

## 10 Did Europeans steal non-European heritage?

In the 1960s, Europeans were reproached for idealising Europe, imposing their cultural model on the world and ignoring all things non-European. Yet, forty years later, Europeans were accused of having ‘plundered’ and ‘despoiled’ non-European cultures. Paradox or contradiction? Is it possible to ignore and despise foreign cultures while wishing to appropriate or draw inspiration from them? The matter of the restitution of ill-gotten cultural property has become the main focus of the decolonial ideology that developed in the 1990s with the emergence of the figure of the victim at the expense of the hero's.<sup>636</sup> It was the harbinger of the advent of the ‘duty of memory’ and ‘the rhetorics of denunciation’<sup>637</sup> The confusion between memory and history redefines the borders between morality, justice and knowledge. It triggers what has been called the ‘abuses of memory’.<sup>638</sup> A profound anthropological shift has been underway since the 1970s, and the wave of ‘woke culture’ is perhaps its most recent and popular expression. Today, the European narrative is primarily presented through the history of the victims of European power, with the scope of victimhood including non-European cultures and the historical narrative focusing on these cultures. The restitution of ill-gotten cultural property has become both a moral and geopolitical issue.

The forerunner of this movement was the appeal launched on 7 June 1978 by Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of UNESCO, advocating for the ‘return of irreplaceable cultural heritage to those who have created it’, arguing that ‘the men and women of these countries are entitled to recover these cultural assets that are part of their very being’. He quoted the Greek historian Polybius, who 2000 years ago had urged us ‘to stop making the misfortune of other peoples the ornament of our homeland’.

---

636 François Azouvi, *Du héros à la victime : la métamorphose contemporaine du sacré*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « NRF essais », 2024. See also: Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes. Génocide, identité, reconnaissance*, Paris, éd. La Découverte, 1997.

637 Sébastien Ledoux, *Le devoir de mémoire. Une formule et son histoire*, Paris, CNRS éditions (Biblis), 2016–2021, p. 129.

638 Emmanuel Terray, *Face aux abus de mémoire*, Actes Sud, 2006; Tzvetan Todorov, *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2001.

Four months later, the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property<sup>639</sup> to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation was established, with Salah Stétié of Lebanon as its first chairman. The word 'Europe' is not mentioned in the founding text, yet Europe was targeted (and subsidiarily America) in its relationship to Africa. The 'battle' was launched by Paul Joachim, a journalist born in Cotonou in Dahomey (now Benin) who had studied in France. In January 1965, in the monthly magazine *Bingo* published in Senegal, he wrote: 'There is one battle that we will have to fight valiantly on all fronts in Europe and America once we have found a final solution to the issues of property that are gnawing away at our minds: the battle to recover our works of art dispersed around the world'.<sup>640</sup>

### *Reclaiming heritage as a guarantee of authenticity and identity*

Countries that have achieved independence need a cultural imaginary realm to establish themselves as nation-states (in imitation of the European model that founded the 'invented tradition'). Reclaiming one's heritage, which guarantees 'authenticity' and identity, is part of this dynamic. The sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky argued that what is authentic is no longer merely what is 'true'; it is also what is ancient, the bearer of memory and collective identity'.<sup>641</sup>

One could say that the second historical phase of the decolonisation process was inaugurated then; after the political conquest, the cultural reconquest.<sup>642</sup> A special issue of UNESCO magazine, *Museum* (Vol XXXI, n° 1, 1979), was published with the title: 'Return and restitution of cultural property'.<sup>643</sup> This comprehensive issue covers all the issues driving intellectual circles today, from the facts to technical and diplomatic solutions. It

---

639 'Cultural property' includes objects, historical and ethnographic documents, manuscripts, visual art and decorative objects, palaeontological and archaeological objects, and zoological, botanical, and mineralogical specimens.

640 Quoted by Bénédicte Savoy, *Le long combat de l'Afrique pour son art. Histoire d'une défaite post-coloniale*, Paris, Seuil, 2023, p. 21.

641 Gilles Lipovetsky, *Le sacre de l'authenticité*, Paris, Gallimard, 2021, p. 323.

642 As early as 1959, the cultural dimension of the decolonial struggle was emphasised at the International Congress of Black Artists held in Rome on the topic 'The unity of black African cultures.'

