

BROOKLYN MUSEUM:

**REPARATIONS/REPATRIATION
NOW!**



YOUR COLLECTION CONTAINS THOUSANDS OF OBJECTS ACQUIRED THROUGH

IMPERIAL PLUNDER

**OUR COMMUNITIES CONTINUE TO DEMAND A
DECOLONIZATION COMMISSION**

#decolonizethisplace



Our action today begins in the galleries of the *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, surrounded by works of militant beauty from the 1960s and 70s.

From Betye Saar to Emory Douglas, the Black Arts movement was crucially concerned with the connection between the liberation of Black people in the United States with the histories, cultures, and anti-colonial struggles of Africa.

It is with this powerful exhibition as a backdrop that our gathering sets out to make visible a violent legacy that runs through this institution.

FACTS. The Brooklyn Museum holds thousands of cultural objects acquired through imperial plunder.

This includes a significant trove of African objects, most famously a set of bronze sculptures and plaques from the Kingdom of Benin. Some of these objects, displayed in museums around the Western world, were looted by British colonizers in what was known as the “punitive expedition” in 1897. There, the plunder of cultural wealth went hand in hand with massacre as a deliberate tactic of terror exercised against those who dared to resist colonial rule. Others, such as Pendant Mask (Uhunmwun-ekue) (which appears on the reverse side of this flyer) were acquired during a “collecting” expedition to the same land led by the Brooklyn Museum itself in 1923. The “Benin Bronzes” as they came to be known, were dispersed far and wide to institutions across Europe and the United States, where they became foundational to the study and display of African Art as a field. These include the British Museum, the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum, and smaller spaces like the Museum of Rhode Island School of Design, where today a group of scholars, artists, and activists are undertaking a kindred action to the one now taking place here in the Brooklyn Museum.

Long-standing demands for the return of such objects to their communities of origin have become increasingly visible in recent weeks.

European institutions and governments have finally begun to respond, however unevenly or problematically. The British Museum has recently committed to temporarily “loaning” some of the Benin Bronzes in its collection to a forthcoming Benin Royal Museum in Edo State Nigeria. The French government, for its part, has just released a report calling for the restitution of a small fraction of colonial-era spoils to African institutions. In these contexts, the discourse of “restitution” has often functioned to displace or dilute a more radical demand, namely the full repatriation of stolen objects, and beyond that, the paying of reparations for centuries of colonization, enslavement, and dispossession. Institutions are publicly claiming to stand on the right side of history, but many strings are attached.

Our action today is tied to an outstanding call since April 2018 by Decolonize This Place and twenty community and arts groups from around New York City, demanding that the Brooklyn Museum establish a Decolonization Commission.

Such a commission would undertake an inventory of the colonial era objects in its collection, and address demands for repatriation and reparations. At the same, the Commission would reexamine the museum’s structure of governance and funding, its working conditions, and its relation to deep historical structures of oppression at work in the very occupied land on which the institution stands. This territorial acknowledgement would involve material measures of redress by the museum in relation to indigenous sovereignty. The Commission would also initiate a process to counteract the forces of racialized gentrification with which the museum has been complicit.

We said it in April, and we say it again now: a non-response from the museum is not acceptable.

The institution continues to mount compelling shows such as *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985*, and *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. However, the values of these exhibitions are not mirrored by the conduct of the institution itself, exemplified by its refusal to respond to the demand for a Decolonization Commission.

Our assembly today is a warning and a reminder to the Brooklyn Museum that it cannot continue to evade accountability to the communities it claims to serve.

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