



Stanley Museum of Art

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University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art Makes Groundbreaking Restitution of Benin Bronzes to His Majesty, the Oba of Benin

*This Marks the First Time a Museum in North America has Directly Returned Artwork
Stolen During the 1897 Massacre to the Rightful Owner.*

Benin City, Nigeria— In a historic ceremony held today at the Benin Palace, the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art returned two artworks from its collection from the Benin Kingdom, commonly referred to as Benin Bronzes, to His Majesty, Oba Ewuare II. The objects, a brass plaque and wooden altarpiece, were identified as having been looted from the Oba’s Palace during the British siege of 1897 and have been part of the museum’s collection since 2001 and 1986, respectively.

The ceremony was held in the Benin Palace and attended by the Oba and representatives from the Benin Royal Court and the Stanley Museum of Art. The Oba personally extended a formal invitation to the Stanley Museum of Art team to be a part of this historic occasion. Remarks were made by Dr. Cory Gundlach, curator of African art at the Stanley, and Dr. Peju Layiwola, Mellon curatorial fellow at the Stanley.

“The violence and loss associated with these objects can never be forgotten,” said Dr. Gundlach, “The Stanley Museum of Art is committed to acknowledging this tragic chapter in history and using it as a catalyst for positive change.”

“Today, we are taking a step towards healing a historical wound and building a new relationship based on respect and trust,” said Lauren Lessing, director at the Stanley Museum of Art. “We hope that the return of these artworks to His Majesty sets a precedent for other museums to follow.”

The museum’s journey towards restitution began in 2020 with the creation of a dedicated provenance research position supported by the Stanley-University of Iowa Support Organization and the University of Iowa’s Office of International Programs. Through this initiative, museum

staff and student researcher, Mason Koelm, traced the objects to the British siege of the Oba's Palace in 1897. This discovery sparked further research and collaboration with Dr. Layiwola, a leading scholar on African art restitution, and ultimately, with Prince Aghatise Erediauwa of the Benin Royal Court. In 2022, members of the museum's Collections Committee and Advisory Board voted to formally deaccession the two objects from the collection, which then became works on loan to the museum from the Oba of Benin.

In his speech at today's ceremony, Dr. Gundlach remarked, "The museum used these objects to teach with the assumption that the open art market provides an equal opportunity for everyone to acquire anything, and with the conviction that American institutions are immune to colonial complications specific to European nations that once occupied Africa." Dr. Gundlach also expressed his hope for future collaboration and potentially hosting the Oba for a visit.

During opening remarks, Dr. Layiwola said, "Today, the Benin bronzes are forging a new kind of cordial relationship between the Stanley Museum of Art, the Benin Royal Palace and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM)."

In 2019, The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) began creating guidelines for looted African art in American museum collections. The Stanley Museum of Art charted a different course, led by Dr. Gundlach's belief that the Benin Bronzes belonged directly to the royal family. While other museums pursued repatriation to the Nigerian government, the Stanley persevered in seeking restitution to the Oba. In 2021, Dr. Layiwola paved the way for direct talks with the royal family by connecting the Stanley with Prince Aghatise Erediauwa, which proved to be a turning point in the museum's pursuit to return the objects directly.

"When the museum contacted me nearly three years ago about their intention, I had no inkling about how committed they were to this cause," Dr. Layiwola said, "I have chosen to work with them because the Stanley Museum of Art has high ethical standards, and today's event is a testament to their transparency."

By 2023, a Presidential Declaration affirmed the Oba's ownership of Benin artworks, upending the plans of many museums to work with the government. The Stanley, having built a direct relationship with the Royal family, found itself well-positioned as a leader in ethical restitution—a position strengthened by a generous grant from the Mellon Foundation in support of provenance research and restitution efforts at the Stanley.

"I am very pleased to be working on this project with the Stanley Museum of Art," remarked Prince Aghatise Erediauwa, "I look forward to building our new relationship. I hope that this visit from Dr. Cory Gundlach and Dr. Peju Layiwola to the Oba of Benin opens the door to many more restitutions from American museums directly to the Royal Court of Benin."

"This historic restitution of the Benin Bronzes highlights the transformative role that educational institutions can play in fostering global understanding and cultural exchange," said Kevin Kregel, executive vice president and provost at the University of Iowa. "By returning these cultural treasures, the University of Iowa's Stanley Museum of Art has demonstrated its commitment to ethical stewardship and set a powerful example for other museums to follow."

The return of the Benin Bronzes is not just about the objects themselves, but about a broader movement towards redressing colonial injustices. The Stanley Museum of Art hopes this act inspires other institutions in the United States to examine their collections and join in the critical work of restitution and reconciliation.