643 Incidentally, the term 'despoilment' is used several times throughout the issue.

reveals that diplomatic discussions on this subject had been underway for several years (for example, between the Netherlands and Indonesia) and that restitution initiatives had occurred (between Belgium and Zaire, for instance). Jeannine Auboyer, the curator at the Musée Guimet (French National Museum of Asian Art), explained how France and Japan achieved 'reciprocal donations' and how a 1956 French law waived the principle of the inalienability of heritage collections. In fact, in August 1977 already, the International Council of Museums examined the issue in a report entitled '*Étude relative aux principes, conditions et moyens de la restitution ou du retour des biens culturels en vue de la reconstitution des patrimoines dispersés*'<sup>644</sup> (Study on the principles, conditions and means for the restitution or return of cultural property to reconstitute dispersed heritages).

Without harking back to the old Greek-British dispute over the Parthenon frieze or to Napoleon's forced requisitions in Italy or Germany, he who dreamt of a 'universal museum', the issue of the restitution of cultural property in the second half of the 20th century<sup>645</sup> primarily affected Europe and Europeans before it became a North-South issue. It is a well-known fact that Nazi Germany carried out a colonisation (and 'collaboration') policy and a policy to eradicate Judaism, which led to the systemic plundering of works of art, books and archives throughout subjugated Europe. Identification, compensation and restitution procedures are still underway. If you visit the Musée de Grenoble, for instance, you will see a painting by Gustave Courbet *Paysage sous la neige* (Landscape in the snow) (1867). This painting is flanked by a notice bearing a red seal mentioning: 'Recovered in 1945'. It is explained that this work was one of 60,000 others despoiled by Nazi Germany with the collaboration of the Vichy regime and returned to France in 1945. Around 45,000 artworks were returned to their owners before 1950. Of the 15,000 remaining items, 13,000 were sold for the benefit of the *Domaines* without a catalogue, making them virtually impossible to identify. The remaining 2,000 were selected by a committee to be deposited with museums under the name '*Musées Nationaux Récupération*' (MNR), with the task of continuing the search for any rightful claimants. However, silence shrouded these artworks between 1950 and the late 1990s.

In the early 2000s, the question of the restitution of works despoiled during the Second World War re-emerged, particularly at the instigation

---

644 <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/15839.pdf>

645 It should be pointed out that the study in this book is limited to the post-WWII period.

of the United States. In France, a database of 'MNR' items was created to facilitate their dissemination and record all the information on the provenance of each work. This database was named Rose Valland in honour of the curator of the *Jeu de Paume* museum, who recorded in her notebooks all the information she was able to glean concerning the looting of works of art stolen from Jews organised by the Nazis and overseen by the Rosenberg General Staff. This notice provides a complete history of the painting from 1933 until it was transferred to the Musée de Grenoble in 1976. Scholarly literature on the matter is extensive. The issue of the restitution of cultural property has been revived. It has gained momentum lately with the rise in the anti-colonial narrative and the increasing importance (political as well as economic or touristic) of cultural heritage worldwide. The 1990s marked the beginning of a 'heritage explosion'<sup>646</sup> and societies (both Western and non-Western) were all affected by the same 'fever of authenticity'.<sup>647</sup>

The West, i.e., Europe and North America, is on the front line because restitution initiatives have been too consequential. Europe, in particular (whose history is inseparable from that of Canada and the United States), has drawn heavily on the heritage of colonised countries. We know that it dictated its narrative to the world (in his 1950 *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire denounced 'Humanity reduced to monologue') and built a monumental heritage that was slow to consider the point of view of the colonised. However, yesterday's heroes no longer fit in with today's anthropological revolution, which has placed the victim and justice at the heart of new representations of history. This is why anti-colonialists fiercely and repeatedly contest the statues of Leopold II in Belgium; why the figure of Jules Ferry in France, who is also linked to colonial policy, is increasingly pilloried; why the statue of Edward Colston, a significant slave trader who died in the 18th century was taken down in 2020 in Bristol, a city in the southwest of England with a history of slavery.

