

“The New Rope is Tied to the End of the Old One”: The *Récade* Museum in Benin

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Introduction

The Sceptre Museum [Petit Musée de la Récade] first opened on 1 December 2015 in the Lobozonekpa district near Cotonou; it is the only museum dedicated to the *récades* or sceptres that symbolised the power of the kings of the ancient Danxome kingdom. The museum is housed in a rather majestic building, with clean architectural lines and windows that allow daylight to enter and illuminate the collections, giving the museum a decidedly contemporary feel. The three steps leading up to the main entrance evoke the contours of a royal throne.

The museum and the contemporary art centre housing it (the Centre, inaugurated in February 2015) share another symbolic characteristic: they were both jointly sponsored by Robert Vallois and the Saint-Germain des Prés Antique Dealers' Collective. The idea of creating a contemporary art centre and the Sceptre Museum within a single venue came out of the encounter between Dominique Zinkpè, a visual artist from Benin well-known on the international art scene, and Robert Vallois, an antique dealer specialising in 1930s furniture who was also an African art enthusiast; in 1983, he had already opened a contemporary art gallery in Paris (with two exhibition halls at 33 and 36 Rue de Seine).

When the museum opened in 2015, Vallois and his wife returned the most splendid pieces in the collection to President Nicéphore Soglo and his son Ganiou Soglo, crown prince of Danxome; these were the ivory sceptres of Kings Béhanzin and Glélé. This highly symbolic gesture marked the beginnings of the return of Beninese heritage from Western collections to their ancestral lands. The simultaneous restitution of the sceptres and opening of the contemporary art centre enabled a dialogue between two historical periods, and this is what lies at the heart of this cultural and artistic project: on the one hand, the past, represented by cultural and artistic objects, and on the other, the contemporary era, marked by the presence of international artists.



Fig. 1. Le Petit Musée de la Récade, Installation view © Le Petit Musée de la Récade



Fig. 2. Le Petit Musée de la Récade, Installation view © Le Petit Musée de la Récade

As well as providing spaces for creation, the Centre is home to exhibition rooms where the public can discover the artworks created by resident artists and an amphitheatre for exchange and discussion between figures from the art world and the general public. These public areas are supplemented by a café, which offers a livelier, more intimate space for socialising.

Creation and International Outreach

The Centre is a venue for contemporary creation, art education and the promotion of Benin's cultural heritage. The Centre has developed rapidly with the support of the Galerie Vallois, the Saint-Germain-des-Prés Antiques Dealers' Collective and the Hospitalité et Développement (HeD) NGO. It is intended as a space for work, meetings and artistic encounters among artists from Benin, greater Africa, and the rest of the world. The Centre helps develop artistic practice in Benin and promote local and African artists on the international scene. Its role in opening up its activities to artists from around the world is essential in reducing the isolation¹ of the continent's artists who have relatively little contact with the dynamics in action in museums and exhibition venues elsewhere. This ambition of inviting artists from other cultures, especially Europe, to Africa takes the form of one-month residencies proposed to artists from Benin and beyond. These residencies are an ideal opportunity for dialogue, boosting artists' self-reflection and confidence which are the foundation of the Centre's aims.

According to Dominique Zinkpè, "African artists are proud of their ancestral artistic heritage, but they wish to move away from ethnographic perspectives and museums in order to access venues focusing on contemporary art."² The main objective of The Centre is to position contemporary African art on the international scene. It operates as a laboratory, offering artists from around the world a place to create and reflect. Three creative workshops, each measuring 25m² and located near the residences, are available to them.

The Centre has both a national and international reputation and plays a vital role in the country's cultural landscape. Despite specialising in contemporary art, it is open to all forms of artistic expression. The residencies programme has been set up to support artistic production and encourage artists in their professional career development. These offer a productive environment to meet and interact with other artists and follow the process of artistic creation first-hand. This is especially important for both emerging and local artists. This provides them with access to an excellent and fully equipped work space such that they can take on a different approach to the creation, production and distribution of their work. Le Centre organises four to five residencies each year. A committee of art critics, art historians, experienced artists and journalists selects the artists on the basis of their talent, artistic qualities and origin: one Beninese artist living and working in Benin, one artist from the African continent and another artist living and working outside Africa. Artists are free to work alone or in groups and to decide whether or not to place their work in dialogue with that of the other artists. As soon as they arrive, they get the opportunity to discover the treasures of the Sceptre Museum's collection, explore the district of Lobooukpa, where Le Centre is located, or head into the city to plunge into its urban life. Some prefer to remain in the comfort of Le Centre and move back and forth between their accommodation, workshop, the bar-restaurant and the sculpture garden. All residents have the chance to engage in conversation with other guest artists and

1 Galerie Vallois (2015 : 21).

2 Ibid.

establish a collaborative project, with each artist contributing their own choices of media and techniques. The library is a powerful tool for artistic creation; it has an internet connection and contains a rich collection of African literature alongside a wide range of works on decoloniality, the history of the Danxome culture, art history, and contemporary art.

