Press release

DIGITAL BENIN

Mellon Foundation supports expansion of Digital Benin with Million-Euro grant

Additional honor by the "Apollo Award for Digital Innovation of the Year 2023"

Hamburg, November 23, 2023: Thanks to a grant of 2.6 million euros from the Mellon Foundation, the knowledge platform Digital Benin will be expanded into an open source tool that will be available to other platforms worldwide for recording cultural heritage.

Prof. Barbara Plankensteiner, Director of the **Museum am Rothenbaum – World Cultures and Arts (MARKK)** in Hamburg, initiated the project and presented Digital Benin to the global public in November 2022 together with the project partners from Benin City, France, Austria and the USA. The **digitalbenin.org** platform consolidates and makes accessible to a general public the art treasures from the Kingdom of Benin, which were looted in the late 19th century and subsequently scattered around the world. **131 museums and institutions from 20 countries** contributed **5,246 objects**. The project partner in Nigeria is the **Institute for Benin Studies** with **Prof. Dr. Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona**.

Prof. Barbara Plankensteiner: "Thanks to the generous support of the Mellon Foundation, the Digital Benin platform can be further developed to technically function as a template for other collection and knowledge contexts around the world and as a significant, expandable tool for future research. Since the launch of Digital Benin, we have received many requests from scholars and stakeholders, who would like to digitally consolidate and make accessible for research object collections and archival materials from formerly colonized societies, whose cultural heritage is currently scattered in museums across the world. This will now be facilitated and will increase accessibility and open up new research opportunities in the field of cultural heritage in the future."

From 2020 to 2023, the **Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation** funded the innovative Digital Benin knowledge platform with over 1.5 million euros. "The trust in the ambitious digital consolidation of the treasures of the historic Kingdom of Benin was absolutely worth the effort," says **Dr. Martin Hoernes**, Secretary General of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation. The **Gerda Henkel Foundation** has also supported digitization measures in Nigeria as part of Digital Benin with 25,000 euros.

In December 2023, the new project phase funded by the Mellon Foundation will continue with the 7 members of the core team in an international collaboration between Dr. Anne Luther, Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhator-Obogie, Eiloghosa Obobaifo, Dr. Felicity Bodenstein, Ermeline de la Croix, Imogen Coulson, Dimitri Muller and Studio Calibro.

The Mellon Foundation is the largest supporter of the arts and humanities in the United States. The foundation is based in New York and coordinates the awarding of grants on six continents. For more information, visit **mellon.org**.

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The Digital Benin project was also recognized for its achievements and innovative approaches on November 22, 2023 in London with the prestigious **"Apollo Award for Digital Innovation of the Year 2023"**

Further press information on the Digital Benin knowledge platform, funding from the Mellon Foundation and the Apollo Award at https://markk-hamburg.de/presse/

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KNOWLEDGE FOR SERVICE

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Digital Benin is winner of the "Apollo Award for Digital Innovation of the Year 2023"

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Background information

DIGITAL BENIN

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Current Achievements funded by the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation

digitalbenin.org is a digital platform that unites all identified historical objects from collections worldwide to provide the most accurate **overview of the royal artifacts from Benin Kingdom looted in the late nineteenth century.** Digital Benin associates the objects and their data with historical photographs and rich documentary material and is not only enabling all interested Edo in Nigeria and in the diaspora all over the world to gain an overview of their cultural heritage, but is also allowing scholars and an interested public to gain new insights.

Over the past 3 years an international **core research and technology team of 9 current, 5 alumni members, 5 Principal Investigators and 10 consultants collaborated in a remote setting in Nigeria, in Europe, and in the US** with over **131 institutions in 20 countries** to bring together this rich digital heritage. This first project phase was generously funded by the German **Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation with 1.5 mio euros and the Gerda Henkel Foundation with 25,000 euros.**

Digital Benin is hosted by the **Museum am Rothenbaum – World Cultures and Arts (MARKK)** in Hamburg, Germany and partners with the Institute for Benin Studies (IBS) in Benin City. The MARKK (founded in 1871) is the second largest museum of world cultures and arts in Germany. It promotes the appreciation for and knowledge of the cultures and arts of the world. Through exhibitions, events and research, it provides spaces for cultural encounters and critical reflection. Founded in an era of colonial power imbalance, the museum today aims to question traditional certainties and encourages global citizenship through cooperation and in an atmosphere of respect, openness and empathy.

The **Institute for Benin Studies** (IBS), a partner of Digital Benin in Benin City, is a registered non-profit and non-government organization dedicated to the study and documentation of the history, culture and ethical values of Edo-speaking people and of Nigeria in general. The IBS connected Digital Benin with their expansive network in the Edo community in Nigeria and in the diaspora for research that has been brought onto the platform; as well, members serve as a critical peer review group of experts in History, Anthropology, Linguistics and other fields relevant to the study of the Benin objects. The support of experts in Benin City is bound to the staff and resources at the IBS and is the only publicly accessible non-profit institution in place allowing all interested people (scholars and a general public alike) to research or inform themselves about Benin history and culture.

