

- Speaker 1: Welcome to the Bill Walton show, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and thinkers. Fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics, and human flourishing. Interesting people. Interesting things.
- Bill Walton: Welcome to the Bill Walton Show. I'm in Overtime with C. D. Dickerson of the National Gallery Of Art and we're talking about the issues of art ownership, who owns it, and repatriation issues. In particular what I'd like to dig into is the issues surrounding the art that was taken from Africa during the colonial area and now resides in museums all over the world, and what we do about that, and where that art should reside? So C. D., would you frame the issue for me?
- CD Dickerson: I think it's helpful to frame the issue by focusing on the case of the Benin Bronzes. Here's a choice example I show on the screen of a head that's at the Rhode Island School Of Design, Museum Of Art cast in bronze. This represents an Oba, which is one of the king figure of the Edo people of the Benin court. There is a country called Benin, but we're talking about Nigeria and a place that's in Southwestern Nigeria, near the coast.
- CD Dickerson: These are exquisite bronzes that were created 1700s, 1800s. The Edo people go back to the 13, 14th century. But these are works that rival the kinds of bronze work that was being created in Europe at the time. The very stylized face, the bead work, exquisite works of art. In 1897 the British were having their designs and wishing to enter into a trade agreement with the Edo people. There was considerable resources in the area and the British, as part of their colonial expansion and empirical mandate, hoped to enter into a trade agreement. They marched on the capital because they became frustrated with the Oba's unwillingness to sign an agreement. It was evidently at the moment that the Oba and the court was celebrating a ritual and it didn't go over well.
- CD Dickerson: The Oba sent his troops out and massacred the British troops. In response, the British sent a punitive expedition to Benin City and, you know, almost decimated the population there. But in the process decided that they were going to loot the palace and take all of the, both ivories as well as the bronzes that they found in the court. There are wonderful photographs from the time. Not wonderful, but showing British troops sitting on these piles of loot that they were going to take back to Europe, and they did take it back to Europe.
- CD Dickerson: The British Museum very quickly acquired a choice selection of them. Many of the works were put on auction in the global market and were bought by other major museums across Europe, including in France as well as Germany. Many of the works in subsequent times have come to the US, the Metropolitan Museum Of Art has a group of these works. But the issue is that these were clearly works that were obtained by European powers in atrocious circumstances and are now held in British museum, European museums, American museums. There's nothing left in Benin. The Edo people who still survive are without any of the cultural artifacts that are testament to their culture.

- Bill Walton: Now culture. Were these religious artifacts originally or were they-
- CD Dickerson: Many of them were religious, were used in ceremonies, but also to commemorate the hierarchy of the courts in the case of a figure such as this one.
- Bill Walton: Are they still practicing those religions?
- CD Dickerson: Yes, they are practicing those religions.
- Bill Walton: So these would have value as religious objects today?
- CD Dickerson: Exactly, exactly. I read the attitudes towards objects in Africa are very different from the attitudes towards objects that we hold. That these are masterpieces that need to be in cases. These are things that were to be lived with. I know that there are museums in Africa that make a regular practice of lending their objects to cultures so that they can continue the ritual practices that these artifacts enshrine.
- Bill Walton: Well, so you're a curator, you love objects, you want to take care of them, you want to preserve them forever. Does that worry you that it goes back, and it gets lent out, and gets passed around and could get lost to history?
- CD Dickerson: I think there are ways to designate certain masterpieces and to create, you know ... if these were to be repatriated, to create a group or a collection that is used for ritual purposes.
- Bill Walton: Explain the problem to me of the Benin culture, Benin culture versus Nigeria, the country, and how we sort out where this should reside?
- CD Dickerson: Well that's one of the arguments against restitution because who are you restituting against? You have the Nigerian government making claims and wanting them back. But again, this is part of a nationalist agenda on part of the Nigerians, which is a completely false concept in terms of the history of the Edo people. But because there is a continuity of the Edo people, and there still is an Oba today, and there are representatives of the Edo people, here becomes a more clear cut case of being able to retribute to heirs of the original owners of the work.
- Bill Walton: Well, in contrast to the restoration or restitution of the art stolen during the Nazi era, which I think is kind of drifting a bit, this is gathering steam.
- CD Dickerson: Yes.
- Bill Walton: You have a politician like Macron in France, I read some of what he said, but he also said, "I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several

African countries is in France." And he said, "I'm from a generation of French people for whom the crimes of European colonialism are undeniable and make up part of our history." So this is not just about art, this is about atonement.