Each residency culminates in a three-month exhibition of the artworks produced but the cultural and artistic dialogue established between the artists and the public evidently continues beyond the Centre to extend around the world. In 2017, the Centre's main sponsor, Galerie Vallois, launched the Cotonou-Paris-Cotonou mobility programme with the aim of displaying the art works produced during these residencies in Paris and international art shows.³ The gallery also regularly exhibits artworks by Beninese artists or other artists with close ties to Benin. They include prominent figures such as Dominique Zinkpè, Gérard Quenum, and Tchif, as well as emerging artists such as the ceramist King Houndépinkoun, performer Prince Toffa, sculptors Marius Dansou and Benjamin Déguénon, and visual artists Makef and Didier Viodé. Non-Beninese artists who have completed residencies at the Centre also receive help to promote their work in Paris and at major art-shows.

Artistic Mediation

Le Centre places education at the heart of its activity. One of its priorities is to make contemporary art accessible to residents of the Lobo-zounkpa district. Guided tours of the Sceptre Museum and the temporary exhibitions, many of which reflect the realities of Beninese society and current events around the world, are proposed to local residents by cultural mediators. During these tours, visitors are encouraged to share the feelings that the artworks evoke in them. The target audiences for these tours are the primary and secondary school children who represent the next generation of Beninese society. Cultural mediators also visit schools, inviting pupils and their teachers to participate in the free guided tours of Le Centre and the Sceptre Museum to develop their artistic sensibilities. Schoolchildren, students and researchers are also allowed to use the library.

Art education is practically absent from the curriculum in Beninese schools. Le Centre aims to arouse curiosity and increase awareness of art among schoolchildren who visit the exhibitions as a result of the mediators' interventions. These visits encourage the children to take an interest in culture and may even awaken an artistic vocation in some of them. Workshops are held by artists, who share their knowledge and expertise with the local children. In one specific workshop, *Work in Progress*, the artists explain their ideas and artistic approach to the public. The activities organised by Le Centre are not limited to culture; they also raise public awareness of the fact that art has a profound relation with society and politics through its exploration of life in all its facets. The residencies, in which artists live and work amid an atmosphere

³ Between 2015 and 2017, the following artists have been invited: Rémy Samuz, Natanaël Vodouhè, Sébastien Niko, Charly d'Almeida, Théodore Dakpogan, Stéphane Pencreac'h, Christelle Yaovi, King Houndépinkoun, who specialise in ceramics, Aston, Zanfanhouédé, Gratien Zossou Edwige Apolgan, Psychoffi, Meschac Gaba (all from Benin); Bruce Clarke (South Africa); Olga Luna (Peru); Vincent Bredif, Jean-Baptiste Janisset and Jeremy Guillon (France); Daphné Bitchatch (Belgium); A-Sun Wu and Paloma Chang (China) and Nazanin Pouyandeh (Ukraine). In 2017, Vallois participated in the Paris Art Fair and AKAA (Also Known As Africa).

of creation, exhibition and study, provide an opportunity to involve children from Lobozonekpa in the artists' projects. They can watch the artists at work after school and discover what drives them. The artists often experience even greater satisfaction than the children themselves as a result of this interaction. Many of the children attend the exhibition openings as they are proud to see the artworks that they have contributed to in some way. This can be an extraordinary experience for children living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. The exhibition opening marks the end of the residency; after a quiet introduction, the public are invited to see the artworks produced by the artist and talk with them before they leave.

The Sceptre Museum: Heritage and Contemporary Creation

Heritage

The Sceptre Museum is a space for reflection that plays an important part in the Centre's functioning and outreach work. Its presence within the Centre accentuates the importance placed on education and highlights the interconnections between history, culture, and artistic creation. The museum is home to a collection of 99 traditional sceptres and several ancient sculptures, along with around 20 contemporary sceptres. Since it opened in 2015, the collection has been arranged for viewing on two occasions; the first when the museum opened and the second in January 2020.

