Press Kit
DIGITAL BENIN
Launch of the Digital Platform for the Art Treasures from the Kingdom of Benin

Date: **Wednesday, 9 November 2022, 11 a.m.**
Location: **Magnus-Haus of the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung**, Kupfergraben 7, 10117 Berlin

Speakers:
- **Dr. Martin Hoernes**, Secretary General Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung; Berlin
- **Prof. Barbara Plankensteiner**, Director Museum am Rothenbaum, Principal Investigator, Hamburg
- **Dr. Anne Luther**, Project Catalyst and Principal Investigator, Philadelphia
- **Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhator-Obogie**, Research Lead, Benin City

Further are present and available for further inquiries:
- **Dr. Jonathan D.M. Fine**, Director Weltmuseum Wien, Principal Investigator
- **Dr. Felicity Bodenstein**, Lecturer at Sorbonne Université Paris, Principal Investigator
- **Eiloghosa Obobaifo**, Researcher, Benin City
- **Imogen Coulson**, Researcher, Hamburg
- **Gwenlyn Tiedemann**, Data Engineer, Hamburg

The following team members will participate on Zoom:
- **Alex Horak**, Design and Development Lead
- **Krystelle Denis**, Design and Development Lead

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Facts & Figures

Project	DIGITAL BENIN – Reconnecting Royal Art Treasures
Preparatory Phase	Since Autumn 2018
Project Start	October 2020
Project Launch	November 2022
Project Duration	Two years
Platform Access	www.digitalbenin.org
Project Objective	Digital consolidation of historic royal art treasures from the Kingdom of Benin, oral histories, research and documentation materials
Project Phases	Phase 1: Create an overview of existing museum collections holding Benin royal arts, data assessment, data collection, object research, oral history collection Phase 2: Development of prototypes for data linking, research and interactions on the platform Phase 3: Development, Design, Launch
Funding	Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung with 1.5 Mio. Euros
Carrying Institution	Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Hamburg
In Collaboration with	Institute for Benin Studies (Benin City), Sorbonne Université Paris, University of Benin (Benin City), Weltmuseum Wien
Principal Investigators	Prof. Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona (Benin City), Dr. Felicity Bodenstein (Paris), Dr. Jonathan D.M. Fine (Vienna), Dr. Anne Luther (Philadelphia), Prof. Dr. Barbara Plankensteiner (Hamburg)
Researchers	Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhator-Obogie (Benin City), Eiloghosa Obobaifo (Benin City), Imogen Coulson (Hamburg), Ermeline de la Croix (Paris), Mabel Osaruemwinnomwan Oviahon (Benin City)
Development and Design	Alex Horak, Krystelle Denis, Gwenlyn Tiedemann (Hamburg), Osaze Amadasun (Benin City)
Participating Countries and Number of Institutions	131 museums and institutions from 20 countries Australia (2), Israel (1), Canada (4), New Zealand (1), Nigeria (2), USA (50) Europe: Austria (1), Belgium (3), Denmark (1), France (4), Germany (19), Ireland (2), Netherlands (1), Norway (1), Poland (1), Portugal (1), Russia (1), Sweden (2), Switzerland (7), United Kingdom (27) see: https://digitalbenin.org/institutions and geographical locations: https://digitalbenin.org/map#institutions&all
Catalogue	The platform documents 5.246 objects, see: https://digitalbenin.org/catalogue

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About the Project

In October 2020, **Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK)** started an extensive two-year project that brings together the art treasures from the Kingdom of Benin, which were looted in the late 19th century and scattered around the world, on a digital platform and makes them accessible to a broad public: Digital Benin.

A generous grant of 1.5 million Euros from the **Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung** is funding the project with offices in Hamburg and Benin City, as well as workplaces in France, Austria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. A fourteen-member international project team, supported by five scientific advisors in Nigeria, Kenya and the USA, set to work contacting collections worldwide, compiling the relevant object data and processing it for the platform. The result: **131 museums and institutions from 20 countries**, including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and Israel, as well as 14 European countries, collaborated for the documentation of **over 5,246 objects**.

An **unprecedented knowledge forum**, **Digital Benin** introduces new scholarship which connects digital documentation of the translocated objects to oral histories, object research, historical contexts, a foundational Edo language catalogue, provenance names, a map of the Kingdom of Benin, and museum collections worldwide. The in-depth, interactive platform thus provides the long-requested overview of the royal artefacts looted in the 19th century, making them visible and accessible to the general public for the first time.

