

## Let's talk about colonial collections and restitution

As a result of the recent Belgian debate about the desirability of a restitution of museum objects obtained in Congo during the colonial period, a number of academics, curators and heritage experts have exchanged experiences and ideas. This debate also applies to museum collections from Rwanda and Burundi, as well as from other parts of Africa and other continents.

In the hope of making a positive contribution to the debate, we propose the following:

1. It is currently impossible to organize a constructive and meaningful dialogue on the basis of legal arguments. Many museum collections were “collected” long before the emergence of legislation relating to international conflicts, human rights and the protection of cultural heritage. Today’s lack of retroactive legislation reflects the continuing power inequalities between the global north and the global south.
2. There is an unmistakable moral argument for restitution based on the fact that the vast majority of Congolese artistic heritage is located in Western museums and private collections. As a consequence most Congolese do not have access to this heritage. Since art, heritage, and history are important points of reference for emancipation and development, an eternal status quo in this regard is morally indefensible.
3. This moral argument is supported by an important historical argument. Already during the colonial period there were Congolese demands for the return of objects. During independence arguments for a complete restitution of this cultural heritage surfaced, when the Congolese pointed out the importance of controlling both natural and cultural resources. As much as some might argue that colonialism belongs to a distant past, the current location of the vast majority of Congolese art objects, despite repeated requests for restitution, proves the opposite.
4. We call for an open dialogue in which requests for restitution are received with respect and sincerity. It needs to be acknowledged that restitution is primarily about the physical return of museum objects. Digitization, loans and traveling exhibitions are also important, but should not divert attention from the main issue. Complexities or practical concerns about restitution (which collections, to whom, how, etc.) should not stand in the way of a dialogue. When necessary, laws must be changed. Paternalism must give way to respectful listening.
5. Museums need to be more transparent about the provenance data in their possession. This information must also be made accessible to non-professional researchers, particularly to Africans and to the African diaspora.
6. General guidelines with regard to the management of colonial collections should be developed for the Belgian museum sector. The work by the German Museum Association and the specialists appointed in France may serve as examples. These guidelines should be in place **within a year**.

7. A great need exists within Belgian museums and universities for more in-depth research into the exact provenance of museum objects. Following the example of research groups in neighbouring countries, Belgian authorities should make new resources available for ambitious research programmes on the provenance of collections and possible strategies for restitution. This research must be conducted in Belgium but especially in Africa. Such research units should be operational **within two years** and should lead to specific plans for restitution.

8. Museums must develop an active restitution policy with regard to human remains from Congo and other former colonies. A proactive policy is necessary: museums themselves must take initiatives to identify suitable solutions through consultation. This process should be completed **within a period of five years**.

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