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BOOK REVIEW

Review of Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. 345 pp. Pluto Press, 2020.

Dan Hicks's new book, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, has made a splash. Designated by the *New York Times* as one of the best art books of 2020, featured on blogs, podcasts, webinars, and in mainstream newspapers, the book and its author, the professor of contemporary archaeology at the University of Oxford and curator at Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, are suddenly everywhere. This Zoom-enabled ubiquity can be understood in the context of the larger historical reckonings of 2020 and 2021 – a global pandemic fueled by global capitalism, climate change, and incompetent governance; a breaking point in the long saga of police brutality against racial minorities and white indifference to it; a toppling of statues to colonialist and Confederate leaders around the world; and, as I was finishing the book, a final attempt to impeach a hate-mongering US president for fomenting rebellion against the very democratic institutions he swore to serve. In its passionately argued call for the restitution of cultural artifacts looted in one of the most notoriously brutal episodes of colonial violence, *The Brutish Museums* encapsulates the zeitgeist.[1]

The objects commonly referred to as the Benin Bronzes (although the metal pieces are actually made of brass, and the corpus includes works in many other materials) once adorned the pillars and shrines of the palace in the capital of the powerful Edo Empire, which controlled a large region of the Niger River and Delta and West African coast from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. The story of how the objects left West Africa is the story of this empire's end, but that is not quite how the European and American museums that now own them tell it. Beside a vitrine at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Hicks's own museum, a panel states: "In January 1897 a small party of British officials and traders on its way to Benin was ambushed. In retaliation a British military force attacked the city and the Oba was exiled. Members of the expedition brought thousands of objects back to Britain, including many of those shown here." The emphasis in this account is not on the colonial reordering of African geopolitics but, rather, on the final event that ostensibly triggered it: the killing of a "small party of British officials," which was led by Acting Consul James Phillips and which is often referred to by the British as the "Phillips massacre." The Field Museum in Chicago tells the same story but with more background:

> At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, European powers "cut the cake" of Africa, dividing territory among themselves. But when England sought to expand its holdings in West Africa, Benin blocked access to the interior of Nigeria. Political tension came to a head in 1897. A British envoy disobeyed the Oba's orders and tried to enter Benin City during a religious ceremony. He and most of his entourage were ambushed and killed. Although it

[1] Zoom also enabled two very stimulating group discussions of the book that have informed this review essay in myriad ways. The first was sponsored by Colgate University's Museum Studies program and included over 30 colleagues, students, and alumni. The other was with a multidisciplinary group of colleagues who saw my post on social media about the Colgate discussion and were eager to talk about the book as well. The resulting conversation with Morag Kersel, Chris Green, Fiona Greenland, Michael Press, and Robbie Vigar was so invigorating that we have made it a monthly event – a virtual book club of sorts.

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> wasn't clear who ordered the ambush, the British used this incident as an excuse to invade Benin. When they reached Benin City, a dreadful sight greeted British soldiers sent to punish the Oba. In a final effort to save his kingdom, the Oba had ordered that countless human captives be sacrificed. In horror, the British burned Benin City and sent many of the Oba's treasures to London. They sent Oba Ovoranmwen into exile.

Such accounts, which also appear in the scholarly literature,[2] suggest that the looting of the palace – not to mention the annihilation of a long-established sovereign polity – by the British was not completely unjustified, as they were acting "in retaliation" for a wrong or "in horror" at native savagery. As long as the seizure of the palace holdings can be construed as something other than unadulterated plunder, as long as there were misdeeds on both sides, then the possession of these artworks by European and American museums today is legitimate. All's fair in love and war. And maybe whatever happened in 1897 was not really so bad. A label at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, gives the impression that the gravest consequence of the destruction of the Benin Kingdom was the end of its artistic traditions:

> Metal arts flourished in the Benin Kingdom of Africa from the 15th century until its capital was sacked during the punitive expedition by the British military in 1897. The most important artworks were life-size heads of the obas, the spiritual and corporeal kings of Benin, placed on ancestral altars. These memorial heads were ordered in pairs by every new king to honor his predecessors. They were not portraits, but representations of the institution of kingship. Each depicted a king and was surmounted by an elaborately carved elephant's tusk, the second most important material in Benin art.