The platform of Digital Benin focuses on objects looted by British forces from the Kingdom of Benin (now Edo State, Nigeria) in February 1897 and subsequently scattered across the world in its immediate aftermath. The historical Benin artworks are an expression of the art, culture and history of Benin and were originally used for representational purposes, to illustrate historical events, as vehicles for communication as well as for religious and ritual practices. A small set of objects is included in the catalogue to represent the broader context in which the artistic production of Benin guilds is situated: Bini-Portuguese Ivories, commissioned by Portuguese trades and produced for the export to Europe in the 16th centuries, objects produced in neighbouring regions of the kingdom and a selection of works produced by named artists after 1930, which are held in museum collections.

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What is the goal, how is the platform structured and what does it include?

Dr. Anne Luther, Project Catalyst and Principal Investigator, Philadelphia

The desideratum as well as diverse attempts to establish an overview of the dispersed royal treasure of Benin has existed for a long time, and has been present in academic circles and activist demands since the 1970s and 1980s. After Nigeria's independence, calls for the return, loan and/or restitution of the objects looted in Benin were often accompanied by requests for museums to supply listings of their holdings. Recent developments in online museum catalogues have made it possible to access information on individual institutional holdings in certain cases. For the first time since their worldwide dispersal as a result of the infamous "Benin Punitive Expedition" of February 1897, the Digital Benin platform shows the objects in place and is supplemented with information that has been difficult to access by the public. It will make a significant contribution to communicating and disseminating knowledge about an outstanding chapter of African art and cultural history to a broad and diverse audience. **The platform establishes a unique resource, which seems all the more relevant at a time when many museums are preparing to restitute artefacts to their places of origin.** After the completion of the project prolongement, Digital Benin will be transferred to a main host in Nigeria and will play a role in fostering further research, **especially for Nigerian scholars, who are presently disadvantaged by the difficulty in accessing research materials and sources held in European and American museums and archives.**

Digital Benin received information on over five thousand objects from 131 museums in twenty countries. It digitised approximately 1,200 catalogue cards from the national museums in Benin City, Lagos and Owo where object information is stored in an analogue database. The transferred data ranges from images and 3D scans to information about the objects' provenance, condition and curatorial research. **Two-thirds of the transferred data comes from the ten museums that hold the most objects in their collections.** Over 12,500 images were transferred by the museums with up to five hundred images for one object. The main technical consideration for the platform was to prioritise userfriendliness for people in Nigerian therefore, the platform shows diverse digital heritage material in a mobile-phone-friendly way.

Digital Benin aims to bring an Edo-centric focus to the knowledges, traditions and histories of the objects. This is ensured by presenting perspectives from practitioners and local specialists in Benin City and throughout Nigeria. The online platform presents different entry points into the study of the objects:

