



Berlin, 25. August 2022

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Return of Berlin Benin Bronzes**

– Check against original text in German –

### **Ownership of Berlin Benin bronzes transferred to Nigeria – a third of the works will remain on loan in Berlin - further cooperation planned**

**DER PRÄSIDENT**  
MEDIEN, KOMMUNIKATION  
UND VERANSTALTUNGEN

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Today, Hermann Parzinger, President of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (SPK), and Abba Isa Tijani, Director General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), signed the contract on the transfer of ownership of the Benin objects from the collection of the Ethnologisches Museum of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin to Nigeria. The agreement regards 512 objects which came to Berlin in the aftermath of the so-called British Punitive Expedition and looting of Benin in 1897. This is the most extensive transfer of ownership of museum objects from a colonial context to date. The first objects will be physically returned to Nigeria within this year. About a third of the transferred objects will remain on loan in Berlin for an initial period of ten years, renewable by mutual consent and will be exhibited in the Humboldt Forum.

Minister of Culture Claudia Roth states: "This return will serve as an example for all museums in Germany which hold collections from colonial contexts. I am very pleased that further agreements to return such collections will follow over the coming months. All these efforts build the foundation for further and closer cultural cooperation between Nigeria and Germany."

Hermann Parzinger, President of the SPK: "I am delighted that only weeks after the first symbolic handover of two objects, on the occasion of the signing of the political declaration on July 1, 2022 at the German Foreign Office, we have now transferred ownership of the complete Benin holdings to Nigeria. The fact that we may keep a third of the objects on long-term loan for the time being and show them in changing presentations at the Humboldt Forum in the rooms dedicated to the past and present art and culture of Benin fills us with deep gratitude and underlines the tremendous trust that has been established in the joint discussions of the past years. We have thereby laid a solid basis for long-term and multifaceted cooperation in the future. I would like to thank all those involved, in Germany and in Nigeria, for the constructive cooperation."



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On his part, Abba Isa Tijani, the Director-General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments said that: "This represents the future concerning artefacts issue; a future of collaboration among museums, a future of according respect and dignity to the legitimate requests of other nations and traditional institutions. Other museums outside Germany are hereby being called upon to emulate the Humboldt Forum. It is noteworthy and must be stated that the other German museums in line with the agreement signed on July 1, 2022 are already getting the rest of the antiquities ready for return to Nigeria."

For years, nationally and internationally, attempts have been made to find a solution for the "Benin bronzes" which, after the conquest of the Kingdom of Benin by British troops in 1897, entered into the possession of various collections worldwide. As a result of the conquest, Oba Ovonramwen, the last independent king, was exiled to Calabar, and the royal palace was looted. Thousands of objects were shipped to London as war booty and sold there. Hundreds more of the looted objects initially remained in colonial Nigeria, but subsequently found their way to European and North American museums through networks of European and African businessmen and traders. Amongst many others, the Berlin museum benefited from the colonial system and its "acquisitions" enforced by violence. Since 2010, it has been a member of the Benin Dialogue Group, in which European Museums discuss the future of Benin objects in their collections with Nigerian partners. The negotiations between Germany and Nigeria at government level which started in 2021, were brought to a conclusion with the signing of a Bilateral Political Declaration in July 2022. This declaration serves as the framework for returns of Benin-objects from all museums in Germany.

The works on loan include all types of art from Benin. Lars-Christian Koch, Director of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum for Asian Art, says: "I am grateful that we can show the outstanding art from Benin at the Humboldt Forum in all its facets. Together with our Nigerian partners, we have completely revised the originally planned presentation. We will be telling the story of the Kingdom of Benin and its conquest, and in addition to the historical objects, we will also be showing works by contemporary artists, such as films, textiles or bronze casts that are still produced today in the traditional way."

Two rooms in the Humboldt Forum are dedicated to art from the Kingdom of Benin and its history. The commemorative head of a queen mother or



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*iyoba*, a showpiece of the art of courtly Benin, will be the central object in the first room. In this room, the significance and history of the objects and their return will be explained. A video installation shows 10 persons who participated in the process. For the second room, some 30 historical objects have been selected to illustrate the full range of Benin's courtly art. They are juxtaposed with contemporary art from Nigeria that still employs traditional techniques today. An ample discussion area offers space for educational activities, workshops and discussions. The display at the Humboldt Forum has been closely coordinated with the Nigerian partners. Over the next ten years, it will be modified regularly in order to give the public an understanding of the diversity and enormous quality of historical and contemporary art from Nigeria. The Nigerian side will also be involved in shaping the education program, for example with NCMM staff members who are already in Berlin as part of a residency.

**Press Images:** <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/news-room/presse/pressebilder.html>