This viewing arrangement allows participants to discover the history of the ancient kingdom of Danxome through the traditional sceptres it used to symbolise power and authority. The kingdom's political, economic, social, religious and military organisation was rather complex and the Danxome name remains relevant to contemporary Beninese society as part of the population continues to identify with the kingdom to this day. Danxome means "inside the Dan's (chief's) belly". According to oral tradition, it was founded by Houégbadja, the first king, after he killed a local chief named Dan. Settling on the Abomey plateau, the Alladahonou people took control of the country. The country expanded under their governance. They succeeded in establishing a robust social structure and hierarchical administration in the unified kingdoms, defended by a standing army of powerful warriors known as *Blu* and horsewomen known as *Agododjié*. The kings lived in pomp and splendour in a palace covering more than 40 hectares. They sponsored a multitude of craftsmen whose sole task was to produce decorative objects to adorn the opulent court. The different crafts were carried out by specialists and passed down from father to son.

The *Yêmadjè* families made royal garments and appliquéd fabrics used for large parasols and loincloths worn by the king, recounting stories of the kingdom through images. The *Zinflou* and *Hantan* wove fabrics for religious ceremonies. The *Djotowou* were leatherworkers, making sandals and royal insignia. The *Hountondji*, who were master blacksmiths, worked with iron and made bronze, silver and gold jewellery, as well as *attojas* or copper bells to decorate drums. The *Agbozo* carved or branded large gourds, which were used to hold food and drink served to senior dignitaries or Europeans who visited the kingdom. The *Allagbé* attached allegoric figures to the sceptres. Similarly, the *Assogbakpé* created bas-reliefs, using a visual language that

remained a mystery to the ordinary people of the kingdom. The arts flourished in the kingdom and its artisans developed an unparalleled level of skill and professionalism, rather as a result of the royal favours bestowed on the arts and the potential of great reward (such as strongholds, slaves, free services from healers, or ennoblement through marriage to a princess) than of fear of punishment.

Sceptres are among the many art forms found in the Danxome kingdom. Although they are not the most representative genre of Beninese art, their status as a functional profane art form makes them rare in traditional African art, the vast majority of which is generally believed to be inspired by religion. The sceptres have attracted academic interest as they present a condensed version of the Danxome kingdom's history. The imagery and symbolism used in the sceptres allow modern-day viewers to imagine what life in the court was like before the French occupation (1894-1960), as well as provide information about aspects of our ancestors' mentalities. The objects that they passed down to posterity allow us to understand life in the kingdom and its political, social, religious and military organisation prior to French colonisation. To some degree, the sceptres summarise the history of Danxome and they could thus be said to grant access to the African soul. Each of their attributes is an ideogram or an allegorical expression of an idea, a deed or an important event. They represent an original way of distilling and transmitting thoughts and feelings, as well as revealing the mottos of the kings or prominent figures that carried them.

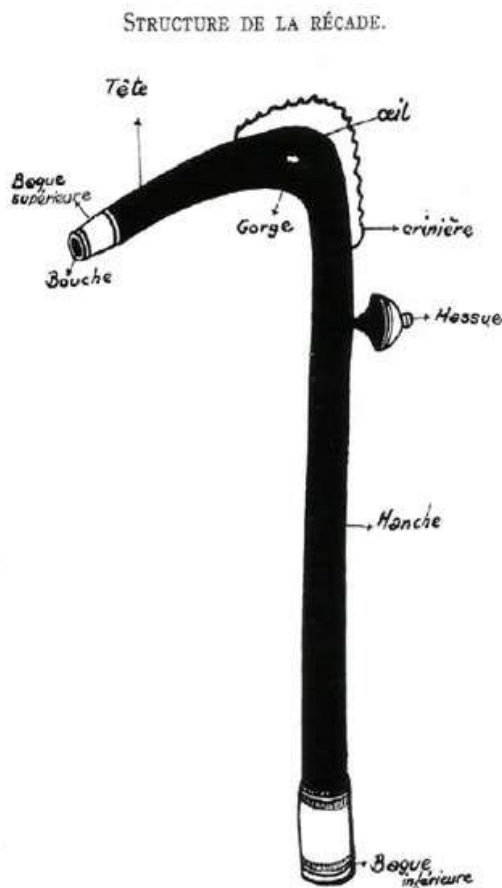


Fig. 3. Structure of a classic Récade: (left to right) Upper ring, head, throat, eye, mane, club, handle, lower ring.