Explore Digital Benin
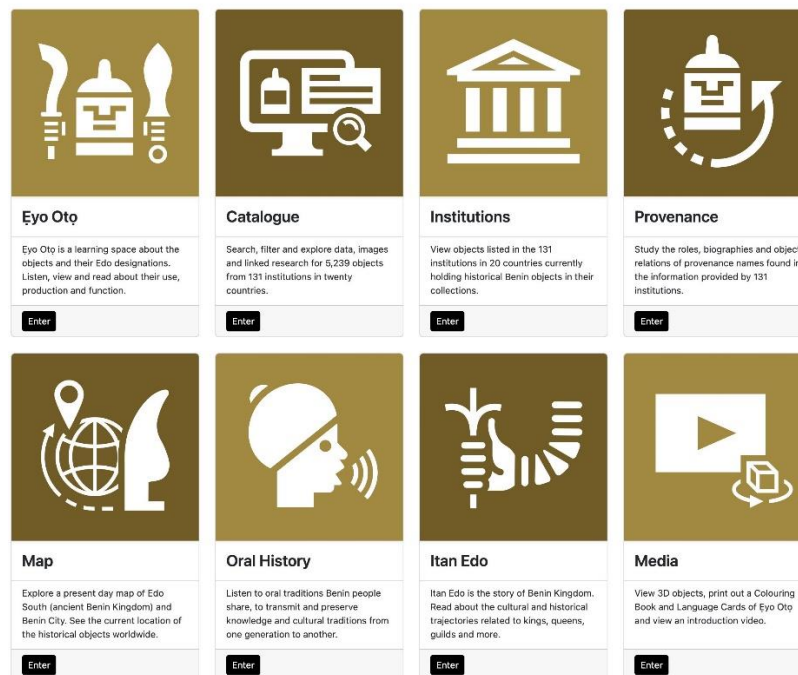
- **Eyo Oto**, a foundational learning space about Benin objects and their Edo designations. (https://digitalbenin.org/eyo-oto)
- A **catalogue** for searching and filtering institutional data of over five thousand objects from 131 institutions and twenty countries. (https://digitalbenin.org/catalogue)
- A **list** of the 131 institutions currently holding Benin objects in their collections. (https://digitalbenin.org/institutions)
- **Provenance** for the study of roles, biographies and object relations of provenance names found in the information provided by the institutions. (https://digitalbenin.org/provenance)
- A **map** to explore historical and present-day sites of the Benin Kingdom and the current location of the translocated objects in institutions worldwide. (https://digitalbenin.org/map)
- **Oral histories** of the Edo people contextualising objects, sharing traditions and reflecting on Benin history. (https://digitalbenin.org/oral-history)
- **Itan Edo** (history of the Benin Kingdom) highlighting the socio-economic trajectories of various historical figures. (https://digitalbenin.org/itan-edo)
- The **media space** includes 3D objects, educational video materials and printable documents. (https://digitalbenin.org/media)
- A **bibliography** shows publications, reports, sales catalogues and other sources which are cited across the platform, (https://digitalbenin.org/bibliography)

Further information: https://digitalbenin.org/documentation/introduction

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Why does the Ernst von Siemens Art Kunststiftung support the Digital Benin platform?

Dr. Martin Hoernes, Secretary General Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung

„The Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung (EvSK) is one of the most important sponsors of German museums. It supports acquisitions, exhibitions, restorations, work directories and inventory catalogues. Already in 2018, as a follow-up to our project KUNST AUF LAGER, we proposed financial support to Prof. Dr. Plankensteiner for cataloguing the top-class Benin collection of the Hamburg MARKK. Her profound knowledge of the art of the former Kingdom of Benin, her involvement in the Benin Dialogue Group, and the discussions about restitution of the art treasures looted from the Kingdom of Benin in 1897 finally led the MARKK and the EvSK to think bigger: after a preliminary project with a workshop, work began in 2018 on Digital Benin, a digital "inventory catalogue" focusing on the pre-1897 art treasures of the Kingdom of Benin.

Digital Benin, however, goes beyond the scope of previous projects. **EvSK has embarked on the adventure of recording 5,246 objects with 131 worldwide museums and contextualizing them in unprecedented ways.** Our foundation is not a savvy science funder and has deliberately taken the risk of an innovative and volatile project, and the trust placed in the project sponsor and the scientists involved has more than paid off. Our foundation is not an experienced funder for academia or the sciences. We have deliberately taken the risk of an innovative and volatile project, and the trust placed in the project sponsor and the scientists involved has more than paid off.

In a further step, after the current launch of Digital Benin in November 2022, archival and photographic sources will also be integrated. **The Board of Trustees of the EvsK has approved a total of more than 1.5 million Euros as sole sponsor for this purpose and has enabled the great team of the MARKK to work largely undisturbed without excessive reporting obligations or political influences.** The international, consensual and modern approach has paid off, and as a representative of the sponsor, I thank the entire team around Prof. Dr. Plankensteiner and Dr. Anne Luther for their goal-oriented and successful work on Digital Benin.

The result is an unprecedented visibility of the art and culture of the Kingdom of Benin before 1897, an art that gained international attention after its colonialist plundering and thus also influenced and shaped the culture of Europe. **The art of the Kingdom of Benin is world art, and can now, for the first time, be fully received and explored throughout the world through Digital Benin - I wish the same for the originals.** All institutions and individuals involved in the current restitutions, research, and preservation will be judged by whether the permanent accessibility and visibility of the original artworks are secured in the future. Digital Benin safeguards the now known and identified holdings, enables international research, and thus perfectly matches the intentions of our founder."

