Frequently Asked Questions about Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS)
and the Future of Works from the Kingdom of Benin at Museum Rietberg

1. What is the Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS)?

The Benin Initiative Switzerland was a research project conducted by eight public Swiss museums. It sought to investigate the origin and provenance of museum objects from the Kingdom of Benin (Nigeria), aiming to identify which of these artifacts were plundered by the British army in 1897 and to trace their journey into public collections in Switzerland. The project took place between 2021 and 2024, led by the Museum Rietberg and financed by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture.

2. Why was the BIS founded?

During the colonial era, the capital of Benin was invaded by British troops and the royal palace was looted and burned to the ground. The king at the time, Oba Ovonramwen, was ousted from the throne and sent into exile. Thousands of historical, symbolic, and prestigious objects, used in rituals or ceremonies and made from brass, ivory, wood, and terracotta, were stolen from the palace. Known as the “Benin bronzes,” these objects were sold on the art market and acquired by private and public collectors around the world, including in Switzerland.

In recent years, provenance research has become an important part of the critical history of museums and collections. Unlawful seizures of items during the colonial era play a major role in this history. The BIS has taken up the issue, pledging to work collaboratively and in dialogue on this matter.

3. How was research conducted and who was involved?

Provenance research and the study of the objects’ significance and function, both back then and now, was conducted in cooperation with representatives of the objects’ country of origin, in addition to also publishing the findings. These partners from Nigeria and members of the Nigerian diaspora include leading scholars from Benin University and Benin Studies Institute; museum professionals from the national museums in Lagos and Benin City, as well as the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA); representatives of guilds; royal representatives; contemporary artists; student groups; and communities from Zurich and across Switzerland. Moreover, the BIS was also in contact with international experts from beyond Switzerland and Nigeria.

4. What are the BIS’s findings?

Of the ninety-six works held in eight Swiss museums, twenty-one were identified as having been “looted” and thirty-four as having “most likely been looted”. The categories were determined based on archival research and discussions with international specialists, including individuals from Benin. Museum Rietberg houses sixteen objects from the Kingdom of Benin, eleven of which fall into these two aforementioned categories.

Two research reports and a publication, which are available online, as well as several exhibitions share these findings, in addition to the methodology and documentation used. The results were also incorporated into the international platform, “Digital Benin”.

5. To what extent can objects from Benin be described as looted colonial goods?

Since the 1930s, Benin has repeatedly called for items to be restituted. The fact that these items were looted—that is to say, they were seized unlawfully and by force—has always been a matter of public knowledge. Although grounds for restitution were denied for a long time due to a Eurocentric perspective, a paradigm shift has since taken place. The works looted in 1897 are internationally acknowledged as stolen works from the colonial era and for the past decade, objects have accordingly been returned to Nigeria. In this way, the Nigerian (i.e. Benin) position on the stolen cultural artifacts has been respected.

6. How has Museum Rietberg handled looted art?

Since the 1970s, Museum Rietberg has been working closely with the countries from which these works originate. This also led to the idea of initiating a dialogue with Benin. Both in research as in education, it is vital to involve the voices and standpoints of the countries of origin – especially in the case of violently seized objects in museum collections. In light of this, BIS invited a delegation from Nigeria to Switzerland in February 2023. This delegation included museum professionals, scholars, royal emissaries, and guild representatives, as well as artists. Together with representatives from the eight Swiss museums, they discussed the future of these objects. They issued a “Joint Declaration”, agreeing that the looted objects and the most likely looted objects should be restituted (§1). This transfer of ownership can mean returning the objects, loaning them to Swiss museums, or circulating them (2). The second part of the “Joint Declaration” emphasized cooperation and dialogue. Museum Rietberg is currently in the process of implementing this agreement.

7. Who decides on the specifics of the restitution?

The decision on restitution lies with each museum’s funding body. In the case of Museum Rietberg, this is the City of Zurich. On July 3, 2024, Museum Rietberg received a written restitution claim from the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) for the eleven (most likely) looted Benin objects. Zurich city council is in charge of reaching a decision based on an external appraisal of the value of the eleven objects in question.

8. To which body will the ownership of these items be transferred?

NCMM is the cultural heritage authority of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. If the City of Zurich complies with NCMM’s request, the ownership of these objects will be transferred to the Federal Republic of Nigeria. As a sovereign state, Nigeria is free to manage its own cultural heritage. As such, they will internally decide how to deal with the objects and whether to loan them to Swiss museums, transfer them to a newly built national museum depository in Benin City, or (in the case of items of religious or symbolic significance) to move them to the royal palace of the Oba.

9. What are the arguments against restitution?

Members of society are concerned by questions of restitution, complex and politically charged as they are. The successful restitution of objects from Germany and Great Britain drew an overwhelmingly positive response from countless international museum and specialist experts, as well as visitors to Museum Rietberg. Yet there were also critical reactions, with people arguing against restitution. They question the standards of Nigeria’s museums, point to the role Benin played in trading in enslaved persons, and call for the objects to remain accessible for the diasporic communities of formerly enslaved persons.

10. How does Museum Rietberg deal with criticism?

Museum Rietberg seeks to uphold the interests of all parties involved. The institution first addressed the violent looting of works from the Kingdom of Benin by the British Empire in 2018. Since then, it has continuously worked to share information on the latest findings, international discussions, the status of negotiations, and the political processes. Criticism is taken seriously even as Museum Rietberg has become a platform for a multitude of voices and perspectives over recent months and years—whether through collaboration or through criticism and engagement with the matter.