After a dry half-sentence on the events of 1897, our attention is firmly redirected to the objects, the rites with which they were associated, and their apparently great importance (mentioned twice). The obvious question – if these are so important, why don't they want them in Africa anymore? — is answered subtly, yet firmly (and, in point of fact, inaccurately) by the use of the past tense, which implies that neither the rituals nor the importance continue today, as a result of the rupture of 1897. Indeed, it is thanks to that rupture that museum visitors in Texas get to marvel at these extraordinary objects. The rhetoric of the label, in conjunction with the museum apparatus as whole, ensures that, if they think about colonialism at all, visitors see it primarily as a force that propelled the movement of beautiful, exotic objects around the world. Visitors are encouraged to enjoy their encounter with these objects untroubled by any concerns about historical injustices, global power imbalances, or any other unpleasant postcolonial hangovers.

Hicks is here to disrupt this tacit pact between museums and the public. He does so first by aiming a spotlight at the inaccuracies and gaps in museums' self-serving historical accounts. Perhaps most remarkable among the latter is their uniform silence about the violence of the destruction of Benin, which was, in fact, not limited to the king, the palace, or the artistic traditions. Hicks recounts the myriad British atrocities throughout the region that attended the campaign to unseat the Oba – the aerial bombardment of neighboring villages; the rockets launched from ships at towns along the river; the machine guns spraying bullets into the jungle; the (estimated, because uncounted) tens of thousands of Edo dead. Hicks sees the presence of the Benin Bronzes in north Atlantic museums today as the indexical traces of a "democidal campaign" (123) against the people of the Benin Kingdom.

There are other aspects of the record that he wants to set straight. It is hard to believe, post-*Brutish Museums*, that we will continue to encounter labels like the one above from the

[2] Fagg 1981; Plankensteiner 2007, 2016.

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Field Museum, where one-third of its 150-word description of the 1897 sack is devoted to what Hicks demeans as the "Phillips incident," and a further 20 percent of it to Edo practices of human sacrifice. Meanwhile, words such as "colonialism," "trade," "commerce," "exploitation," and "palm oil" are nowhere to be seen in any of these texts. Building on documents and arguments already put forward decades ago by Philip A. Igbafe and Robert Home, Hicks demonstrates conclusively that the fate of Benin was sealed – and, indeed, actively planned for by British authorities – with an impossibly unfavorable treaty foisted on Oba Ovonramwen in 1892.[3] The document granted the British unfettered trading rights and access to resources (chiefly palm and rubber) throughout the Oba's territories in exchange for British "protection." Despite the agreement, however, the Oba continued to exercise sovereignty in the region in ways that obstructed free trade and cut into British profit. What was needed was a pretext to remove him altogether. The real aim of the party headed by Acting Consul James Phillips in January 1897 may have been less to conduct a diplomatic *tête-à-tête* with the Oba than to be seen as having been refused by him, thereby justifying the end of diplomacy. This would explain the otherwise inexplicably bad timing of Phillips's departure for the palace, before approval for the mission had been granted from London and despite a direct warning from the Oba not to come during the religious festival. Hicks goes even further, noting that "it is far from inconceivable" (97) that Phillips's superiors realized that his intrusion might trigger a violent reaction from the Oba and that such a provocation could be useful in accelerating the timetable to a full-scale military intervention. And it was: 10 Royal Navy ships and 1,200 British troops were in the Bight of Benin within six weeks of the ambush of the Phillips party. In this reading, Phillips and his men are as much sacrificial pawns of the British colonizers as they are victims of Edo savagery.

Hicks also lays to rest the old chestnut that the seizure of material goods from the palace proceeded rationally or by design or that its scope was in any way constrained by, or commensurate with, the military operation. So much is implied, for example, by the British Museum's gallery label claim that the Foreign Office auctioned the official booty to cover the cost of the expedition. Phillips had stressed to the prime minister, when making the case for deposing the Oba, that there would be "sufficient ivory … in the King's house to pay the expenses incurred in removing the King from his Stool" (90). But in the chaotic days and weeks following the sack of the city, there were no organized inventories or distributions. The uncarved ivory was indeed sold off by the protectorate. But, otherwise, it seems to have been every man for himself. Consul General Ralph Moor divvied up his personal haul of 300 bronze plaques among friends, the market, and the British Museum. Other officers did likewise with a further 700 plaques plus additional works in bronze, ivory, wood, and coral. Many were sold off directly in Lagos to German buyers; today, some of the biggest collections are in German museums as a result. Others were brought back to Britain and sold there or else remained in the officers' families and were dispersed by later generations. The breadth of the scattering is evident from Hicks's Appendix 5, which lists the nearly 200 museums, galleries, and collections around the world that currently hold Benin loot.