Sceptres were first created during the reign of the first king, Ouégbadja (1650-1680).⁴ They take their shape from a bent branch or primitive hoe. Oral tradition tells that farmers serving the king were caught off guard by a horde of enemies as they went about their work in the fields. To defend themselves, they removed the iron blades from their hoes and routed the invaders using the handles as makeshift weapons. After this historic victory, the tool began to be used as a weapon in the kingdom's arsenal. At a later point, artisans began to attach allegoric figures, emblems or coats of arms to staffs with a right angle at one end to commemorate the exploits of the Danxome kingdom. The local name for the sceptres, *récades*, comes from the Portuguese *recado*, which means "message."⁵ They serve to identify the *récadère*, the sceptre bearer or messenger. Along with the throne, large parasol and sandals, the sceptre is a symbol of authority and command, and a royal attribute. It bears the king's insignia, which sometimes featured an animal or a rebus.

The craftsmen involved in making the sceptres were wood carvers, then blacksmiths and finally a jeweller from the Hountondji family, who added decorative motifs based on the king's personal instructions. Once the sceptres were complete, they were passed on to the dyer, Hantan Zinflou, to be carefully wrapped in appliqué fabric bearing the king's allegories before being handed to his majesty. The royal sceptre was reserved for the king and became an object of veneration that no ordinary person was permitted to touch. Only the crown prince could inherit it. The king would usually wear it on his left shoulder, with the blade facing the ground when he appeared in public. He would hold or brandish it in his right hand during royal dances to mark the rhythm.



Fig. 4 Classic *Récade*. © Le Petit Musée de la Récade (Le Centre, Abomey-Calavi)

4 Adandé (1962: 14).

5 Ibid.



Fig. 5 Classic Récade. © Le Petit Musée de la Récade (Le Centre, Abomey-Calavi)

The court messenger (Huî-Sagu), who bore the sceptre as the king's representative, enjoyed full immunity and was often considered sacred. Any affront to a sceptre was viewed as a challenge to the king's authority and was punishable by death. The sceptre served to authenticate verbal messages, but it was also a passport or credential for the bearer. When the messenger arrived at his destination, he would crouch before the recipient, draw the sceptre from its fabric sheath and present it respectfully.

The recipient would be able to identify the sender from the emblem on the sceptre and would crouch in deference to listen carefully to the king's message. Sceptres thus served as a communication tool and played an important role in relations between the king and his court, or between the king and rulers of neighbouring kingdoms. Another sceptre was dedicated to the king's wife, who gave birth to the heir to the throne. She carried the sceptre to draw recognition and respect. The sceptres carried by the Danxome armies, the Blu, are also noteworthy. Each battalion had its own insignia, evoking a particular exploit of warfare. When the king appeared with a sceptre bearing a battalion's insignia, that battalion would be on duty. The warriors from the battalion would all raise their weapons into the air to show that they submitted to the orders of the king as the commander in chief of the armies. Other sceptres featured the insignia of the kingdom's main deities. They were carried by priests as they paraded before the king at official ceremonies. This category includes the sceptres dedicated to Hêviosso, god of the sky, rain, thunder and lightning; Sakpata, the Earth divinity; Dan Aïdohouedo, the rainbow; and Dan, the divinity in the form of a serpent.

There were also staffs, including the Kpota, which took the form of a club. These were used by Migan, the minister of justice and the king's executioner. Corporal punishment using this weapon was reserved for those who had contravened the moral code or committed a serious crime that could bring the kingdom into disrepute. The guilty individual's home would be surrounded. Outside the entrance, a man with his back to the door would throw the Kpota over his head and into the house. The household would be alarmed by the fall of the staff – an omen of misfortune, – and then men would surround the house and arrest the people inside. These days, ordinary people carry a sceptre as a baton in parades. Once considered a sacred object, it has become a popular art

object that can be commissioned from craftsmen, including the descendants of sculptors and blacksmiths from the ancient Danxome kingdom. All customers need to do is choose the symbols or allegories they wish to feature on the sceptre.

The Sceptre Museum is also home to a collection of sabres, in homage to the courage of Danxome horsewomen. Some have seen action on the battlefield, while others were simply given by the king to the female army founded by Queen Tassi Hangbé. She was the only woman to lead the kingdom, ruling for three years (1708-1711) after the death of her twin brother Akaba. As a woman, she was expelled from power and her name was erased from the chronological succession of kings because the patriarchal system in place did not allow a woman to rule the Danxome. Yet Tassi Hangbé succeeded Akaba because Danxome beliefs held that twins were sacred and shared a single soul.

