Seeing the world: displaying foreign art in Berlin, 1898-1926

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As the popularity of reality television demonstrates, there is some pleasure in feeling superior to others’ mistakes. The examination of museum practice in the nineteenth century, particularly when it relates to the arts of Africa, can inspire similar smugness. By denouncing the racism and xenophobia of our forbearers, we prove the virtue of our own age. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were indeed marked by profound racism and xenophobia, and victory over these pernicious social ills is a critically important goal of the twenty-first century. Yet the motives of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century curators are more complicated than they might first appear, and are not solely related to race. This paper considers the treatment of architectural relief sculpture from present-day Turkey and Nigeria that were accessioned and placed in newly built museums at the turn of the twentieth century. The Pergamon altar and the Benin palace reliefs rank among the masterpieces of the Berlin museum system’s collections. Both arrived in Berlin during a period of unprecedented museum growth, when curators and directors struggled to provide a comprehensive view of the world through the limited framework of a museum gallery. Yet the methods of display chosen for these monuments are radically different. The comparison of curators’, directors’ and architects’ goals in housing and displaying these two great world monuments reveals competing approaches to comprehensive exhibitions.¹

Why compare the Pergamon and the Benin reliefs at all? The Pergamon reliefs (Figure 1) were part of a Hellenistic altar built on the acropolis at Pergamon (now Bergama) in Western Anatolia during the 2nd century BC. The building dates to the reign of Eumenes II (r. 197-159 B.C.). The structure had an open, colonnaded court on a podium surrounded by the now-famous gigantomachy reliefs. A

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Susan Vogel and my classmates at Columbia University in the 2009 seminar “The Object and the Museum: African Art in the West” for the development of my work on the 19th and 20th century reception of Benin art in Germany. Their insights and bibliographic recommendations greatly helped me to better understand the complexity of this period. I would also like to thank Dr.s Rebecca Brown and Cindy Kang for kindly reviewing this article before its publication, and for providing edits and comments that made the argument clearer. All remaining mistakes are, of course, entirely my own.
monumental stairway led to an inner court, which may have been a sacrificial altar. The Telephus frieze, also displayed in Berlin, decorated this inner court. Although the fabric of the ancient building was used in newer construction in the area for centuries, it was first formally excavated in the late nineteenth century. German-led excavations resulted in the Pergamon’s current location in Berlin. The Benin bronze reliefs (Figure 2), in contrast, date from the early modern period. These reliefs were installed within the audience courtyard of the Oba, or king, of Benin within his palace in Benin City, now within Nigeria. Likely commissioned by King Esigie (r. 1517-1550s) and completed by his son Orhogbua (r. 1550s-1570s), the reliefs encased the square wooden columns supporting a conpluvium roof in an immense courtyard. As a comprehensive decorative program, the relief plaques were likely experienced as a single artwork, similar to the Pergamon friezes. The Benin relief plaques were removed to storage at an unknown point between the 1640s and 1702, and were only infrequently consulted by courtiers after that date. The plaques were brought to Europe by the British as a result of their occupation of Benin City in 1897, and many of them arrived in Germany after their sale at auction in 1898.

![Figure 1. Relief from the Altar of Zeus at Pergamon, Hecate fights against Clytius (left); Artemis against Otos (right), c. 166-156, Pergamon Museum, Berlin. Credit: Rictor Norton and David Allen, available under Creative Commons License (CC BY 2.0).](image)

The Pergamon and Benin pieces have more in common than it may seem at the outset. Despite their great temporal and geographical distance, from a museum studies perspective they are quite similar. Both are architectural reliefs found with only a general understanding of their original display context; both arrive in Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century; both are immediately displayed in new museums upon their arrival; and both are considered as artefacts of foreign lands by their German exhibitors. Yet when the Pergamon reliefs are presented to the public in 1901, they are arranged in a purpose-built museum dedicated to an architectural reconstruction of the entire monument. When this is found insufficiently grand, both by visitors and by Kaiser Wilhelm II, this new museum is torn down and another, more ambitious museum constructed in its place. In contrast, upon arrival in Berlin the Benin architectural reliefs are placed into modest, uniformly-sized glass display cases, like the majority of objects in the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, or Royal Museum of Ethnology. Only in 1926 are the Benin artworks given a gallery of their own. Both the early and late display methods of the Benin reliefs obscure their role within a larger monument. The profoundly different impression made by the installation of these two series of architectural reliefs may initially seem a result of nineteenth-century attitudes towards their cultures of origin. However, the chosen display methods are more closely related to the development of public museums in Germany and the evolving goals of these institutions.
The development of Berlin museums

Like many European museums, the roots of German archaeological and ethnographic museums lie in royal collections. In Berlin, objects from Asia and Africa were kept alongside antiquities in the Kunstkammer, or art chamber, of the royal palace. In 1794, Jean Henry was appointed inspector, and later Director, of the Royal Cabinets of Antiquities, Coins and Art. A librarian and preacher by training, Henry worked to systematize the collection. He divided the existing holdings into three sections: the Cabinet of Art and Rare Specimens, the Collection of Rarities from Beyond Europe, and the Curiosities of the Fatherland; the Cabinet of Naturalia; and, the Cabinet of Antiquities and the Cabinet of Medals. The Rarities from Beyond Europe collection was so large that by 1798 it required its own room within the Kunstkammer. At this point in the late eighteenth century, ethnographic objects were still firmly a part of the art collection, within the subsection of the Cabinet of Art and Rare Specimens. Archaeological objects were slightly outside this art category, in a section of their own, alongside medals.

It isn’t until the leadership of Leopold Freiherr von Ledebur that ethnographic objects are defined separately from art in the royal collection. Named head of the Prussian art collection in 1829, Ledebur divided objects between art, history and ethnography. In the Visitor’s Guide to the Royal Art Collection and the Ethnographic Cabinet, published in 1844, even the title emphasizes this new division. The collections began to be physically separated in this period as well. Paintings and sculptures moved from the palace to what is now known as the Altes Museum in 1830. As the collections grew, the Neues Museum was opened in 1859 to display cultural objects. The ethnographic collection, along with Egyptian and Prehistoric antiquities, was housed in the basement of the Neues Museum. A mere forty years before the purchase of the Benin bronzes and the opening of the Pergamon Museum, the categories of ‘ethnographica’ and ‘antiquities’ were not only presented in the same manner, but in the same space.

