

Assuming our Responsibilities in the Present

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The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, was originally set up to inspire enthusiasm for the colonial activities of Belgium in the Congo. Its collections mostly stem from that period, and were brought to Tervuren by missionaries, soldiers, colonial administrators and scientific missions. Today, the RMCA operates as a museum, a research institute and a major information resource on Africa. It works closely with the *Institut des musées nationaux du Congo*, helping to train staff, computerise collections and inventories, organise security, renovate permanent exhibitions and strengthen capacity-building. It is a multidisciplinary establishment, with collections in the fields of Cultural Anthropology (Ethnography, Sociology, Linguistics, Ethnomusicology, Archæology and Prehistory); History; Geology and Zoology. In each of these Departments, the museum has exceptionally

In the particular case of the RMCA, a wholesale return of all objects collected during the colonial era cannot, we believe, be envisaged. The past is what it is. Moreover, the RMCA takes its responsibilities very seriously as regards the conservation of the cultural and natural heritage from Central Africa in its collections. It should also be noted that restitution is always discussed in relation to museums in the public sector and not really in relation to private collections. At least in a museum, the collections can be seen by everyone, whereas this is not the case for private collections.

> We fully support the ICOM approach that museums should develop partnerships with museums in the countries that have lost a significant part of their cultural heritage. This is the approach taken by the RMCA, which has joint research and museology activities in more than 15 African countries. Also, we believe that

the community of museum professionals has an important role to play in the fight against the illegal traffic of cultural property. For example, recently one of our staff recognised an ethnographic piece at a private gallery in Paris, which had probably been stolen from a museum in the Congo. She immediately got in touch with the museum concerned, collected all the necessary information and contacted the police. Within 72 hours, the object had been confiscated by the French police. Steps are now being taken to secure the return of that piece to its country of origin. I hope that we will soon be able to develop the same policies and the types of action and mentality in the protection of ethnographic objects and cultural goods as already exists for animals and plants through the CITES Convention (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).

> In summary, we agree with the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. We hope that the issue can be seen in a much larger context, with emphasis on the importance of capacity-building and of ensuring better access to collections through computerisation and digitalisation.

large and rich collections from Central Africa. Over 100 students a year work on their dissertation or doctorate with us.

> The RMCA was probably one of the first museums to be directly involved in debates on restitution. In 1976, it returned 114 ethnographic objects to the Museum of Kinshasa, following an agreement between the Belgian and Congolese governments. This is one of the sole examples of restitution of this kind or on this scale. Many of the objects returned were stolen years later, after the departure of President Mobutu from the Congo in the mid 1990s.

> In the light of this history, we in principle support the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. We believe that individual cases of restitution should be dealt with on an *ad hoc* basis.

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