

An Eighteenth-Century Benin Brass
and
the Task of Decolonizing Art Institutions in the Classroom

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A few weeks before New York City's universities made the rapid switch to online learning, I gave a lecture to my Art History Survey II class on African Art in the Early Modern Period. The centerpiece of that lecture — one I had given at least half a dozen times in my short career as an adjunct instructor — is a small eighteenth-century brass figure from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Little did anyone in that forty-five-student class know that in just a few days, there would be no museums to visit, no libraries open, not even a classroom with a blurry, outdated projector.

Through the rest of the Spring semester, every educator in the country seemed to be in survival mode. Students were emailing me scans of positive COVID-19 tests, heart-wrenching stories of parents on ventilators flooded my inbox, and phone calls from students panicking about their lack of access to reliable internet or even a computer became a near-weekly occurrence. My lecture on the small brass figure seemed like it had disappeared into the ether --something no-one would remember given the cascade of disaster that was sweeping through New York City, which within weeks had become the center of the global pandemic.

After the semester had finished, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis. This crime provided the spark that lit the powder keg. We have all read countless essays, articles, and studies about the systemic inequality that pervades not just the United States, but all settler colonial

nations. The ivory towers of academia and art institutions are not immune to calls to address the white supremacy inherent in the way they function, their organization, and the way they reproduce culture and knowledge that consistently silences Black voices. Art historians on my Twitter feed asked for resources to teach a decolonized history of art which doesn't flatten the complex experiences of Black history by only acknowledging images of African enslavement, victimhood, and subservience. How can we include the Black voices of the past if those voices were rarely recorded? Moreover, how can we try to find those voices in the archive if the archive is closed in the midst of a global pandemic?

These questions brought me back to the small brass figure I had shown my students before the pandemic dissolved life as we knew it. I did not choose this figure not because of its importance in the history books. Rather, I chose to discuss *Seated Portuguese Male Figure* (eighteenth century) because it allows for the practice of what I consider the five main approaches I want my students to use to critically engage with the art we discuss in class:

1. Formal analysis
2. Cultural context
3. Historical context
4. Provenance research
5. Critically examining academic and museum institutions and the field of art history

While these ideas may seem basic, if applied to objects such as *Seated Portuguese Male Figure*, they can allow students to see the inherent biases of academia and museum institutions, and critically engage with the lack of information that seems intentional in regards to how these institu-

tions record, present, and reproduce non-white histories.

Firstly, a formal analysis of the work not only allows students to practice the most fundamental skill of art history, but also opens the door for discussing key issues of inter-racial representation. The unnamed artist was a Benin brass worker and his figure represents a Portuguese trader. This dynamic reverses and complements other examples of inter-racial representation from the survey syllabus, such as Anne-Louis Girodet's *Jean-Baptiste Belley* (1797) or *Portrait of Madeleine* (formerly *Portrait d'une Negresse*) by Marie-Guillemine Benoist (1800). What did eighteenth-century Benin brass makers find notable or worthy of representation in European physiognomies? What physical traits were exaggerated to emphasize the Europeanness of the figure? How does difference look when we reverse the euro-centric perspective? The shift not only enriches discussions of African Art from the Early Modern period, but allows students to identify how race is a shifting construct, one that looks different depending on perspective.

Secondly, we examine the cultural contexts of *Seated Portuguese Male Figure*. The lack of detail on the back and the bar that is attached to the bottom of the figure strongly suggest that it was created to be part of an ancestral altar, either an *aseberia* or *ikegobo*.¹ These details allow for a discussion of the religious practices of the Empire of Benin with students, which also allows the class to think of greater nuances in colonial histories. Was the cultural exchange between colonized and colonizer reciprocal, and how? What does the presence of a Portuguese trader on an ancestral altar say about the nuances of cultural connections and exchanges? These types of questions allow students to frame these objects as evidence of a nuanced Benin-Portuguese relationship, as well as explore how those from elite Benin society considered the influx of European traders.

A central tenet of my teaching is to impress on my students that objects have lives. Art His-

tory is not only about who made it and when, but also who owned it and where, how it was placed, and the generational meanings that have accumulated in a piece. The third part of the discussion allows the scope of the class to expand even farther, not only in terms of cultural practice, but in terms of the colonial histories of West Africa. This is an important part of the discussion that scaffolds the required critical thinking about histories and institutions in general. For this, I lecture briefly about the history of the Benin Massacre of 1897. Warning the students of the graphic and violent nature of the documentation of the 1897 massacre, we discuss how the theft of cultural objects is an integral part of genocide and the cementing of colonial power. Some students are struck by the contrast in the colonial drive to preserve African objects and destroy African cultures. For the fourth part of the discussion, I introduce late-nineteenth-century auction catalogues as examples of provenance research — some of which are available as open resources through the Internet Archive or Yale University’s Ross Archive of African Images — such as W. D. Webster’s *Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnological Specimens, in Bronze, Wrought Iron, Ivory and Wood from Benin City, West Africa, Taken at the Fall of the City in February, 1897, by the British Punitive Expedition under the Command of Admiral Rawson*.² It is in this catalogue that we see a reproduction of *Seated Portuguese Male Figure* from the Metropolitan Museum (page 132, figure 156), identifiable by the uniquely broken arm that is present even in the 1897 image.

In *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, Rodney Harrison writes about colonial curio dealer catalogues and what they can tell us about the exchange of ethnographic souvenirs in Britain and its colonies.³ While Harrison’s case-study explores indigenous agency in Oceania by focusing on the 1929 catalogue of a Sydney-based dealer, the overarching lesson to educators who wish to decolonize their teaching is to look to

documents of colonization and allow students to approach them with criticism and clarity. Even though *Unpacking the Collection* is an anthropology textbook, it would do art history departments good to look beyond the connoisseurship that commodifies our knowledge or the Winklemannian hierarchies of taste that are, at their core, perpetuations of white supremacy. By using vague examples of museums as institutions that preserve colonial power structures, our message will fail to fully express the violence with which these objects came into the hallowed halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre, or the British Museum. It is by using explicit examples — and particularly examples that do not make it into the survey textbooks — such as the *Seated Portuguese Male Figure*, that students are able to employ critical thinking to question the institutions that we as a culture have understood as bastions of the impartial preservation of objects and the supposed neutrality of the gallery space.

The fifth and final approach I employ with my students is to find the *Seated Portuguese Male Figure* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online catalogue.⁴ In doing so, I am able to demonstrate to my students, many of whom are taking their first art history class, the conventions museums use to present and organize information, and how to use an online museum catalogue. It is also an opportunity to introduce my students to the wealth of free, downloadable museum catalogues that are available from the Metropolitan's website. I want to impress on my students that museums are, and should be considered, educational institutions which they can access and use to enrich their own knowledge. While the focus of this exercise is to critique institutions for the white-washing of history in their catalogues and publications, and to encourage students to hold museums and universities accountable for the lack of investment in non-white histories, I want to impress on them the utopian idea of a museum which, as Jacques-Louis David expressed succinctly at the end of the French Revolution, "should be an imposing school."⁵

Whether in-person or over Zoom's screen-share feature, I ask for a student volunteer to read the provenance of *Seated Portuguese Male Figure*: "Court of Benin; taken from the Royal Palace in 1897 during the British military occupation of Benin; [W. D. Webster, London, until 1899]; Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, Farnham, Dorset, UK, from 1899; [Alan Brandt, New York, acquired by 1982]; Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, New York, acquired by 1988, until 1991."⁶ Just by looking at the provenance, I point out how much detail is recorded of the post-1897 history of the work, how many British and American names are listed compared to how little information was remembered and recorded of the history of the figure in Benin. The provenance is also the only part of the Metropolitan's catalogue entry that acknowledges the violence through which this piece was acquired, using tacit language such as "military occupation" to mask the brutality of the physical and cultural genocide that was committed in Benin in 1897. It is only recently that the Metropolitan edited the provenance line in their catalogue to acknowledge the 1897 massacre at all, and many other Benin brass and bronze works that were seized by the British during the massacre don't contain the acknowledgement of any military engagement.⁷

By applying all five of these approaches to build students' understanding of the greater lives of art objects, the groundwork is laid for a critical discussion of how museums and other institutions preserve and present knowledge, and the vested interests that are at the core of this presentation. In allowing students to find the parts of history that are elided in the museum's presentation of its collections, the colonial narratives are made clear. Ultimately, instructors in art history should not shy away from the lack of knowledge our institutions share. We should lead our students to these erasures and allow them to ask (and answer) *why*. Students can understand why, and through the guidance of their instructors are able to contextualize these reasons

into greater historical narratives that affect our current cultural, political, and economic moment.

As educators, becoming comfortable with sharing the erasures of colonized cultures and non-white histories with our students is a way to both hold our institutions (and ourselves) accountable and allow our students to develop and practice critical thinking and analytical skills. At a time when universities are asking more and offering less to faculty — both salaried and contingent — building new exercises that take on the magnitude of colonization, genocide and the marred roots of collecting practices is an overwhelming task. It is a task, however, that we owe to our students, and not our institutions. Without access to the physical spaces of archives, libraries, or museums, we must look to the gaps in the narrative accessible to us to build a new curriculum that addresses the pressing need to examine the colonialist roots of our discipline. The crippling effect of COVID-19 has made clear exactly why systemic change is necessary. We cannot pretend that the same inequalities and injustices that see communities of color more adversely affected by a pandemic don't hide in our syllabi, and aren't at the core of the way our museums were built. Spending an hour on Zoom discussing a brass figure from eighteenth-century Benin certainly won't solve these issues, but we have to remember that teaching is a sustained practice and not a single action. This discussion allows us to address some of the ways our discipline and our institutions have failed the histories of colonized cultures, people of color, and the silenced voices that are somewhere in a closed archive.

NOTES

¹ Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 69.

² W. D. Webster, *Catalogue of Ethnological Specimens* 3, no 21 (Bicester: Oxford House, 1898) 132, https://archive.org/details/b2177948x_0003/page/n131/mode/2up, page 132.

³ Rodney Harrison, "Consuming Colonialism: Curio Dealers' Catalogues, Souvenir Objects and Indigenous Agency in Oceania" in *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum* edited by Anne Clarke, Robin Torrence, Rodney Harrison and Sarah Byrne, (New York: Springer, 2011), 55.

⁴"Figure: Seated Portuguese Male" Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/316502>.

⁵ Jacques-Louis David, *Seconde rapport sur la suppression de la commission du museum*, Paris, 1794 cited in: An-

drew L. McClellan “The Musée du Louvre as Revolutionary Metaphor During the Terror” *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2 (June 1988): 308.

⁶ Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Figure, Seated Portuguese Male”.

⁷ See the catalogue entry for *Plaque: Oba or Chief* which cites the provenance as “Court of Benin until 1897; Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, New York, until 1991” (“Plaque: Oba or Chief”, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/316489>).