These similarities of display end under the leadership of Adolf Bastian, named the Directorial Assistant of the Ethnographic Collection in 1869. Bastian ensured that the ethnographic collection was fully separated from art, culture and antiquities. Renowned as the father of ethnology, Bastian helped to define this new field as a lecturer at the University of Berlin and the founder of the Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory, as well as the co-editor of its publication,

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4 König, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 14.
5 König, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 15.
6 König, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 15.
the Zeitschrift für Ethnologie. The Society supported Bastian in his ambition to establish a separate building for the ethnographic collection. Given the funds by Wilhelm II for a purpose-built museum, the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde opened downtown on Königgrätzer Straße (now Stresemannstraße) in 1886.

Although the accession of the Benin and Pergamon reliefs were accomplished by Berlin museums in the same decades, the slow division between ethnographic and antiquities collections ensured that they were destined for vastly different institutions. From 1897 to 1899, Fritz Wolff designed a purpose-built museum for the Pergamon altar that was constructed on the Museumsinsel, or Museum Island, an ambitious cultural project on an island in the Spree River. After installing the gigantomachy relief, the building was opened to the public in 1901. With a neoclassical facade, the simple structure provided room to install the gigantomachy as a frieze running around the outer edge of a reconstructed altar (Figure 3). A 1904 visitor’s guide explained the museum’s goals. ‘The purpose which governed the plan of the museum was the erection of a building in which the frieze of the Great Altar of Pergamon might find, as nearly as possible, its original setting and light.’

Due to the constraints of displaying a building within a building, however, visitors were able to circumnavigate the display but unable to see it in its entirety. With only seven to nine meters between the building wall and the mounted reliefs, the visitor could appreciate the gigantomachy only in procession, seeing one side at a time. Despite the museum’s stated goals, it was impossible to stand at a distance and view the whole.

Figure 3. Reconstruction of the west side of the Great Altar of Pergamon, North Frieze, former Pergamon Museum, Berlin, 1901. Credit: bpk, Berlin / Former Pergamon Museum / Waldemar Titzenthaler / Art Resource, NY.

7 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 121.
8 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 122.
At the Royal Museum for Ethnology as well, a gap quickly emerged between the director’s desire to present an impression of the entirety of human culture and the visitor’s ability to experience such a totality within the museum building. A guide to the new Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, published in 1885, describes the collection as divided between the ethnographic objects and artefacts of German and other early history.

[The ethnographic collection] has the purpose to show the human characteristics of every culture outside the frame of world history rooted in the ancient Mediterranean, by studying specimens of its cultural, architectural, martial, hunting, fishing, and agricultural tools, its crafts, its clothing, its jewellery, and so forth, and to illustrate through all manner of monuments from ancient and present times their particular development and their context.\footnote{‘Die ethnologische Abteilung hat die Bestimmung, die Menschen-Eigentümlichkeit derjenigen Völker, welche in den Rahmen der um die alte Mittelmeerkultur bewegten Weltgeschichte nicht inbegriffen sind, durch Proben ihres Kultus-, Haus-, Kriegs-, Jagd-, Fischerei-, Ackerbau-, und Handwerks-gerätes, ihrer Kleidung, ihres Schmucks u.s.w., sowie durch alle anderen Arten von Denkmälern aus alter und neuer Zeit in ihrer besonderen Entwicklung und ihren Zusammenhängen zu veranschaulichen.’ \textit{Führer durch das Museum für Völkerkunde}, vol. 6, Berlin: W. Spemann, 1895, inside cover.}

The guide goes on to explain that people ‘outside the frame of world history’ include Africans as well as Indians and their neighbours, east Asians, ancient American cultures, and elements of European societies considered both ‘survivals’ of an earlier time and characteristic of a particular people.\footnote{The collection of European peoples’ early artifacts is likewise considered outside the frame of history, until the continent converted to Christianity and, therefore, entered ‘into fully historical time.’ (‘Die vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Sammlungen umfassen die Denkmäler und Überreste der europäischen Stämme von ihrem ersten Auftreten an bis zu ihrer Bekehrung zum Christentum und ihrem Eintritt in die völlig geschichtliche Zeit.’) \textit{Führer durch das Museum für Völkerkunde}, vol. 6, Berlin: W. Spemann, 1895, inside cover.} Although it is difficult at this date to imagine the idea of such major cultures as ahistorical, the implication of the text is clear: from the very start, the museum forthrightly sets itself apart from museums concerned with history rooted in the ancient Mediterranean, and therefore from monuments like the Pergamon. At the same time, it undertakes to illustrate ‘all manner of monuments’ and sets a wide definition of material culture.

The idea of a total view—both literally, in the sense of being able to see myriad objects at once, and figuratively, in the sense of creating a comprehensive
view of mankind—is frequently mentioned in Bastian’s writing. Writing to the minister of culture, Bastian explained that the museum would bring together, ‘the monstrous mass...necessary to sufficiently represent in a systematic, methodological order the ethnological provinces of the earth in their full extent.’ The individual objects on display were superseded by the goal of displaying a totality of human products that served as indices of culture. Yet the quickly growing collections soon crowded the airy glass cases intended to provide a birds-eye view of world cultures (Figure 4). Here too, it was impossible to see the whole.

Figure 4. A display case with objects from Benin in the African Department of the Royal Museum of Ethnology, Berlin, before 1914. Credit: bpk, Berlin / Ethnologisches Museum / photographer unknown / Art Resource, NY.

The Pergamon and Ethnology Museums are only two examples of curatorial method in this golden age of museum building. Their struggle to define the correct level of contextualization for museum presentations was shared by other institutions. The Kaiser Friedrich Museum, known since 1958 as the Bode Museum in honour of groundbreaking curator Wilhelm von Bode (1845-1929), provides insight into another model of reconstructing the context of artworks. Construction

began in 1897 and the museum opened to the public in 1904, the same time period as the Pergamon Museum and the Royal Museum of Ethnology. Bode, one of the first connoisseur curators, established a museum that encompassed painting as well as sculpture, and included both fine and decorative arts. This practice was a direct challenge to the prevailing model of German museums in the period, which divided royal collections into: museums of fine art and art history, or Kunstgeschichte museums; museums of cultural history, or Kulturgeschichte museums; and, museums of arts and crafts, or decorative arts, called Kunstgewerbe museums. Bode’s model joined artefacts previously placed in Kunstgewerbe museums with paintings historically understood as the province of Kunstgeschichte museums.

Bode’s curatorial decisions were intended to help visitors understand the aesthetics of the culture and period on display. His vision included museum spaces that contributed to the experience of a particular period. The architect of the Bode Museum, Ernst von Ihne, created continuous display spaces in shifting historical idioms, to establish a context for the art displayed within. Yet, unlike the first Pergamon Museum, none of the exhibits attempt to provide a literal context. Instead, they suggest the aesthetic mode of their culture of origin, as perceived by the exhibiting culture (Figure 5). This unusual concept, propagated by Bode and supported by Crown Princess Victoria of Prussia, focused specifically on visitor experience.


Despite the differences in their collections and curatorial approaches, Bastian, Wolff and Bode are all struggling with the limits of museum presentation.
When presenting a foreign or temporally distant culture within a modern building, how comprehensive can the exhibit be? What are the boundaries or frames that determine what is appropriate to the museum display and what falls outside it? As museums expanded from the founding royal collections through new accessions, directors and curators could actively choose what the museum would display and how these objects fit into the larger institutional narrative. The Pergamon marble reliefs and the Benin bronze relief panels arrive at a moment in the history of German museums when the question of how objects are displayed and how they are perceived by the public is still in flux. The changing installations of both relief series in the first decades of the twentieth century reflect the conflicting state, public and curatorial demands on museums.

Museums and the state

As numerous scholars have demonstrated, museums are potent symbols of the state. Announcing both domestic and international successes, museum displays present an opportunity to shape public perception at home and to augment a country’s reputation abroad. The unification of Germany in 1871 created a new nation with ambitions abroad, but also led to a greater sense of competition between different regions of the new country, each vying for dominance within domestic politics. The exhibition of the Pergamon and Benin reliefs are related to this broader story of national and international competition.

Both the history of the Pergamon excavation and the purchase of the Benin bronzes are related to German scientific and academic competition with the British. Amateur archaeologist Carl Humann first visited Pergamon in 1864, and convinced the Ottoman government to block looting of the site. After more than a decade of campaigning for official support in Germany and the Ottoman Empire, Humann secured the funding and site permissions to begin excavation in 1878. Turning over a marble relief slab, he felt that the writhing, active figures represented a new epoch of art history. Here was something to rival the Parthenon reliefs in London, which the British government purchased from the seventh Earl of Elgin, Thomas Bruce, in 1816 and placed in the British Museum. German museum directors and archaeologists, most notably Alexander Conze, Director of the Sculpture Collection at the Berlin Royal Museum (appointed in 1877), were actively seeking an ancient monument worthy of comparison with the Elgin marbles. Yet many German-funded archaeological digs ended without success, either because few objects of sufficient splendour were found, or because the local authorities blocked their removal to Germany. As a former engineer and road surveyor in the service of the

13 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 101.
14 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 52.
15 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 93.
Ottoman Empire, Humann enjoyed a better relationship with the Ottoman government than many of his countrymen. By purchasing the Ottoman government’s share of the Pergamon excavation finds, Humann secured their legal release to Germany under local antiquities law. Further excavations were completed in 1880-1881 and 1883-1886, and so the Pergamon altar slowly arrived in Berlin over the course of two decades.16

The German acquisition of the Benin bronze plaques also relates to professional rivalry among European museums. The bronze and ivory artworks of the Kingdom of Benin were seized by the British army after conquering Benin City in February 1897.17 A portion of the royal treasury and artwork in the palace was officially confiscated and brought to Europe, while other pieces were taken by individual soldiers. The government sold the formally seized artworks at an auction to benefit the orphans and war widows of the military endeavour. Although British Museum curators petitioned the colonial office to keep the Benin artworks for research and public display, they were unable to retain them all. Lacking resources, the British Museum was unable to prevent a large number of artworks from being sold at auction in 1898. The Berlin Royal Museum of Ethnology, however, had no difficulty in securing funding for accessions. Local enthusiasts, eager to support the Berlin ethnographic museum in its competition with museums in Dresden, Munich, and Leipzig, provided seemingly boundless resources. As a result, the Berlin museum was fast becoming the world’s largest ethnographic collection. Felix von Luschan, an influential curator of African art at the museum, profited from the British inability to keep the Benin bronzes. Von Luschan wrote to a major museum donor, Hans Meyer, to secure his support for purchasing the Benin material at any price. Meyer agreed, responding, ‘It is actually a riddle to me that the English let such things go. Either they have too many of them already or they have no idea what these things mean for ethnology, cultural history and art history.’18 After rushing to London for the auction in 1898, von Luschan purchased the majority of the items up for bid for Berlin. The Königliches

16 The massive marble slabs were sent to the coast, and then shipped with the assistance of the German Navy. Bilsl, *Antiquity on Display*, 131.

17 In January 1897, a young officer wishing to demonstrate his diplomatic aptitude left for Benin City in his superior’s absence to discuss a trade dispute. Despite warnings from members of the Benin court hierarchy that the king, or Oba, was conducting an important ceremony and could not be disturbed, Acting Consul General James Philips, six British officers and 200 Hausa retainers continued along the road to Benin. Perceived as a military invasion, they were attacked by Benin forces, and in February the British retaliated and conquered Benin City.

Museum für Völkerkunde, now called the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum, continues to have the largest museum collection of Benin material in the world.

Intra-European competition for colonial power also coloured the reception of the Pergamon and Benin reliefs. Merchants in Hamburg and Bremen had long profited from trade routes and even privately administered colonies in the Pacific and in Africa, but given the relatively late unification of Germany, the new nation had far greater colonial ambitions than claims. During the Berlin Conference in the winter of 1884/1885, Germany could claim far less African territory than the British or French. The Pergamon altar, excavated in Western Anatolia, directly related to German imperial ambition in other regions. In the late nineteenth century, Germany devoted significant financial, political and diplomatic support to exploring ancient sites between the Aegean Sea and the Persian Gulf in order to secure the country’s pre-eminence in the field of archaeology. The archaeology of lands within the Ottoman Empire (modern Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Syria) was considered of particular importance, due to German colonial ambitions in the area.\(^\text{19}\)

The gigantomachy frieze of the Pergamon provided the perfect iconography for the rising German empire. In the gigantomachy, Prussians can see themselves as Athenians, uniting an empire and protecting the arts.\(^\text{20}\) As an index of German power, the Pergamon seemed a fitting monument for public celebration and museum reification,\(^\text{21}\) a narrative that affected the later development of museum displays described below.

**Museums and the public**

At the turn of the twentieth century, the visitor response to the Pergamon Museum and the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde were equally negative. Both Wolff and Bastian had failed to consider the public in their projects because both felt that the museum was a place for the use of Wissenschaftler, educated specialists who already knew something of the subject on display. In Bastian’s mind, the ability to see all of the Museum’s holdings far outweighed the need for visual clarity and order. Likewise, housing an accurate reconstruction of the Pergamon was far more important to Wolff than heightening the public experience of the structure. Public demands for reform surrounded the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde; Wolff’s Pergamon Museum was demolished in 1908 to make way for a new building to house not only the Pergamon, but also the other monumental finds from the expanding German archaeological program.

The Berlin public’s interest in museums seems expected today, but the founding directors of the Pergamon and Royal Ethnology museums could be

\(^{19}\) Bilsel, *Antiquity on Display*, 18.


\(^{21}\) Bilsel, *Antiquity on Display*, 123.
forgiven for failing to take it into consideration. The museum was a new institution in the nineteenth century, and public interest grew over the course of the century, shifting the museum’s identity from a place of specialized research to a place of public entertainment and instruction. In the nineteenth century, new philosophical thinking led by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Wilhelm von Humboldt emphasized the importance of education, self-improvement and character building, or Bildung. A rising middle class sought out new, life-long educational opportunities, from joining amateur learned societies, attending public lectures, or visiting museums. In addition to these venues, the panopticon became a popular location for edifying entertainment throughout the nineteenth century. The panopticon, a venue for displays and theatre performances, allowed German city-dwellers to be all (pan) seeing (opticon). Located in or near shopping areas, the panopticons provided titillating and exotic exhibitions that purported to show visitors the world. Thousands of visitors poured into the panopticons, particularly on Sundays and holidays, when as many as 5,000 people might attend. The experience of the panopticons and special festivals affected public expectations of both the Pergamon Museum and the Royal Museum for Ethnology.

In 1886, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Royal Academy of Arts and the 25th anniversary of Kaiser Wilhelm I’s ascension to the Prussian throne, architectural firm Kyllmann and Heyden erected a temporary Pergamon at the exhibition grounds for the enjoyment of visitors. Plaster casts of the arriving gigantomachy panels provided a great attraction, although their interest must have been subordinated to the surrounding spectacle. The building was a hybrid, with the Pergamon altar supporting the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, thus representing the two most important recent excavations of the German Archaeology Institute in a single view. Visitors could walk into the building and see a panorama of the Pergamon on a festival day, as imagined by the artists Alexander Kips and Max Koch. Spectators in Berlin enjoyed images of ancient spectators leaving a theatre, collapsing the contemporary excavation site with its ancient, imagined past. From outside, the architectural fantasy of the Pergamon served as a backdrop to live entertainment. At the height of the festivities, 1,500 actors staged the battle of the Attalids against the Gauls, using the pastiche monument as a stage setting. Berlin, known as the Athens on the Spree, used the event to make a pointed statement about its superiority over the French, not only as the victors of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), but also in the field of archaeology. The pride embodied in the

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22 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 16.
23 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 18.
24 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 110.
25 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 111.
26 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 111.
27 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 109.
monument and the spectacles surrounding it shaped more than emerging nationalism, however. These displays also shaped the expectations of the public when viewing the Pergamon. Although architects, archaeologists and other educated people considered the plaster display a mere set-piece, more than 1.2 million people visited over the course of the exhibition, from May to July, and many of them may have assumed that the display successfully transported an ancient reality to contemporary Germany.

Popular culture also affected public reception of ethnographic museum displays. Smaller public spectacles of foreigners and their material culture were far more frequent than the exceptional Pergamon extravaganza. Beginning in the eighteenth century, and gaining popularity over the course of the nineteenth century, circuses, zoos and panopticons made foreign cultures present on German soil. Although foreigners had visited Germany to study or to trade for centuries, the public events emphasized and exhibited their ‘foreignness.’ Within the halls, waxed busts of different racial ‘types’ and ethnographic objects were also displayed. In the theatre of the panopticons, promoters hired and collaborated with foreigners to present an entertaining version of their home culture, including music, dance and the demonstration of everyday chores. Carl Hagenbeck, a zookeeper and animal importer, first hired human subjects for his shows in 1874, when a group of Sami, then called Laplanders, could be seen living alongside reindeer. The show was particularly popular, and so Hagenbeck began to regularly include human subjects in his shows.

At this distance in time, it seems strange to think that audiences could confuse panopticon shows with the dissemination of real knowledge, as if attending a circus performance were equal to attending a zoological lecture on elephants. Yet the aura of authenticity surrounding the panopticons lent authority to their performances at the highest levels. In 1886, Hagenbeck worked with a group of Duala men from Cameroon, some of whom had arrived as sailors on the H.M.S. Bismarck. To increase general interest in their performances, Hagenbeck billed one of the performers as ‘King Dido,’ despite the actor/sailor’s more plebeian birth. This invented title confused even Crown Prince Friedrich (r. March - June 1888). In the summer of 1886, the Crown Prince entertained the actor/sailor and his friends at the royal palace at Potsdam for an afternoon. That the Crown Prince could be so deluded emphasizes the air of academic respectability that clung to this realm of popular entertainment.

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German anthropologists and ethnographers directly contributed to the positive reputation of the panopticons. Anthropologists were not only familiar with, but also intimately connected to, such public entertainments. Indeed, the approval of leading anthropologists, such as the curator Felix von Luschan, helped to garner government tolerance for these types of shows, which might otherwise be considered pornographic or insalubrious for the general public. The Berlin Anthropology Society often held meetings at zoos or panopticons in order to study the performers. In 1878, for example, thirty-two visitors from Sudan collaborated with Hagenbeck on a show. Hagenbeck billed them as Nubians, and the Berlin Anthropological Society was invited to measure the performers. Finding that all the Sudanese visitors were Christian or Muslim Arabic-speakers, the anthropologists were frustrated that no further cultural study could take place.

The Berlin Colonial Exhibition of 1896 illuminates some of the conflict between German ethnologists’ intentions in exhibiting African people and their material culture to the public, and the realities of the people and cultural material intended for display. Performers from across the German colonies were invited to participate at the Colonial Exhibition. Hosted in Treptow Park, so-called traditional dwellings (some designed by Museum for Ethnology curator Felix von Luschan himself), set the scene. Each day, the visitor-performers were expected to grind grain or weave in order to show ‘everyday life’ to the crowds.

Although colonial governors charged with the task of locating the performers for the Colonial Exhibition wished to find Naturvölker, or natural (i.e.: uncultured) peoples thought of as ‘uncorrupted’ by European ways, most performers were selected from among cosmopolitan German trading partners of long standing. As Andrew Zimmerman describes in his 2010 book, Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany, the delegations from Cameroon and Togo particularly disrupted anthropologists’ expectations. The Cameroonian delegation, for example, comprised members of the Bell family, part of the Duala ruling elite for more than a century. As city-dwellers who spoke German, the Duala group refused to act like ‘primitives’ or be photographed in the ‘traditional’ costumes that they donned for the crowds. During the evenings, they changed back into their customary European-style clothing and sang risqué German drinking songs—a far cry from the authentic ‘primitives’ the ethnologists expected. Likewise,

33 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 20.
34 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 20.
35 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 21.
36 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 26.
37 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 28-29.
38 For further discussion of the fascinating interaction between organizers, performers, and anthropologists, see Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, Chapter 1: Exotic Spectacles and the Global Context of German Anthropology. This paragraph summarizes the information presented in pages 26-29 of Zimmerman’s book.
the Togo contingent was organized by a Christian village leader, J.C. Bruce, and his nephew, a Berlin-trained shoemaker who spoke German with a Berliner’s accent. Bruce and his nephew were more interested in complying with organizers’ and visitors’ expectations of the exhibition, and hired dancers and artists to accompany them to Berlin, where they hoped to promote interest in Togolese culture as well as to profit from the sale of souvenirs. Although the concept of the ‘primitive Other’ was complicated by the cosmopolitan performers, the public was seemingly unaware of this slippage between display and reality. The participation of German Anthropological Society members in measuring, photographing, and otherwise studying the visitors must have added credibility to what was an essentially fictional performance.

Although the design of the Pergamon Museum and the Museum for Ethnology were not initially intended to serve the public, the public sought education and entertainment in both buildings. Many visitors likely expected to consume new knowledge in the same way that they had experienced Pergamon Exhibition, the Colonial Exhibition, or the ever-varied panopticon performances. Museum directors and curators were forced to contend with public expectations, and with the ways that the public consumed ‘edutainment’ in the late nineteenth century.

The initial plans for the Royal Museum of Ethnology specifically avoided any possible comparison to the experience of the panopticon. The close connection between anthropologists and the world of the public spectacle created a dilemma for the new institution. Although early ethnologists and anthropologists felt that panopticons and zoo performers provided useful opportunities for serious research, their performances were not viewed as authentic or academically rigorous. This perception may have inspired Bastian and his colleagues to draw a bright line between the panopticon method of display and the methods of display used in the museum.39 Where the panopticon preferred to show context, usually by exhibiting 'native peoples' using weapons or cooking utensils and living in 'traditional' dwellings, the museum for ethnology created its own context for objects, where pristine glass cases displayed the anthropological specimens waiting for comparison and analysis with other objects, without any distracting artifice. Not only were different cultures' products gathered under one roof to facilitate the study of humankind, but individual objects were examined only in comparison to many other specimens of their type. Bastian, von Luschan and their colleagues argued that a single object is a useless curiosity; only a series provides a means of comparative study.40 The raison d’être of the Royal Museum of Ethnology was to arrange individual objects into a broader typology, to overcome any unique aspects

39 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 193.
40 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 173.
of the object in order to allow a class of objects to speak some previously unknown truth about human nature.

The Pergamon Museum – in its first incarnation – likewise responded by avoiding the sensationalism of the public spectacle. The neoclassical building had a simple, largely unornamented interior that allowed the visitor to focus on the Pergamon reliefs. Its high vaulted ceilings directed natural light onto the gigantomachy. Other archaeological fragments were on display in a neighbouring room. The understated space was designed to give primacy to the Pergamon reliefs, and not to distract the visitor with the museum’s architecture. However, it did not satisfy public expectations of the presentation of the Pergamon that were set during the great spectacle of 1886.41 Kaiser Wilhelm II agreed with the general public sense of the museum as too modest for such an important archaeological find.42

In both museums, the visual presentation of the collection was the primary mode of education and public address. The Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde was noted for its absence of guidance, with only small labels denoting the origin of the object and its type placed for the edification of visitors.43 For this reason, the museum’s annual guides provide particularly useful insight into curatorial thinking and communication with the public. The guide provides brief introductions to each section and an orientation to the physical space and layout of the museum, but does not otherwise provide much more than geographical information. There is no exegesis on the purpose of objects, no matter how unfamiliar the practices related to it. For example, while the museum guide describes some Yoruba pieces as related to Ifa, the guide does not explain what Ifa is: a system of divination and an oral compendium of inherited Yoruba wisdom.44 This sort of oblique reference to contextual information presupposes that visitors arrive with an existing knowledge of foreign cultures. The museum provides a venue to apply knowledge to the examination of visual evidence, so that the learned visitor can draw his or her own conclusions about the similarities and dissimilarities of different civilizations.

Orientation to the physical space of the museum is of primary concern within the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde guide. On the first floor, a spacious lobby was organized around a sculpture of the seated Buddha, while the galleries presented the prehistoric German peoples and carefully laid-out cases of Heinrich Schliemann’s finds at Troy, in accordance with the wishes of the donor. The sparsely filled spaces end, however, on the main floor, where visitors encountered case after case jammed with a seemingly limitless number of weapons, masks, clothing, pottery, religious sculpture, and other art. Beginning in 1898, only

41 Bilsel, *Antiquity on Display*, 122.
two years after the opening of the new building, the museum guide includes a footnote at the start of the African section apologizing for the lack of order.

The collection is organized by geographical points, although the enduring, strong growth of the collection has not always allowed for a spatial separation, so that neighbouring cases often have collections from entirely different areas of Africa. There is a plan next to the main entrance to the first gallery to help with orientation.\(^45\)

The museum’s preoccupation with orientation is connected to its primary means of educating visitors: through the direct comparison of similar objects from different cultures. The orderly rows of glass and iron cases were intended to make this sort of comparison possible from many different directions. In fact, despite the orderly rows of cases, the sheer mass of disparate material contained within created great confusion for the museum-going public and curators alike. The disorderly presentation prompted a public outcry and demands for a new method of display.\(^46\)

The overflowing cases, and indeed the overflowing building, of the Royal Museum for Ethnology were recognized around the world. Despite the museum’s international reputation for its comprehensive collection, the realities of collection management and display rendered it nearly useless. Visiting American anthropologists noted the chaos within the cases promoted only confusion, and precluded learning by observation,\(^47\) Bastian’s main goal. In 1900, the public complained of the disorder within the museum through letters published in the Vossische Zeitung,\(^48\) demonstrating the severity of the problem. Von Luschan acknowledged that no member of the public could make sense of the objects within. ‘The public wanders dull-wittedly around our halls, and I am positive that, of a hundred visitors, ninety-nine do not realize when they move from one ethnographic province to another.’\(^49\) From the opening of the purpose-built museum in 1886, the board of directors encouraged Bastian to consider dividing the collection into a


\(^{46}\) Even before the new museum opened, the Board of Directors encouraged Bastian to divide the collection between display-worthy items and those held in reserve for research, but Bastian refused. This issue is more fully discussed below.

\(^{47}\) Zimmerman, \textit{Anthropology and Antihumanism}, 191.

\(^{48}\) Zimmerman, \textit{Anthropology and Antihumanism}, 195.

\(^{49}\) Zimmerman, \textit{Anthropology and Antihumanism}, 191.
Schausammlung, or display collection, and an Arbeitssammlung, or a working collection designed for the use of researchers. Bastian refused, feeling that any division of the collection would make it impossible to convey the total impression of humankind that formed the museum’s mission. In this scenario, a spacious and proper arrangement of the Benin material would have been impossible. It is no surprise that the orderly presentation of the Schliemann collection on the first floor could not serve as a model for the display of the Benin bronzes—the narrow boundaries of the display (what Schliemann had collected) and the pressure to display each piece separately (per the wishes of the donor) made the first floor gallery an exception to the rule of the museum.

Refrining display

Nineteenth-century museums experimented with methods of presentation and sometimes failed. Both the first Pergamon Museum and the first Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde aimed to provide a comprehensive context for the objects on view, yet the public deemed these spaces insufficient to the task. By 1930, both collections were rehoused with entirely new installation strategies. Yet the Benin palace reliefs were still not presented in an architectural context. It is worth exploring why the Benin plaques were treated differently from the Pergamon reliefs, as well as how new installations of each series reflect changing museological goals.

There are multiple factors at play in the treatment and display of the Benin bronze plaques vis-à-vis the marble Pergamon reliefs, from the practicalities of early museum organization to racist ideas of the primitive ‘Other.’ Two systemic factors contributed to the failure to display the Benin bronzes as art, or as part of an architectural monument. First, the bronzes were unlikely to be shown in an art museum, even if they were made in Europe, because bronze as a material had a slightly different place in the hierarchy of fine arts in Germany in the late nineteenth century. As previously mentioned, the movement of royal collections into public museums in this period occasioned a fairly strict division of objects into three museum types: Kunstgeschichte, Kulturgeschichte, and Kunstgewerbe museums. As small bronze and ivory objects, the Benin corpus would have belonged in the Kunstgewerbe museum, alongside other decorative arts objects. However, Kunstgewerbe museums were seen as the least prestigious museums, designed primarily for the aesthetic education of tradesmen. Ethnographic museums, in contrast, were considered research facilities in a cutting-edge field. In the German

50 But by 1906, following a public outcry about the crowded state of the Museum, the board of directors prevailed, and a storeroom was built in Dahlem. König, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin,19.
51 Penny, Objects of Culture, 34.
context, the accession of the Benin plaques into ethnographic museums, instead of Kunstgewerbe museums, is not the result of a division between the art of Europeans and non-Europeans, but instead a mark of the esteem in which these plaques were held.\(^5\) Given the museum system of the day, the Benin plaques—like any other small bronze reliefs—could not be expected to be placed in an art museum.

