

PRESS RELEASE

Magdeburg, 17 November 2021

“Dealing with our own colonial past”

The German Lost Art Foundation hosts the digital autumn conference “The Long History of Claims for the Return of Cultural Heritage from Colonial Contexts”

The debate around the return of cultural goods to former colonial regions is highly topical – and at the same time much older than most assume. In the digital autumn conference “The Long History of Claims for the Return of Cultural Heritage from Colonial Contexts” from 17 to 19 November 2021 in cooperation with Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Research Center for Material Culture of the National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands, the German Lost Art Foundation investigates the long history of claims for restitution of cultural goods and human remains from colonised countries.

The conference will systematically review the demands for a return of cultural heritage presented to European colonial powers by individuals and sometimes communities – e.g. from Namibia, New Zealand, Ethiopia, and Peru – since the nineteenth century. 500 participants have already registered to take part in the event. For many decades, however, returns remained the exception:

“The demands for restitution go back a long time and still often remain unanswered until today. This demonstrates the importance of finding sensible and transparent solutions for the approach to cultural goods and collections from colonial contexts”, as Gilbert Lupfer stated, executive board of the German Lost Art Foundation. “Dealing with our own colonial past is also of great importance for the identity of German institutions. Provenance research, that is the investigation of the origins of objects and of human remains from colonial contexts are a key element in this approach”.

At the conference, more than 40 international scholars and experts will present and discuss demands and restitutions until the 1970s. Their research reveals disputes about restitutions sometimes lasting for decades, traces veiled references to colonial violence by the former colonial powers in archives, and discusses what the “homecoming” of human remains can mean for societies. The question of lessons to be learned from history is finally posed at the end of the conference in a high-level panel discussion chaired by the journalist Stefan Koldehoff (Deutschlandfunk).

German Minister of State for Culture and the Media Monika Grütters: “Shedding light on the wrongs of the colonial era is essential to bring about reconciliation and understanding with people in the societies affected. This includes dealing appropriately with collections from colonial contexts. The Statement on Benin Bronzes represents a significant milestone in this effort, and substantial returns will be made in the coming year on the basis of this statement. What is crucial now is to pursue this process vigorously, and by doing so to raise awareness of our colonial past. This conference organised by the German Lost Art Foundation is an important means to that end.”

Hermann Parzinger, President Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz: “In the debate about objects acquired in the colonial era, museums have a special responsibility that goes beyond academic discussions: as preserving institutions, they must find concrete solutions – together with countries of origin and

communities. At SPK, we assume this responsibility for the collections entrusted to us, just as we have done for years in coming to terms with the Nazi past. It is essential to learn from the experiences of the past. That is why this conference is so important!"

Wayne Modest, Content Director of the National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands: "The question of return has become one of the pressing matters of our current moment that reminds us that the colonial past is not just a thing of the past but a past that continues to shape our present. And while we are sometimes led to believe that these are discussions that only started recently, we should never forget the longer histories of struggles to place this question on the agenda. This discussion is intricately bound up with questions of justice in the present, of historical injustices that live on in the present. To confront such injustices is part of the work that we have to do as museums – we cannot hide anymore – if we are to help to shape a different kind of present, and fashion more just and equitable futures. I see this conference not simply as an engagement with the longer history of claims, it is not just another history lesson, but an important part of learning from what has already been done, and what must still be done to really make changes."

Please note:

The conference language of this international event is English, the keynote lecture by Bénédicte Savoy on Thursday 18 November at 7pm (CET) and the roundtable discussion concluding the conference on Friday 19 November at 2.30 pm (CET) will be held in German (with English translation). You will find the conference programme on <https://history-of-restitution.com>. As the maximum number of participants has been reached, the event will also be broadcast via livestream on the German Lost Art Foundation's YouTube channel (or at www.kulturgutverluste.de) where it is publicly available without registration.

Conference publications

The first article of the new series "Working Paper German Lost Art Foundation" is published in conjunction with the conference, in a new online format for publications: "Returns of Cultural Artefacts and Human Remains in a (Post)colonial Context: Mapping Claims between the mid-19th Century and the 1970s" (by historian Lars Müller). The series published at irregular intervals will address current research subjects and is available on the online platform <https://perspectiva.net/> of the Max Weber Foundation – German Humanities Institutes Abroad. The programme will include dossiers, guidelines, research aids, research reports and overviews from all areas of activity of the German Lost Art Foundation, be it Nazi-looted cultural property, war-related transfers of cultural property, cultural assets seized in the Soviet Zone of Occupation/GDR, and cultural goods and collections from colonial contexts. The inaugural working paper is available on: <https://doi.org/10.25360/01-2021-00017>

The conference proceedings will be published by the German Lost Art Foundation in the fourth volume of its scholarly series "Provenire".

The Foundation

The German Lost Art Foundation was founded on 1 January 2015 in Magdeburg by the German federal government, the Länder of the Federal Republic of Germany and the three national associations of local authorities as a central point of contact for matters pertaining to unlawfully seized cultural property. The institution is sponsored by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, who also funds its project grants for research. The main activities of the Foundation focus on cultural assets confiscated by the National Socialists through persecution, particularly those from former Jewish owners (so-called "Nazi confiscated art"). Since 2019, when the German Lost Art Foundation expanded with a department for colonial contexts, it has also been possible to apply for the funding of projects dealing with cultural goods and collections from colonial contexts. Approximately 4,4 million Euros have been granted for a total of forty projects in this area.

Further information is available on: www.kulturgutverluste.de

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