

Editorial

While museums have begun – prompted not least by public debate – to confront the issue of their own institutional decolonisation by questioning the acquisition circumstances of the items in their care, and thus potentially the legitimacy of their holdings, the art trade seems as yet unfazed by concerns about consent and duress in provenance transactions of African items.

In June 2020, two sculptures representing deities from the Igbo community in today's southeast Nigeria were sold at auction in Paris for 215,500 euros including buyer's premium. Both the scholar Chika Okeke-Agulu and Babatunde Adebisi, legal adviser for the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments, expressed concerns about the sale in view of the objects' provenance via the French dealer Jacques Kerchache (also referenced in passing in our article by Alexandre Girard-Muscagorry) from what was a conflict zone at the time of transfer. Conversely, the auction house maintained that there was no "suggestion that these statues were subject to improper export".¹

In the commercial world, the question of legality remains the predominant criterion for deciding whether to proceed with the sale of an object. Nevertheless, legal circumstances may change, as is evident in recent draft legislation by the French Conseil des ministres regarding the restitution of African objects in French museum collections previously considered "inalienable". Ethical issues already guide the approach to transactions of other objects, as previously discussed in our issue on Politics. They are however applied unevenly, with larger, international auction houses no longer selling objects belonging to the category of human remains, whilst smaller firms continue to offer such material in "tribal arts" sales.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, monuments to those who benefited from slave trade have recently fallen across the Western world, perhaps indicating a more long-term change in perception of historical events and relations, but certainly a need for informed and prolonged debate. This renewed focus on what was perhaps

1 Quoted on BBC News online (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53218138>). Also, see Scott Reyburn, Disputed African Artifacts Sell at Auction, in *The New York Times*, 29 June 2020.

the most devastating form of extractive trade in history points to the continuous social consequences of the modern global slave trade. Our article by Zoe Cormack points to the potential entanglement between the slave trade and the wholesale extraction of African material culture. As shown by some of the articles in this issue dealing with more recent developments since decolonisation (in particular Memel-Kassi), the consequences of this long history of extraction are also apparent in the current state of heritage protection and practice in Africa.

The recent population forecast commissioned by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington School of Medicine envisages Nigeria to become the world's second biggest country by 2100. The sub-Saharan African population is set to triple in the next 80 years. It is hard to imagine that the art trade would remain unchanged by restitution demands from more dominant and more confident African countries, or by the cultural turns it may engender.

Our current issue on the art market for objects originating from Africa examines their entry into and movement through the markets from a historical perspective, as they advance through different classifications and associations, from the ethnographic and the association with natural history to the status of art and antiquities. We hope you find that the contributions add insight to our subject.

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