But one could go back further in time. The Italian navigator Christopher Columbus, who was long hailed as a 'hero' for having 'discovered America', is now regarded as one of the figures behind the 'genocide' of the Native Americans and indigenous peoples in general, as well as of the European colonisation of America. Columbus Day, a public holiday in the United States since 1934, has been replaced in many American cities by a day in

---

646 Pierre Nora, « L'ère de la commémoration », in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, t.3, Quarto, Gallimard, 1997, p. 4707.

647 Gilles Lipovetsky, *Le sacre de l'authenticité*, op.cit., p. 9.

honour of 'indigenous peoples'. Europe, like North America, has had to face the issue of the 'statues of discord' through the demand to reconsider the history of slavery and colonisation, which led to vandalism and destruction.<sup>648</sup> A movement has developed throughout the world to 'de-heroise' and 'de-condition' memory, affecting figures thought to be beyond 'suspicion' (including Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Victor Schœlcher, Churchill and Gandhi).

*The Quai Branly Museum of Primitive Art, an untimely emergence*

The issue of restitution has recently been reintroduced into the rekindled debate on the colonial heritage involving Europe and the countries it colonised. This is not the place to review the history of this issue and the controversies it has generated. I will merely examine the rationale that transformed European interest in the culture of non-Europeans in the 19th and 20th centuries into a process of predation and domination. How was it that what might have been perceived as a way of recognising other cultures was eclipsed in favour of a moral condemnation centred on the accusation of 'despoilment'? This development on opposite fronts occurred in a very short space of time and, paradoxically, at virtually the same time as in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, specific extremist movements with religious pretensions were carrying out outright destruction of the heritage of these regions: from the explosion of the Buddhas of Bamiyan (2001) to the destruction of the Arch of Triumph in Palmyra (2015).<sup>649</sup> Incidentally, Europe did not stand idly by in the face of this non-European heritage nihilism. The 47 ministers in charge of heritage at the Council of Europe launched an appeal in Namur (April 2015) for greater 'international solidarity'. At the behest of French President François Hollande, on 20 March 2017 in Abu Dhabi, in collaboration with UNESCO, a new foundation was created (*Aliph*) whose purpose is 'the protection of endangered heritage'.

---

648 Jacqueline Lalouette, *Les statues de la discorde*, Passés/Composés-Humensis, 2021. See also: Bertrand Tillier, *La disgrâce des statues : Essai sur les conflits de mémoire, de la Révolution française à Black Lives Matter*, Paris, Payot, 2022.

649 In addition to smuggling and pillaging for business purposes, we could add: the destruction of several mausoleums in Timbuktu and a mosque in Mali, including the main mosque in the city, and the burning of manuscripts (June-July 2012); the demolition and desecration of the mausoleum of the sage al-Chaab al-Dahmani in Tripoli, Libya (August 2022); the ransacking of the pre-Islamic heritage of the Mosul museum and a vast auto-da-fé (February 2015), etc.

The European Commission bolstered intra-European cooperation by committing to protect 'World Heritage' (July 2017). It has decided to modify the regulatory environment by proposing a specific offence relating to cultural goods (in connection with the fight against the financing of terrorism) and a European regulation to combat the illicit import of cultural property into the European Union in connection with developing countries.

At this point, we should mention the project announced in 1998 by Jacques Chirac, President of the French Republic, to create a museum dedicated to the arts of the civilisations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. At long last, non-Western art was being recognised for its true worth. This ended what was described as a long period of denial, contempt, and even a lingering colonialist attitude. Indeed, created in 1938, the *Musée de l'Homme* was the only place where these non-European works were exhibited, but the rationale behind this approach was primarily anthropological, not artistic. The objects represented were essentially regarded as objects of study that provided information about a given community. The museum offer on this issue was twofold. Non-European works already had a place of exhibition: the *Musée des Arts africains et océaniens* (Museum of African and Oceanian Arts) in the *Palais des colonies*, inaugurated in 1931. With some difficulty, this museum attempted to implement its original mission: to reconcile ethnographic and artistic approaches. In their famous short film, *Les statues meurent aussi* (Statues Also Die), shot at the dawn of decolonisation (1953), Alain Resnais and Chris Marker drew attention to this issue: 'We had been commissioned to make a film about Negro art', Resnais explains. 'Chris Marker and I started with the following question: why is Negro art in the *Musée de l'Homme*, while Greek or Egyptian art is in the Louvre?'<sup>650</sup>

