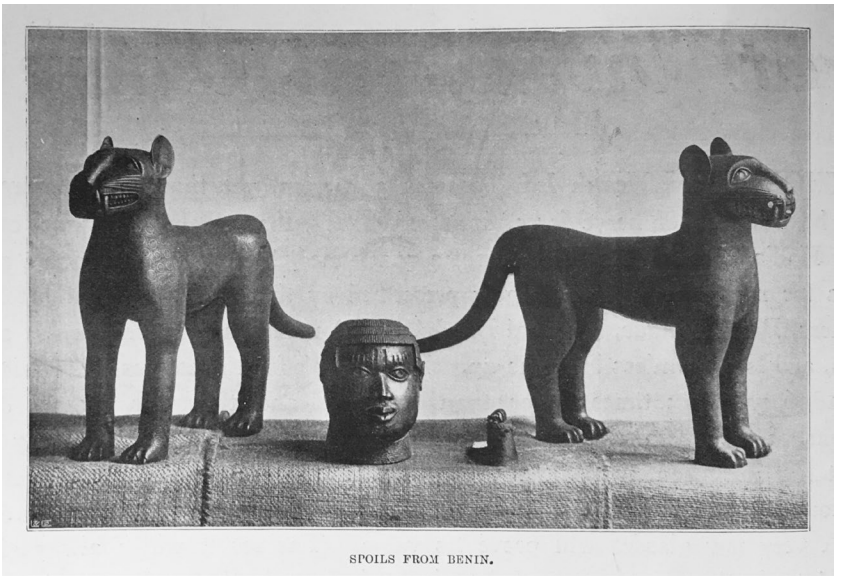

Figure 1: This clipping from *The Illustrated London News* (August 7th, 1897, p. 194) shows a pair of leopards, 50 × 79 × 15 cm and 49 × 77 × 14 cm, respectively.

Felicity Bodenstein

The Global Market Trajectories of Two Brass Leopards from Benin City (1897–1953)

Abstract The art market trajectory of these two brass leopards, looted in Benin in 1897, illustrates the relationship between processes of commodification and changes in the narratives about African art; processes that are often visualized in the readily communicating circuits of commercial galleries and museum exhibitions. Read in direct relationship to their successive displacements, the price history of these objects attests to the stark economic asymmetries, as well as to the difference of their cultural meaning, between the place from which the piece originated and the place where it is today and to the long history of enrichment that such objects provide through their commodification.

Keywords Benin City, Leopards, Benin Bronzes, Art market, Provenance, Resale

Bodenstein, Felicity. 2021. "The Global Market Trajectories of Two Brass Leopards from Benin City (1897–1953)." In *Reading Objects in the Contact Zone*, edited by Eva-Maria Troelenberg, Kerstin Schankweiler, and Anna Sophia Messner, 132–139. Heidelberg Studies on Transculturality 9. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.766.c10415

The invasion of Benin City, referred to in British sources as the "punitive expedition" of 1897, was largely motivated by the ambitions of British colonial administrators to expand their control over the trade routes going through the Edo territory that was ruled over by the Oba Ovonramwen (ca. 1857–1914). It deeply transformed the longstanding trade relationships that had existed between that area and Europe since 1486 and the arrival of the first Portuguese explorers (Igbafe 1979; Home 1982). It also led to the commodification (‣**Commodification**) of a very specific group of objects related to the royal house of Benin City and its guilds. Reception histories have tended to focus on the writings of critics and on such admittedly central figures as Felix von Luschan for their role in evaluating these objects, but there is another evaluation process that is explicitly related to the market and its actors, one that can be read in the biography of the pair of brass leopards represented in this image.

The objects, produced at the court of Benin (and that continue to be produced today) were an intrinsic part of the cult of ancestors and the decoration of the palace and chiefs' homes, and in absence of written documents served to chronicle the history of the kingdom. The "Benin bronzes" were virtually unknown in Europe at the time of the events of 1897; yet British administrators who had regularly visited the court, notably to negotiate the 1892 trade agreement that lead to the conflicts of 1897, knew of the ample existence of these pieces in brass and ivory.

The history and conditions of their dispersal after the events of February 1897 are as famous as they are lacunary due to the absence of exhaustive lists of what was taken, a fact that has led to the proliferation of estimate figures that have constantly risen since, ranging from 2,400 to 10,000. The objects were divided into official and unofficial loot or booty. Part of this was sold in bulk, the other part left in Benin in the personal baggage of expedition members (Bodenstein 2020). Several dealers of *ethnografica* specialized in the resale of pieces that they acquired from individual officers and civil members of the expedition. Here we will follow the case of two of these objects, a pair of brass leopards, in order to understand the kinds of lives these royal antiquities came to lead as commodities on the Western art market.

The first available image of the objects whose trajectory we will follow from Benin City, to Paris, New York, and all the way back to Lagos appeared in *The Illustrated London News* of August 7, 1897, to report on the "Spoils of Benin." It features a large pair of brass leopards placed on either side of a male bronze head. The caption reads:

> These are thought to be symbolic objects connected with the hideous sacrificial rites of Benin, and are of especial interest owing to the strong traces of Egyptian influence in their workmanship, testifying to a civilisation far older than the Portuguese colonisation of the country three centuries ago (*The Illustrated News*, 1897).

Gisela Völger explains the ties between leopards and sacrificial practice as related to the fact that many aquamaniles used for cleansing purposes in ritual contexts took the form of leopards (Plankensteiner 2007, 279–280). This pair are not however aquamaniles but representations of power. The photo with its caption is exemplary of common public discourse surrounding the objects; the issue of human sacrifice, in particular, was indeed generally used as a larger justification for the military actions taken against the town and its inhabitants. Similar brass leopards were sold in relation to this sacrificial narrative, and in one account of sales at the auction house of Henry Steven's one can read: "Three pounds bought the two leopards between which the victim had to lay his head – at the time of the capture of the city they were wet with human blood" (Allingham 1924, 185). In terms of finishing and detail, the leopards illustrated here are generally considered to be two of the finest of the bronze leopards taken in 1897 (at least twenty such bronzes exist in collections today) and would doubtlessly have initially been sold for a higher price than the ones quoted from the Steven's sale. The *Illustrated News* article identifies the leopards as the property of Matthew Hale of Hale & Son and they were sold for the first time by their auction house on the 18th of August 1897 for the price of £53 (Hale & Son 1897, 7).

The pair was sold again in 1930 by the French art dealer Charles Ratton for £700 (approx. $3,400) at the sale of George W. Neville's collection at Foster's auction house in London (Fosters 1930, 9; see Fig. 2); Neville had accompanied the Benin Expedition (Coombes 1994, 31). It is interesting that the leopards went from Hale & Son to the private collection of Neville as it is often assumed that he had himself brought the object back, yet the case of the leopards proves that members of the expedition sometimes augmented their collection of trophies after their return to Britain. A rare photograph of Neville's sitting room shows the leopards on either side of an amply decorated fireplace, with a wall plaque that was also later bought by Ratton and that had a long and illustrious career on the art market before being bought by the Musée de quai Branly in 2002 (Inv. 70.2002.4.1).

The leopards were part of a wave of acquisitions made by Charles Ratton (1895–1986) and his colleague Louis Carré (1897–1977) who seized upon the opportunity of sales provided by a downturn in the economic situation of the British upper class to acquire large numbers of Benin pieces, which had until then remained in private hands. Georges-Henri Rivière (1897–1985), employed at the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro (the future *Musée de l'Homme*) since 1928, accompanied Ratton on more than one occasion, buying and then donating to the museum. It was Rivière who developed the idea of inviting Ratton (Laurière 2008, 398) to organize an exhibition that was set to be the first in a series of prestigious temporary events designed to bring new life to the Trocadéro Museum which had been in decline for some decades.

Planned to last for two months, the exhibition "Royal Bronzes and Ivories of Benin" was prolonged due to its success and the leopards were

Figure 2: *A Catalogue of the Highly Important Bronzes, Ivory, and Wood Carvings from the Walled City of Benin, West Africa, Forming the Collection of the Late G. W. Neville, Esq., of Weybridge, a member of the Benin Punitive Expedition, who himself removed them after the capture of the City in 1897*.

the most prominently placed pieces in the exhibition, majestically framing the exhibition entrance, echoing the manner in which their protective and symbolic power would have been harnessed to frame a royal altar or the entrance of an important building in Benin City. On this occasion, they were insured for 100,000 francs each, which was equivalent at the time to £1600 for both[1], more than twice their recent acquisition price. Judging by the press illustrations, they were clearly the focal points of the 1932 show, and though they stayed in Ratton's possession until 1935, they did not leave the Trocadéro immediately after the exhibition. He left them on loan there for the section on West Africa and he also allowed them to be presented at other exhibitions such as "L'art animalier rétrospectif" (A History of Animals in Art) held at the Musée d'histoire naturelle in 1934.[2] In 1935, they joined Ratton's collection that went on a prestigious tour in the United States where they were exhibited at the Pierre Matisse Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art, insured by this point for £14,000. In 1936, Louis Carré, a close colleague of Ratton, bought them both for the "special

1 All of the historical currency conversions have been made using the calculator of: http://www.historicalstatistics.org/.
2 Archives du Musée d'histoire naturelle, correspondance Ratton 2 AM1 K81 d.

price" of 80,000 francs (Paudrat 2007, 242); the equivalent of ca. £1000 in 1936, this price indicates that Ratton's gains were indeed only quite marginal in this instance, suggesting that the exchange may have been part of a larger financial arrangement between Carré and Ratton.

