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**Wilhelm Östberg, ed.** *Whose Objects? Art Treasures from the Kingdom of Benin in the Collection of the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm.* Stockholm: Ethnografiska Museet, 2010. Illustrations. 72 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-91-85344-59-8.

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## The Order of the Polar Star Meets the Treasures of Ancient Benin

Sometimes the surrounds of an exhibition booklet are as important as the publication itself. This publication accompanies an exhibition on Benin art hosted by the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2010. Begun by Mike Barrett who went on research leave, the project was completed by Wilhelm Östberg, a curator and professor of anthropology who has never been to Nigeria. He worked with an able museum staff and drew on outside resources, notably, John Picton, Barbara Plankensteiner, Barbara Blackmun, and me. The exhibition was a great success as several of the photographs in this publication show. The opening lectures testify to the ongoing debate on the restitution of Benin artifacts, the leitmotif of the accompanying book. Even in Sweden, the least stressed people in the world according to a recent poll (the most stressed hominids are alpha male baboons in Kenya), the political issues are potentially volatile, causing anxious heads to rear, especially when important dignitaries had to be accommodated and shown hospitality. Guests included Eheneden Erediauwa, the Crown prince (and a former ambassador to Namibia and elsewhere), and numerous Nigerian delegates.

Östberg handled it beautifully. The book includes the opening speech by Edun Akenzua, half-brother to the present Ọba, who hits the standard rewind button to a yesteryear political spin circuit and appeals for the "rehabilitation" of the objects removed by the British Punitive Expedition in 1897. (Oba Erediauwa, the incumbent on the throne has not, as Östberg states in an adjoining essay, actually phrased it that way.) Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, acting chair of sociology and anthropology at the University of Benin, presents results from her survey of secondary school students in Benin City about repatriation. Student responses are stock and bland, and show that not one of them has ever been to the museum in Benin City. The museum grounds are used mostly for kids' parties and picture taking. An occasional tourist coming off a Sahara adventure pops in, as do a few back-to-roots types. Even an art historian occasionally drops by.

The most useful essays are by Östberg himself. The most fascinating is his recounting of the story behind the major donation of Benin objects to the museum. In 1907, Hans Meyer, an academic and a man of private means in Leipzig, offered a significant donation expecting to get a decoration from the Swedish royal family in return. He did indeed become commander of the Polar Star but not of the first class order he desired, sending him into a frenzy of negotiations. Östberg followed the correspondence between the chancellery of the Duke of Sachsen-Meiningen, Leipzig, and Stockholm over a period of five years as governments became involved and the circumstances around the donation were finalized. Meyer complained bitterly that the decoration he received was not of equal standing to those he received from Romania, Russia, Portugal, and elsewhere. The essay about Meyer, called "African *Objects D'art* as Currency in a Bid for the Polar Star–and for Recognition on the European Scene," gives insights not only into German nationalism and social prestige at the turn of the last century, but also into how objects become signified as value. The social life of things here plays out as a form of social barter: fifteen Benin objects to start, with an additional sixteen to press the advantage as negotiations tightened up. Meyer, by

the way, was not eligible for the decoration he madly desired, an award set aside for Swedish citizens only.

A short contribution by Östberg also mentions how the museum obtained other Benin objects (a total of forty-three), and another intriguing essay discusses an opening of exhibition gift of two new plaques. One, cast in 1960, shows Ọba Akenzua greeting Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, an event that took place in 1953. The other cast from 2003 is of Ọba Ọvonranwen on his way to exile in 1897 after the British conquest. The final essay is a nuanced summary on repatriation. Östberg tells me that there is a vocal pro-repatriation lobby in Stockholm, and his balanced commentary I believe was required to ensure an undistracted exhibition. In "The Coveted Treasures of the Kingdom of Benin," he outlines Nigerian demands, those of the government, and those of the palace, and the stance of the perennial scapegoat, the British Museum. It is a power issue, as he smartly concludes. In a section called "Loot? " he asks questions that extend beyond the Benin artifacts, and in a section called "Who Should Have the objects? " he notes that they continue to be truly political art. He then discusses repatriated items, such as those returned by Sweden to Guatemala and elsewhere. His brief discussion of security in Nigerian museums is simply answered: There is none. Moreover, the Nigerian government has not made formal requests for the return of the Benin or other objects. Let sleeping dogs lie. And give Östberg credit for a job well done.

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