

Traces of History

Connecting the Kingdom of Benin with the Rautenstrauch-Joest- Museum in Cologne

Some first results on the provenance
of RJM's Benin Collection

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1. Starting point, project objectives and framework

The Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum has a collection of 96 objects from the ancient West African Kingdom of Benin in today's Nigeria. The museum acquired the Benin Bronzes¹ between 1899 and 1967 as part of 15 donations and purchases (see figure 1). Like most of the approximately 4,000 Benin Bronzes scattered worldwide today, it is likely that the Cologne pieces came to Europe after having been looted from the Royal Palace in the Kingdom of Benin in 1897 by the British Army. The British invaded the capital of Benin, plundered the city, burned it down, took the king as a prisoner and took some few thousand cultural artefacts with them to England.² From there, the objects, including commemorative bronze heads, relief plaques and sculpted ivory tusks, were spread all over Europe and the United States, where they became part of private and museum collections.³

File / Konvolut	Acquisition date RJM	Number of objects	Kind of acquisition
1897/01	3 donations in 1899	15	Donation by Adele and Eugen Rautenstrauch
1901/09	20.11.1901	6	Donation by Theodor Rautenstrauch
1902/19	21.11.1902	44	Donation by Theodor Rautenstrauch
1904/10	14.07.1904	2	Purchase from William Ockelford Oldman, London
1905/13	29.09.1905	4	Purchase from William Ockelford Oldman, London
1906/12	03.09.1906	2	Donation/ Money for acquisition from Theodor Rautenstrauch
1906/24	19.06.1906	1	Purchase from F. Smith, UK
1907/03	12.04.1907	1	Purchase from William Ockelford Oldman, London
1943/05	23.03.1944	13	Purchase from Louis Carré, Paris
1949/05	04.01.1950	2	Donation by Eduard van der Heydt
1953/04	18.07.1953	1	Purchase from Hugo Langerbein
1963/02	06.02.1963	1	Purchase from T.J. Bouman
1966/08	07.04.1966	1	Transfer with Klaus Clausmeyer
1966/09	06.04.1966	1	Exchange with Stolper Galleries of Primitive Arts, Amsterdam
1967/12	07.07.1967	2	Donation by Stolper Galleries of Primitive Arts, Amsterdam

Figure 1: The 15 RJM files (Konvolute) containing Benin Bronzes⁴

¹ Not all of the so-called Benin Bronzes are actually made of bronze, but also of brass, ivory and in some cases even wood (Östberg 2010).

² On the violent history of the Benin Bronzes, see e.g. Barley 2010; Hicks 2020; Lundén 2016.

³ There are some few Benin Bronzes that are not directly linked with the British "punitive expedition" and found their way Europe prior to or after 1897, but most of them were brought to Europe after the looting of the Royal Palace in Benin City (Plankensteiner 2007).

⁴ The acquisition dates given in the sources sometimes differ from the RJM acquisition dates. If that is the case, this is indicated in the findings.

1.1. Aim of the provenance research

The RJM collated some first information on the objects, including their history, in an overview in 2019 in order to contribute to the Benin Dialogue Group.⁵ Much of the objects' provenance, however, remained a mystery. What kinds of journeys did the Benin Bronzes take before they got to the RJM? Who owned them before and in what context? How did they transform from being sacred royal objects in the Kingdom of Benin into sought-after pieces of art and then again into contentious museum pieces?

The RJM, together with the Museumsgesellschaft RJM e.V., asked me to look into the objects' history and compile an overview of their provenance traces.⁶ This first research on the objects' biographies was made possible through funding from the Museumsgesellschaft RJM e.V. from the estate of the Ludwig Theodor von Rautenstrauch. The aim was to gain more knowledge on some of the objects' biographies, which would then be used to both contribute to a digital database on Benin and possibly dig deeper into some of the provenances in the future. Moreover, the idea was to provide further information on the artefacts to the Nigerian artist Peju Layiwola, who was going to work with the collection in the context of the museum's temporary exhibition "Resist. Kunst des Widerstands".

1.2. Time scope and people involved with the project

The provenance research had an approximate time scope of 100 working hours. It started in July 2020, with a first working period (scientific research) from mid July to mid October 2020 and a second one (integration of new findings and compilation of final report) in January 2021.

In July and August, Layla Pankratz, an intern at the RJM, supported me in my work and was of great help with looking into the sources available at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum. In regular meetings with the museum's director Nanette Snoep, its curator for Africa, Clara Himmelheber, and its conservator Birgit Depenbrock, we discussed the project, questions that were arising and potential next steps. Preliminary results were made available to the museum in the form of an excel file containing information on the Benin collection's provenance in October 2020.

5 In the Benin Dialogue Group, representatives from European Museums have been working together with the Edo State Government and the Royal Court of Benin with the aim of sharing knowledge regarding the return and restitution of Benin Bronzes and developing a long-term solution for sharing Benin artefacts between European institutions and Benin, including the establishment of a museum in Benin City. For more information on the Benin Dialogue Group see <https://markk-hamburg.de/en/benin-dialogue/>.

6 I have a background in among other things postcolonial studies and material culture and have worked on the provenance of the Benin collection located at Stockholm's Museum of Ethnography (see Bedorf& Östberg 2014, 2010).

2. Approach, methods and sources

From the start, it was clear that it would not be possible to trace every single object's provenance – an undertaking that in all its depth would have required far more time – and probably not either to reconstruct entire object biographies. The aim, instead, would be to try and find as many puzzle pieces regarding the provenance of the museum's Benin Bronzes as possible. Early on in the project, I decided, together with the colleagues at the RJM, to focus on the earlier files up to 1943 (see figure 2). Tracing those objects, we assumed, would probably entail fewer layers of ownership and hence bits and pieces of their history might be slightly easier to grasp than the biographies of those objects that found their way to the museum after 1943. Instead of singling out certain objects included in these nine files from the start, the idea was to try and trace such objects for which I could find some provenance clue during the first weeks of the research.

File / Konvolut	Acquisition date RJM	Number of objects	Kind of acquisition
1897/01	3 donations in 1899	15	Donation by Adele and Eugen Rautenstrauch
1901/09	20.11.1901	6	Donation by Theodor Rautenstrauch
1902/19	21.11.1902	44	Donation by Theodor Rautenstrauch
1904/10	14.07.1904	2	Purchase from William Ockelford Oldman, London
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1906/24	19.06.1906	1	Purchase from F. Smith, UK
1907/03	12.04.1907	1	Purchase from William Ockelford Oldman, London
1943/05	23.03.1944	13	Purchase from Louis Carré, Paris

Figure 2: The RJM files containing Benin Bronzes that were included in the provenance research

Since the objects included in the research came to the museum between 1899 and 1943 – two years up to 46 years after the looting of the Royal Palace in Benin City –, we knew that they would have widely varying “layers” of ownerships, contexts and history.⁷ All the objects share so to speak the top layer, since they all found their way to the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum at some point in time and thus might have left traces in Cologne (see figure 3). From there on though, the number of layers between their departure from the Kingdom of Benin and their arrival in Cologne as well as the specific contexts of their journeys were expected to vary widely. Some of the objects might have been at the homes of British military officers, in their private collections;

⁷ This is true for all provenance research. Even for one file (meaning one donation or purchase) with objects from the same origin or “bottom layer”, it likely that the objects' histories vary.

others at museums or in the hands of private collectors. Some might have been sold at auction houses or by art and curiosity dealers, just to name a few of the possible layers. The aim of the provenance research was to find some of the puzzle pieces constituting the objects' provenance.

