Ulrich van Loyen

The Poisoned Museum

Recevoir est reçu
The Edda/ M. Mauss

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In an article in the 25 January issue of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the President of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Hermann Parzinger, took up Emmanuel Macron's suggestion: artefacts that came to Europe in the colonial context should be exhibited in the site of their origin. In the shadow of France, the Prussian State Possessions, with its Prussian Palace – that vintage sarcophagus that does not hold the entire world as Hegel imagined, but nonetheless the Prussian-German relationship to the entire world, sees itself obligated to make an impressive international display. For of course what are required – alongside the gigantic, politically legitimized research funds to reconstruct proveniences, decipher handwritings, and ensure transparency vis-à-vis sponsors and the sovereign (digitalization) – are above all international framework conditions for the exhibitions so that the return of the exhibition objects can be regulated, together with the proper recipient – best identified by those carrying out the restitution; the recipient will also have to ensure the proper institution for and the proper treatment of the objects. Whether these are to be legally binding returns or merely loans seems to be secondary for Parzinger (which says a lot). For the example of sculptures from the royal house of Benin, Parzinger points out that it first must be considered who will get something back. And yes, it would be best for many, many people to consider this, all of Europe, because after all that's where the objects are strewn. One could fear that the result could be a European pedagogical mission, in this case to the Nigerians, who for a start are called upon to show patience and understanding for the German mixture of barbarism and pedantry. The museums must be built and operated, and one wishes the state of Nigeria lots of fun thereby. But the hope – as

can be glimpsed through the suggestions – is that somehow the museum could be the site where a riven nation could convalesce or an "imagined community" come together. As if what is to be returned was what will first produce those to whom it is returned. Along with the museum-ripe relationships to the rest of the world to which Germany wants to arrive, these are lovely prospects.

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Along with the spirit of giving, which urges to give back, the spirit of the preserver also clings to the object; that is, something that did not belong to the object, at least in Parzinger's view, but that nolens volens was made a part of it in the course of history. And along with European democracy's spirit of peace, that just may be the European institution that calls itself "museum" and that points out its kinship with royal curiosity cabinets as well as the idealistic hope that it could provide educational *experiences* to the nation that remains to be created. Museums as sites of the petty and the sublime, of crumbliness and memory, a very European achievement whose universality (and thereby innocence on principle), however, Mr. Parzinger seems to believe in more than Mr. Macron does; the latter seems rather to seek to export museums as franchised institutions all over the world (the Louvre already stands in Abu Dhabi). Using the museums that one supposedly bestows on them, but which one would like even better to obligate *them* to establish (with international agreements, the customary UNESCO bullying patronization, etc.), one replays the old colonization. To put it clearly: the gift is as poisoned as the site to which it is supposed to be given, which it carries with it in a way, and from which it can no longer be released. Unless the people were permitted to finally do with the things what they want, what they think of, what they used to do with them, etc. But part of that would be that the Nigerians, the present inhabitants of Guatemala, or the Inuit might reject the imperative of the autonomy of art. This imperative was one of the things with which the robbery itself was retroactively legitimized; the comparison of Benin's sculptures to the art of the Renaissance stands for this. If there is one discipline that is not innocent, then it is art history, and it is possible that its priests know this, too: those who have secured supremacy over the ethnological archives and collections secretly hope that, in the course of returning these objects, evil will be exorcised from art history itself. But it is equally possible that they will experience the shock of their lives, if the united artefacts cause the collapse of the museum built especially for them. (That is the last dream of art history: its salvation as *purification through what is foreign in it*.)

