

AUTHENTICATION  
IN ART

AiA Art News-service

artnet®

## ‘The Idea Is Not to Empty Museums’: Authors of France’s Blockbuster Restitution Report Say the Reaction Has Been Overblown

Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy say the media misunderstood their argument and oversimplified their ideas.

**Kate Brown**, January 24, 2019



Felwine Sarr, at left, and Benedicte Savoy. Photo: Alain Jocard/AFP/Getty Images.

The authors of the pivotal restitution report commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron, which reportedly called for the near complete evacuation of African objects from French museums, want to set the record straight.

In November, economist Felwine Sarr and art historian Bénédicte Savoy published a sprawling 252-page document compiling mountains of research, arguing that it was time to for France to reconsider its position on objects taken from sub-Saharan Africa and exhibited in national museums. The pair quickly became the public faces of a rising global movement questioning the West's retention of objects with troubling provenance.

But Sarr and Savoy say the media has misunderstood and misconstrued their arguments.

### *'Stop Scaring People'*

Since the report went live, the duo have been taking to interviews to stress that, no, the point is not to empty museums, which would be an unrealistic goal. "It also presupposes that the countries making demands want everything back and that does not seem to be the case," Sarr told the German news outlet *Deutsche Welle*. "Much more probable is that they want some objects with high symbolic value—and these are not in the thousands, but a number probably less than a hundred."

In 2017, Macron called for the "temporary or permanent restitution" of African heritage and enlisted Sarr and Savoy to write the proposal on the matter. Days after its publication, Macron ordered the return of 26 objects looted from Benin.

While the provocative document has been celebrated by African nations, in France, it has received pushback. Stéphane Martin, head of the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac in Paris, France's premier museum of non-Western art, was openly critical of the paper, arguing that full restitution would mean that "heritage will become the hostage of memory."

In his comments, he also demoted Sarr and Savoy from expert researchers to "engaged persons." (According to their report, 90 to 95 percent of Africa's heritage is outside the continent. In French museums alone, there are an estimated 80,000 African objects, 70,000 of which are in the Musée du quai Branly.)



Royal statues of the Kingdom of Dahomey dating from 1890–92 at the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac in Paris. Photo: Gerard Julien/AFP/Getty Images.

Last Monday, January 14, Sarr and Savoy made their first public appearance in Germany in front of an overfilled auditorium of over more than 500 people. In their talk, given at the invitation of several nonprofits, they addressed the criticism their report faced in the media, arguing that their ideas had been oversimplified “to create fear,” Sarr said. He added not one of the 150 African interlocutors consulted for the report proposed the idea of evacuating Western museums.

“Stop scaring people,” he said. “The idea is not to empty museums to fill others. It’s a lot more complex and serious than that.” According to Sarr, the report’s real point is that relations between France and African nations need reinvention, and that restitution is only one issue surrounding the West’s colonial past. “If there is a road you can take, you must take it,” he told the Berlin audience. “We were given a historic opportunity to make advances on an important symbolic question. We had to start somewhere, and so we took Macron and his words seriously.”

### *What the Report Means for Germany*

In Germany, the report has indirect but significant implications for the rhetoric swirling around Berlin’s controversial Humboldt Forum, which is being built to resemble a Prussian palace and is due to open later this year. The new \$700 million museum will house the capital’s major collection of ethnographic objects, some of which were acquired during Germany’s colonial era, when the nation occupied modern-day Namibia, among other areas of Africa.

Savoy publicly resigned from the Humboldt Forum's advisory board in 2017 after criticism mounted that the museum had failed to address its colonial roots. "I want to know how much blood is dripping from each artwork," she wrote in an op-ed published by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2017. "Without this research, no Humboldt Forum and no ethnological museum should open."

At the talk in Berlin this month, Savoy said that the idea that African collections are an inalienable part of France's cultural heritage is still widespread. The situation is different in Germany, she remarked, where the debate around restitution of Nazi-era loot has been ongoing for years, so that some of the necessary language is already in place.

As far as Macron is concerned, Sarr said he should be recognized as the only Western leader who has taken a public stand on the issue of Africa's missing heritage. "He opened a door," Sarr said. "We have to put our foot in the door so that it cannot close again."