Time period	Locations and contexts of the Benin Bronzes
1899-1967	Benin Bronzes come to the RJM
Where were the objects at what time? Who owned them? What were the contexts and routes of their travels? How many layers of provenance?	
Probably 1897	Objects travel from Benin to Europe and the U.S., most of them presumably in 1897 after the looting of the Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Benin

Figure 3: Layers of Provenance

2.1. Exploring the top layer: Traces of the objects' provenance in Cologne

The starting point for the research were the records available at the RJM's archives for each of the files (ranging from zero documents for one of the files over some notes to more detailed documentation for some of them) as well as the museum's inventory books and index cards. The archival sources were transcribed if necessary (some of them being in German script that was common at the beginning of the 20th century) and checked for relevant details and clues on the Benin objects.

In a second step, we both tried to identify other potential records at the museum that might entail relevant information on the objects, their acquisition and their history (e.g. minutes from the museum's board meetings, annual reports and material analyses, see figure 4) and looked into the inventory of the Historical Archives of the City of Cologne. For the different steps of the research, see figure 5. Focusing on potential sources in Cologne to start with was feasible since Layla Pankratz was able to support me on-site in Cologne in the first weeks of the project.⁸ Unfortunately, research at the Historical Archives in Cologne was restricted by the fact that most of the Archives' sources are still being restored (as a consequence of the building's collapse in 2009) and very few of the files can be accessed. We ordered the most relevant file to be restored (a service that the Historical Archives amazingly offers and that takes a few months), but in the end accessing the file at the archive's reading room was not possible due to the ongoing pandemic.

⁸ I am not based in Cologne and due to the COVID-19 pandemic my possibilities of having longer research stays in Cologne were restricted.

Source	Relevant information	Notes
Records linked with the acquisition files (Konvolutakten)	Yes	
Inventory books (Inventarbücher)	Yes	
Index cards objects (Karteikarten)	Yes	
Information on collectors and art dealers with connection to museum	Limited (general)	
Minutes from the museum's board's meetings (Vorstandsprotokolle)	No	Only available for the years after 1927
Annual reports	No	Just one annual report for the period 1904-1907
Former employees' files (Nachlässe ehemaliger Mitarbeiter)	No	
Documentation on receipt of objects (Konvolutbuch/ Eingangsbuch)	Yes	
Thermoluminescence analysis of Benin objects	No	More relevant for historical classification
Photo material Benin exhibition 1961	No	More interesting for artist working on objects
"Erzählcafés" with former employees	Limited (general)	Some info on collectors
Tags and labels on the objects	Limited	Further analyses and comparison of handwritings would be needed
Material analysis Benin objects from 2004, Rathgen Forschungslabor	Limited	More interesting re when and how objects were made
Restauration files (Restaurierungsakten und Zustandsprotokolle)	Limited	More interesting for artist working on the objects
Photo archive RJM (unsorted)	No	
Documentation of objects prior to and after loan to other museums	Yes	Information on where the objects were loaned to and when (part of overview)
Clausmeyer file, albums with photographs	Limited	
Database on restorations and folder on loans	No	Information on where the objects were loaned to and when (part of overview)
Catalogue of duplicates (Dublettenkatalog)	Limited	Info on objects that were given to other museums

Figure 4: Sources examined at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum and their relevance

Provenance Layer	Steps of the research	
Top Layer: Cologne	Records available at RJM's archives	Literature search and getting in touch with other researchers who have been working on the Benin Bronzes
	Other potentially relevant sources at RJM	
	Relevant sources at the Historical Archives in Cologne	
The blank space in-between	Follow the traces pointing to next layers of ownership, e.g. art dealers, museums, private collectors	
Bottom layer: The Kingdom of Benin	Try to find traces leading back to where the objects' journeys started	

Figure 5: Steps of the provenance research

2.2. The blank space in between: Searching for puzzle pieces covering the period between Benin and Cologne

After having combed through all the potentially interesting sources that were available in Cologne, I started exploring the layers beneath and following the traces pointing to the next “layers” of ownerships and contexts where the objects might have come from. Knowing for example that the museum purchased some Benin Bronzes from the art and curiosities dealer William Ockelford Oldman at the beginning of the 20th century, we were lucky to find Oldman's sales register online (see figure 6). This register in turn had information on where and when Oldman purchased the objects.

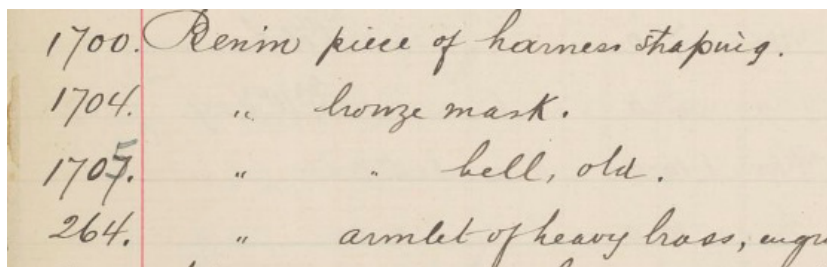


Figure 6: Section from William Ockelford Oldman's sales register with information on Benin Bronzes Oldman sold to the RJM in 1905 (source: Smithsonian Transcription Center)

Apart from clues and traces revealing themselves in the museum's archival records, even research already conducted on the Benin Bronzes was of great use for identifying some provenance puzzle pieces. Thanks to previous studies, we know, for example, that many of the objects looted from Benin in 1897 were in the hands of arts and curiosity dealers in London between the end of the 19th century and the 1930s (Bodenstein 2018; Waterfield & King 2006). Examining the sales of prominent British auction houses and art dealers that had traded Benin Bronzes, such as Stevens' Auction Rooms, William Downing Webster, Foster's & Co. auction house and William Ockelford Oldman, was therefore promising. An interesting source in that respect – providing rather general information on the sales of Benin Bronzes in London at the turn of the century and not necessarily on specific pieces – were for example newspaper advertisements of the London auction houses (see figure 7). Large parts of the auction catalogues of W.D. Webster, one of the prominent dealers of ethnographic objects at the turn of the century, were luckily available

online. On top of that, a colleague in the field of Benin research, Dr. Felicity Bodenstein, was so kind as to share her digitalized annotated version of one of the Webster catalogues with me, the original of which is held by the British museum. Going through the Webster auction catalogues, I found that six of the objects owned by the RJM were in the hands of W.D. Webster in the late 19th or beginning of the 20th century. Some of the Benin Bronzes the museum had purchased from Louis Carré in 1943 – just to briefly mention another example – could be traced since previous research had shown that many of the Benin objects that came to France at that time had been sold by Foster's & Co. auction house in London in the 1930s (Bodenstein 2018). And examining their auction catalogue showed in fact that some of the Cologne Benin Bronzes had been at the auction house in the early 1930s.

