



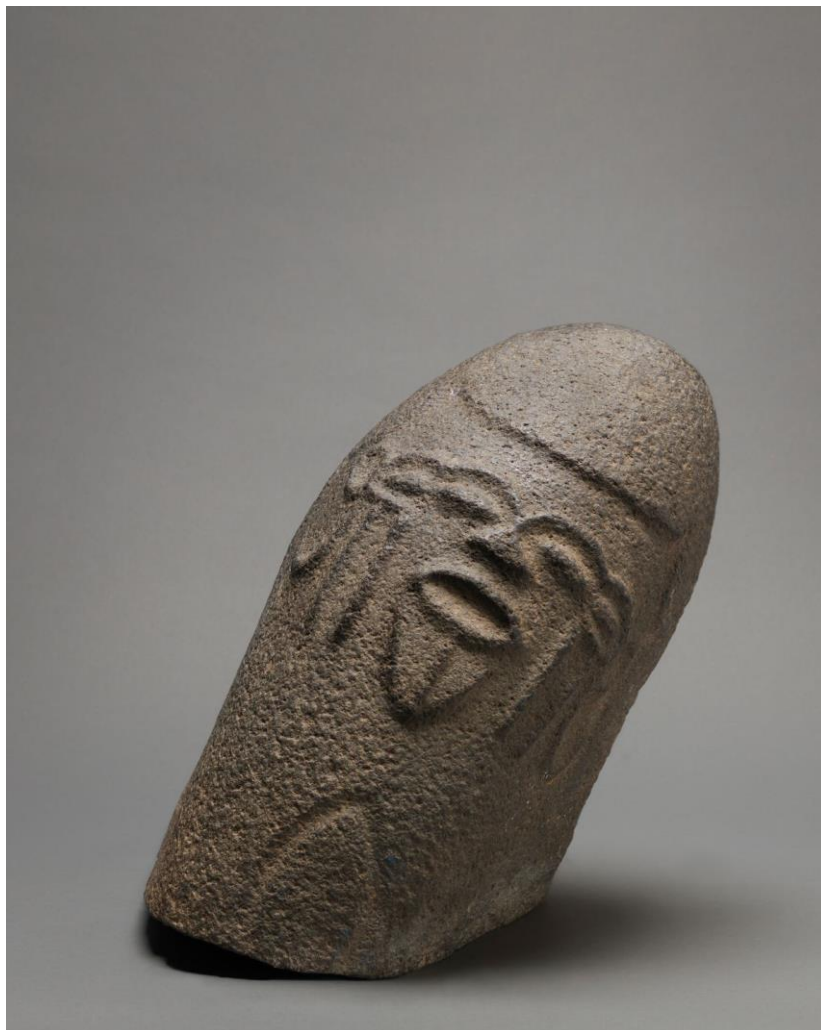
THE ART NEWSPAPER

US museum returns centuries-old Bakor monolith to Nigeria

The Chrysler Museum of Art repatriated the ancient sculpture following the recent discovery of photographic evidence

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Ekoi people, Akwanshi head, around 1600. On loan from Njemetop, Nigeria
Photo: Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia

Decades after it was looted from the village of Njemetop in southeast Nigeria, an ancient basalt monolith has returned home. Until last week, the humanlike stone work was held by the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, which has



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repatriated it to the Nigerian government. It is the first of the carved rocks known as the Bakor monoliths, made between the 15th and 17th centuries—many of which were stolen in the 1960s and 70s, during and after the Biafran War—to be returned to Nigeria.

The Chrysler Museum acquired the monolith in 2012 as a bequest from collectors Renée and Paul Mansheim, who had purchased it at an auction in Paris in 2005, [for €4,200](#). “No issues were ever raised with the museum by anybody in Nigeria or any previous owner—there had been no claim made on it,” Erik H. Neil, the Chrysler Museum’s director, says. “We recognised, through scholarly activity, that this wasn’t something that we wanted to hold on to.”

The museum began investigating the monolith’s provenance after Christopher Slogar, an African-art specialist and professor at California State University, Fullerton, raised concerns about it after visiting the collections last winter. Research turned up a photograph of the monolith in situ in Nigeria, taken in 1961 and published in 2022 in [The Bakor Monoliths](#), a book released by the cultural heritage nonprofit Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Preservation. A foreword by Abba Isa Tijani, director general of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, notes that the monoliths are “representative of ancestors, associated with traditional spiritual and social practices within the forest belt of Cross River State, south-east Nigeria” and that the symbols decorating them are likely an ancient form of writing.

“These exceptional sculptures which remain one of the most unique art forms from Nigeria, have suffered from neglect, the effects of the growing demand for land for agricultural use with its activities such as bush burning as well as illegal excavation and export,” Tijani writes. “A number of these sculptures have found their way into museum collections in Europe and the United States.”

When the monolith entered the Chrysler Museum’s collection, it came with incomplete provenance information. “The details were not there,” Neil says. “The provenance for a lot of African material is not always clear, frankly, and dating can be very hard.” Still, the museum did not have reason to reject the work. “It was felt that it had been on the market, and it was a gift,” Neil adds. “It had sold publicly just a few years before, and no issues had been raised about it.”

Once it became clear that the monolith should never have left Nigeria, the museum moved quickly to remedy the situation. Its board of trustees voted to deaccession the carving, and staff began making arrangements for its return to the Nigerian government. On 23 June, a repatriation ceremony was held at the Nigerian embassy in Washington, DC.

Uzoma Emenike, Nigeria’s ambassador to the US, praised the stone’s return, saying in a press release that it “demonstrates adherence to obligation and accountability. Indeed, it is a significant milestone and has opened a new page in the history of [the] institution.”



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To Neil's knowledge, this is the first time that the Chrysler Museum has repatriated an object, in part because it simply does not have many works in its collection that may have contested heritage, he says. The museum was founded in 1933 with a core collection given by Walter P. Chrysler Jr. that has largely expanded with donations from regional patrons. "We don't have a big body of material that is in the most questionable areas," Neil says. "So we don't have a big African collection, we don't have an abundance of Native American material." When questions over provenance arise, the museum brings in outside scholars as consultants. "We do not have a kind of budget that allows us to have a team of provenance researchers." He adds that the museum could consider the possibility of dedicating more resources to provenance but "it's more a question about being rigorous about procedures".

The monolith's first stop in its home country is Abuja, where plans are in the works for its display at a museum. Meanwhile, the Chrysler Museum has collaborated with Factum Foundation to produce a facsimile of the stone made out of resin, which the museum will use to educate visitors about cultural restitution.

A survey conducted in 1961 and 1962 that was commissioned by the National Museum in Lagos documented 300 Bakor monoliths across 30 sites. In the destruction of civil war, fought between 1967 and 1970, many were stolen and smuggled over the Cameroon-Nigeria border before entering the antiquities market. Several ended up in the collections of museums around the world, including the British Museum, Israel Museum, Musée du Quai Branly and the New Orleans Museum of Art. The top half of one monolith is in the [collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), bequeathed in 1994 by the late Nina Bunshaft.