In addition to these sticking points in the standard museum narrative of the Benin Bronzes, Hicks also critiques several of the larger historical frameworks within which these events have traditionally been understood. One is the premise that this episode had anything to do with nation-states. He emphasizes the competing authority of the various commercial and governmental entities operating in the Niger River Delta (the Niger Coast Protectorate versus the Royal Niger Company), the diffusion of agency during the events of 1897 (for example, Phillips acting without authorization from Whitehall), and the haphazard dispersal of the loot in the aftermath. Hicks characterizes the situation as one not of

[3] Igbafe 1970; Home 1982.

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"informal empire" or "indirect rule" undertaken for the good of the home nation but, rather, as extractive, market-driven, "corporate militarist colonialism." At the same time, he draws attention to the aggregate effects of the endless succession of "small wars" and punitive expeditions conducted by the French, German, Belgian, and British in Africa and across the global South during the 30 years following the Berlin Conference of 1884. He describes the sum of their parts as "World War Zero," even though "the relentless Eurocentrism of history faculties" means that the "details … remain largely unwritten" (51).

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Hicks's ambitions are more activist than merely correcting the historical narrative of the Benin Bronzes. *The Brutish Museums* is, first and foremost, a call to Hicks's fellow north Atlantic curators. (He addresses it to those in "anthropology museums," but the critique is no less applicable to art museums and natural history museums that display colonial loot as well.) What they should be spending their time on is provenance research on their permanent collections or what he somewhat heavy-handedly rechristens "necrography" in order to underscore the fact that the dislocation of these objects from West Africa was attended by violence and death. This work should be understood not as an end in itself but, rather, as a prelude to full restitution of the objects. His aim is "to put an end to [anthropology museums'] function as the warehouses of disaster capitalist-colonialism" (15). He asks his readers to "imagine anthropology museums where nothing is stolen, where everything is present with the consent of all parties" (227), where "each gap made by returns is filled by new work made by artists, designers, writers and others from the dispossessed community paid for by the museum, to help museums remember and to bear witness to colonialism today" (239). This would allow museums to become "sites of conscience, and of restitution, reparation, and reconciliation" (17).

Although he has little to say about the connections, the book is, in this regard, very much of a piece with the new ethics of curation that has emerged since the debates around the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act and the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art in the early 1990s.[4] Like *The Brutish Museums*, both of those initiatives called on collecting institutions to undertake rigorous provenance research on their permanent collections and to take proactive steps to restitute all illegitimately acquired holdings to their rightful owners. Despite Hicks's self-fashioning as something of a lone voice crying out in the wilderness, the notion that museums can do harm by continuing to own and display certain items in their collections is one that has taken deep root over the last 30 years and will not shock anyone who has been keeping up with the ever-growing literature on decolonizing museums.[5] To be sure, he frequently takes these familiar arguments to a new place. His takedown of the much-criticized 2002 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums, for example, frames the document not as a panicky response to the then-imminent completion of the New Acropolis Museum in Athens, which was turning up the heat on the Elgin Marbles debate.[6] Rather, Hicks sees the impulse on the part of big, metropolitan museums to band together as a united coalition

[4] Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 16 November 1990, 104 Stat. 3048; Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, 3 December 1998, https://www.state.gov/washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art/ (accessed 2 November 2019).

[5] Many of the key works in this literature are missing from Hicks's bibliography. To name only those from last 20 years, the omissions include Thomas 2001; Simpson 2002; O'Neill 2004; Vrdoljak 2006; Greenfield 2007; Colla 2008; Prott 2009; Singh 2009; Kersel 2011; Marstine 2011; R. Phillips 2011; Lonetree 2012; Murphy 2016; Colwell 2017; Brodie 2018; Effros and Lai 2018; among many others.

[6] "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums," *ICOM News*, vol. 4(1), 2004.

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in the early 2000s as a symptom of the us-versus-them, West-versus-East ethos of the Bush/Blair "new world order" following 9/11. He goes as far as to note similarities between the invasions of Benin City in 1897 and of Baghdad in 2003 – in particular, the "fabricated pretexts" for the removal of rulers who hindered European or American exploitation of natural resources and the uncounted enemy dead.

