

The Recovered Memory of Stolen Works of Art

An Interview with Bénédicte Savoy

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Works of art, prime objects of desire at the best of times, are intimately connected to the history of wars, annexations and conquests. In this history, Bénédicte Savoy discusses the transnational history of spoliations or “patrimonial translocations”, and the long-lasting memory of such traumatic events. “

Bénédicte Savoy is professor of art history at the Technische Universität Berlin, where she has held a chair in “Art History as Cultural History” (*Kunstgeschichte als Kulturgeschichte*) since 2009. Her work examines the cultural and social history of the arts, the history of museums, and issues surrounding artistic despoliations. She is the author of numerous books, including *Patrimoine annexé. Les biens culturels saisis par la France en Allemagne autour de 1800* (Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 2003) and a *Dictionnaire des historiens de l’art allemands* (together with Michel Espagne, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 2010).

Bénédicte Savoy gave several classes on the subject of patrimonial translocation as guest lecturer at the Collège de France in March 2015; you can watch and listen to them again [here](#).

The Long Term of Patrimonial Translocations

Books and Ideas: In order to discuss your main object of research, usually referred to as patrimonial “spoliation”, you have created the concept of “patrimonial translocation”. Why did you resort to this new terminology?

Bénédicte Savoy: The terms “pillage”, “spoliation”, “confiscation” or “artistic seizure” carry within them implications in terms of ideology, politics or representation, which in themselves already constitute a particular reading of events. This is particularly striking when, taking a transnational approach, we try to translate them. Take the case of the major investigation Corinne Bouchoux published in 2013, *Si les tableaux pouvaient parler* (“*If paintings could talk*”), the subtitle of which is *Le traitement politique et médiatique des retours d’œuvres d’art pillées et spoliées par les Nazis* (“*The Political And Media Treatment of the Return of Works of Art Pillaged and Spoliated by the Nazis*”). In French, the words *pillées* (pillaged) and *spoliées* (spoliated) immediately make us think of the Nazi period. However, we avoid using these terms to refer to the massive confiscations carried out by France in Europe under

the Revolution and Empire, which are usually qualified, in French, as *conquêtes artistiques* (artistic conquests) or *confiscations révolutionnaires* (revolutionary confiscations). These terms, of course, carry the view and legitimising rhetoric of the people who have appropriated these objects: they are connected to the language of the victors, of the predators, and not to those of the victims.

Among victims, the choice of terms is generally less cautious. The Italians still speak today of *spoliazioni* and *furti napoleonici* to refer to the French policy of appropriation in the 1800s; we find the same vocabulary in Spain, in the Netherlands, in Luxemburg. As for the Germans, who at different periods in history have been both the victims and the instigators of massive patrimonial violations, they talk of *Beutekunst* (looted art) to refer to the confiscations of works of art carried out by the Red Army in Germany in 1945, and of *Kunstraub* (art theft) when they are referring to Nazi or Napoleonic spoliations. When dealing with the specific history of the 20th century, they have also invented complex formula that are used by administrative bodies and by the press, for example the almost untranslatable “*NS-verfolgungsbedingt entzogene oder kriegsbedingt verlagerte Kulturgüter*” (cultural goods extracted as a result of Nazi persecutions or displaced due to conflict). In Russia, people still to this day talk about “war trophies” to refer to the collections from German libraries and museums that remained on the territory of the former Soviet Union after the big wave of restitutions to the GDR in the 1950s. In short: when dealing with such sensitive issues, words are always also points of view.

