

Press Statement of the meeting of the Benin Dialogue Group

in Benin City, Nigeria, 5-7 July 2019

The Benin Dialogue Group held its sixth meeting in Benin City from the 5-7 July 2019 at the invitation of the Governor of Edo State, His Excellency Mr. Godwin Nogheghase Obaseki. The Benin Dialogue Group is a multi-lateral collaborative working group that brings together museum directors and delegates from Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom with representatives of the Edo State Government, the Royal Court of Benin, and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria.

A central objective of the Benin Dialogue Group is to work together to establish a museum in Benin City that will facilitate a permanent display reuniting Benin works of art dispersed in collections around the world. During the meeting, the Benin Dialogue Group discussed the new Royal Museum in Benin City and joint exhibition planning. At the invitation of His Excellency the Governor, Sir David Adjaye led a discussion concerning the architectural vision for the museum in Benin City.

The Benin Dialogue Group continued working on sharing information concerning collections of Benin works of art as a basis for developing content, training, joint activities and initiatives to facilitate the creation of the Royal Museum. This constituted a significant advance on the plans made for the Royal Museum during the Benin Dialogue Group in Leiden in 2018.

The Benin Dialogue Group welcomed the initiative of the Edo State Government to create a museum trust that would be responsible for the planned Museum, its operation and be a custodian for the collection. It recommended next steps, including: incorporate the museum trust; create a Board of Trustees and Advisory Council; appoint a project team to develop the new Museum with support of the Benin Dialogue Group members.

As part of the outcomes, the Benin Dialogue Group drafted a vision statement:

The vision is to establish a new Royal Museum to reunite in Benin City the most significant of Benin's historical artefacts, currently in various locations around the world. The Museum will showcase the rich history and culture of the Benin Kingdom from the earliest archaeological evidence to contemporary creative expressions, in recognition of the fact that Benin City continues to be a vibrant artistic centre. The museum will be founded as a place of remembrance, education and inspiration for the people of the Benin Kingdom and audiences from around the world.

The Benin Dialogue Group acknowledges the looting of Benin in 1897 and understands that many of the museum collections were assembled as a result of this event. Acknowledging the deep loss that this event caused, the members of the Benin Dialogue Group shared knowledge regarding various initiatives across Europe that are currently seeking to address the questions of return and restitution. There are national, international and institutional legal complexities that govern issues of return and restitution particularly as member museums are from different countries and jurisdictions with different laws and regulations. The Benin Dialogue Group will continue to share information and keep partners updated on changes and provide support in this continuing conversation.

We are very pleased that we can go forward with the permanent display in the Royal Museum in Benin City that reunites works of art with people in their place of origin. The next Benin Dialogue Meeting will take place in London in 2020 at the British Museum, followed in 2021 at the Museum am Rothenbaum, Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) in Hamburg.

In the coming months the Benin Dialogue Group will establish initiatives to deepen understanding of their collections and to undertake provenance research, and looks forward to welcoming the delegates from the project team for the Royal Museum and from the Royal Court.

HRH Prince Gregory Iduorobo Akenzua, Enogie of Evbobanosa and Professor Barbara Plankensteiner, Museum am Rothenbaum, Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Hamburg:

“Speaking on behalf of the Benin Dialogue Group, we are immensely grateful and appreciative for the generosity and warm hospitality of Edo State Government in their hosting of this event and our group. We are deeply impressed by the level of investment and commitment to developing the new Royal Museum. We are very confident that this unique collaborative project has taken a crucial step forward. We will continue to work together to ensure we fulfil our common goal.”

Governor of Edo State, His Excellency Mr. Godwin Nogheghase Obaseki

“It has been my pleasure to host the 6th meeting of the Benin Dialogue Group in the ancient city of Benin, home of so many priceless artefacts that are on display in museums around the world. I am particularly gratified by the significant progress made during this meeting, and look forward to the opening of the new Museum in the near future. Edo State remains committed to this objective, and will definitely do all possible to ensure the realisation of this vision.”

List of Participants in the Benin Dialogue Group, Benin City, 2019

Edo State Government, Nigeria

The Royal Court of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Abuja, Nigeria

Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna, Austria

Ethnologisches Museum, State Museums of Berlin, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Berlin, Germany

Museum am Rothenbaum, Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Hamburg, Germany

Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden und GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, Germany

Linden-Museum, Stuttgart, Germany

Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Leiden, The Netherlands

National Museums of World Culture, Stockholm, Sweden

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

British Museum, London, UK

Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK