

THE CHARTER OF THE CHÂTEAU MUSÉE VODOU AND THE ARBOGAST COLLECTION

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château
musée
vodou
strasbourg

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PREAMBLE

Today, it has become a necessity for the collectors and founders of the museum as well as for the team that runs the Château Vodou to express themselves in writing on a variety of subjects concerning the history of the museum's collection as well as the role that the museum intends to play. The museum staff is aware of sensitive and ethical issues surrounding African heritage exhibited in France, in Europe and around the world, as well as of the current debates concerning the restitution of African heritage in French public museums.

These questions are addressed by the tour guides in a direct, oral way during their guided tours, which has been the case since the opening of the museum. However, in order to spread this message more widely in a form that is faithful to the values of the museum and its team, we have decided to create this charter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to provide some background on the theme of African heritage, its history and the geopolitical context of restitution requests, we want to give a brief historical summary.

The period of colonisation, from the late 19th century until the transition to the independent states we know today, gave way to the looting of African art and cultural heritage on a massive scale. After the division of Africa symbolised by the Congress of Berlin under the aegis of Bismarck in 1884-1885, the plundering of Africa was systematically organised.

In order to provide for colonial exhibitions, museums that showcased 'exoticism' and human zoos, European states appropriated many goods. The objects that were exported were both daily and sacred objects and were largely collected through forced sales, attacks, fighting, plundering, and looting. Nowadays it is estimated that 90% of African heritage is no longer on the continent. There thus exists a clear link between the rise of global European empires and the birth of world culture and ethnographic museums.

In West Africa, although a large part of the territory had already been conquered, the kingdom of Danhomè (part of present-day Benin) resisted vigorously to various attempts of colonisation. During a battle, King Behanzin set fire to the royal city in order to prevent it from being taken over by the French colonisers. Yet, the French managed to stop the fire and the colonial troops of general Dodds looted the palace. The booty that was taken in this process is estimated at more than 200 objects including royal pieces of great significance.

Following numerous requests for restitution from different African countries, including an official request from Beninese President Patrice Talon in 2016, the French President Emmanuel Macron has committed to returning these items of great cultural significance. In 2021, 26 pieces looted during the colonial period were restored to Benin.

Given the burden of this complex historical context, ethical questions and controversies about the ownership of African artworks need to be addressed. In this regard, the staff of the Strasbourg Vodou Museum aims at clarifying the significance and the origins of its collection in order to dispel any doubt on this topic.

For more information, see:

- [France: the looted heritage back in Africa?](#)
- [Restitution? Africa in search of its masterpieces](#)
- [Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage - Towards a New relational ethic](#)
- [Art of Benin of yesterday and today: From restitution to revelation](#)

HISTORY OF THE COLLECTION

The Château Vodou collection is a private collection of more than 1,500 items belonging to Marc and Marie Luce Arbogast. 220 objects are shown in the permanent exhibition "Vodou, the art of seeing differently". It is currently the largest collection of African Vodou objects in the world.

Marc Arbogast's original choice to collect Vodou objects was guided by the aesthetic quality of each piece. However, very quickly, in-depth historical and anthropological research was carried out. The need to understand the cultural and sacred aspect of each piece was a major priority for the collector. Provenance research played a major role in this context, in order to safeguard the link with the communities from which each artefact originates.

The majority of the items in the collection were acquired in return for payment and after negotiation, while some were given away free of charge. No object was collected under pressure, force or threat. All objects were collected by Mr. Arbogast after 1974, i.e. after the dates of independence.

There are many reasons why the original owners of the objects have decided to separate from them: personal reasons (such as heirs who do not wish to keep the family's religious heritage or owners who have converted to another faith), the discarding of objects that have fulfilled their religious purpose, monetary reasons, sale in order to be able to manufacture new, different and more powerful objects, the wish to protect this heritage by handing it over to a museum...

Legally, the Unesco Convention of 17th November 1970 "on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property" establishes the mandatory return of illicitly acquired cultural property. The notion of restitution applies to so-called "illicitly acquired " or wrongfully possessed property.

The Château Vodou collection is therefore not considered to be so-called "illicitly acquired" property. Moreover, the objects were collected after the period of colonisation and are the property of a private person. Nevertheless, the team that runs the museum remains attentive to these issues and tracks the news around them. This is also one of the themes regularly addressed to raise awareness among visitors and the public who come to attend the museum's conferences.

THE ROLE OF THE MUSEUM AND ITS MODE OF OPERATION

Within this historical framework of relations between Africa and France and the circulation of works of art and people, the Château Vodou seeks on a daily basis to fulfil numerous missions in the interest of these works of art, of Vodou culture and of the conservation of this heritage.

Our ambition today is to share and enrich the knowledge about the original Vodou. By highlighting certain elements, details and experiences, we aim to advance scientific research on the subject of Vodou in West Africa (Benin, Togo, Ghana and Nigeria). Naturally, the conservation of this important heritage is also essential for the years to come.

The exhibition of Vodou pieces is a material support to go further and explain Vodou spirituality in its full diversity and complexity. The artistic, cultural and religious diversity of Vodou, its moral guidance, both in the Adja-Fon cultural area and in the Yoruba, Mahi and Goun cultural areas, in present-day Benin and in nearby countries (Togo, Nigeria, Ghana) where related forms of worship are performed, are at the heart of our mediation programs.