The ambition behind the Quai Branly project was to end this ambiguity and reinstate non-Western art into the history of the arts. Thanks to considerable resources and constant political commitment, the *Musée des Arts Premiers Quai Branly* was inaugurated with great fanfare on 20 June 2006. On this occasion, its initiator, Jacques Chirac, declared: 'There is no more hierarchy between the arts than between peoples. This conviction in the equal dignity of the world's cultures is the cornerstone of the Quai Branly

---

650 R. Vautier, N. Le Garrec, « *Les Statues meurent aussi et les ciseaux d'Anastase* », *Téléciné*, vol. 175, n° 560, 1972, p. 33. Quoted by: M. De Groof, « *Les Statues meurent aussi* (Chris Marker et Alain Resnais, 1953) – mais leur mort n'est pas le dernier mot », *Décadrages*, 40–42 | 2019, 72–93.

Museum.’ This museum shelters two-thirds of the 90,000 works of African art conserved in French public collections. And yet, in a matter of a few years, this museum has become ‘one of the most divisive museums in recent European history’,<sup>651</sup> a symbol of neo-colonialism.

Why? In parallel, studies explored the conditions under which these works had been acquired. They reveal the inequalities specific to the colonial regime: acquisitions were generally made under duress (in a proportion that is difficult to ascertain precisely and document), if not through theft or spoliation. Michel Leiris drew attention to this phenomenon as early as the 1930s. While participating as an ethnologist in the Dakar-Djibouti Scientific Mission (1931–33) led by the eminently reputable scientists Marcel Griaule, Paul Rivet and Georges Henri Rivi  re, he wrote in his diary (published from 1934 and regularly reissued): ‘Nine times out of ten, the methods used to collect objects are those of forced purchase, not to say requisition. All this casts a shadow over my life, and my conscience is only half clear’. He points to a vicious circle: ‘...we plunder Negroes, on the pretext of teaching people to know and love them, that is to say, in the end, to train other ethnographers who will also go “love” and plunder them...’. On 28 September 1931, he wrote: ‘What a sinister thing it is to be a European’.<sup>652</sup> However, Leiris would overcome his guilty conscience to participate in the initiatives of French anthropologists and historians (whom it would be unfair to forget) who sought to promote the history and culture of Africa, starting in the 1950s.<sup>653</sup>

The issues of restitution and acquisition have overshadowed the generous intention behind the creation of the Quai Branly Museum. This was the dawn of a new legal-diplomatic issue that would affect almost every country in Europe at a time when they were trying to stop the nihilistic madness of the destroyers of non-European heritage in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The difference was that European countries had not destroyed the heritage they were harvesting in unequal conditions. They preserved it according to the standards in force for all heritage (Western or otherwise)

---

651 Alex Greenberger, ‘Jacques Chirac, Former French President Who Supported Controversial Museum of Non-Western Art, Dies at 86’, *Art News*, September 26, 2019.

652 Michel Leiris, *LAfrique fant  me*, Gallimard, 1934, p. 343.

653 Georges Balandier and Jacques Maquet (dir.), *Dictionnaire des civilisations africaines*, Paris, Hazan, 1968. This reference dictionary aims to reveal Africa’s creativity in its cultural works, techniques, and the extreme variety of its social relationships. Michel Leiris is one of the contributors.



and even promoted it through exhibitions, documentaries, studies, and publications.

In fact, the issue at stake was beyond mere restitution. It was the Europeans' claim to build the museography narrative of non-European art through the Quai Branly Museum, which then became the symbol of European cultural imperialism. This was the other aspect of what has been called the theft of history, i.e., the history of non-Europeans by Europeans, who were at this time urged to keep to their own history and focus on Europe. In this moral questioning of Europe, which implies a reversal of perspectives, it has been argued that European art's 'modernity' stems from borrowing from African art. Some Americans feel that Pablo Picasso drew inspiration from African masks to create a 'primitivist' form of art, which would have constituted the 'cornerstone of modernism'<sup>654</sup> whereas the current African trend, in the name of 'the emancipation of the gaze' and forgetting Cézanne,<sup>655</sup> sees it as the source of Cubism.<sup>656</sup> This type of statement shows the limits of the extrapolations to which the question of restitutions gives rise. This fundamental question should be treated seriously, free from moralising statements, the consensus of the moment and geopolitical instrumentalisation. In fact, in the first part of the 20th century, interest in African art was confined to a small but non-conformist cultural avant-garde. In 1907 and 1908, Picasso, Apollinaire, and Le Corbusier's accounts pointed to the deserted state of the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography. In the 1920s, nothing had changed. In 1924, Le Corbusier wrote,

---

654 'But almost immediately, art historians and politicians accused the museum of having colonialist and imperialist overtones—especially in a city where artists such as Pablo Picasso once looked to African masks to create 'primitivist' art that was a cornerstone of modernism.' Alex Greenberger, 'Jacques Chirac, Former French President Who Supported Controversial Museum of Non-Western Art, Dies at 86', *Art News*, September 26, 2019.

655 In 1907, a Cézanne retrospective was held in Paris, which certainly influenced Georges Braque, a friend of Picasso, to turn towards what was gradually being called 'cubism'. Yet, what mostly animated these avant-garde circles at the time was the dispute about the nude. It was Picasso who 'joined Braque in his work of geometrisation and highlighting of volumes'. Braque, the inventor of cubism, mainly focused on still lifes, which didn't stop him from buying an African mask in 1905 and 1910. See: Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les Avant-gardes artistiques, 1948–1918*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015, p. 367–369.

656 A thesis defended, for example, by the Senegalese artist Kiné Aw. See: « Le cubisme est né en Afrique » : entre Pablo Picasso et l'art africain, une histoire d'inspiration », <https://www.rfi.fr/culture/20230408-le-cubisme-est-n%C3%A9-en-afrique-entre-pablo-picasso-et-l-art-africain-une-histoire-d-inspiration>.



'I was always alone... with the guards'.<sup>657</sup> He lamented this because the 'so-called primitive arts' were apt to make people understand 'that there have been other civilisations of great cycle and things of great splendour and that they have always been hidden from us or revealed to us simply under the heading of ethnography, that is to say, a purely technical science'.<sup>658</sup>

This elite was very favourable to recognising what, at the beginning of the century, was called 'the distant arts' and, on the initiative of Félix Fénéon, advocated for their admission to the Louvres Museum.<sup>659</sup> Today, the Quai Branly Museum—Jacques Chirac houses the exhibits from the Trocadéro Museum (created in 1882 and which would become the *Musée de l'Homme* in 1938) and attracts 1,410,000 visitors.

*The Declaration of Ouagadougou and the new topoi: 'spoliation'*

At the beginning of his mandate, young President Emmanuel Macron tackled the issue of the restitution of cultural property. On 28 November 2017, he delivered a committed speech at the University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on the restitution of African heritage and promised to instigate a political process ('I cannot accept that a large part of the cultural heritage of several African countries is in France'). This would lead to the Sarr/Savoy Report (*'Restituer le patrimoine africain : vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle'* —Restoring African heritage: towards a new relational ethic) submitted to President Macron on 23 November 2018. This report delivers a perceptive diagnosis and opens some very interesting avenues. The French President's pledge has already produced concrete restitution measures. Along with the international students in my Erasmus Mundus Masters course, I attended the very brief exhibition (October 2021) at the Quai Branly Museums of the works that France has returned to Benin. Heritage may be divisive, but it can also be a source of resilience and a symbolic factor for rapprochement, reconciliation, and even moral reparation. Thus, in 2010, the French government had already returned—under

657 Quoted by Maureen Murphy, « Le Corbusier et les arts du Danhomè : primitivisme ou retour à l'ordre? », in Christine Mengin (dir.), *Le Corbusier et les arts dits « primitifs »*, Paris, Fondation Le Corbusier/éditions de la Villette, 2019, p. 48.

658 Letter written by Le Corbusier to Paul Rivet, 7 October 1935, quoted in Christine Mengin, *op.cit.*, p. 163.

659 *Le Bulletin de la vie artistique*, 15 November 1920. Reedition: Félix Fénéon, *Les arts lointains iront-ils au Louvre?*, Paris, Espaces & Signes, 2019.

particular conditions—<sup>660</sup> 297 manuscripts that had been seized in Korea by the French fleet in 1866, and Māori heads claimed by New Zealand. This led to protests from cultural and heritage stakeholders, who brandished the argument of inalienability, fearing for the integrity of the collections.

However, I would like to point out the ideological presupposition of the co-author of this report in light of a case that I know rather well from investigating and publishing about it. She is not alone in sharing this presupposition. It is a contemporary symptom of decolonialist activism and of the media and editorial interest in the renewed attention to the evils of colonialism. Bénédicte Savoy's intellectual career is symptomatic of this evolution. Her outstanding doctoral dissertation (defended in 2000) focused on the 'cultural goods seized' by France in Germany around 1800. It was published with the title: *Le Patrimoine annexé. Les biens culturels saisis par la France en Allemagne autour de 1800*<sup>661</sup> (Annexed Heritage: Cultural assets seized by France in Germany circa 1800). In the preface, Pierre Rosenberg, a jury member, expressed surprise that the publication's title should differ from the dissertation's '*Les spoliations des biens culturels...*' (The spoliation of cultural assets ...). His perplexity is apparent. Why was the term 'spoliation' removed? He ventured an explanation: 'The term *spoliation*, which was obsolete until recent years, has come back into fashion with the spoliation of Jewish property by the Germans during the last war. *Seized*, with its more historical resonance, refers primarily to property seized during the French Revolution. The term does not have the controversial contemporary ring that the word *spoliation* has. To put it simply: would it have been possible to compare Napoleonic France with Nazi Germany (...)?'

In the space of twenty years, this 'unfortunate contemporary tone' has become mainstream and now allows the use of the term 'spoliation' without reference to Nazism unless 'Nazism' has entered a process of trivialisation. It should be noted that the term 'spoliation' is mostly absent from the 'Sarr/Savoy Report'. It appears only once in the chapter: '*Les formes historiques de la spoliation*' (Historical forms of spoliation). Current events have

---

660 To circumvent the problem posed by the inalienability principle of public collections, these manuscripts were loaned for five years, renewable. At the time, the intention was to facilitate trade negotiations with South Korea. President Sarkozy's government sidestepped the obstacle of the law by creating an awkward situation, with the manuscripts remaining the property of France.

661 Bénédicte Savoy, *Le Patrimoine annexé. Les biens culturels saisis par la France en Allemagne autour de 1800*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2003, 2 volumes, préface de Pierre Rosenberg.

prompted this specialist in Franco-German cultural history to 'seize' upon the anti-colonial *topos* and use titles that move away from the 'wisdom' ascribed to her by Pierre Rosenberg and reflect an ideological stance: *Le long combat de l'Afrique pour son art. Histoire d'une défaite post-coloniale*<sup>662</sup> (Africa's enduring struggle for its art. History of a post-colonial defeat). However, it is fair to say that this latest book provides essential insights into the phenomenon.

It is an interesting study because it provides a closer look at how current events and morality (or convictions or prevailing opinions) interfere with the field of knowledge in the history of European culture. This is what I would call the 'Champollion syndrome'.<sup>663</sup>

*The statue of 'Champollion' in the courtyard of the Collège de France*

In the inaugural lecture for her chair in 'The Cultural History of Artistic Heritage in Europe, 13th-20th centuries', Bénédicte Savoy commented that she had been appalled to discover a new meaning in the statue of Champollion, by Auguste Bartholdi (1834–1904), when she walked into the courtyard of the *Collège de France* in 2017. A pensive Champollion, standing, rests one foot on the head of a pharaoh on the ground. Using a subjective and moral register, she described her 'dismay' and 'stupefaction' at this 'decapitated statue of ancient Egypt, the majestic, broken head of a pharaoh who could be Ramses II'.<sup>664</sup>

She was tempted to see it as a symbol of the predatory Europe that had built its heritage by dispossessing other cultures, which led her to consider that this statue 'says more about the history of heritage in Europe than any book'. However, she admitted that she did not try to find out the

662 Bénédicte Savoy, *Le long combat de l'Afrique pour son art. Histoire d'une défaite post-coloniale*, Paris, Seuil, 2023 (1<sup>st</sup> edition published in Germany in 2021).

