

NEFERTITI IN ABSURDITY: HOW OFTEN MUST EGYPTIANS ASK GERMANS FOR THE RETURN OF THE EGYPTIAN QUEEN?

“On the other hand, even after giving away the colourful bust of Nefertiti, the Berlin Museum would still be far superior to all other collections, including that in Cairo, as regards the number and artistic value of the artworks from the Amarna period. And among our stock are many pieces that are of higher artistic rank than the elegant bust of the colourful queen”.

James Simon, 28 June 1930 (1)



Nefertiti, Egypt now in Neues Museum, Berlin, Germany.

The latest argument for detaining Nefertiti is clear evidence that the holders of the cultural property of others have no valid reason for depriving them of their cultural symbols. (2)

It is established that there is no requirement in Municipal or International law that owners of stolen/looted objects or objects acquired under dubious circumstances must request, formally or informally, for their return before the holders of the objects can return them. It is sufficient that the current holders have been informed of the position of the legitimate owners for them to act. Indeed, United Nations and UNESCO resolutions, international conferences as well as the ICOM (International Council of Museums) Code of Ethics require the holders to take the initiative in negotiations for eventual return. In many cases, only the holders have full knowledge about the location and conditions of the objects. (3) [ICOM Code of Ethics](#) provides in its paragraphs 6 as follows:

6.1 Co-operation

Museums should promote the sharing of knowledge, documentation and collections with museums and cultural organisations in the countries and communities of origin. The possibility of developing partnerships with museums in countries or areas that have lost a significant part of their heritage should be explored.

6.2 Return of Cultural Property

Museums should be prepared to initiate dialogues for the return of cultural property to a country or people of origin. This should be undertaken in an impartial manner, based on scientific, professional and humanitarian principles as well as applicable local, national and international legislation, in preference to action at a governmental or political level.

6.3 Restitution of Cultural Property

When a country or people of origin seeks the restitution of an object or specimen that can be demonstrated to have been exported or otherwise transferred in violation of the principles of international and national conventions, and shown to be part of that country's or people's cultural or natural heritage, the museum concerned should, if legally free to do so, take prompt and responsible steps to co-operate in its return. (4)

It follows from the above that for a museum to turn a request for restitution into a political matter, instead of dealing with the demand is not in accordance with the principles of the ICOM (International Council of Museums) Code of Ethics. Furthermore, [Athens International Conference on the Return of Cultural Objects to their Countries of Origin](#) (Athens, 17-18 March 2008) concluded. inter alia, as follows:

“Requests and negotiations for the return of cultural goods can work as a vehicle for cooperation, collaboration, sharing, joint research and economic promotion;

In recent years a clear tendency towards the return of cultural objects to their

countries of origin has been developed on legal, social and ethical grounds. The return of cultural objects is directly linked to the rights of humanity (preservation of cultural identity and preservation of world heritage).

Museums should abide by codes of ethics. On this basis, museums should be prepared to initiate dialogues for the return of important cultural property to its country or community of origin. This should be undertaken on ethical, scientific, and humanitarian principles. The cooperation, partnership, goodwill and mutual appreciation between the parties concerned could lead to joint research programs and exchange of technical expertise.”

Moreover, to react to Egypt's repeated calls for the return of Nefertiti as if it were the very first request is to say the least, either a loss of memory or a deliberate attempt to obscure the records or mislead others. Egypt has been asking for the return of Nefertiti for almost a hundred (100) years. (5)

Egypt then is not obliged to send any new formal request with respect to the return of Nefertiti. But, for the sake of argument, we may ask, what is a “formal demand”? For most of us, a letter from the Egyptian Embassy in Berlin, from an Egyptian Minister or Deputy Minister of Culture or an Egyptian official entrusted with matters of restitution, to the German Foreign Ministry or a German museum, in this case, Neues Museum, requesting the return of Nefertiti would be formal enough.

