

Colonial collections in the museums of Basel

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The colonial past of Basel is also present in its museums. The Museum der Kulturen Basel, founded in the nineteenth century and today one of the largest ethnographic museums in Europe, holds hundreds of thousands of objects from all continents, many of them acquired during the colonial period by travellers, merchants, scientists and missionaries, including members of the Basel Mission. The Natural History Museum holds collections of plants, animals and human remains collected in colonial contexts. And the private collections of Basel families include objects of colonial origin.¹

The question of the provenance of these objects and of their possible restitution to their countries of origin has become a central issue for European museums since the 2010s. The case of the Benin bronzes, the sculptures and plaques looted by British troops from the royal palace of Benin in 1897 and dispersed among museums throughout the world, has become the symbol of this debate. Several Swiss museums, among them museums in Basel, hold objects from Benin. In 2021 a group of Swiss museums formed the Benin Initiative Switzerland to research the provenance of these objects in cooperation with Nigerian partners.²

For the art market and the financial centre, the restitution debate has legal and practical consequences. Objects of doubtful provenance lose their market value and may become the subject of claims. Collectors, dealers and auction houses must examine the provenance of the objects they buy and sell. Likewise, banks that accept art as collateral or advise clients on art investments must take provenance risks into account. The Cultural Property Transfer Act imposes due diligence obligations on dealers and auction houses in Switzerland, while the anti-money laundering rules have been extended to certain art market participants. Part H examines these questions in connection with Art Basel and the art market.

1 Notes

1. On the collections of the Museum der Kulturen Basel and the Naturhistorisches Museum Basel acquired in colonial contexts, and on their provenance research, see the publications of these museums. To be verified. ↩
2. On the Benin Initiative Switzerland (from 2021), in which several Swiss museums including museums in Basel research the provenance of objects from the Kingdom of Benin in cooperation with Nigerian institutions, and on its published results, see the publications of the participating museums. To be verified. ↩

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