663 Robert Belot, « Le syndrome Champollion. La mésinterprétation de la statue de Bartholdi au Collège de France comme révélateur de la difficulté à aborder sereinement la question de la restitution des biens culturels », Communication au colloque *L'Europe face à la revendication de la restitution des biens culturels mal acquis*, Saint-Étienne, Université Jean Monnet, 20 janvier 2020. See also Markus Messling's excellent article, « Champollion devant l'universalisme républicain », *La Vie des idées*, 27 Septembre 2022. ISSN : 2105–3030. URL : <https://laviedesidees.fr/Champollion-devant-l-universalisme-republicain>.

664 Bénédicte Savoy, *Objets du désir, désir d'objets*, Paris, Collège de France / Fayard, 2017, p. 42–47.

artist's intention: 'What did Bartholdi mean to say? I do not know'. This was forgetting the boundary between emotion and knowledge. Although there can be no knowledge without a knowing subject, and although every researcher is the product of their environment and times, the act of knowing implies distancing oneself from one's feelings or forebodings, remaining as neutral as possible in the face of the political or moral pressures that dominate the news, and resisting the excessive mediatisation that has latched on to the issue of the restitution of ill-gotten cultural property. Mostly, it implies gathering information. The risk here would be to produce 'de-knowledge' and injustice. Does Auguste Bartholdi, the statue's creator, deserve such a peremptory judgment? Is the foot resting on the head an 'act of domination'? To understand, it is important to contextualise, guard against anachronisms, research, and, above all, not give in to the teleological and retrospective illusion of lending 19th-century people our present-day feelings. To appreciate Champollion's statue and overcome any misunderstandings, it is essential to understand its creator, his republican commitments, his work and the environment in which he evolved. This is what I have tried to achieve through a dozen of publications devoted to the sculptor.

Auguste Bartholdi fell in love with Egypt during his first trip there<sup>665</sup>. In 1854, he had just turned twenty. Together with the painter Jean Léon Gérôme, he set off on a photographic mission sponsored by the French government. The purpose was to photograph the heritage of Ancient Egypt, which was extremely popular in France. Painters, writers and architects flocked to this civilisation, whose writing Champollion had discovered three decades earlier. He was fascinated with the discovery of a new world very far from Europe. The mythological universe of this pre-Judeo-Christian civilisation resonated mysteriously with him. Bartholdi would experience the revelation of the challenge of monumentality in Egypt: the art of controlled excess that uses the landscape and brings sculpture closer to architecture. Between 1865 and 1867, he developed a project for a colossal creation to flank the entrance to the future port of Suez (the canal linking Europe and the Middle East was to be inaugurated in 1869). The first terracotta model features a lighthouse with a woman holding a torch on its pedestal. She was a *fellahin*, as they were called at the time, i.e., a

---

665 Robert Belot, « Bartholdi, l'Égypte et la première mondialisation », *De la Vallée des Rois à l'Arabie heureuse. Bartholdi en Égypte et au Yémen – 1855–1856*, Paris, éd. Snoeck-musées de Belfort, Gand-Courtai (Belgium), 2012, p. 130–167.

Muslim peasant woman, such as the ones the traveller often met and drew. Ismail Pacha, Vice-King of Egypt, refused the project. This is the project that would be repurposed to become the Statue of Liberty.<sup>666</sup> Such was Bartholdi, the man who wanted to reconcile cultures and unite continents.

In this context, in 1867, at the Paris World Fair, where Egypt was featured, the Alsatian statue-maker presented the model for the statue of Champollion that now stands in the Collège de France entrance courtyard. Bartholdi was an admirer of both the Egyptologist and Egypt. It is interesting to consider how the press viewed this sculptural gesture at the time. For instance, the magazine *Le Journal illustré* (25 August-1 September 1867) wrote:

'It is impossible to convey with more striking truth the profound *meditation* of the scientist, transfixed before the mystery that had been questioned in vain before him and that his genius would unveil. His gaze locked on this sphinx-like head, with its strange combination of stern gravity and I know not what mocking finesse that seems to challenge human intelligence. Champollion is following within himself the awakening of a thought in whose depths the truth was beginning to emerge. *His foot placed on the silent witness of the past*, whose silence he has sworn to break, is already a sign of triumph. It is the patient struggle of the genius who is aware of his strength and knows that he will triumph. (...) It is man, timeless man, with his *thirst for knowledge*, with his great and proud curiosity, and that secret instinct which warns him of his power and arms his will against the most impenetrable mysteries'.