It has been reported that the Germans consider a request from Zahi Hawass, Secretary-General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiques, as not sufficiently formal. Germans argue that the letter was addressed to Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation president Herman Parzinger and not to the head of government: *"This is not an official request. An official request is a request from one government to another,"* foreign ministry spokesman Andreas Peschke told a regular government briefing in Berlin. (5) They argue further that the letter was not from the Egyptian Minister of Culture but his Vice-Minister. They add that the letter was not signed by the Prime Minister of Egypt and that the Egyptian Cabinet has also not signed it. Is this serious? In the past, Germans have discussed this issue with Egyptian ambassadors and other officials, including Zahi Hawass. Is this new requirement of extra formality a sign of desperation or part of the usual delaying tactics? Do the Germans now want to tell the Egyptians who should be handling their restitution demands? No doubt Zahi Hawass is not easy for the Germans since he is a person who knows what he is doing. Since when have Prime Ministers and Cabinets been known to be signing, as a matter of principle, letters on restitution? Would we soon hear that the Egyptians have not used the right letter head or paper for a formal letter or that they have not sent the letter to the proper addressee? The variations on this argument are infinite.

It seems for many Western museums and their governments, any arguments, however weak, are good enough for defending their retention of cultural objects of others. We are all kept busy in dealing with the arguments instead of coming to grips with the desire of the other party to secure the return of the object. Arguments that should normally embarrass educated persons now become acceptable and are offered by senior officials.

The present supply of extremely weak arguments is, in many ways, a triumph of the museum directors and the ethnologists. They have managed to persuade some of their people, at least some of the governments, that objects which have been taken under dubious circumstance from Africa, Asia and America have become part of their culture. In the case of Nefertiti, some say she is the very essence of beauty. Were there no icons of beauty in German culture before the Egyptian queen was sneaked out of Egypt in 1913?

The British Museum, London, Neues Museum, Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Völkerkundemuseum, Vienna and Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, following the infamous [*Declaration on the Value and Importance of Universal Museums \(2002\)*](#) consider Nefertiti, the Benin Bronzes and other African cultural objects as part of their culture. The Declaration announced the intention of Western museums not to return any of the stolen/looted objects or objects acquired under dubious circumstances.

The museum directors and the ethnologists have succeeded in convincing others that objects which hitherto were considered as pagan or heathen objects are now part of European culture and nobody raises objection. Even the churches and other religious bodies who should have been the first to raise objections, not only on theological grounds but for moral reasons, are also silent. The massacres and other forms of oppression, including violence and deceit in the acquisition of cultural objects of others do not seem to worry those who normally are on the alert for any moral failures.

A sense of shame that should accompany the display of stolen/looted property of others seems to have completely disappeared from European consciousness. Even whilst such displays are going on and the original owners are clamouring loudly for the return of such items, most Western museum directors and leaders remain unmoved. They react as if they were performing the most normal acts and those reclaiming their artefacts were troublemakers who dare to disturb the highly scholarly exposition of their culture.

The pretence to show the cultures of others when they are protesting against the deprivation of their cultural objects is one of the worst forms of cultural imperialism for it is based on the assumption that only Western museums or

Westerners can show and explain African culture. The assumption of superiority is used to justify what would otherwise be considered unacceptable moral failure. Stealing, looting and killing become acceptable when presented as necessary for the higher duty of safeguarding the cultural objects of others.

The triumph of the museum directors and the ethnologists seems complete as far as regards the conscience of some persons. And where are all the intellectuals who are so knowledgeable about culture? They remain mostly deaf and dumb in this matter.

The Western world has taken enough cultural objects from the rest of the world and should now be prepared to return some. Germany has more than 200,000 Egyptian cultural objects and should really not be seen arguing with Egypt over one object, Nefertiti, however much Germans may be in love with her. (6) There are other equally worthy figures in the museums, as James Simon, the one who financed the excavations at Amarna and gave Nefertiti as gift to the Neues Museum thought.

Should one not adopt the position of James Simon who pleaded for the return of Nefertiti to Egypt rather than that of Adolf Hitler who in his wild ambitions dreamt of building a new museum with Nefertiti as centrepiece? (7)

One can only hope that the Egyptians, Nigerians and others with pending claims of restitution will double their efforts in the face of such absurd arguments so that the question of returning to owners their cultural objects can be settled soon. Germans, like many Westerners, seem to forget the need to co-operate in this matter as provided in Article 15 of the [Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970](#)

Nothing in this Convention shall prevent States Parties thereto from concluding special agreements among themselves or from continuing to implement agreements already concluded regarding the restitution of cultural property removed, whatever the reason, from its territory of origin, before the entry into force of this Convention for the States concerned.