But there are two significant ways in which Hicks's approach departs from the prevailing ethical practices of progressive museum workers today. The first is his insistently Manichean, binary worldview. A core principle of *The Brutish Museums* is that everything that does not work actively toward the dismantling of colonialism perpetuates it. He finds culprits everywhere. They include the practitioners of the scholarly methodologies of "object biography" (or, more recently, "object itinerary") and "entanglement," two of the leading paradigms in museum anthropology and art history since the 1990s. In older approaches in these disciplines, attention traditionally focused on the moment of the object's creation (the artist, style, context, patron, original meaning, purpose or use, and so on). The "biographical" approach, by contrast, gives equal attention to the subsequent events, repurposings, repairs, relocations, and reinterpretations that comprise the life of an object over time.[7]

In Hicks's view, this methodology only serves the interests of museums, setting up false equivalences between their curatorial acts and the acts of the works' original creators (as in this comment from Hartwig Fischer, the current director of the British Museum, speaking of the Elgin Marbles: "When you move cultural heritage into a museum, you move it out of context. However, this shift is also a creative act").[8] This approach also diminishes the singular significance of moments of violent rupture like the one when the Bronzes were taken from Benin City. Hicks is equally disparaging of more recent "entanglement" approaches, which downplay the politics and power imbalances between communities that have had their objects taken from them and those that have done the taking, in favor of narratives of hybridity, mutuality, and the two-way street of appropriation.[9]

Hicks is not wrong that the implication or underlying premise of both object biography and entanglement is that the object belongs in a museum. Intentionally or not, these approaches normalize the status quo and make us feel okay about how we got here. In this way of thinking, a space like the British Museum is, at its essence, a happy one, where "objects collect people" (in a feel-good phrase from a 2007 history of the Pitt-Rivers Museum[10]), not an index of colonial violence or a reification of grotesque global inequities. Ultimately, for Hicks, it is a zero-sum game. These latest methods have served only "to divert and hold back anthropology museums from thinking about colonial violence or taking action on cultural restitution" (28).

Since, in his view, no museum display of loot can avoid justifying colonial violence, producing difference, institutionalizing racism, and naturalizing inequity, Hicks is fundamentally uninterested in what his colleagues in the museum field are actually doing in their Benin exhibits. Although he spends several pages citing wall texts from nearly a dozen institutions, he offers no analysis of them individually, only the blanket conclusion that

> [n]o amount of institutional self-consciousness or re-writing of the labels to make the story more direct, or less euphemistic will work – to tell the story of this colonial

[7] The seminal texts for object biography are Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999; see also Joyce and Gillespie 2015; Bauer 2019.

[8] Cited by Hicks (25). Interview with Hartwig Fischer by Ioannis Andritsopoulos, *Ta Nea*, 26 January 2019, https://www.parthenonuk.com/latest-news/440-interview-by-ioannis-andritsopoulos-ta-nea-s-uk-correspondent-with-the-director-of-the-british-museum-hartwig-fischer.

[9] Thomas 1991.

[10] Gosden and Larson 2007.

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> violence in the gallery space is itself to repeat it, to extend it, as long as a stolen object is present and no attempt is made to make a return. Reflexivity in this instance, as so often in anthropology and archaeology, becomes mere self-regard, mixed perhaps with virtue signaling, and always risking a kind of "dark tourism," of "ruin porn," of that kind of dereliction *flâneurie* that dehumanises by bringing just words and images to loss in material forms, rather than actions. (218)

This dismissal of labels as "just words" is misguided, in my view. It ignores the fact that gallery wall texts are the key interface between curators and the public, and while the former may have been grappling with shifting professional ethics concerning heritage and cultural property for a generation, the latter has not. It will be difficult for publicly funded museums to move toward restitution without first educating their audiences about these new ways of thinking about collection histories. Indeed, many institutions will need to reverse a half-century's worth of rhetoric focused on aesthetic delight, entertainment, and escapism. As the recent headline "You Can See Immersive Van Gogh Digital Art Shows in Nearly 40 U.S. Cities" makes clear, museumgoers have been conditioned to expect an experience closer to that of going to a movie than to visiting a "site of conscience, of transitional and restorative justice, and of cultural memory" (240).[11] The first step toward realizing Hicks's vision will be for museums to acknowledge publicly that what they have been peddling – leisurely enjoyment of marvelous objects from around the world – in many cases, has come as a result of significant and ongoing harm to others.