I tried to gather information on the acquisitions and sales of all the auction houses and art dealers whose names I came across over the course of the research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, access to many of the museums' and libraries' archives was quite limited.

SALE NO. 14,245.
STEVENS'S AUCTION ROOMS LTD.
(Established 1760.)

A CATALOGUE
 OF
**RARE BENIN BRONZES
 AND IVORIES**

*To be sold by instructions of RALPH LOCKE, Esq.
 (late Divisional Commissioner of S. Nigeria.)*

THIBETAN HANGINGS. TEAPOTS, etc.
 Antique and Modern Furniture,
 Oil Paintings, Japanese and other Prints.
 Embroideries, Tiger Skin Rugs, Coins, China, etc.

WHICH WILL BE SOLD BY AUCTION ON
Tuesday, January 3rd, 1928
 at **ONE** o'clock precisely,
 at their Great Rooms,
 38 King Street, Covent Garden, and 15/16 Floral Street,
 London, W.C.2.

On view day prior and morning of sale till 12 noon. Catalogues on application
 to the Auctioneers.

Telephone : Gerrard 1824. Telegrams : "Auks, Rand, London."
 Established 1760.

RIDDLE, SMITH & DUFFUS, Printers, Regent House, 89 Kingsway, W.C.2; and Forest Hill, S.E.28

Figure 7: Advertisement for an auction at Stevens' Auction Rooms in January 1928, where among other things "Rare Benin Bronzes and Ivories" were sold.

From the start of the research, my work also entailed searching for relevant literature on the Benin Bronzes and getting in touch with other researchers who had been working on the Cologne collections or on Benin objects in general as well as with institutions where relevant sources might be found.

2.3. When did the journey start?

The start of the Benin Bronzes' journeys constitutes the "bottom layer" of the provenance puzzle. As already mentioned, it is very likely but not entirely certain that most if not all of the objects came to Europe after the looting of the Royal Palace of Benin in 1897. Some of them might, however, not be linked to this date, but might for example have been purchased by African traders prior to or after 1897. Since the British military did not make an inventory or list of the objects it took from the palace, I was not sure, whether it would at all be possible to discover any traces leading to this "bottom layer". I hoped to ideally find some indications on whether some of the Bronzes might have belonged to the private collection of the British officers who had been part of the military expedition. In such cases, it would be fair to assume that the respective officers had taken the objects with them from Benin City (Bodenstein 2018).

3. Findings for the Benin Bronzes that got to the RJM between 1899 and 1943

For every file containing Benin Bronzes the RJM acquired between 1899 and 1943, I will first provide details on the provenance findings and outline questions and traces for future research. I will then list the sources I have consulted, including both the records available at the RJM that were of special interest and contacts with other researchers and museums.

3.1. Two years after the looting of the Royal Palace: Birth of an ethnographic museum in Cologne and its collection of Benin Bronzes in 1899

1897/01 – Donation Adele and Eugen Rautenstrauch

The first file (Konvolut) containing among other things 15 Benin Bronzes was a donation by Adele and Eugen Rautenstrauch in 1899 (the file is misleadingly labeled 1897). According to Eugen Rautenstrauch's note (source: RJM archives), his son Theodor bought the objects in London. More details on the provenance are known for two of the artefacts:

- Object RJM 2014 (carved ivory tusk): According to Eugen Rautenstrauch, the tusk was taken from the royal palace in Benin-City by Lieutenant Searl who then put it up in a sports club in London, where Adele and Eugen Rautenstrauchs son Theodor bought it for 50 pounds (source: Eugen Rautenstrauch's note on five of the donated Benin objects, RJM archives). As to the tusk's history at the RJM, records at the Historical Archives in Cologne suggest that the artefact was given as a loan to Musée d'Ethnographie. Palais du Trocadéro in 1932 in order to be displayed at the Exposition de Bronzes et Ivoires du Royaume de Bénin (Historical Archives of the City of Cologne Best. 614, 619).
- Object RJM 2009 (figure): According to von Luschan (1919: 329-330) and Fröhlich (1966: 264), the object was at Berlin's Ethnographic Museum first and came to Cologne in 1898. I have contacted to the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin was established to confirm this information, but my request has so far not yielded any results.

The Historical Archives of the City of Cologne holds three documents that might serve to learn more on the objects' provenance in the future: In the context of the three donations, Adele and Eugen Rautenstrauch made in 1899 (all three of them containing Benin objects), they sent three letters to the City of Cologne. The documents (part of "Bestand 608 (Kulturdezernat), A162") have already been restored, but not been digitalized yet and due to COVID-19 it was unfortunately not possible to access them at the City Archives. Apart from those records, any sources that might exist on Theodor Rautenstrauch's activities and his purchase of the objects in London would be valuable for further exploring the objects' histories.

Archival documents of interest at RJM

- Description of five Benin Bronzes by Eugen Rautenstrauch
- Note on donation to Museum of Natural History (predecessor to RJM)
- Copy of donation certificate Adele& Eugen Rautenstrauch to City of Cologne, Benin Bronzes are explicitly mentioned (original at the Historical Archives of Cologne)

Other documents and contacts of interest

- Lothar Pützstück's book "Symphonie in Moll" covers the museum's early history and also mentions the donation and the respective sources at the City Archives
- Lothar Pützstück (email exchange in August 2020), Ulrich Soénus (who also wrote about the museum's history, email exchange in August 2020), Carl Deußen (who conducts research on Wilhelm Joest, email exchange in July 2020)
- The Historical Archives of the City of Cologne has records on loaning objects 2014 to the Musée du Trocadéro in 1932 (Best. 614, 619)

3.2. A blank spot: Theodor Rautenstrauch's first donation to the RJM containing Benin objects in 1901

1901/09 – Donation Theodor Rautenstrauch

Two years after his parents had donated the first pieces from the Kingdom of Benin to the RJM, Theodor Rautenstrauch followed in their footsteps and also made a donation that contained among others six Benin Bronzes. Where those artefacts came from remains a mystery, a blank spot. Apart from the information available in the museum's inventory books and index cards, there are neither files on the objects, neither in the museum's archives nor in the City Archives, and none of the additional sources consulted includes information on or depictions of the six pieces. For future research it would be interesting to dig deeper into whether there might be any archival sources on Theodor Rautenstrauch's purchases of ethnographic objects.

3.3. "Unique Collection of Benin Bronzes" from Stevens' Auction Rooms in London in 1902

1902/19 – Donation Theodor Rautenstrauch

An auction catalogue from Stevens' Auction Rooms in London reveals that Theodor Rautenstrauch seems to have been a frequent customer at the London arts' dealers: In June 1902, he purchased a total of 44 Benin objects at an auction of "Unique Collection of Benin Bronzes, Ivory Carving etc." at Stevens' Auction Rooms – one of the prominent dealers of ethnographic objects at that time – in London. The pieces Theodor Rautenstrauch intended to buy or already had bought are marked respectively in the auction catalogue. The layer previous to Cologne is thus known for all the 44 objects. Attempts of identifying where J.C. Stevens himself purchased the artefacts have so far not been successful yet. Access to the institution that might have sources on Steven's activities (the National Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where I have been in touch with one of the curators) has been limited to COVID 19, but this might be resumed in future research.