Further information: https://www.ernst-von-siemens-kunststiftung.de

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Digital Benin opens a new Chapter in the History of Knowledge

Prof. Dr. Barbara Plankensteiner, Director Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK), Principal Investigator

„Until now, only a few scholars have been able to gain an overview of the art of the Benin Kingdom through years of research and have even had the opportunity to see and compare a large part of the approximately 5,000 works in collections and museum depots worldwide. Thanks to Digital Benin, this overview is now available to the public and scholars, especially the Edo people and Nigerian colleagues who have been asking for this transparency for decades. It has been a long-held wish of the Benin Royal Family and Nigerians to have an overview of the royal art treasures scattered all over the world and to bundle, network and present the knowledge about them. A considerable part of the works will now return to Nigeria as part of the current restitution processes. In parallel, Digital Benin opens a new chapter in the history of knowledge.

The project team did a great job, it could not have been done better. I would like to thank everyone involved for the excellent collaboration, the unique team spirit across continents, and the enthusiasm with which they drove the project forward. I also thank all the museums in the Benin Dialogue Group for staying true to their promise and providing data on their collections. Without these core collections and their exemplary attitude, another 120 museums would not have participated. Above all, however, I would like to thank the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung and its Secretary General, Dr. Martin Hoernes, for their extremely generous support. Without his openness and foresight to embark on this adventure, Digital Benin would not have been possible."

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Ẹdo mien oya, so kpan etin ma fe Edo. The Benin people experienced pain and mystery but their strength was not killed

Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhator-Obogie, Research Lead, Benin City

Born in Benin City I grew up knowing of this pain, and also learning about our rich cultural heritage dislocated by 1897. Yet there lies within the Benin society till today a sense of the valour of our ancestors.

This unique digital platform had started with a clear objective: to create a catalogue of all the Royal Treasures looted and globally circulated from Benin Kingdom between 1897 and 1930s. Beyond bringing together the Royal Treasures of Benin Kingdom, we created with Digital Benin a living museum. What we are launching is a platform that will enable the young generation of Benin/Ẹdo people to learn about the rich historical and cultural heritage of Benin with a sense of national consciousness that speaks to the essence of the civilization from our past that is present in our daily ceremonies and rituals. The platform has and will preserve for future generations the significance of our cherished cultural values and practices as an educational tool with materials like oral traditions, which will help Ẹdo people learn about their ancestors as if the contributors are speaking to them in a real life situation. Digital Benin practically demonstrates the qualities of the future research museum which allows professionals to have access to materials remotely and from a pool of multiple perspectives. It has the capacity to rekindle in art enthusiasts the appreciation of the aesthetics value of the huge ritual and ceremonial properties looted from Benin Kingdom. But if anyone now desires to know what a living museum would do, just as the traditional ancestral altars in each household in Benin Kingdom does, Digital Benin is a solution to such questions. When viewed as artistic materials or relics of pre-colonial Benin Kingdom these Royal ritual and ceremonial works lose their sacred properties. Therefore, Digital Benin has provided additional meaning to the museum holdings from Benin Kingdom by situating them with the cultural context to explain their significance as a living culture today. This view of Digital Benin as the living museum is no doubt a solution to the knowledge gap that exists among European and American museums or institutions holding them as mere artefacts. These are some of the goals set out for Digital Benin in the beginning.

Oba gha to kpere ... Ise!!!

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The Project Team

Principal Investigators

Prof. Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona (Benin City)

oversaw in particular the relation to and between the research team in Benin City and stakeholders in Nigeria such as the University of Benin, Benin City. She is a graduate of the University of Benin, Benin City; University of Ibadan, Ibadan; University of Nigeria, Nsukka, all in Nigeria, and New York University.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/prof-kokunre-agbontaen-eghafona

Dr. Felicity Bodenstein (Paris)

provided general guidance and oversight as well as input and insight on provenance research and publications locating archival records. She is an art historian working in Paris, specialized in the history of archaeological and ethnographic collections.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/dr-felicity-bodenstein

Dr. Jonathan D.M. Fine (Vienna)

provided general guidance and oversight and, along with Prof. Dr. Barbara Plankensteiner, introduced the project to the Benin Dialogue Group. He assisted in the coordination and negotiation of legal agreements with the institutions. Jonathan Fine is director of the Weltmuseum Wien.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/dr-jonathan-fine