This is the reason why, after having worked for about a decade on these issues from a transnational perspective, I have suggested we use the term “patrimonial translocation”. Originally, “translocation” is a term from genetic chemistry that refers to an “exchange between chromosomes provoked by breakage and repair”, an exchange that implies mutations. Of course, genetic heritage and cultural heritage are not comparable. And yet the metaphor works: applied to the issue of spoliations, “translocation” has the immediate advantage of putting the *concept of place* at the centre of the discussion. This issue of place (the place of origin and the place of exile of a work of art, the place where it is and the place where it is missing, the place that is judged safe or risky for it, the issue of what is deemed to be its natural environment – a church for example, a collector’s living room, the sands of Egypt – or not – a museum, a distant continent) is crucial in terms of understanding and analysing, and even identifying the emotions and discourses that have always been connected to the forced displacement of works of art, which generally garners more media attention and is more studied, but also of books and manuscripts, natural history objects, archives etc. Understood in its main sense, “translocation” then invites us to reflect on the “breakages” and “repairs” connected to displacements, the individual or collective traumatism that they imply in the long term. Finally, the term leaves ample room for the issue of *mutations*, of the multiple transformations that affect displaced objects and the societies that receive (or lose) them as a result of displacement. The articulation of these three elements: place, wounds and transformation – is crucial in terms of understanding the logic of patrimonial appropriations and their effects.

Books and Ideas: As a historian, you argue that it is important to resituate patrimonial translocations within the framework of the long term of history. How do you establish connections between very different historical and political events?

Bénédicte Savoy: The historiography of patrimonial spoliations has always been a fragmented historiography, which functions on a case-by-case, country-by-country basis,

often with a view to supporting a particular claim. There are good reasons for this. It is indeed impossible to equate the dismantling of Jewish collections in Europe during the Nazi period, which was carried out within the general context of an odious policy of racial persecution, and the transfer from public museums in Italy or Germany to Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, which was carried out in the name of ideals such as liberty, public instruction or progress in the arts and in knowledge. The study of massive patrimonial displacements – just like, in fact, the study of restitutions – must always pay careful attention to the historical, political, cultural, ideological and symbolic context within which these displacements take place, to the singularity of each case. This is essential if it is to remain credible.

And yet, when we consider forced patrimonial translocations over the long term, and in particular the discourses that justify them, the iconography of events, the way in which their memory is structured into a narrative and passed down from generation to generation, the type of emotions that they provoke, we see certain striking constants emerge, which are an integral part of the phenomenon and which deserve to be taken seriously, since they can shed light on our contemporary discourse and positions. Take the issue of the memory of spoliations. Today, seventy years down the line, not a single week goes by without the media referring to the confiscations of works of art during the Second World War. Very recently, two fiction films were even devoted to this topic: *Woman in Gold* by Simon Curtis and *The Art Dealer* by François Margolin, which came out in France in February and March 2015 respectively. Clearly, these artistic issues are connected to a “past that won’t pass”, to use Henri Rousso’s phrase. But this long term of memory is not limited to the Second World War. In these matters of patrimonial translocations, there are numerous cases where one hundred, one hundred and fifty or two hundred years are not enough for people to forget events. In 1915 for example, in the context of the First World War, people in Germany had not forgotten the confiscations carried out by Revolutionary and Imperial France one hundred years earlier, and these were systematically investigated and politically instrumentalised. In Moldavia and in the Czech Republic, people still to this day talk about the systematic confiscations carried out by Sweden during the Thirty Year War, almost 400 years ago, and about the presence in Stockholm museums of paintings taken in particular from Prague’s prestigious collections, including some very beautiful paintings by Arcimboldo. Four centuries have gone by, but the memory of the losses endures. Significantly, the first great report in human history of recovering a work of art that had been confiscated in times of war, a Mesopotamian tale from the reign of Assurbanipal, explicitly emphasises the issue of time. It describes a period of 1637 years between the seizing and recovery of a statue of a goddess. Even if we allow for this tale involving some epic exaggeration, there is enough here to seriously worry anybody who, in ministries, museums, archives or law firms, is working today on restitutions and spoliations. This past that won’t pass is a constant that must be taken into account in the way in which requests for restitution, be they formulated by Jewish families, Third World countries or the representatives of wronged communities, are received (or not).

Translocation, Restitutions, Emotions

Books and Ideas: Both translocations and restitutions are connected to strong emotions (the suffering of the victims, the humiliation of the losers, the pride of the victors, the gratitude of the people to whom works of art have been returned)... What sources do you use as the basis for your analysis of what you call these “patrimonial emotions”?