Some museums have begun this difficult work. A label in the Penn Museum draws attention to a rare instance in which the colonial violence has left an actual physical trace on one of their Benin objects: "The burnt tip of this carved tusk – taken from an ancestral altar – is possible evidence of the horrific destruction that ravaged the Kingdom." A wall panel at the National Museum of Scotland states frankly that:

> British soldiers looted around 4000 objects of immense cultural value from the royal city. … Today, most of these objects are in European and American museums, including a small portion in National Museums Scotland. The location of these objects in museums outside of Nigeria has been contested since the mid-20th century and remains unresolved today.

Below a photograph of the 2016 coronation of the new Oba, Ewuare II, a wall text at the Horniman Museum in London explains the continuity of the dynasty and declares that "[m]ost of the objects you see here were removed by British officers as they burnt the city to the ground. The retention of these objects in museums across the world remains contentious. Curators at the National Museum, Lagos and the Benin City National Museum were consulted about our plans for this display."

Labels such as these chip away not only at expectations of beauty and light-hearted entertainment but also at myths about institutional authority, omniscience, and infallibility. They acknowledge uncertainty about where the objects belong and the implications of the museum's actions for communities beyond its walls. They invite audiences to think critically about the issues and to form their own opinions. By contrast, the Benin labels at other institutions, such as those quoted at the beginning of this review essay, describe the events of 1897 in terms designed to reassure audiences and discourage them from further thinking

[11] Lindsey Matthews, "You Can See Immersive Van Gogh Digital Art Shows in Nearly 40 U.S. Cities," *Afar Magazine*, 19 August 2021, https://www.afar.com/magazine/where-to-see-immersive-van-gogh-exhibits-in-the-us-in-2021.

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about that sordid history and its implications. Meanwhile, museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Warrington Museum, and the Quai Branly, make no mention at all of the events of 1897, let alone of the ongoing controversy about where the objects belong today, in their Benin displays. Hicks's disinterest in these variations in approach not only fails to recognize the important work that some institutions have undertaken, but it also gives a pass to those that have stuck their collective head in the sand.

What is more, for all his emphasis on the importance of restitution over all other considerations, Hicks has little to say about how museums have actually been engaging this matter or the practicalities of it. He barely mentions the Benin Dialogue Group, the international body made up of representatives (including himself) from European museums with major holdings of Benin materials, members of the Edo royal family, Nigerian officials from the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, plus Nigerian scholars and legal experts. This group has been meeting regularly since 2010 to discuss loans, exchanges, and other strategies of collaboration; it is currently playing a major role as plans take shape for the new museum in Benin City. In the United States, the Association of Art Museum Directors has recently convened a task force to examine the issues.[12] There are also other smaller museums that are not part of these larger organizations that have been bravely trying to sort these matters out for themselves, whose efforts Hicks also ignores. The Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum, for example, had been working quietly to restitute its Benin bronze head even before the release of the Sarr-Savoy report in 2018, but the process has been anything but straightforward.[13] As explained in a gallery label installed in February 2019:

> The RISD Museum recognizes the looted status of this sculpture and has initiated communication with the current Benin oba, Oba Ewuare II, and with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria. The Museum acknowledges the histories of colonial looting that are inherent in geographically comprehensive museum collections and embraces this opportunity to identify and confront those injustices.

This label hints obliquely at one of the major challenges – namely, the imperfect alignment of interests and expectations between the Nigerian federal government (represented by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments) and those of the Edo royal family; the Edo state government also has its own interests in these discussions as well. The RISD Museum formally deaccessioned the head in the fall of 2020, but it remains on display in the gallery while the museum awaits further guidance from Nigerian officials about how, where, and to whom to return it.[14] A retired British doctor named Mark Walker also ran into this problem. In 2013, he set out to restitute two Benin objects seized by his grandfather, a British soldier, in 1897. When the office of the Nigerian High Commission in London made arrangements for the restitution of Walker's pieces to the president of Nigeria, complete with a press conference at the Abuja airport, Walker refused, insisting instead that he, as the descendent of the person who had taken the items, would hand them over only to the

[12] There is no information about this task force on the Association of Art Museum Directors's website; I thank Gina Borromeo for the information that it exists and for the information in this paragraph about the Rhode Island School of Design's (RISD) Museum's restitution efforts and wall texts.