Two sculpted emblems belonging to King Glèlè are also displayed at the museum. One has a piece of metal embedded in its mouth, which conferred a degree of power to the king, who would touch it from time to time with his tongue.

Contemporary Sceptres

Danxome's impressive artistic heritage acts as an umbilical cord allowing contemporary Beninese society to connect with its past. With this in mind, the museum has invited artists from Benin and elsewhere to revisit the royal sceptre. The artists consequently designed a number of contemporary sceptres, which preserve and elaborate upon the traditional style originally invented by Danxome craftsmen. These contemporary sceptres are on display alongside the ancient sceptres of the original collection. They employ symbolism and explore a variety of themes.

In the work by Gérard Quenum (fig. 6.), the doll's head topped with a stack of gourds is reminiscent of the influence of royalty and the traditional authorities on Beninese society to this day. / The clay sceptre by Richard Korblah shows a chameleon carrying a key in its mouth, ridden by a man surrounded by talismans and whose head is speckled with white spots. It hints at the idea that the ability to adapt and to maintain ties with ancestors and other protective spirits is one of the keys to success. / Euloge Glèlé attaches a mobile telephone to the blade of his sceptre, taking to its paroxysm the idea of conveying a message and highlighting the role of the sceptre as a means of communication. / The work by Aston is inlaid with bunches of keys and coins; it draws its strength from the buffalo and from the protection of a bocio fitted with fuses. It symbolises the thriving reign of King Guézo, one of the most famous kings of Danxome, who worked to unite the kingdom and whose symbol is the leaking jar. Oral tradition tells that Guézo proved his strength by using his bare hands to kill a raging buffalo that was crossing the kingdom. / The curved part of the sculpted wooden sceptre by Julien Vignikin is made from a trumpet mute. Symbolising muffled speech, this accessory for one of the most emblematic jazz instruments hints at the transatlantic slave trade and the struggle to defend the cultural expressions developed by the slaves. / Niko's sharp-beaked sceptre stands like a sheepdog watching over its flock and is reminiscent

of a king looking out for his sons. / Marius Dansou intertwines metal wire, bolts and other mechanical parts to create a piece that is slender and elegant despite the hard materials used. This duality highlights the range of purposes for which the object served. / Remy Samuz presents a wooden sceptre studded with pieces of metal and topped by a roaring lion. The blade, which takes the form of a sphere made from woven iron wires, resembles the nest of the golden-feathered weaverbird. The piece pays tribute to King Glèlé, who defended the kingdom against repeated assaults by European imperialists. / Benjamin Déguénon combines a hatchet dedicated to the god Hêviosso (another facet of his personality is that of an avenger, who strikes men down when they behave badly on Earth), a Christian cross and an assen shrine to a dead person's spirit. The assen is a metal symbol linking the world of the living to that of the dead, where offerings of food and drink are made. This sceptre reflects the syncretism of spiritual values in contemporary Beninese society. / The sceptre by Prince Toffa, which is adorned in the Coca-Cola colours and has a sharp blade, alludes to the global hegemony of the United States and its economic and military supremacy. / Meanwhile, Azébaba's sceptre is clad in white, red and black threads. Each of the three colours has a meaning in Fon culture. White symbolises purity and peace, red evokes energy and sometimes danger, and black represents the invisible world in Voodoo practice. Their presence on the sceptre highlights the spiritual power of Fon rulers. / Tchif has designed a series of sceptres illustrating different facets of the power of the elements: the Earth with the master ploughman, the water with a fisherman and his Mami-Wata, the power of the yin and yang duality of the living and the dead. / Edwige Aplogan creates a sceptre for King Adandozan (1797-1818), who was known as a particularly bloodthirsty tyrant. His memory appears to have been so disturbing that his name, reign and symbols have been erased from the kingdom's historiography. The sceptre's handle is made from vermilion enamel, while the blade is a whirl of copper wire. Three faces can be made out, evoking forgotten figures from history like King Adandozan. / King Houndékpinkou, a ceramist who works on the fusion of soul and matter, adopts a unique language combining Japanese and Beninese influences. His sophisticated sceptre is smooth to the touch and adorned with sparkling decorations, bringing passion and royalty together with gold leaf and bronze or red silver enamel. The artist revisits the history of the sceptre through the creative act, seeking to fulfil the duty of memory. / Dominique Zinkpè illustrates the meaning of his surname *Afô man sô dan kpon*: if you tread on a snake, you risk getting bitten (fig. 7). The handle of his sceptre features a stylised reptile, while the blade takes the form of a foot with three toes that evokes a god from the Voodoo pantheon represented by a one-legged man. The glass, a carefully carved crystalline green, reminds us that power is no less fragile despite its shine. / Meanwhile, Kossy Aguessy created a sceptre with clean lines made entirely from polished bronze (fig. 8). Each side of the stick is engraved: his name in hieroglyphs and the Fâ sign *djogbé*.⁶ A symbolic depiction of the artist as a monkey's head wearing a crown evokes both his lineage and his destiny, combining his physical and spiritual identity. The sceptre uses two African languages, which are likely to be related to one another as Fâ geomancy is believed to have originated in Egypt. Just as the