Carré's archive provides quite a diverse set of documents more generally dedicated to the subject matter of leopards. Sent to him in New York by an assistant in 1949, those documents provide a sense of how he developed the marketing strategy for this pair in particular.[3] His description of Ratton's leopards as "a pair of exceptional beauty" was supported by all kinds of images relating to the representation of such felines, including an article from the New York Herald on "Cheetah Racing", and animal photography of trained leopards. These images possibly served Carré's arguments on the particular naturalism of these figures and on the history of the interactions between leopards and humans. The accompanying text notes: "The taste for wild beasts has always been very highly developed in the princely courts of all times." Its main argument was to draw the distinction between the symbolic importance of the representation of the panther versus the leopard, the latter being an animal that could be much more easily tamed. Man's power over such a wild animal is described as a measure of civilization. Carré uses this argument to distinguish Benin culture from notions of the "primitive" (‣**Primitivism**). By comparing the importance of the leopard in Benin culture to that of its role in all major antique civilizations, he places Benin art on an equal footing with Persia, Greece, and Rome (‣**Masterpiece**). In particular he emphasizes the unicity of these pieces:

> The twin leopards of the Louis Carré collection are the most important pieces known to have come from the Royal Palace of the city of Benin, destroyed in 1897. [...] These bronze leopards are unique in Benin art as well as in the whole history of art. Such sculptures of leopards have never been found elsewhere (Carré 1948).

In 1952, Carré sold them to the colonial institution in Lagos that would later become the National Museum. The acquisitions register shows that the purchase was made from the Louis Carré Gallery, New York for a total of £7,133 for both. This was by far the most expensive acquisition made in prevision of the creation of one of Nigeria's first national museums, driven mainly by the initiative of Kenneth C. Murray, Edward Harland Duckworth, and Bernard Fagg (Hellman 2014), who created a general service of Nigerian antiquities in 1943. The establishment of the museum's collections was based on important efforts to collect material inside of Nigeria, but also and in particular to buy back objects taken from Benin City in 1897. Murray's *Draft Notes for a History of the Museum,* conserved in the archives

3 Carré, Louis. 1948, typed document entitled "The Twin Benin Bronze Leopards." Fonds Louis Carré, DA001294/63817, Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris.

of the National Museum in Lagos attest to the many financial negotiations that he undertook in order to allow for these acquisitions to be made; the price of the leopards was equivalent to more than the budget of £5,000 that he had initially negotiated for the construction of the whole museum. This unrealistic figure—that fortunately rose to about £100,000 for the overall cost of the museum—gives a sense of the value of the leopards in the context of the financial constraints in developing a national collection in Nigeria at this time. They were rapidly considered as some of the most important pieces in the museum when it opened its doors in 1957 (Nigeria and Federal Ministry of Research and Information 1959, 26).

Each step is accompanied by a considerable gain in commercial value. Today the leopards are among the objects that the National Museum in Lagos lends regularly to major international exhibitions on African art, despite the fact that it rarely, if ever, receives such loans in return (‣**Heritage**, ‣**Return**). Benin City, and its national museum some three hundred kilometers from Lagos, did not benefit from the wave of acquisitions made in the 1950s, as priority was given to the museum situated in the colonial capital. The trajectory of these pieces illustrates the relationship between processes of commodification and the evolution of narratives about African art; processes that are often visualized in the readily communicating circuits of commercial galleries and museum exhibitions. Read in direct relationship to their successive displacements, the price history of these objects attests to the stark economic asymmetries, as well as to the difference of their cultural meaning, between the place from which the piece originated and the place where it is today and to the long history of enrichment that such objects provide through their commodification.

Figures

Fig. 1: Lagos: National Museum, inv. nos. 52.13.1 and 52.13.2.
Fig. 2: Messr. Foster, Thursday May 1st, 1930, Lot 50, description, p. 9.

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