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In recent years, I have been able to witness this yearning for exorcism as a basic postcolonial situation intensely in the Italian discussion of the museum. Until 2017, the university-owned museum in Turin that emerged from the collection of Cesare Lombroso, the founder of criminal anthropology, stood on the verge of being closed. It is an exemplary museum in the sense that it leaves Lombroso's collection (complete with the skeleton of its founder) as its centerpiece, preparing it and following it up in several rooms. This collection includes several skulls – objects that, according to Parzinger, characterize "anthropological collections", some of them taken from ritual contexts (cemeteries of the "poor people in Purgatory"), some from normal graves. And all of them from the South of Italy, the internal colony of the nation-state founded in 1861, in which Lombroso worked as an army doctor during the punitive expeditions against Calabrian brigands. Lombroso wanted to depict the connection between delinquent behavior and conspicuous physical traits, primarily based on their heads; crime, underdevelopment, and congenital disease seemed to him to be the vicious circle of the South that he aimed to break up. That a hundred years later several Calabrian communities would demand the return of their earlier residents' skulls and finally the closing of the museum was foreseeable. The untenability of Lombroso's phrenological speculations, his successors' racism toward the "meridionali" (southern Italians), the long and often disgraceful experience of precisely these migrants in the industrial city Turin transformed this demand into an opportunity for the city to confess its guilt in relation to the South as well as to contribute to raising the South's social level – returning the skulls turned into a gesture of reconciliation, by means of which the museum's researchers could finally rescue the museum. On the other hand, the Calabrian communities' making Lombroso and his deeds current effected his inward historicization; the museum became all the more museum, the more skulls were removed from it. Nonetheless, the number of unidentified skulls remains large, so that the showcases remain well filled. The Devil is exorcised, long live the Devil!

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With an eye to Lombroso, Macron, and Parzinger, one must not fail to ask the basic question: What is the basis for the seemingly self-evident claim for the return of historical artefacts and objects to an ethnic, state, or culturally identified community? In the case of the skulls, one can at any rate concede that the point is to pacify the restless ghosts, to keep conflicts in check, to consolidate memory, to inter someone in his own ground, there where his descendants want to have him with them. Wherever this is possible in the world, it is a legitimate project; far too many are buried far from home. And what about cultural goods –skulls people pray to, of course, are cultural goods, but to avoid disturbing the art historians' common sense we have to simplify: what about sculptures and pictures? As is well-known, the Louvre is one big collection of looted art, and in cases where it was not explicitly military campaigns, the new owners made use of the difference in power, the lack of infrastructure, and the others' lower level of education. Hardly anything here can have been "strictly consensual". Today, returns among European neighbors are considered both superfluous and ahistorical; instead, they are carried out with nations clearly different from one's own or that, after years of antagonism, are to be recognized as equal (for example, Russia). Europe recognizes only those who identify through culture (and a museum is part of that).

The return need not be carried out without a fight, nor without moral conflicts (for example, Kafka's "Trial" manuscript", purchased by the German Literature Archive Marbach, also claimed by Israel, where Max Brod preserved it as owner and Israeli citizen). Here, the stance has prevailed that, if the rightful owners can no longer be determined by individual genealogy, the claim defaults to the collective or their present-day legal heirs (or in the case of Israel, the moral successor). The retransfer of ownership accordingly places the creator of the retransferred object in his background, prescribes him a cultural and ethnic identity, which is regarded as of higher value in the context of history, so rich in tumults and turbulences. In a certain way, the West reduces itself to absurdity: in schools and universities, young people are taught that culture (and gender) are to be grasped as "constructed", but when it

comes to questions of restitution is when politics, research, and museum people revert to an essentialist primitivism.

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Despite all the pathos of restitution and as much as it underscores the societal relevance of science, the results include a number of cognitive dissonances or at least incongruities. Perhaps we shouldn't smooth them out, but learn to understand them as part of our way of being entangled in the world and as our wish for innocence and purity, which has been bought dearly each time (blood is purified with blood; the Cross on the Berlin City Palace replica knows it). But maybe one should learn to endure one's own history, which means grasping it as an inalienable part of oneself. Then it might become clear that, while one cannot give anything *back*, one can definitely pass something *on*.

The President of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz demonstrates precisely the opposite when he pleads to dissolve scientific archives (and that's what the ethnological collections are) or to disentangle the concept of art (based on the artefacts to be distributed by regions of origin). On the one hand, this is politically arbitrary; on the other, it forgets history, including by negating art's history of entanglement. The science that one conducts with this policy will be merely poor science, and the politics that rushes to help this science merely poor politics.

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