As a second systemic factor, within the Royal Museum for Ethnology the curator’s primary goals were accession and cataloguing, with display as a distant third goal. The exponential growth of the museum collections under Bastian, due to colonial seizures and a high level of private funding for purchased accessions, soon swelled the museum far beyond its capacity. A proponent of salvage anthropology, who felt it his duty to collect specimens of world cultures before they were subsumed by ‘superior’ European culture, Bastian pushed his curators and supporters, as well as colonial officials, to collect as much as possible for the museum.\(^5\) Given Bastian’s conviction that objects could only be studied as a series, there were few limits to the material desired by the museum—even types of objects that had already been collected were valuable as comparanda. This fervour for collecting was so strong that the Berlin Anthropological Society developed a guide for the German Navy on how to collect anthropological specimens at port.\(^5\) The bourgeois desire to collect medals of service to the royal family also contributed to the growth of the collection, with many colonial officers, missionaries and traders amassing collections to be donated to the museum to earn a commendation.\(^5\)

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europeans’ general disdain for non-Europeans is of course also a factor in the way the Benin relief plaques were displayed. Non-Europeans were considered Naturvölker, a term that implies a primitive state of being that lacks history and culture. Colonial officials were particularly invested in this categorization. Yet there was a plurality of opinion within Germany on this topic. The low view of colonized people was not shared by all members of the public, from the Crown Prince’s cordial treatment of ‘King Dido’ to journalists’ criticism of the colonial exhibition. The educated curators and anthropologists at the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, particularly of von Luschan’s generation, also struggled with these reductive views of the ‘Other.’ Writing to a colleague, von Luschan wondered about such definitions.

How would you determine a criterion for ‘savage peoples’ [wilde Völker]? For twelve years I have directed the collections from Africa

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Kathryn W. Gunsch  

Seeing the world: Displaying foreign art in Berlin, 1898-1926

and Oceania here at the museum, and I still have not been able to determine such a criterion. On the contrary, the longer I concern myself with these questions and the closer I come to answering one of them, the clearer it becomes to me that it is not at all possible to divide [illegible] natural peoples and cultural peoples.56

Indeed, von Luschan had only the highest respect for the artwork of the Benin kingdom, which he recognized as art. His 1919 book Die Altertümer von Benin, includes 889 illustrations of items held in Berlin, Vienna, Hamburg and Stuttgart as well as works in private and public collections in Britain. Von Luschan spent twenty years researching this publication, and plainly admires the Benin artworks. He openly notes their importance for cultural and art historical questions. He unfailingly refers to the Benin pieces as Kunstwerke – art works – and their makers as Künstler, or artists. In the introduction, von Luschan also famously compared the success of Benin’s bronze-casting technique to Benvenuto Cellini:

These Benin works notably stand among the highest heights of European casting. Benvenuto Cellini could not have made a better cast himself, and no one has before or since, even to the present day. These bronzes stand even at the summit of what can be technically achieved.57

By comparing the Benin brass-casters to an undisputed Renaissance master, one who completed brass-casting himself instead of designing the form and leaving the technical accomplishment to others, von Luschan emphasized both the creative and technical genius inherent in the Benin corpus.58

Today, the perception of Benin art as art seems proof of high regard. Yet in the early twentieth century, many anthropologists felt that the relegation of an object to the status of art robbed it of its higher calling as a contributor to science. One solution to the overcrowding in the Royal Museum of Ethnology involved separating the objects made by historical Kulturvölker (now including the peoples of Japan, China, India and ancient America) from those of ahistorical Naturvölker (at

56 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 35-36.
58 Gunsch, ‘Art and/or Ethnographica,’ 28.
this point defined as the peoples of Africa, Oceania, and Native America). The Asia curators, however, worried that this shift would relegate their collections to what they considered the less useful field of art history. F.W.K. Mueller, the curator for China, argued that such a change would turn the collection into a ‘scientifically worthless curiosity cabinet.’ For Mueller and many supporters of the Royal Museum for Ethnology, inclusion in the ethnographic museum did not rob an object of its art value, but instead added to it; the ethnographic museum elevated an object’s value above mere ornament by assigning it a role in the project of understanding human nature.

At the same time, by valuing the object above its art-value, the Royal Museum of Ethnology decidedly minimized the unique qualities of each object. In this model of exhibiting like objects to promote comparison among many cultures, the special display of Benin architectural ornamentation is impossible. The Benin artworks were placed into the identical iron and glass cases that housed the rest of the collection. Within the grid-like order of the museum, and its method of meta-analysis, there was no room to accommodate the singularity of the architectural relief sculptures. For the Benin reliefs are singular. Although architectural ornamentation is known across the continent, the removable bronze relief plaques are particular to the Benin kingdom, and to a particular point in that kingdom’s history. Yet creating an architectural context for the Benin plaques, akin to the context created for the Pergamon in the museum built in 1901, would only serve to highlight the incomparability of these objects, undermining the methodological framework of the ethnographic museum.

While the crammed cases of the Royal Museum for Ethnology seem a pointed dismissal of the achievements of Benin artists, especially in comparison to the beautiful, light-filled space first dedicated to the Pergamon, the display methods reflect the differing goals of two different institutions and their related academic fields more than a racially-based hierarchy of worth. Both museum displays attempted to provide a comprehensive view of the world, whether of global culture or ancient architecture. As museums began to accept educating/entertaining public into their mission, displays changed and museum goals shifted to accommodate new roles. In the early twentieth century, the Pergamon Museum assumed a greater role in projecting German Imperial might, and the Royal Museum for Ethnology began to adopt the language of colonialism.

The Pergamon Museum designed by Wolff was torn down in 1908 for structural reasons. Its demolition is also likely related to royal and public disappointment with the simple display. In its place, a far grander structure emerged. Designed by Alfred Messel in 1907, the building was completed in 1930.

59 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 195.
60 Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism, 196.
61 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 122.
under the direction of Ludwig Hoffman, who took over the project after Messel’s death in 1909. Instead of a simple presentation of a frieze, the new Pergamon museum became more like the Pergamon first presented in the popular panopticon than the Pergamon as envisioned by archaeologists and scholars (Figure 6). The museum director, Theodor Wiegand, envisioned the museum as ‘a museum of ancient architecture’ and not merely architectural fragments. Wiegand shared the prevailing interest in displaying a comprehensive context, and in his view, this meant creating an *Anschauung*, or intuitive experience, of a completed architectural ensemble in full scale, so that visitors can enjoy the original effect of the architecture.