[13] Raicovich 2019.

[14] The new label now includes the sentence: "Recognizing the looted status of this sculpture, the RISD Museum deaccessioned it in Fall 2020, anticipating its repatriation."

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descendent of the person from whom they had been seized.[15] The Edo court happily stepped in, making a whole new set of arrangements including a police escort from the Lagos airport to Benin City and a lavish restitution ceremony at the palace where Walker handed the pieces directly to the Oba before an audience of hundreds.

These complexities are one of the factors that have discouraged some museums from pursuing restitution in recent years, despite changed attitudes about colonial histories and cultural heritage among younger generations of curators. Hicks has little sympathy with, or patience for, what he sees as little more than excuses for inaction. One also suspects that he downplays the messy details on the ground in Nigeria because they would muddy the sharp line he repeatedly draws throughout the book between good guys (Nigerians) and bad guys (white, Euro-American museum workers, collectors, anthropologists, and art historians).

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Hicks's commitment to that binary is perhaps also the reason he ignores another key principle of recent curatorial ethics: consultation with, and the incorporation of voices from, stakeholder communities. Nigerians are Hicks's good guys, but they are more invoked than heard from directly. Even though many Nigerians have weighed in about the fate of the Benin objects in innumerable publications, particularly since the centennial of the British invasion, much of their work is conspicuously absent from Hicks's bibliography.[16] Nor is there much evidence of direct, personal consultation with affected community members. Instead, the actions that Hicks proposes come across as very top-down. He makes the case for restitution by chronicling the wrongdoing of British colonialists, not by amplifying the perspectives of the Edo or modern-day Nigerians and their accounts of the significance of these objects for their living religious, political, and artistic traditions, connections to ancestors, and contemporary tourism (a factor mentioned in many of their writings). He offers little detail about what any of this looks like from the Nigerian perspective. For example, he has barely a single sentence to say about one of the most significant developments concerning the fate of the Benin Bronzes in the last century – namely, the decision made in 2017 by the Edo state governor, in collaboration with the national Nigerian authorities and the royal court, plus the members of the international Benin Dialogue Group, to build a new museum in Benin City adjacent to the palace, which is to be designed by Sir David Adjaye, the renowned Ghanaian architect.[17]

The problem is that Nigerians have expressed a wide range of views about the Benin Bronzes, and they do not all align with Hicks's arguments. Beyond the conflicts between the national and state governments and the royal court noted above, there are also disagreements about whether it is acceptable for the new museum to display long-term loans, which many European museums are ready to offer or whether, instead, they should insist on full, no-strings-attached, permanent restitution, which, until very recently, no European

[15] Ebegbulem 2014; Fennell 2020; B. Phillips 2021, 201–2.

[16] Some of the important, but uncited, contributions include Eyo 1994; Okediji 1998; Shyllon 2006, 2010, 2018; Agbontaen-Eghafona 2010; Layiwola 2014; Adewumi 2015; Opoku 2019; Victor Ehikhamenor, "Give Us Back What Our Ancestors Made," *New York Times*, 28 January 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/opinion/looted-benin-bronzes.html (accessed 8 September 2021).

[17] The degree of consultation and the depth of the alliance have recently been challenged by the Oba. On these developments, see Olawale Ajimotokan, "Nigeria: Oba of Benin, Obaseki Set for Showdown over Looted Artefacts," *This Day*, 9 July 2021, https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/07/09/oba-of-benin-obaseki-set-for-showdown-over-looted-artefacts/ (accessed 8 September 2021).

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museums were ready to offer.[18] This particular debate played out in the Nigerian national press between Folarin Shyllon, a Nigerian professor of law who served until his recent death on the Benin Dialogue Group, and Kwame Opoku, a journalist at the publication *Modern Ghana*, who was not a part of that powerful body.[19] Likewise, divisions within the Edo court surfaced in 2013, when the then current Oba's brother, Prince Gregory I. Akenzua, participated in the ceremonies at the opening of the new Benin Kingdom Gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The gallery features 28 bronzes and six ivories that Robert Owen Lehman had given to the museum the previous year. The museum claimed that the prince was there as the representative of the Oba, thereby implying the Edo court's blessing of the museum's acceptance of the bequest; the court, however, disputes this account.[20]