⁶ The word Fâ is used by the Fon people. The Yoruba say Ifa, while the Mina in Togo say Afa. Most scholars agree that Fa is the god or genie of divination, who acts as an intermediary between men and the gods. Fâ is a divinatory science that originated in Ancient Egypt. It is believed to have been brought to the ancient Danxome kingdom by Yoruba people coming from Nigeria. It is consulted for all kinds of purposes. Djogbé continues to be referred to as Ogbe-medji or Twice Ogbe. This first sign of the Fâ is believed to have created the world and contain the four elements: fire, air, water and earth, which combine with one another to give life. Ogbe means "life" or "world".

ancient sceptres reveal the personality of the Fon ruler depicted, these contemporary sceptres point to local artists' perspectives of their collective memory and current societal concerns.



Fig. 6. Gérard Quenum. Contemporary récade, 2015 © Le Petit Musée de la Récade (Le Centre, Abomey-Calavi)



Fig. 7. Zinkpe. Contemporary récade, 2015 © Le Petit Musée de la Récade (Le Centre, Abomey-Calavi)



Fig. 8. Kossi Aguessy. Contemporary récade, 2015 © Le Petit Musée de la Récade (Le Centre, Abomey-Calavi)

Ancient and Contemporary Sceptres in Dialogue

The Sceptre Museum offers visitors a venue where tradition and modernity sit side-by-side. Positioned alongside one another, these striking pieces serve to raise awareness among young people in particular, who are almost entirely ignorant of their history. Rather than the twelve kings referred to in school textbooks, children visiting the museum discover the history of the fourteen kings of Danxome, including King Adandozan and Queen Tassi Hangbé, whose role in the kingdom's history has been revived by the contemporary sceptres.

The guided tours at the Sceptre Museum are available in four different languages: Fongbé, Mina, French and English. The use of local languages Fongbé and Mina means that any local can enjoy the tours, regardless of their education level. French is available as it is the official working language in Benin, while English makes the material accessible to international tourists. The tours provide local people, schoolchildren from Lobozonekpa, as well as students and researchers, with a bridge to the past so that they can discover fragments of their history and their ancestors' ingenuity, creativity and expertise, and restore their pride in their identity. In this way, restitution (of ancient sceptres by Robert Vallois and the Saint-Germain des Prés Antiques Dealers' Collective, in this case) may be said to contribute directly to raising awareness and education in the society where these artistic and cultural objects were originally produced. Their presence at the heart of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and their use in teaching and artistic creation demonstrate the importance of contact between a society and its heritage.

The contemporary sceptres expand upon and refine the narrative of...?. Contemporary artists offer reflections on our era while preserving the original form invented by the craftsmen of the Danxome kingdom. There is an old saying: "Kan xoxo nu é non gbè yoyor do" or "It is at the end of the old rope that the new rope is woven". This principle of continuity between tradition and progress underpins every individual's identity in contemporary Beninese society. One cannot exist without the other.

Conclusion

What impact did the restitution of these works have on the affirmation of identity and the healing of psychological wounds caused by the dehumanisation of Black Africans during the slave trade and colonisation? There can be no doubt that the Beninese public visiting Le Centre and the Sceptre Museum feel that they have regained their lost history and identity. Yet it remains unclear why some Europeans use the term "donate" with respect to objects that they took from Africa in the past. It is important to seek to understand why some decide to "donate" while others prefer to "return" works belonging to the societies from which they were stolen. Regardless of the term employed, both donation and restitution help deconstruct the ahistorical narrative fabricated by eminent Western scholars that underpins the racism still in vogue in our contemporary world and that persists in the form of the "ethnographic" viewpoint. The return of these looted objects has shown the whole world that African societies have a history, regardless of what has long been taught at schools

and universities around the globe. It is now crucial that African history is rewritten to ensure that children the world over are taught this new narrative and that future generations are equipped to accept one another on the grounds of human equality.

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