Bénédicte Savoy: There is a magnificent photo from the 1950s, taken in the San Giorgio Maggiore basilica in Venice, which shows the absence of the painting of *The Wedding at Cana*, by Paolo Veronese, which was specifically painted to cover the back wall of the refectory in 1562, but was transferred to Paris in 1797 as part of the French policy of “liberation of [European] heritage”. This painting was not returned in 1815, it is still on show in the Louvre to this day. Of course, the numerous emotions connected to its two-century-long absence are more difficult to identify for a historian than the victors’ justifying discourse, which was so magisterially studied by Édouard Pommier in the 1990s (*L’art de la liberté. Doctrines et débats de la Révolution française*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991). Yet these emotions have been expressed since classical times, in the form of statements that may be spontaneous or organised, spectacular or discreet, political or poetic, verbal or visual. The task of the historian is to identify these emotions in various, sometimes unexpected sources, to determine their origin (who is being moved and why?), to measure their authenticity and intensity, and their symbolic or political reach.

The *mise-en-scène* of what we might call “the presence of the absence” of displaced works of art is a constant. In the mid-1950s, we can also recognise it in the museums of West Berlin, which were deprived of their collections for several years by the Western allies, or, going much further back, as early as Antiquity, in the form of plinths that were left empty... In the great founding text of the history of displaced property, Cicero’s *In Verrem*, the tears and anger (of the victims of spoliations, but also of the scandalised historian) are omnipresent. In fact, the expression of emotions is often transferred to the displaced works of art themselves, which suddenly find themselves endowed with the power of speech (like the case of a Mesopotamian statue begging to be taken home), or the famous animal heads from Pierre Bergé’s collection, which have been depicted as racked with sobs in some Chinese caricatures¹.

In fact, it appears almost impossible to write the history of patrimonial translocations without taking into account this multi-layered density of emotion, without attempting to draw up its typology and implications. Today, the study of emotions, of the history of emotions, is still a young branch of historiography, its methodological and theoretical framework are still being developed. One of the challenges it faces is articulating empirical studies with the conceptualisation of models. In the field of architectural heritage and monuments, Daniel Fabre recently put forward the wonderful concept of “patrimonial emotion” (Daniel Fabre, ed., *Émotions patrimoniales*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, coll. “Ethnologie de la France”, 2013). Even if he mainly bases his survey on national cases and takes a particular interest in non-moveable assets (churches, palaces, archaeological sites etc.), this concept offers a very useful theoretical framework for thinking about the emotional dimension of forced patrimonial translocations, restitutions, and claims more generally, as they are formulated today by individuals, states, or communities that have suffered past wrongs.

¹ In works of fiction, and particularly in films, emotions also play a central role, whether we consider film directors choosing to show the tears of a gruff Soviet soldier in the face of Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*, just after it has been confiscated in Dresden by the Red Army and is about to be sent to Moscow (as is the case in *Five Days, Five Nights*, a 1961 Soviet propaganda film by Lev Arnshtam), giving a crucial role to music (composed by Dmitri Shostakovich in the afore-mentioned film), or whether they use editing to juxtapose war violence or racial violence with the recovery of works of art (as in *Chinese Zodiac*, a surprising film by Jackie Chan, which deals with the recovery in Paris of works of art taken from the pillage of the Summer Palace in 1860).

Cultural Transfers and Aesthetic Pollinations

Books and Ideas: The displacement of works of art sometimes gives rise to what you call “aesthetic pollinations”; what do you mean by this expression?

Bénédicte Savoy: We can study patrimonial translocations from the perspective of the victors, of the discourse legitimising the confiscations, a discourse on the safety of the works of art, on providing open access to them, on ensuring they are well conserved, for example. We can study them from the perspective of the victims and take into account the memorial and traumatic dimension of events, the emotions (be they real or constructed, acknowledged or repressed) that are associated with them in the long term.

We can also adopt the perspective of the objects themselves, of the paintings, statues, books, archival collections, natural history objects, which, by being seized and displaced, are subject to new logics of appropriation or identification, to intellectual, aesthetic and symbolic dynamics that transform them. We are then dealing with a logic of “cultural transfers”, as defined by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner. In the specific field of the arts, these transfers can take the form of aesthetic pollinations, meaning formal or conceptual fusions, transformations and hybridisations.