It was, however, possible to find some traces for some of the artefacts: Five of the Benin Bronzes Theodor Rautenstrauch bought at Stevens are mentioned in William D. Webster's auction catalogues from 1900 and 1901 (see figure 8, they were thus owned by Webster sometime before being sold at Stevens') and one of the objects belonged according to Felix von Luschan's findings to the private collections of Captain George Le Clerk Egerton:

- Object RJM 5259 (figure), Webster catalogue 28/1901, figure 42, p. 5& p. 23, Webster Inv. No. 10814 “Bronze figure, 9 inches high”, 7 pounds
- Object RJM 5257 (pendant), Webster catalogue 29/1901, p.50 & p. 58, figure 102, Webster inv. No. 11689, “Bronze shield shaped pendant representing a fish”, 11 pounds
- Object RJM 5250 (armcuff), Webster catalogue 24/1900, p. 4 & p. 21, figure 11, Webster inv. No. 9497, “Bronze armlet with open ornamentation, 5 inches broad”, 3.10 pounds
- Object RJM 5248 (armcuff), Webster catalogue 24/1900, p. 4 & p. 21, figure 14, Webster inv. No. 9818, “Bronze armlet ornamented with four figures, 4 ¾ inches broad”, 10 pounds
- Object RJM 5280 (altar stool), Webster catalogue 28/1901, p.4 & p. 22, figure 33, Webster inv. No. 10817, “Seat or stool cut out of a solid piece of hard, dark wood; the top is carved with interlaced ornamentation, the support represents two serpents entwined, one is devouring a crocodile, the other an antelope, on the underside of the top is a fish and a frog, and on the top of the base is a frog, fish and mask, 16 ¼ inches high, 15 ½ inches diameter”, 20 pounds
- Object RJM 5244 (stand) according to von Luschan originally private collection Captain George Le Clerk Egerton (von Luschan 1919:320), Pitt Rivers Museum contacted in September 2020 for clarification.

For another Benin Bronze, object RJM 17941 (a figure fragment), the handwritten inventory number found on the object suggests – when compared with other handwritten accounts by Webster – that it might have been in the hands of Webster, but this still needs to be confirmed. So far the object could not be located in Webster’s auction catalogues.

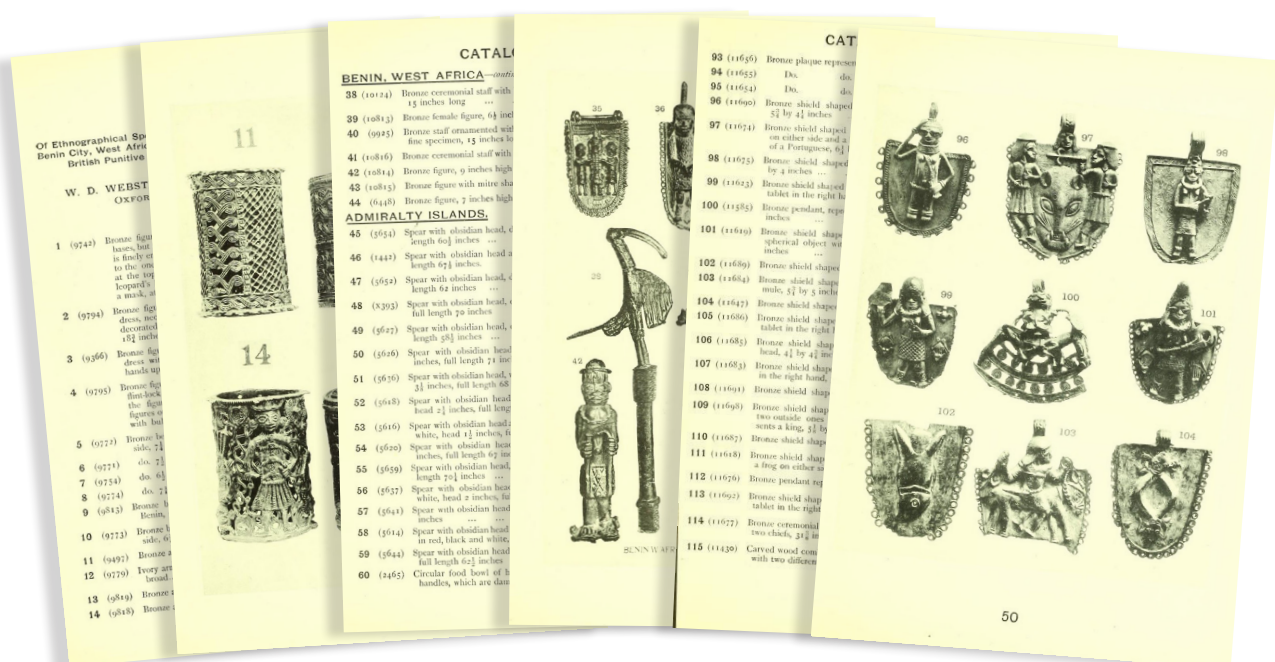


Figure 8: Auction catalogues from Webster. To the right, the photo of object RJM 5257 (here no. 99) in the 1901 catalogue.

Regarding the artefacts' internal history at the RJM, it is noteworthy that records at the Historical Archives in Cologne (Best. 614, 619) show that two of the objects (objects RJM 5240, an asen, and object RJM 5280, an altar stool) were given as loan to Musée d'Ethnographie, Palais du Trocadéro in 1932 in order to be displayed at the Exposition de Bronzes et Ivoires du Royaume de Bénin (see figure 9).

