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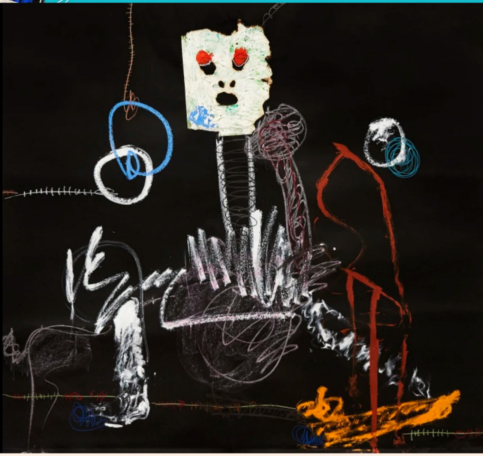
Artist Thierry Oussou: ‘If you take the king’s throne you take their place’



Two years ago the Beninois artist staged a fake dig for treasures taken by the French — now the battle for their return is on

Natalie Whittle 11 HOURS AGO

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In 2016 you planted a replica of King Béhanzin of Dahomey’s throne in Allada, southern Benin, for archaeology students to discover. What was the thinking behind this project?

The question for me has always been: how do we reappropriate our culture in the present and rewrite our own history? That was my intention when working on the replica of the throne with the sculptor Elias Boko, using the same Iroko wood as the original. I wanted the students at the University of Abomey-Calavi to collaborate with us, to bring something of their own to this project.

What is your view of art repatriation?

It’s a good thing. I am proud that the government in Benin had the courage to ask for the restitution of sculptures taken during the colonial period, and I am proud of President Emmanuel Macron’s decision last month to agree to some of these requests. This will help Beninois youth retrieve the history they had lost.

We must acknowledge this grand gesture but we can’t just be happy with simple restitution. I’d like to go further and talk about intercultural exchange. We should allow a young French person to see other international work, and a

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young Beninois to see — why not? — a Picasso in Benin.

I'm waiting to see how Benin is going to integrate these works back into society. I wouldn't want them to be made into sacred objects: they have been desacralised already. There's a discourse there that has already been erased by the coloniser, so a new discourse would need to acknowledge them as major works in a new way.

Thierry Oussou

Should all museums return artefacts taken or acquired as a consequence of colonial rule?

I can't say that all museums are going to start giving back African works. I know a museum in Geneva, the Barbier-Mueller, that has *asen* [iron altars] from Benin. Do you want them to return these objects? If I were them I would say categorically 'No'. It would be good to lend them, to allow for these works to travel at least once, for people to imbibe them a little.

An *asen* in Benin is very symbolic, it's the story of an entire generation. It would be good for young people in Benin who have never seen these works to have access to them at least once. Many can't afford to travel to France or Europe as students to see them themselves — even art historians. That's the fundamental question that I was touching on with "Impossible is Nothing" [the installation based on the 2016 dig and displayed at this year's Berlin Biennale]. You don't have access to the original? Let's do something with the copy.

If art is returned to a country, what should then happen to it?

I can say confidently that the current government in Benin will take care of these works. I trust them. I don't know about tomorrow, given politics. You wouldn't want those works to be returned to Benin for another president to sell them in 50 years' time. We have to collaborate with the Ministry of Justice to create a legal protection in the long term. People say that Benin is a poor country, that it can't take care of these works. You read a lot of things! And I don't like that. But a country wouldn't make a formal demand for restitution unless it was determined to take care of what was restored.

How does the absence of historical artefacts from their home territory affect contemporary artists' work?

Thank you for this question. As an artist, I am still young. I did some research on the throne through students and my contact at the university. A professor got in touch with the director of the Musée du quai Branly — Jacques Chirac on my behalf and asked if I could see the throne, which is held in storage.

I still haven't had a response from the director at quai Branly. So I don't have access to this sculpture. I tried to take it positively, but it still hurts. It hurts historians too, this absence. But another era is opening up. Objects may be gone but memory lingers. We can use this absence to create something new. My project was in dialogue with this. Absence can be a source of inspiration.

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Which pieces of Beninois art or history, currently held abroad, do you feel particularly strongly about?

You already have the answer to this question. You know, a king's chair is their authority. If you take the king's throne you take their place. There are other objects that have been taken away but I care more about the throne, which is testimony to King Béhanzin's stance against colonisation.

I don't think the original of the throne will be returned — it already belongs to a private collection. All I can say is that Benin will welcome those objects that are returned with great enthusiasm. As for the throne, I have already made a project out of this, which now has its place in the discourse of contemporary art. That's my way of reinserting the memory of this king into our society.

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Thierry Oussou's 'Impossible Is Nothing' (2016)

How do you view Macron's public commitment to returning artefacts?

I think Macron did something that his predecessors didn't have the courage to do. I appreciate that. Even if he had a political agenda, there is still something sincere in there. He did it publicly. Not only African youth but the world will benefit from this in the long term. So he really made history here.

Do you feel that the directors of national museums such as Musée du quai Branly share his views?

Whether or not museums share the president's opinion, they must respect his decision. Of course, it hurts to let go of parts of a collection, I can see that. But the works have been there for centuries, and maybe they want to be returned, don't you think? Quai Branly will find the right formula to collaborate with collectors and Benin. They won't lose their works, there's a partnership to be developed here.

This is an edited version of an interview translated by Elsa Court

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