This is particularly clear around 1800, when a whole generation of young Germans discovers the paintings of Dürer, Cranach, Holbein, and Van Eyck in Paris, at a time when these artists were not given much prominence in the original collections. Or another example might be on the eve of the First World War, when the Berlin artistic and literary avant-garde, led by Rainer Maria Rilke, was electrified by the art of Amarna, by the faces of Nefertiti and Akhenaton, which were deemed to be so modern, and had been transferred directly from the sands of Egypt to Museum Island in 1913. Indeed, far from being limited to the status of acts of war or domination, patrimonial translocations are also cultural acts, which radically differentiates them from acts of vandalism or patrimonial destruction.

Within this framework, it is no coincidence that one of the most prominent contemporary artists of his generation, the Chinese Ai Weiwei, has seized on the topic of the spoliation of the Summer Palace in Beijing in 1860, and of recent debates regarding the Chinese government’s claim to restitution of the bronze heads, in order to create a monumental and itinerant work of art, *The Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, an installation which he himself describes as a “*historic outdoor sculptural exhibition*”.

Illustration 3: Ai Weiwei: *The Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, an installation in Somerset House, London, May-June 2011, @ kennie ting 2011 (source: www.dreamofacity.com).

The Circle of Animals has been shown in public spaces or museums in major capital cities the whole world over – New York, London, Berlin, Moscow, Toronto etc. – and is the first work of conceptual art that has put the question of artistic spoliations itself at the very centre of an aesthetic approach. The work, of which there are several versions, displays gigantic reproductions of the twelve animal heads representing the traditional signs of the Chinese zodiac (rat, dog, ox etc.) that were originally grouped around a fountain in the Summer

Palace. The original heads had been made in the 18th century, based on plans drawn up by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit and famous player in the cultural transfers between Europe and China, before they were pillaged by the French and British army during the Opium War and transferred from China to Europe in 1860. For the past decade or so, the Chinese government and mass media have turned the return of these objects, which are now scattered throughout the world, into a national propaganda issue, with the heads of the zodiac being presented as emblems of a mistreated Chinese identity.

On his blog, which has now been banned, Ai Weiwei explained in February 2009 why the Chinese authorities and media, by focussing so much attention on the bronze heads, were in fact attempting to make people forget about the real problems facing Chinese society². For this dissident conceptual artist, the very issue of the memory of spoliations and their instrumentalisation by the Chinese regime has become the object of a work of art.

The Legitimacy of Museums in the Current Era

Books and Ideas: Given new international regulations and the ever-increasing claims for restitution, have the mission and legitimacy of museums changed?

Bénédicte Savoy: Public opinion has long associated the idea of museums with that of spoliation (or of “salvation”, depending on what ideological perspective you take). This connection and the representations that go with these ideas are very old. We find traces of them as early as [in](#) Antiquity, and particularly striking examples around 1800, when Napoleon’s military triumphs are connected to the history and conversion of the Louvre, renamed the Musée Napoléon, which at the time was the legitimising authority for the artistic seizures that were carried out across all of Europe. For centuries, the legitimacy of the museum as institution, just as that of the church or of school, was not called into question.

Today however, it seems to me that museums need to re-explain their role, to restate where they are coming from and where they are going. This may be less true in France than in Germany, where I have been living for around twenty years, and where the general public identifies less extensively with its museums. Here, questions surrounding claims and restitutions touch historically sensitive nerves. Take the case of the regular requests for restitution of the bust of Nefertiti, which is kept in the Neues Museum in Berlin. While I do not have statistical figures to give you, it seems to me that in German public opinion, or at least among young people, say among my Berlin students for example, the initial reflex would be to return the work to its original owners without any discussion (which of course raises the complex question of property in a transformed geopolitical and historic context).