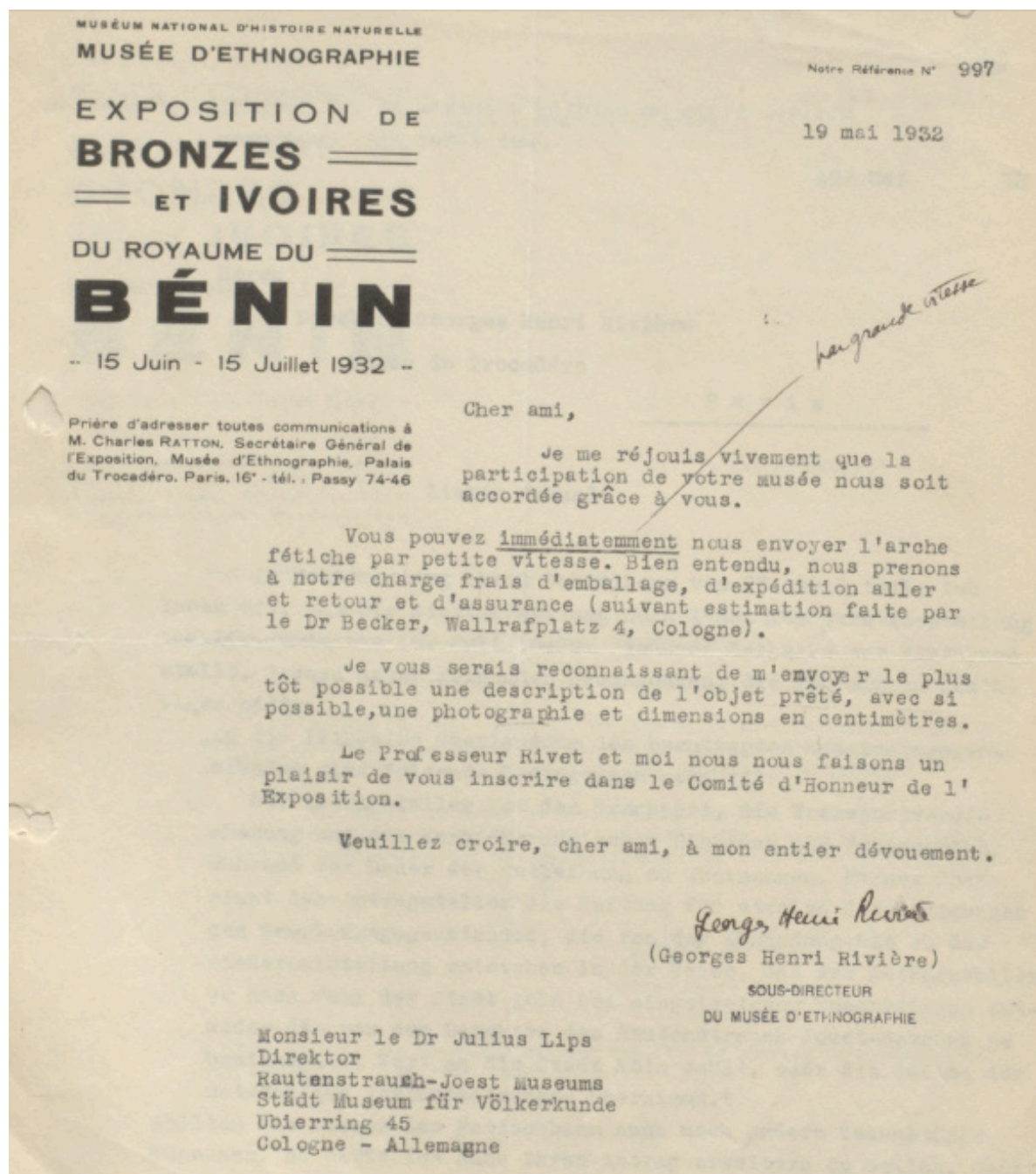


Figure 9: Letter from the deputy Director of the Musée d'Étnographie in Paris to the RJM concerning the loan of object RJM 5240 for the museum's Benin exhibition in the summer of 1932.

Archival documents of interest at RJM

- Steven's auction catalogue on "Unique Collection of Benin Bronzes, Ivory Carvings etc." auction on 03.06.1902, with objects presumably marked with prices by Theodor Rautenstrauch

Other documents and contacts of interest

- Webster's "Illustrated Catalogues of Ethnographical Specimens" are in parts available online.
- The Historical Archives of the City of Cologne has records on loaning objects RJM 5240 and RJM 5280 to Musée d'Éthnographie Palais du Trocadéro in 1932 (Best. 614, 619).
- The Pitt Rivers Museum (contacted in Oct 2020, not clarified yet) has sources on Captain Egerton.
- In order to be able to further trace the objects, it would be valuable to know where Stevens bought the objects and who owned them prior to and after Webster. For further information on Stevens' and Webster's activities the following institutions/ persons have been contacted:
 - ✓ Victoria & Albert Museum/ National Arts Museum: Ella Ravilious, Curator Documentation and Digitalization (email exchange in August/ September 2020), access to collections is very limited due to COVID-19.
 - ✓ Bénédicte Savoy at Technische Universität Berlin (email exchange in September/ October 2020), no further clues on Webster and Stevens.
 - ✓ Felicity Bodenstein at Sorbonne (email exchange in September/ October 2020), has sent annotated Webster catalogues (with prices) from British Museum.
 - ✓ Henrietta Lidchi at Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, contacted in September 2020.

3.4. and 3.5 Another London arts dealer sells his Benin objects to Cologne in 1904 and 1905

In 1904 and 1905, the RJM extended its collection of Benin Bronzes through two purchases of in total six objects from another dealer of arts and ethnographic objects in London, William Ockelford Oldman. The purchases are well documented in the museum's archival records, the respective files containing correspondence between Oldman and the museum as well as an auction catalogue and, for the second acquisition, even pictures of the objects sold. Through Oldman's sales register that is available online, we also know that Oldman himself bought the objects at the already before mentioned Stevens' Auction Rooms as well as from three other sellers, Rogers, Hassan and Laurence. This is where the traces end; the objects' whereabouts between 1897 and their purchase by William Ockelford Oldman still remain a mystery.

1904/10 – Purchase from William Ockelford Oldman

The selection of ethnographic objects that RJM's director Willy Foy bought from W. Oldman in 1904 included two Benin Bronzes, a ceremonial sword and a ceremonial staff. On Oldman's handwritten list of objects sold to RJM that is included in the museum's records, he lists even a third artefact from Benin, a "carved ivory tusk" (Oldman inv. no. 4209). In the end, the museum seems not to have bought the tusk though, as the object was, according to Oldman's sales register, sold to Stevens at a later date (Steven's sale).

Oldman's sales register provides the following information on the two Benin Bronzes purchased by the RJM:

- Object RJM 12376 (ceremonial sword): According to Oldman's sales register (p. 9, inv. no. 1351), Oldman bought the "executive sword" from Stevens on 13.03.1901 and sold it to "Rautenstrauch Museum" on 24.08.1904.

- Object RJM 12375 (ceremonial staff): According to Oldman's sales register (p. 9, inv. no. 4332), Oldman bought the "Benin ceremonial staff" from Rogers on 10.08.1903 and sold it to "Rautenstrauch Museum" on 24.08.1904.

Further information on when the previous owners, Stevens and Rogers, acquired the objects is still missing. Post-covid access to the National Archives at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London might provide further clues on that.

Archival documents of interest at RJM

- Oldman auction catalogue with markups
- Handwritten List of objects (by Oldman) he sold to RJM, the dispatch date of the goods being marked as 20.06.1904

Other documents and contacts of interest

- Oldman's sales register 1904 - 1910 is available online at the Smithsonian Transcription Center and as a pdf.

1905/13 – Purchase William Ockelford Oldman

Even for the four Benin Bronzes included in the Oldman sale to the RJM one year later, in 1905, Oldman's sales register provides details on when and from whom W. Oldman purchased the artefacts:

- Object RJM 15939 (clamp): According to Oldman's sales register (p. 42, inv. no. 1707) bought the "Benin bronze bell" from Laurence on 10.02.1902 and sold it to W. Foy (RJM's director) on 17.10.1905.
- Object RJM 15938 (armring): According to Oldman's sales register (p. 43, inv. no. 264) Oldman bought the "Benin armlet of heavy brass, engraved" from Hassan 13.02.1902 and sold it to Dr. W. Foy on 17.10.1905.
- Object RJM 15937 (pendant mask): According to Oldman's sales register (p. 42, inv. no. 1704) Oldman bought the „Benin bronze mask“ from Laurence on 10.02.1902 and sold it to Dr. W. Foy on 17.10.1905.
- Object RJM 15936 (adornment): According to Oldman's sales register (p. 42, inv. no. 1700), Oldman bought the „Benin piece of harness straping“ from Laurence and sold it to Dr. W. Foy on 17.10.1905.