It is only on the assumption that fairness, morality, harmonious international relations, resolutions of UNESCO and the United Nations are irrelevant to issues of restitution that States such as Germany, France, Great Britain, United States, Belgium and others can afford to argue with Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria and other

States about the restitution of looted/stolen/contested cultural objects. Underlying all these absurd arguments, one senses a feeling of Westerners that non-Westerners are somehow inferior beings. Otherwise, how can one explain the abundance of extremely weak arguments that are offered by Austrians, British, French, Germans, and others when the issue of restitution of looted, stolen or dubiously acquired African artefacts comes up for discussion?

Kwame Opoku, 29 January, 2011.

“The history of the bust of Nefertiti shows very clearly how hollow it can sound when Germans and other Europeans refer to legal principles in relation to the “Third World.”

Gert von Paczensky and Herbert Ganslymayr (8)



*Queen Tiye, Egypt, now in Neues Museum, Berlin, Germany
Another Egyptian Queen in Berlin. Could they turn her also into a “Berlinerin”
or is she too dark?*

NOTES

1. *“Andrerseits bliebe das Berliner Museum auch nach Abgabe der farbigen Nofretete-Büste an Fülle und künstlerischem Wert der Kunstwerke aus der Amarnazeit allen übrigen Sammlungen, einschliesslich Kairo, überlegen. Und*

unter unserm Bestande gibt es so manches Stück, das künstlerisch von höherem Range ist als die elegante farbige Büste der Königin. ”

Open Letter from James Simon to the German Minister of Science, Art and Education, 28 June, 1930. Reproduced in, Gert von Paczensky and Herbert Ganslymayr, *Nofretete will nach Hause: Europa - Schatzhaus der „Dritten Welt“*, C. Bertelsmann, 1984 pp. 304-305.

2. *Artinfo*, “Egypt Seeks to Reclaim Nefertiti, But Germany Rebuffs Its Advances,” [http:// artinfo.com](http://artinfo.com)

Bloomberg, “Egypt Demands Return of Nefertiti Bust From Germany”
<http://www.bloomberg.com>

ArchaeoBlog, “Nefertiti Update“ <http://www.acagle.net/ArchaeoBlog>

Agence FrancePress “Egypt demands Germany return Nefertiti,”

<http://www.google.com>

3. Many African objects are in places in the Western world where the people who produced these objects are not aware of or have never been. With growing Western hostility to Africans, very few may ever see the art works of their forefathers.

4. An excellent timeline was established by *Culture and Development*, a German project supported by the European Union that has now ceased to function. The chronology goes up to 2009. It is not known whether the non-renewal of the project has anything to do with the critical views of the group as regards restitution generally and the detention of Nefertiti in particular. The group produced very useful projects that can be consulted with profit.

<http://www.nofretete-geht-auf-reisen.de/echronol.htm>

<http://www.culture-and-development.info/issues/restitu.htm>

5’ <http://www.google.com>

6. Some German museums with large collections of Egyptian artefacts are listed below. We did not find any Egyptian museums with collections of German artefacts. The Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin alone has some 100,000 pieces.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>

Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin, <http://www.smb.spk-berlin>

Kestner Museum, Hannover

Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum, Hildesheim

Ägyptisches Museum, Leipzig

Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, München

Museum Schloss Tübingen

Naturmuseum Senckenberg,

We leave out the many collections of Egyptian artefacts in European and American museums. See list of museums with Egyptian artefacts at <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/er/museum.html>

7. See Kwame Opoku, “Nefertiti, Idia, Tiye and Others Revisited; Nefertiti in Splendid Isolation?” <http://www.modernghana.com>

K. Opoku “Nefertiti, Idia and Other African Icons in European Museums: The Thin Edge of European Morality”, www.modernghana.com

8. Gert von Paczensky and Herbert Ganslymayr, *Nofretete will nach Hause* p.307.