The statue of Champollion evoked, first and foremost, the disinterested pursuit of science, the quest for truth, the thirst for knowledge and a respect for other cultures. And now, it should be seen as an 'unbearable and affected document', proof of European cultural domination and that 'the shiny, golden medal of culture and knowledge almost always has, in the West, a reverse side of symbolic and true violence'. Champollion's foot resting on the head of the pharaoh or the sphinx would reveal Europe's rapacity for accumulation toward other cultures and symbolise colonial hegemony. However, Bartholdi's intent was the opposite. This foot is the triumph of the desire to know, the success of science in the service of the

---

666 The Americans would learn of this unexpected origin only many years later. On 2 February 2017, the leading American daily, *US TODAY*, ran the headline, 'The Statue of Liberty was modelled after an Arab woman'.

discovery of pre-Judeo-Christian cultures. Precisely, his fascination with non-European cultural heritage allowed the celebrated statue-maker to resist the nationalist overtones that gripped Europe at the end of the 19th century. This illustrates how good conscience does not always mix with science. However, as Plato recommended, combining ‘true opinion and science’ is the most challenging thing of all. Behind the rhetorical effect of this moral rebuke, which is very much in tune with the spirit of the times, and despite the anachronism of the analysis that underlies it, there is a tendency among European scholars to ‘right the wrongs’ and to propagate among their European contemporaries, even through what their ancestors did best (such as the discovery of hieroglyphics), the Christian culture of repentance and resentment, as Nietzsche would say, in the name of the victims.<sup>667</sup>

*Conclusion: The paradox of reclaiming heritage*

The appeal for the restitution of cultural property by formerly colonised countries and their ambition to ‘museograph’ their history and arts are ultimately marked by a strange paradox that has not been adequately brought to light, probably because of the ideological context in which it developed. In a way, one might see the triumph of the European cultural model in these claims. Indeed, heritage (both as a concept and politically) was invented by Europe, such as the museum,<sup>668</sup> according to Krzysztof Pomian, was ‘born in Rome in the last third of the 15th century ...’<sup>669</sup> Yet this model has its limits and drawbacks. The present consensus around heritage and authenticity as the ultimate metapolitical issue implicitly proceeds from a kind of ‘abusive substantialisation’<sup>670</sup> that is incompatible with historical reality.

Yet, intellectuals who sought to ideate Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War (for example, the *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*)

---

667 Pascal Bruckner, *Un coupable presque parfait. La construction du bouc émissaire blanc*, Paris, Le livre de Poche, 2022.

668 The museum not as a ‘treasure’, but as a ‘specific institution’ in charge of ‘preserving continuity’. See Krzysztof Pomian, *Le musée, une histoire mondiale. I. Du trésor au musée*, Paris, Gallimard, 2020, p. 19.

669 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

670 Heinz Wismann, *Lire entre les lignes. Sur les traces de l’esprit européen*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2024, p. 30.

understood that Europe could not be defined as a kind of patrimonial essence, through a genetic 'prior existence'. They did not particularly 'idealise' Europe, as Léopold Sédar Sengor criticised, as they made self-criticism one of the distinctive features of the European spirit. The philosopher Heinz Wismann aptly understood that Europe, although it had invented museums, 'is not the museum of European achievements',<sup>671</sup> it is 'movement' and 'each rebirth is an alteration, a disruption.' Hence, his heterodox definition of heritage is that it is a 'disposition of the mind' instead of an accumulation of cultural property to be enshrined, valorised, and kept for eternity.

One could go so far as to think that the fight for cultural heritage is almost a rear-guard battle. Those who seek authenticity, questing an 'ontological memorial', are in for a disappointment. The European spirit is to be achieved through 'gesture,' successive transformations, and, above all, *crisis*: 'There can be no European culture without this crisis in which it separates from itself'. Should we then dissociate cultural identity from its heritage (and our idea of our heritage)? Or should we reformulate the question of identity as a process to activate differences instead of a mausoleum freezing them in place? Such is the excellent question he poses.

---

671 *Ibid.*, p. 10–11.