The previous owner of three of the artefacts Oldman refers to as Laurence might be George Fabian Lawrence, a curiosities dealer and art collector, who even worked with museum collections and archaeological excavations.⁹ Trying further to trace back through what channels and

⁹ The British Museum provides the following information on Lawrence: "Born in 1862. Ran a shop at 7 West Hill, Wandsworth, selling antiquities. Catalogued collections at the Guildhall Museum (1900 to 1903); he also catalogued collections in the Kingston & Richmond Museums. After the Guildhall he moved to the London Museum (1911-26), where he was Director of Excavations. In the role of Inspector for the London Museum he was responsible for watching over building works in London, and often bought finds from the workmen. From 1929 onwards he was a Life Member of the Metropolitan Museum. He was also a collector of antiquities and passed many of his finds to the British Museum, with which he was a regular correspondent (e.g. ME Correspondence: April and September 1935 on the subject of "Luristan bronzes" and other antiquities from Iran)." (www.britishmuseum.org, accessed 13.10.20).

contexts the four Benin Bronzes found their way to Laurence/ Lawrence and Hassan would be a next step in any future endeavors to learn more about the object biographies.

Archival documents of interest at RJM

- Oldman's "Illustrated Catalogue of Ethnographical Specimens" no. 29 (August 1905), including pictures of the objects sold
- List of objects Oldman sold to RJM, including the four Benin objects (17. June 1905)
- Correspondence (letters) between Oldman and W. Foy, among others on specificities of some aspects of the sale

Other documents and contacts of interest

- Oldman's sales register 1904 – 1910 available online at the Smithsonian Transcription Center and as pdf

3.6. Theodor Rautenstrauch provides money for the acquisition of another two Benin Bronzes in 1906

1906/12 – Donation Theodor Rautenstrauch

Four years after his extensive donation of Benin Bronzes, the museum's inventory books mention Theodor Rautenstrauch as the donor of two Benin objects again: a commemorative head and a relief plaque. The museum's records, however, tell a slightly different story, allowing for the assumption that the RJM itself purchased the relief plaque from the Museum für Völkerkunde in Hamburg and the commemorative head from F. Smith, an arts dealer based in England. For the relief plaque (object RJM 17973) this is confirmed by correspondence between the two museum directors Willy Foy and Georg Thilenius that is kept at the MARKK's archives in Hamburg (MARKK, 101-1 Nr. 479) and the RJM's archives. In one letter, Foy laments the state of the slightly damaged plaque and asks for a discount (see figure 10). Another letter sent from Thilenius to Foy, where Thilenius confirms that he has received 250 Mark for the Bronze head, suggests that Thilenius seems to have accepted Foy's request to receive a discount. The purchase of the commemorative head (object RJM 17974) from F. Smith is documented in RJM's own records. Theodor Rautenstrauch might thus have provided the money for the museum to be able to buy the objects and is therefore mentioned as the donor.

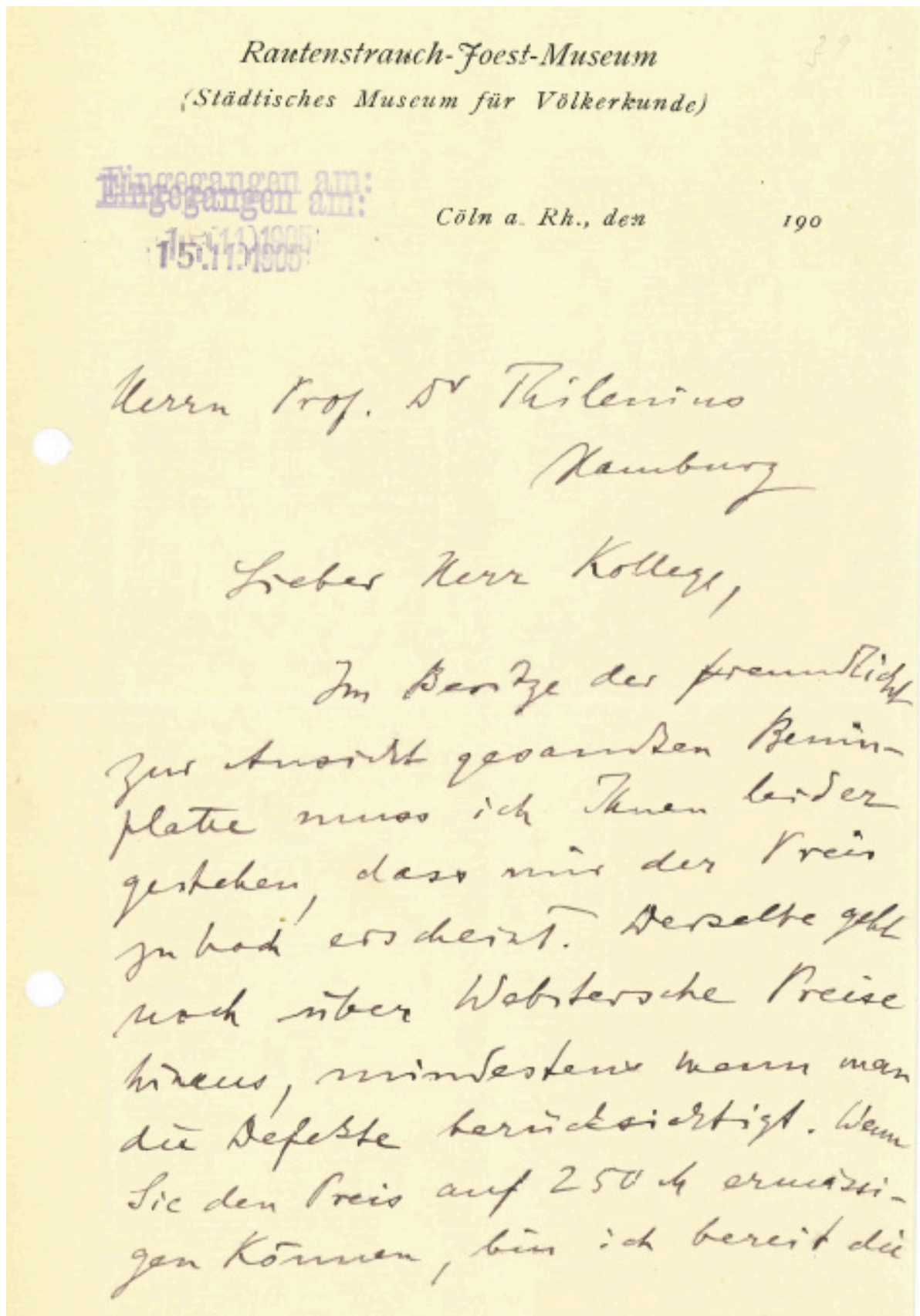


Figure 10: Excerpt of a letter from RJM's director Willy Foy to Georg Thilenius, director of the Museum of Ethnography in Hamburg (15.11.1900) on the price for the relief plaque from Benin.