CD Dickerson: Right. In two and a half minutes Macron completely reversed the French stance on this issue that had been in decades in operation. He immediately commissioned a report from a French art historian and a Senegalese historian that again, I think 250 page report, again recommending that all of the colonial objects held in France be restituted to their source countries. So yes, this is very much building steam.

Bill Walton: Well, and unlike the other issues, this one also is part of popular culture. As I understand it, there was a big blockbuster called the Black Panther, which I haven't seen yet.

CD Dickerson: I'm afraid I haven't either, but I know the scene you're talking about.

Bill Walton: The villain, the super-villain, Erik Killmonger, goes into an exhibition and he's looking for an ax, and he finds the curator and the curator of course, is the villain. I hate to say that, but the curator's the villain. She says to him, "It was taken by British soldiers in vanillin Benin but it's from Wakanda. And then he says, "Don't trip. I'm going to take my hands off of you." And she says, "It's not yours." He says, "Well, how do you think you got it?" He said, "Do you think they paid a fair price when they took it from the country or did they take it like they took everything else?" That's in a blockbuster movie.

CD Dickerson: Right. It's a front and center issue. Colonialism, empires, righting wrongs. Part of the responsibility of curators, and really where this is going right now in the US, is just making clear to audiences the complicated histories of ownership of objects like this. So no longer do you have a label that just calls this what it is, but it has an extended label that spells out exactly how this was acquired and why it's where it is today.

Bill Walton: So how would you resolve this?

CD Dickerson: How would I resolve this?

Bill Walton: If you were-

CD Dickerson: I'm sympathetic to seeing at least a portion of these works go back to Benin, but it's terribly complicated. Again, the ownership, whether or not there is a worthy museum in which these can be displayed. There is a Benin working group that is a group of leaders both from Benin, Nigeria, as well as European museum professionals, who are trying to work towards a solution and the proposal is that within three years Benin City will have a beautiful functioning museum in which these could be displayed.

CD Dickerson: Part of me wonders whether or not there needs to be some sort of international body in which these objects are put in trust so that these works can be shown both in Benin. But at the same time we don't, again, want all eggs in one basket. I think that the value of, again, the universal, The Encyclopedic museum needs to be thought through, because we don't want those museums to be completely denuded of African art, because that would be an injustice to Africa because Westerners would not have the opportunity to have that kind of very seminal contact with African art and culture, which I think only expands perspectives and exactly the place of museums in the 21st century.

Bill Walton: It seems to me an international consortium's a good idea, particularly if you could get all the major encyclopedic museums involved. Because I can see benefits. Is it [Beanize] you'd be called if you're from Benin? I don't think you want all your art in Benin, I think you would like the world to see it. They're more likely to see it in London or New York perhaps, or in Tokyo, or in Beijing, or wherever, than they might be in your own country. And so if you had some ability to oversee this and have ... You're involved in putting together expeditions, maybe have it move, having a traveling show from place to place.

CD Dickerson: Right. The pushback you get from Benin, from the source countries is the nuance between restitution and repatriation. Repatriation being the idea of showing perhaps on extended loan, a work of art in the source country. Whereas restitution is real transfer of ownership. As you can imagine, the source country wants to have that privilege of ownership and power.

Bill Walton: Now we're talking about my favorite topic. One of my favorites. My wife Sarah was art director at Art+Auction and Art & Antiques. She was very involved in collectors, and museums, and dealers, and that sort of thing. Not firsthand, but in terms of covering it as a journalist. She coined the term, where there's art, there's crime. And that there's a lot of money involved here. If you look at what's happened with these objects from Africa, they were stolen. That was arguably over the course of time, wrong, but they come into a London museum where they gradually get more, and more, and more valuable. Part of that value, as you know as a curator, if you're an artist, you have something that goes into a museum, it becomes more valuable. So the fact that it was there, it gives it a value. You take it back to some of these countries where arguably governance is not that great, it's easy to see circumstances where somebody wants to monetize these as opposed to preserve them. Or am I just being ... Tell me I'm wrong.