Other Nigerians have raised less overtly political, more philosophical objections to the restitution of the Benin Bronzes. The artist and scholar, Moyo Okediji, writing in 1998 in *African Arts* in response to the renewed calls for repatriation on the centenary of the 1897 expedition, offered a nuanced perspective.[21] Noting that the shrines and palaces where these objects were meaningful are long gone, he is dismissive of the "largely decorative functions" they would serve "within mediocre imitations of Western museums." He also makes the opposite argument from Hicks, seeing value, not horror, in their function as indexical traces of colonial violence in European and American museums today. Speaking for expatriots like himself (he is on the faculty at the University of Texas at Austin), he asks: "What evidence have Africans for slavery and other forms of hegemonic decimation? The only extant visual sign of how the West ransacked and pillaged Africa, apart from the presence of blacks in the Americas, are the transported works."

Readers interested in the diversity of Nigerian views about the Benin Bronzes will be better served by another monograph that, coincidentally, appeared just a few months after Hicks's. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, by the journalist and conservationist Barnaby Phillips, draws on the author's lifetime of experience in Africa.[22] When Phillips tells the story of 1897, he incorporates the haunting lyrics of a song about the capture of Oba Ovonramwen that was sung to him by the elders in the Edo village of Ughoton in 2019 as well as the personal account of an Edo warrior named Aisien who fought against the British, whose story was passed down orally to his grandson, who wrote it down in the mid-twentieth century and self-published it in 2013. Phillips also interviewed a range of contemporary artists, activists, scholars, and museum and government officials in Nigeria, who offered a wide variety of perspectives on the topic of the Benin Bronzes and where they belong today; as he puts it, "I was hearing almost the same diversity of opinions about the return of the Benin Bronzes in Benin City itself as I might have heard in far-off London" (249). For example, some of Phillips's interlocutors expressed pride that the artworks are serving as "cultural ambassadors" abroad. Others have a living memory of the thefts in the 1980s and 1990s of dozens of Benin objects from the National Museum in Lagos and worry that restituted pieces would be stolen again. Some Nigerians are keen to see the objects displayed

[18] In spring 2021, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation announced plans to restitute the 520 Benin artifacts held in Berlin's Ethnological Museum in 2022. Catherine Hickley, "Berlin Museums Board Agrees to Relinquish Benin Bronzes 'Regardless of How They Were Acquired,'" *The Art Newspaper*, 30 June 2021, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/berlin-museums-board-agrees-to-relinquish-benin-bronzes.

[19] Shyllon 2018; Opoku 2019.

[20] Opoku 2012; Sowole 2013a, 2013b; Boston Museum of Fine Arts, *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Opens Benin Kingdom Gallery Showcasing Robert Owen Lehman Collection of Rare West African Art*, press release, 2013, https://www.mfa.org/news/benin-kingdom (accessed 8 September 2021).

[21] Okediji 1998.

[22] Phillips 2021. Phillips was born in Kenya and served as an Africa correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation for many years.

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in a national museum, where they would inspire local artists and attract international tourists; others believe the only appropriate home for them is the Edo royal palace.

The contrast between the two books exposes both the weakness and the strength of the title under review. Phillips's incorporation of local perspectives produces a nuanced picture, with many grey areas compared to Hicks's insistent binary. The complexities paradoxically make Phillips's book the more scholarly of the two, despite his journalistic background and Hicks's Oxford credentials. Having read it after Hicks's volume, I remain convinced that the pieces should be returned but recognize that this will not be a simple matter of flipping a switch at one end and that restitution would be only the beginning – not the end – of a long process toward restorative justice.

But such nuances are arguably not what is needed right now. There can be little doubt that European and American museums will try to use the divisions among and within the various political entities in Nigeria as an excuse not to return the artifacts; one can see the strategic wisdom of Hicks's choice not to dwell on the messy internal politics. There is also an ethical integrity to his uncoupling of the question of what is right for European and American museums to do from the question of what will happen to the objects once they are back in Nigeria. That latter question is, perhaps, none of our business. Whatever the security systems and climate controls were before the British showed up in Benin City in 1897 had served the bronzes just fine for the preceding centuries. We must trust our colleagues and fellow humans in Nigeria to do right by these works once again, according to their own standards.[23] The stark moral clarity of Hicks's manifesto is both refreshing and fitting for our current, troubled political moment.

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[23] On this principle, see Kreps 2008.

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