Archival documents of interest at RJM

- Confirmation of the purchase of a bronze head from F. Smith
- Confirmation from Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg, that 250 Mark were received for a Bronze plaque
- Receipt for sending 250 Mark to Hamburg

Other documents and contacts of interest

- Sources at MARKK Hamburg (MARKK, 101-1 Nr. 479): correspondence between Willy Foy and Georg Thilenius

3.7. More from the English arts market: A Benin pendant comes to Cologne in 1906

1906/24 – Purchase F. Smith

The same F. Smith from England who sold the commemorative head from file 1906/12 to the museum in September 1906 offered another Benin Bronze (plus another eight ethnographic objects) to the RJM in October of the same year. In the short letter preserved in the museum's archival records, he writes that the "Benin pendant on closer examination is not so complete as I thought" and that he therefore takes off ten shillings from the originally proposed price. Apparently, there had already been some negotiations regarding the price before, since Smith asks the museum to "please do not make (him) another offer", since he already "is asking a very low price". How, when and from whom F. Smith got the pendant has not been possible to trace yet. We know, however, from one of the auction catalogues of W.D. Webster that the object was in Webster's hands in 1901:

- Object RJM 18950 (pendant), Webster catalogue 29/ 1901, p.51 (fig. 13) and 58, Webster inv. no. 11692, "Bronze shield shaped pendant, representing a woman holding up a square tablet in the right hand", 5 ½ x 3 ½ inches, 1.50 pound

Archival documents of interest at RJM

- Short letter from art dealer F. Smith, containing no information on acquisition context

Other documents and contacts of interest

- Webster's "Illustrated Catalogues of Ethnographical Specimens" are in parts available online
- See the information on file 1902/19 for contacts regarding further potential info on Webster

3.8. A last Benin Bronze from London in 1907

1907/03 – Purchase from William Ockelford Oldman

William Ockelford Oldman seems to have been one of the trusted sellers of ethnographic objects to the RJM. In April 1907, Dr. Foy purchased a number of items from Oldman for the museum again. Among those objects was a staff, labelled "Benin carved stick" in Oldman's sales register. According to the sales register, Dr. Foy bought seven more objects from Benin with that lot, namely two bells, two rattles, two wooden masks and one figure standing on bowl. Curiously,

however, neither is one of those seven Benin Bronzes among the objects that are categorized as Benin in the museum's database and that the museum still owns today, nor are the objects mentioned as sold or exchanged. Looking at the entire lot bought from Oldman at that time, it might be possible that the two bells were just labelled as being from Nigeria and not explicitly from the Kingdom of Benin (in which case the two objects would be RJM 19591 and RJM 19592). The five remaining objects are, however, missing completely on the RJM's list of items purchased from Oldman on that day.

The one artefact that with certainty is a Benin Bronze, the staff (object RJM 19598), can be traced back to T. Barnard. According to Oldman's sales register (p.104, object RJM 10278), Oldman bought the "Benin carved stick" from T. Barnard on 12.05.1906 and sold it to Dr. W. Foy 30.04.1907.

Archival documents of interest at RJM

- Handwritten sales lists Oldman had sent to RJM

Other documents and contacts of interest

- Oldman's sales registers available online at the Smithsonian Transcription Center and as pdf

3.9. A dubious affair? The purchase of Benin Bronzes from German-occupied Paris in 1943

1943/05 Purchase from Louis Carré through Hildebrand Gurlitt

The acquisition of thirteen Benin objects from France in 1944 and thus during National Socialism is without doubt the one that looks the most suspect at a first glance, especially since the art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt was involved in the affair, albeit only as a middleman. Might there be a background of so to speak "double injustice" since the objects might not only have been looted from the Royal Palace in the Kingdom of Benin but also sold under constraint or been part of expropriations under Nazi-occupied France? RJM's curator Ricardo Marquez Garcia has already traced the provenance of one of those 13 objects, a leopard (object RJM 44722), in 2020 and published an RJM-internal report on this. After analyzing the records available on this acquisition at the RJM archives, Ricardo Marquez Garcia concluded that the sale from Carré to RJM's director Heydrich (who sought to extend the museum's collection after parts of it had been destroyed when two bombs hit the building) itself seems to have been unconstrained since the tone in the letters exchanged is relaxed and cordial. The records also show that Hildebrand Gurlitt in fact only acted as a middleman who was hired as an expert for the transport and currency exchange. As for the leopard in particular, Ricardo Marquez Garcia could establish that Carré's colleague Charles Ratton, who owned the object before him, bought it in London in 1931 and that the object was not a case of expropriation.

Trying to trace the object biographies of the other Benin Bronzes sold to RJM by Louis Carré, I was able to reconstruct some puzzle pieces for four more of the artefacts: One of them, an ivory masque (object RJM 48107) is depicted in the magazine *Cahiers d'Art* from 1932, a special issue on the "Exposition Bronzes et Ivoires du Bénin au Musée d'Éthnographie Palais du Trocadéro" with the caption "masque ivoire, Benin, coll. Carré" (see figure 11), allowing for the conclusion that Carré owned the object in 1932 already. Three other objects – a bell (RJM 47314), a side-blown horn (RJM 46888) and a key (RJM 43018) – might correspond with three Benin Bronzes included in an auction catalogue from Foster's & Co. in London (see figure 12) and sold to Ratton& Carré in 1931, even if the sizes given for the side-blown horn differ slightly.

- Object RJM 47314 (bell) might be the same object as nr. 102 on p.8 of Foster's & Co. auction catalogue from 1931 (bought by Carré/ Ratton) "a bronze square-shaped bell, widening at base, chased with frog design in relief and native mask, on a pricked ground. 7 in. High". If so, the object belonged, according to the auction catalogue, to the Allman collection (Robert Allman was a medical officer at the British military expedition to Benin in 1897, see Allman 1897) and was when it was auctioned, the "property of a lady" at Rathmines, Dublin (Allman retired to Dublin).
- Object RJM 46888 (side-blown horn) might be the same object that is mentioned in the Foster's & Co. auction house catalogue from 1931, nr. 107, p. 8 (bought by Carré/ Ratton) >> "an ivory tusk war horn, carved in figure of crocodiles and native mask at base, perforated sineros sides, 14 inches long" (107) or another, carved in snakes and belts of carving at base" (108). If so, object belonged, according to the auction catalogue, to the Allman collection and was when it was auctioned, the "property of a lady" at Rathmines, Dublin (Allman retired to Dublin). The size given in the auction catalogue is, however, shorter than the museum info on the artefact's length.
- Object RJM 48107 (pendant mask with Oba or Iyoba head) depicted in Cahiers d'Art 1932 on Benin exhibition at the Musée du Trocadero (Cahiers d'Art, numéro spécial, 1932 "Exposition Bronzes et Ivoires du Bénin au Musée d'Éthnographie Palais du Trocadéro"), caption "masque ivoire, Benin, coll. Carré". Hence, Carré owned the object in 1932.
- Object RJM 43018 (key) might be same object as the key mentioned in the Fosters's & Co. auction house catalogue from 1931 (p. 8, no. 101) and bought by Carré & Ratton: "a bronze key incised in waved ornament, the handle surmount chased in native masks, 6 in. long". If so, the object belonged, according to the auction catalogue, to the Allman collection and was, when it was auctioned, the "property of a lady" at Rathmines, Dublin (Allman retired to Dublin). Even the size given in catalogue corresponds to the museum info on the artefact's size.