Dr. Anne Luther (Philadelphia)

is the project catalyst. She ensured that all participants were on the same page regarding the timeline, design, technical development and research goals. She defined the overall operations strategy and set the development direction based on her years of experience as a research manager at the Center for Data Arts at the New School in New York and as a PI and catalyst for various digital projects with museums internationally.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/dr-anne-luther

Prof. Dr. Barbara Plankensteiner (Hamburg)

oversaw the project and provided guidance for institutional contacts and introductions to the various institutions holding Benin collections. With her extensive experience with collections and connoisseurship, she guided and oversaw the inclusion of works to ensure that recent market copies were not included. She is director of the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK).

https://digitalbenin.org/team/dr-barbara-plankensteiner

Researchers

Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhator-Obogie (Benin City)

gathered, documented and evaluated pertinent collection information in Nigerian museums and designed and executed research relating to the historical works of art in Benin City and the Edo-speaking region. He recorded oral traditions and local knowledge in his essential role in the project. He set up research methodologies which informed the focussed and goal-oriented development of partnerships with stakeholders in Nigeria. His field research included the respectful inclusion of contributions from his long-standing relationships in Benin City in his role as researcher.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/osaisonor-godfrey

Eiloghosa Obobaifo (Benin City)

is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Benin, Benin City. She gathered, documented and evaluated pertinent collection information in Nigerian museums and archives and transcribed all data from the National Museums in Benin City, Lagos and Owo included in the platform.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/eiloghosa-obobaifo

Imogen Coulson (Hamburg)

holds a B.A. from the University of Cambridge with a specialization in Archaeology, and an M.A. in the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas from the Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia, UK. She joined the project in fall 2021 and contributed crucial object research and review.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/imogen-coulson

Ermeline de la Croix (Paris)

studied Law, Art History and Archaeology at Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne University. For Digital Benin she is working on the provenance data in collaboration with Dr. Felicity Bodenstein.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/ermeline-de-la-croix

Mabel Osaruemwinnomwan Oviahon (Benin City)

is a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute for Benin Studies. She is a Research Fellow of the French Institute for Research in Africa, Nigeria (IFRA-NIGERIA). She assisted the content production and bibliographical reference for Itan Edo.
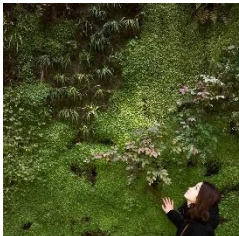
https://digitalbenin.org/team/mabel-osaruemwinnomwan-oviahon

Development and Design

Alex Horak

is a software engineer and designer with a background in human-computer interaction. He led the project's design and development together with Krystelle Denis.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/alex-horak

Krystelle Denis

is a software engineer and designer specializing in visual frameworks, data-driven narratives, and pedagogical tools, particularly in contexts of cultural heritage. She led the project's design and development together with Alex Horak.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/krystelle-denis

Gwenlyn Tiedemann (Hamburg)

is a digital humanties expert and software engineer, specialising in research data management and digital art history. She joined the team in mid-2021 and played the critical role on the receiving end of the data transfer of all institutions.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/gwenlyn-tiedemann

Osaze Amadasun (Benin City)

is an illustrator and designer currently living and working in Lagos, Nigeria. His works cut across drawing, painting, illustration and graphic design. He was brought into the project to create a visual language for the controlled vocabulary for the native Edo designations identified by Eiloghosa Obobaifo to group all object information on the platform.

https://digitalbenin.org/team/osaze-amadasun

Consultants

- **Aiko Obobaifo** (Benin City), https://digitalbenin.org/team/aiko-obobaifo
- **Prof. Dr. Omoregbe** (Benin City), https://digitalbenin.org/team/prof-dr-omoregbe
- **Prof. Victor Osaro Edo** (Ibadan), https://digitalbenin.org/team/prof-victor-osaro-edo
- **Dr. Uyilawa Usuanlele** (Oswego), https://digitalbenin.org/team/dr-uyilawa-usuanlele
- **Chao Tayiana Maina** (Nairobi), https://digitalbenin.org/team/chao-tayiana-maina

Proofreading

- **Max Bach** (Berlin)

Former Team-Members

- **Erik Stein**, Data Architect
- **Dr. Amanda Maple**, Researcher

Logo Design

- **MüllerValentini - Agentur für Markendesign** (Berlin), https://www.muellervalentini.de

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