of 3 to 5,000 objects looted from the royal palace. About 170 of them are now in the MARKK. The works, made of bronze, ivory and wood - often grouped together under the term "Benin bronzes" - are to be restituted, along with holdings from other German museums to Benin City starting next year. Preparation for the restitution began in April of this year together with the Nigerian partners and representatives of the federal and state governments. At the same time, the MARKK's digital knowledge platform, Digital Benin, which is funded by the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, will provide a worldwide overview of the looted artworks by the end of 2022.

Weitere Medieninformationen und Bildmaterial:

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MARKK
MUSEUM AM ROTHENBAUM
Kulturen und Künste der Welt

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Iconic art

The high artistic quality of the Benin bronzes is recognized worldwide. At the same time, the artworks highlight the colonial exploitation of the African continent by Europeans. Benin City is now a vibrant art centre in Nigeria and many contemporary artists deal with the devastating loss of their cultural heritage in their artworks. The (art-)historical significance and identity-forming role of the works will be examined from different perspectives in the exhibition. In this way, an understanding of the importance of the return to Nigeria is awakened. Additionally, an awareness of how significant African art is for an understanding of the history of mankind is created. The exhibition examines the court art of Benin and simultaneously refutes the racist notion of the superiority and uniqueness of European art.

Hamburg

The port of Hamburg was a key gateway for the transfer of Benin works to Germany as well as their trade in Europe. After the looting by British colonial troops in 1897, agents of Hamburg trading houses and German shipmen were instrumental in the distribution of the artefacts. The interest of Hamburg museums in these previously unknown works in turn fuelled the collecting mania in Germany. These interconnections are explained and illustrated in the exhibition.

In the exhibition

The collection is presented in its entirety for the first time in over 100 years, including fragments and small objects, as well as three important works that were transferred from the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe to the MARKK collection this year. It also brings together historical photographs, contemporary works, and present-day voices from Benin City. The complete presentation of the collection aims to provide transparency nationally and internationally, offer insight into the ongoing restitution process, and, together with the accompanying publication to be published next year, contribute to the scholarly indexing and final appreciation of the holdings in Hamburg.

With financial support from the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, the Hubertus Wald Stiftung, the Herbert-Pumplün-Stiftung, and the Freunde des Museums am Rothenbaum. Provenance research was supported by the German Lost Art Foundation.