Digital Benin is a prototype for data exploration in museums worldwide. As of June 2022, the Digital Benin project team received digital material from **131 institutions in 20 countries including over 400 datasets and more than 12000 2D and 20 3D images**. The project team built a translation layer that connects these data and creates a new approach to connecting museum data internationally. Digital Benin demonstrates the potential for building new tools and gaining innovative insight into institutions and the knowledge they produce. The uniqueness of transferred data

from 20 countries worldwide in the original data structure makes it possible to develop tools and research that can be used, utilized and adapted by digital projects in the cultural heritage space.

At the same time, the digital platform generates an online archive that is constantly evolving in the following way: Digital Benin comprehensively documents the known historic Benin objects that were looted at the end of the 19th century and are currently held in museums outside, and throughout, Nigeria. For the first time in over 125 years, it is possible to access object groups in their designated Edo language (which itself makes a significant contribution to communicating and disseminating knowledge about an outstanding chapter of African art and cultural history to a broad, interested audience). The evolving research and development that results from this novel digital archive gives the opportunity to study the objects, their iconography and context, or their uses, that had not been possible before. The assemblage of these objects in one digital platform fosters new and surprising insights.

Extension by the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation and Gerda Henkel Stiftung (2022-2023)

By the end of November 2023, Digital Benin will include an **Archive and Interactive Contributions in the Oral History page**. The Archive will give access to **4,939 documents in 46 institutions** as a pivotal expansion to the object catalog. Just as the historic Benin objects are dispersed across institutions globally, so are the relevant archival materials. Although not comprehensive, these documents are identified and brought together by Digital Benin, and selected for their relevance to the study of the historic objects and the history of the Benin Kingdom. Visual Research Tools allow the users to explore provenance names, objects in archival material and more to give a distant view and the possibility to dive deeper into the assembled materials on the platform. The interactive videos show the functionality and significance of historic objects from Benin Kingdom as archival documentation of stories and historic events. The objects that are referenced in the videos as archival evidence are linked to show a learning experience about the various aspects of Benin traditions and important historical trajectories.

Digital Benin photographed over 300 historic objects in the NCMM in Lagos and Benin with a team of photographers, museum staff and researchers in 2023. The images will be included in the catalog on Digital Benin. Over 23 institutions have submitted new or edited data to Digital Benin after the launch of the platform, with new digitization and research due to the launch of the platform.

Mellon Foundation extension (starting December 2023)

No other digital museum project brings together over 400 data structures in its original format from 131 institutions in 20 countries, having implications for other global digital museum collections projects. This unique data collection allows the development of new knowledge and software tools in the international museum context. The extension of the project between 2023-2026 is therefore defined by (1) a **sustainable and accessible online archive of objects and associated documentary material** – historic photography, documents, local knowledge – (the majority has been accumulated in the first three years of the project), (2) defining and executing **new research** that was only now possible based on the data acquisition and the generated online archive and (3) the **development of new software tools and guidelines for the field of cultural heritage**. Digital Benin is planning to develop open source tools for the wider cultural heritage field to allow the call of many communities to build a data accumulation platform like Digital Benin that

strengthens and enables a recontextualization of objects in their place of origin. The extension received **2.6 mio euros for three years and will begin in December 2023**.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (in short Mellon Foundation)

is the largest supporter of the arts and humanities in the United States. The Mellon Foundation supports work in higher education, the humanities, the arts, and cultural heritage and conservation since 1969. With a commitment to social justice through all our grantmaking, the foundation's mission is to build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking, where ideas and imagination can thrive. Based in New York, the Foundation coordinates grantmaking on six continents with a current endowment of 8.1 billion dollars with 550 mio. dollars in a grant making budget in 2023 and a total of 18,680+ grantees since the founding. More information at **mellon.org**.

Additional honor by the "Apollo Award for Digital Innovation of the Year 2023"

Founded in 1925 and published monthly, Apollo is one of the world's oldest and most respected magazines on the visual arts. It covers everything from antiquities to contemporary work, as well as providing in-depth discussion of the latest art news and debates; exclusive interviews with the world's greatest collectors and artists; expert information on the market, authoritative guidance on collecting, and reviews and previews of exhibitions worldwide.

The Apollo Awards celebrate exceptional achievements in the art and museum worlds, commending remarkable work by individuals and institutions in both historical and contemporary fields. Since the inauguration of the Awards in 1992, Apollo has been promoting leadership in this sector and rewarding its outstanding figures.

The categories for the Apollo Awards include: Personality of the Year; Artist of the Year; Museum Opening of the Year; Book of the Year and Acquisition of the Year. The Digital Innovation of the Year award is given to an individual or organisation who are harnessing digital technology to advance access to, or knowledge of art. More information at **https://www.apollo-magazine.com/digital-innovation-shortlist-apollo-awards-2023/**.