CD Dickerson: First, I'd be interested ... I don't have any market numbers for these and when ones have more recently come on the market, but there's probably quite a taboo collecting that has eroded the market value of these works right now.

Bill Walton: Oh okay, sure.

CD Dickerson: So I'm not certain, just because they're in museums, that the market is sky high.

Bill Walton: So because of the provenance of these, because of their role in the culture and the religion-

CD Dickerson: Right. I mean, no museum would [crosstalk]

Bill Walton: ... collectors don't want to touch them?

CD Dickerson: Exactly. Exactly.

Bill Walton: That's interesting.

CD Dickerson: Also again, if they're restituted to the court of Benin and all of a sudden, they want some easy money and they try to sell them on the art market, would there be a market? Would the British museum then try to repurchase things that they had?

Bill Walton: No. I don't see it. Yeah, okay, so-

CD Dickerson: So I don't know if there is necessarily going to be those kind of market forces in play.

Bill Walton: So the right way to preserve their existence is to get it into museums. There are some museums that have opened, one in Pretoria, another one in Benin.

CD Dickerson: Yeah, Senegal has one that's opened. But if I had my dream to think about the kind of project that I would love to lead down the road, it's not only about bringing Benin Bronzes back to Benin, it's also about bringing Italian Renaissance altarpiece, it's about bringing world cultures to places that don't have any perspective on the world, whether it's China, on us. The Louvre is to be admired in this respect. They've recently opened in the UAE, sort of a satellite institution. It's more the UAE buying the rights to parts of the collection-

Bill Walton: UAE?

CD Dickerson: Abu Dhabi.

Bill Walton: [crosstalk 00:00:13:43].

CD Dickerson: Emirates. The UAE hired a star architect to design a lavish building and has purchased the rights to be able to display parts of the Louvre's collection in an Arab country and the Louvre, in perfectly great faith, has put on display magnificent loans that create a small encyclopedic museum in an Arab country. That's the kind of initiatives that we need to see playing out across the world.

Bill Walton: See, that's exciting because we're changing the subject then. This has devolved a bit into what's going on here in the United States with reparations for slavery,

and that people are saying, "Well, this is part of the reparations," and there's words like racist used, and power imbalances, and that sort of thing. It's all the sort of toxic dialogue that we seem to be having here in the United States. If you had a solution that would involve thinking about curating the world's art in order to bring people together to understand other cultures, that's a very powerful way to deflect the negativity.

CD Dickerson: Right. Exactly, exactly. I mean, there's still issues of ownership of these objects that would have to be sorted out and if they are put in trust with some sort of international body, but you know, that's where I see progress being made, where museums can really make a difference across the world.

Bill Walton: Do you think you can get a head ... I've mentioned at the outset that I think you're destined to be head of one of the world's great art museums. Maybe we should-

CD Dickerson: I don't know. But you know, you think of a museum like The Met with that kind of resources to open a satellite location somewhere very remote. It seems like it would be in the cards and the kind of branding opportunities and what it could do for The Met, for these large encyclopedic museums. Maybe that's where France ultimately will move with its initiative that Macron has launched.

Bill Walton: Well, I think it will take money to do it.

CD Dickerson: Absolutely.

Bill Walton: The Metropolitan Museum does have the money to do it. France does not. So I think we're more likely to find an answer-

CD Dickerson: Right. But I could see a nonprofit-

Bill Walton: [crosstalk] New York.

CD Dickerson: ... nonprofit coming along when being able to raise the kind of money necessary.

Bill Walton: Well, I think we've set a task for ourselves. Couple of billion dollars and we'll be [crosstalk]

CD Dickerson: You got to think big.

Bill Walton: But it's a big idea and I hope you push it, because if we could think in terms of these encyclopedic museums, not just operating in their one building in whatever city they're in, but operating satellites throughout the world, that's pretty dynamic.

This transcript was exported on Dec 12, 2019 - view latest version [here](#).

CD Dickerson: Sharing and partnerships.

Bill Walton: That's great. Well, C. D., thank you. This has been very interesting. You've been watching the Bill Walton Show in Overtime with C. D. Dickerson. We're talking about the world's art, and where it should reside, and how we preserve cultures and beauty through time. Thank you.

Speaker 1: Thanks for listening. Want more? Be sure to subscribe at thebillwaltonshow.com or on iTunes.