Still in Berlin, very recently, the Humboldt Forum project, which should bring together the ethnographic collections of various Berlin museums as of 2019, was recently the target of a major opposition campaign. The Humboldt Forum is being built on the former site of the Prussian royal palace, which was blown up by the GDR in order to be transformed into a “Palace of the Republic”, which was then in turn knocked down by reunified Germany to

² “The recent media hubbub over the rabbit and rat bronzes is just a big deal over nothing. It’s as if someone has robbed the grave of a great nation’s ancestors, and the patriotic villains are squirming once again [...]. This is a nation that disregards fact and shamelessly grandstands itself”. (Ai Weiwei, “My Regards to Your Mother”, 27 February 2009, in: Lee Ambrozy (ed.) *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*. MIT Press, 2011).

make place for a reconstruction of the baroque palace. It's a complicated place. As is the project of using it to bring together the African, Australasian and Asian collections of the Berlin museums. A few months ago, a collective called NoHumboldt21 launched a campaign of posters that clearly showed how museums are no longer as "natural" as they may have been in the past. These posters, which were widely distributed, subverted the official graphic design and logo of the national museums of Berlin, grouped together within the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Property Foundation). One shows, against an elegant black background, the throne of a Bamum sultan from Fumban in Cameroon taken from the Berlin collections, and above which is printed, in big white letters, the following question: "Preußischer Kulturbesitz?" – "Prussian cultural property?" On another, we see a close up of a bronze portrait from Benin, with this other question: "Have you already gazed on war booty?"

Clearly, in 21st century Berlin, where very diverse worlds coexist, and where young people from all over the world come to seek a freedom of action, interaction and creation that cannot be found anywhere else in Europe, the model of the peaceful museum, whose origins one ignores or accepts, no longer applies. More and more, a requirement for transparency regarding the origins of the works exhibited is being put forward. And in my opinion, it is growing clearer every day that the "imperturbable museum", draped in institutional silence and in the forgetfulness of its own origins, is history. Audiences are far more interested in transparency regarding provenance, in the highlighting of the historic conditions in which museums have acquired possession of this or that work of art, and in the social, political and cultural history of their collections than the museums themselves like to think. We must be aware and make people aware of these contexts. And perhaps we should more often make the point, and make it with genuine conviction, that the goods of art and culture are goods that are common to all humanity, that there is no "national cultural property", and that "national museums", when they have been conserving the works of this or that culture of the world, are doing so, so to say, only in the capacity of temporary guardians, because they have been designated as such by chance or by the violence of history. Arno Bertina has just published a wonderful tale in which we see African countries claim free entry to museums for their citizens, arguing that the works exhibited there belong to them (Arno Bertina, *Les lions comme des danseuses*, ed. La contre allée, 2015). I love the idea of shared museums.

Books and Ideas: The terms "patrimonial destruction" and "patrimonial displacement" do not refer to the same phenomena. Can you explain this distinction to us, perhaps in light of the recent destructions of works of art that have taken place in Iraq and Syria?

Bénédicte Savoy: The destructions that have taken place in Iraq and in Syria, in Mali and in Yemen in recent months have more in common with autodafés and iconoclasm than with the issue of forced displacements of works of art. In the case of patrimonial translocations, when victors take possession of other peoples' heritage and transport it at great expense to their own countries, they are motivated by the idea that this heritage has a value (be it aesthetic, economic, symbolic or religious) that is likely to enrich what they consider to be their own culture, or to complete a heritage that already exists. We might therefore say that the act of appropriation and of accumulation is, at the same time and in spite of its violence, an act of appreciation, of aesthetic or cultural acknowledgement. In the case of the destructions that you mention, we are dealing with a process of negation that has been so well described by Dario Gamboni (*La destruction de l'art – Iconoclasme et vandalisme depuis la Révolution française*, Les presses du réel, 2015), of *damnatio memoriae*, of the violent and ostentatious

deletion of the past, of religions or cultures that are “other”. The very first historic works devoted to vandalism, for example the *Histoire du vandalisme* by Louis Réau, did not, for ideological reasons, draw very clear distinctions between confiscations and destructions. And yet, there is a very clear dividing line between objects of desire and objects of denial.

Interview carried out by Cristelle Terroni.

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