Figure 11: Benin Bronze (RJM inv. no. 48107) depicted in Cahiers d'Art from 1932.

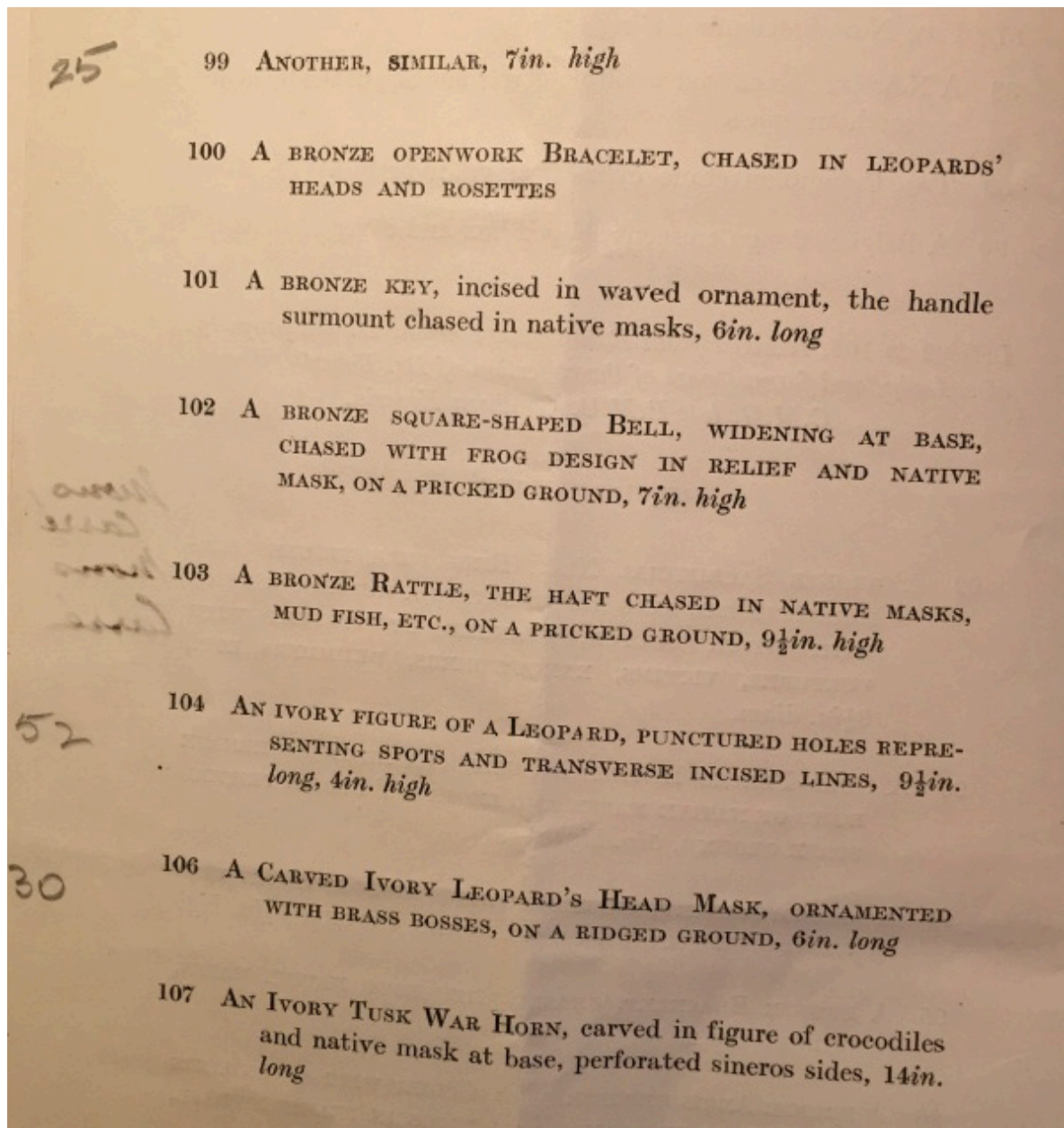


Figure 12: Excerpt from the auction catalogue of Foster's & Co. auction house 1931, objects no. 101, 102 and 107 might correspond with artefacts from RJM's collection.

Those traces allow for the assumption that Charles Ratton or Louis Carré already owned the four objects in the 1930s. Details on the provenance of the remaining eight Benin Bronzes included in the Carré sale and on whether the circumstances of their acquisition might be dubious, are, however, still missing. More information on how Ratton and Carré acquired the objects might be available at Musée du quai Branly (communication with the museum's head of collections' documentation and archive Sarah Frioux Salgas in autumn 2020), but the respective documents are not available online. For further research, a visit to Paris would be necessary. A promising platform for exchange for future research in that regard is a network of researchers working on ethnographic objects acquired during NS-times at Technische Universität Berlin, led by Bénédicte Savoy. A first digital meeting with Bénédicte Savoy and Mattes Lammert took place in November 2020.

Archival documents of interest at RJM

- Detailed correspondence on the acquisitions from Louis Carré via Hildebrand Gurlitt

Other documents and contacts of interest

- Foster's & Co. auction house catalogue 1931; Louis Carré and Charles Ratton bought numerous Benin pieces at the auction, they are marked respectively (available as pdf)
- Cahiers d'art on Benin exhibition at the Musée d'Éthnographie Palais du Trocadéro: Cahiers d'Art, numéro spécial, 1932 "Exposition Bronzes et Ivoires du Bénin au Musée d'Éthnographie Palais du Trocadéro" (available as pdf)

4. Concluding thoughts

96 artefacts, 96 individual histories and a multitude of places, actors, journeys and contexts. The collection of Benin Bronzes at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum has a vast amount of stories to tell. In this first research on the provenance of the artefacts from the Kingdom from Benin that found their way to the RJM, the aim was to start shedding some light on the biographies hidden behind the objects. The two factors constraining the research were on the one hand time and on the other hand the COVID-19 pandemic that made it difficult to access archive and library collections. In spite of these limitations, the result is indeed some first exciting puzzle pieces of the objects' travels providing new links as well as quite many contacts, clues and traces that could be pursued further in future research endeavours.

Two lines of research seem to be particularly promising for future explorations: First, finding more records on the key players among the dealers of ethnographic art from both England and France would be useful in order to be able to trace the artefacts to their previous context. Any information on when and where e.g. J.C. Stevens, W.D. Webster, George Fabian Lawrence or Charles Ratton purchased the respective objects would lead one step further. A second research focus that might possibly further illuminate the objects' provenance is documentation on exhibitions where Benin Bronzes were on display between the end of the 19th century and the 1960s. If the Cologne pieces formed part of the exhibition before getting to the RJM, even such records would provide more knowledge about their biographies.

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