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About the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art

The University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art is a leading university art museum that serves as a focal point for members of the public as well as a multi-disciplinary tool and creative hub for students across campus. Striving to provide relevant, thought-provoking experiences, the museum cultivates experimentation as an innovative teaching and learning resource for the university and beyond.

The Stanley has one of the most important university-owned art collections in the country, including significant holdings of African art, 20th-century painting and sculpture, works on paper, textiles and ceramics. Their world-class collection of modern and contemporary art began with university acquisitions made in the 1930s to support the nation's first Master of Fine Arts program and the belief that students should learn from the best art of their time. The collection continued to evolve as generations of University of Iowa faculty and students, including Grant Wood, Elizabeth Catlett, Mauricio Lasansky, Miriam Schapiro, Philip Guston, Hans Breder, Ana Mendieta and Oliver Lee Jackson, shaped the field of American art.

The strength of the Stanley's African collection lies in The Stanley Collection of African Art, which entered the museum through bequests from Max and Betty Stanley in 1979, 1986 and 1990. The internationally recognized collection consists primarily of wooden masks and figures that are highly representative of a canonical style sought out by American and European African art collectors during most of the 20th century.

For more information, visit stanleymuseum.uiowa.edu.

About the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is the largest supporter of the arts and humanities in the United States. Since 1969, the Foundation has been guided by its core belief that the humanities and arts are essential to human understanding. The Foundation believes that the arts and humanities are where we express our complex humanity, and that everyone deserves the beauty, transcendence and freedom that can be found there. Through our grants, we seek to build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking, where ideas and imagination can thrive. Learn more at mellon.org.

Images and Description

Images are for press use only. All reproductions must be accompanied by the given captions, with the credit line, "**Image courtesy Oba Ewuare II.**" Images cannot be cropped, altered or overlaid with any text.

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Plaque

Benin Kingdom (Edo) style

16th - 17th century

Brass

11 1/2 x 9 3/4 x 3/4 in. (29.21 x 24.77 x 1.91 cm)

Image Courtesy Oba Ewuare II

The brass plaque (called *ama* in Edo language) depicts a high-ranking officer from the Benin Court. Shown in relief before the schematic rendering of flora, he wears a woven cap, beaded sash over the shoulder, a leopard-face pendant on the hip, and a ceremonial sword (*eben*) in one hand.



Hen

Benin Kingdom (Edo) style

Before 1897

Wood, iron

19 x 8 x 11 in. (48.26 x 20.32 x 27.94 cm)

Image Courtesy Oba Ewuare II

Probably created as an altarpiece devoted to maternal ancestors in the Benin Kingdom, this wooden hen figure (*iyekhokho*) represents a hen with a densely textured surface. Patterns on the bird represent feathers, and designs on the base refer to Igbesanmwan, the Oba's wood and ivory carver's guild. The cylindrical point rising from the back may have been created to support an elephant tusk or a wooden object representing one.



Palace Dignitaries carrying the Benin Bronzes during the restitution ceremony. Photo by Omoregie Osakpolor. Image courtesy Stanley Museum of Art.



His Majesty, Oba Ewuare II, holds up the brass plaque presented to him by Dr. Cory Gundlach (right) during the restitution ceremony at the Royal Palace. Photo by Omoregie Osakpolor. Image courtesy Stanley Museum of Art.



Dr. Peju Layiwola, accompanied by court officials, taking the returned objects into the inner chambers of the palace for the Oba's wives and other family members to see. Photo by Omoregie Osakpolor. Image courtesy Stanley Museum of Art.



Court Officials and Stanley Museum of Art staff pose with Oba Ewuare II in the Royal Palace. Photo by Omoregie Osakpolor. Image courtesy Stanley Museum of Art.



Left to right: Amenaghawon Idawu; Josephine Abbe; Dr. Peju Layiwola; Prince Aghatise Erediauwa; Dr. Cory Gundlach; Mark Olaitan; Sylvester Evbodaghe. Photo by Omoregie Osakpolor. Image courtesy Stanley Museum of Art.



Dr. Cory Gundlach addresses the Oba and the Benin Royal Court during the restitution ceremony at the Royal Palace. Photo by Omoregie Osakpolor. Image courtesy Stanley Museum of Art.



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Left to right: Prince Aghatise Erediauwa, Dr. Cory Gundlach, and Dr. Peju Layiwola at the Benin Royal Palace during the restitution ceremony. Photo by Omoregie Osakpolor. Image courtesy Stanley Museum of Art.