![Figure 6. Visitors to the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, 2014. Credit: Kevin Rhodes, available under Creative Commons License (CC BY 2.0).](image-url)

Wiegand’s vision of a museum of completed, monumental architecture blended German archaeological and, by extension, imperial glory with the achievements of the ancient artists who designed and executed the buildings within. Although no definitive information exists about the original designs of these monuments, Wiegand devised full reconstructions for the Pergamon, the Ishtar Gate and the Miletus Gate. The Pergamon Altar is displayed inside-out, a confusing and misleading inversion of its original installation, as Can Bilsel amply demonstrates in *Antiquity on Display: Regimes of the Authentic in Berlin’s Pergamon Museum*. However, to the casual visitor, the Pergamon altar is plausible as a

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62 Bilsel, *Antiquity on Display*, 201.
building. One can climb steps that seem to belong to the same architectural fabric as the gigantomachy reliefs. One can walk through a portico at the top and look at the visitors streaming into this building-within-a-building. Even if the display is an inventive fiction, the fact that the reliefs are part of a complex, monumental architectural structure is never in doubt. In the new Pergamon Museum, Wiegand successfully accomplished the ‘view of the whole’ that Bastian so longed to present in the Royal Museum for Ethnology.

The overcrowding of the Royal Museum for Ethnology in its original location on Königgrätzer Straße eventually led to the division of the Schausammlung and Arbeitssammlung that Bastian had opposed. In 1906, a hangar was placed on land in Dahlem to store part of the collection. By 1914, the architect Bruno Paul began making plans for a museum complex at Dahlem, where there was room for larger museum buildings. The Asiatic Museum was completed in 1921, but there were no funds for the three other buildings intended to house the African, Oceanic and American collections. Instead, the Paul building was used for storage as well, and a smaller part of the collection reinstalled on Königgrätzer Straße in 1926. In the galleries installed in 1926, the collection is installed in a manner similar to the Bode Museum, with architectural details that suggest the original location of the objects. The Benin collection was installed on two low platforms ringing the room, vaguely echoing the benches and altars of the palace in Benin City. Informational labels gave the public a greater introduction to the artwork and artefacts on view, satisfying the demands of the non-specialist visitor.

The installation of the Royal Ethnographic Museum in 1926 and the display of the Pergamon Museum in 1930 bowed to the demands of the general public. The spaces increased the visitors’ sense of grandeur, akin to the mode of presentation used in public spectacles. Whether nearly fictitious, as in the case of the Pergamon Museum, or merely a small sample of the whole, as in the Royal Museum for Ethnography, these institutions made it easier for the public to apprehend the displays. Both museums also responded to the needs of the state. The Pergamon Museum was widely perceived as a monument to the glory of German archaeology, one aspect of the power of the state. The Museum served as an effective platform for this message, welcoming more than one million visitors in its first year. The Royal Museum for Ethnology also served state goals. By 1914, the guide to the museum specifically thanked colonial officials for their help in gathering the collection. A new section on racial characteristics, particularly a

63 ‘den Blick aus Ganze.’ Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 208.
64 König, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 19.
65 König, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 19.
66 König, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 19.
67 Bilsel, Antiquity on Display, 207.
description of sub-Saharan African peoples’ hair, is added to the introduction of the African collection. The guide published in 1929 takes this racial language further, commenting on the shape of sub-Saharan peoples’ noses, the size of their lips, and the colours of their skin. In this guidebook, the description of the Benin collection introduces the idea that the height of Benin court art production is thought by some researchers to be credited to European or Indian influence. While the guidebook acknowledges that such theories lack concrete evidence, the mention of such theories at this date—thories which were already rejected in Britain by 1899, and again rejected by von Luschan in 1919—is in itself revealing. Although the presentation of the Benin collection in the later display seems more respectful of the achievement of the kingdom’s artists, the accompanying language and interpretation make it clear that the reverse is true. While the artworks enjoy greater space, light, and visibility, the guidebook language reveals a newly racialized attitude towards artists and patrons stemming from the racist language of colonialism.

The different presentations of the Pergamon and Benin reliefs continue in Berlin today. The Pergamon installation is now itself a historical artefact, and will be protected through the renovation currently planned for the Museumsinsel. Given the recent emphasis on the art-value of the ethnographic collection, as displayed in the highly successful international touring exhibition Africa: Art and Culture, the continued presentation of the Benin plaques outside of an architectural setting is surprising. Although the Benin plaques are known to have been displayed on columns supporting the roof of a courtyard with an impluvium, they are not displayed in a way to suggest their architectural relationship. Attached to the wall, the reliefs seem like individual compositions, and not part of a narrative

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72 For the catalogue of this highly celebrated exhibition, please see Hans-Joachim Koloss, Africa: Art and Culture, Munich: Prestel, 2002.
73 This is not a problem unique to Berlin, however. No museum, to my knowledge, displays the plaques as if they were part of a larger architectural context. The new installation of the Robin Lehman collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is unique in suggesting the pillars that would have supported the plaques through a subtle use of two dimensional ‘columns’ that form the support for the display.
structure similar to the gigantomachy. The reliefs do contribute to a greater narrative of Benin royal authority and military prowess at the height of the kingdom’s expansion in the 16th century, but this is not a prominent feature of their display.

The racism of early colonial officials and some anthropologists is palpable to a twenty-first century reader. Yet when considering European encounters with “primitive art” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the full context of art acquisition, study, and display must be considered. The seeming marginalization of the Benin monuments, in comparison to other foreign architectural reliefs accessioned and exhibited in the same period, is not solely related to discrimination. Despite the grand building, arguably greater violence has been done to the vision of the sculptors of Pergamon than the casters of Benin. The vision of the Pergamon architects has been subsumed into the vision of their early twentieth century German successors. Regardless of initial impressions, the differing level of display afforded to these two great monuments has more to do with the broader framework for knowledge and display in the period of their accession than with a deliberate marginalization of the greatest accomplishments of the ‘Other.’


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74 For a discussion of the plaques’ function as historical records and narrative of royal power, please see Kathryn W. Gunsch, The Benin Plaques: A 16th Century Imperial Monument, forthcoming, Ashgate Press.