The museum's mission is to conserve, protect and promote a heritage of humanity. We restore, study and enhance the knowledge around this collection. In other words, we seek to fulfil the same missions as French public museums. The entire museum team works daily to promote this heritage all the while carrying the deepest respect for it. We value cultural exchanges and are fortunate to work with researchers, artists, organisations and officials from West Africa as part of our cultural and scientific programming. We have been carrying out these missions for more than 9 years now and we are constantly aiming to build new partnerships.

Therefore, we humbly try to share this rich heritage with our visitors and to break the clichés that surround Vodou, clichés that were historically constructed by the colonising and evangelising campaigns, of which we are well aware.

In December 2022, the Friends of the Vodou Museum association and the collector, Marc Arbogast, signed a partnership agreement with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Benin via the national agency for the promotion of heritage and development of tourism. The collaboration will be organised along three lines: the circulation and sharing of collections; education, communication and scientific collaboration; and the promotion of Benin's tourist and cultural attractiveness. This agreement takes place in the context of the future creation of the International Vodoun Museum in Porto Novo, Benin.

The Arbogast collection and the theme of Vodou provide an opportunity to tackle many subjects in the context of cultural events or during guided tours: slave trade, colonisation, the importance of remembrance, history of migrations, history of art, traditional medicine and pharmacopoeia, faith, intimate and philosophical questions, magic, creativity.... The museum is a unique tool to address the notions of opening up to others, sharing and tolerance.

Finally, the mode of operation of the Château Vodou is atypical. The museum is managed by a non-profit association and thus relies on a fragile economic model. At present, less than 10% of the museum's income comes from subsidies and it must therefore finance itself through ticket sales and donations.

THE CONSERVATION OF OUR OBJECTS AND THEIR SANCTITY

The purpose of a museum is to give their visitors the opportunity to engage with a cultural heritage, but museums also and above all aim to protect this material and immaterial heritage so that it may withstand the test of time and be transmitted to future generations.

At the Château Vodou, most objects presented in the exhibitions are cult objects. Currently, these objects are no longer animated, nor do they carry any active spiritual substance. Yet, they are part of the museum's collections for their quality, which is still regarded as sacred. The team remains fully aware of the spiritual charge of these objects, even though they no longer fulfil a religious purpose. This is taken into account within our conservation practices in order to treat them with the greatest respect.

The team guarantees the longevity of the objects by stabilising their deterioration. Conservation and restoration take into consideration the complexity of the materials that constitute this collection while guaranteeing respect for their history and use.

The majority of the objects are placed under glass or in locked cabinets to ensure that they are protected. As the objects are mostly composed of sacrificial materials, they are frequently inspected. When objects have to be handled for restoration or conservation, staff members take the necessary precautions and follow strict procedures.

INVENTORY AND INVENTORY CONTROL

Each object in our inventory has a unique inventory number which establishes its identity. Each object has an illustrated record in the museum database and is divided into several sections:

- Identification of the object (name, dimensions, materials, description, etc.),
- Date and context of use,
- Geographical and cultural origin of the object,
- Mode of acquisition and status of the object,
- Multimedia related to the property,
- Data related to the management of the work, its preservation and its location.

Each section is completed as thoroughly as possible, according to the state of knowledge of the team for each object. Additions are made frequently during research or field trips. We are committed to moving away from obsolete vocabularies inherited from colonisation and to using the names of the believers and dignitaries. The collection of more than 1400 items is reviewed every two years.

The biannual review of a museum's collections is an operation to check the presence of the works of art registered in the inventory. The aim of a review is to verify the integrity of the museum's collections by checking the actual presence of the artefacts and to compare them with the inventory. Conducting a review allows us to better understand and update the data relating to the works: verification of the inventory number, measurements, taking documentary photographs from different angles, reading and reinterpreting inscriptions and marks. During these campaigns we also check the state of conservation of each object and, if necessary, program restoration campaigns.

NEW ACQUISITIONS AND SOURCES OF ACQUISITION

One of the main missions of a museum is also to continue acquiring artworks. Indeed, the museum traces the memory of the past, but it must also keep up with the current evolutions of societies.

At Château Vodou, the collector Marc Arbogast is in charge of acquisitions from his own funds and via his network. He then provides the objects to the association as part of the Arbogast collection. The goods are purchased from photographic or video proposals. Negotiations are only started if the object is considered a fit addition to complete the collection and its many themes and priorities. The majority of sellers come from the countries of origin of the items and their motivations are, as already mentioned above, diverse. However, through each donation or sale, the museum appears as the guarantor of the non-destruction of the object and also of its non-reuse by others. The museum offers a third way to the ritual end of a consecrated object.

Buying new objects of course raises ethical questions. Firstly, it should be highlighted that none of the pieces originate from conflict zones. Secondly, with regard to the Unesco Convention of November 1970 and the Unidroit Convention of 1995, we take greatest care in assuring that none of the items in the collection have been stolen or illicitly acquired.

Finally, a last, more philosophical question can be raised: Can we acquire everything? When one acquires sacred, religious or ritual pieces, this moral question naturally arises.

The answer to this question is rather subjective, but in the case of the Vodou Museum, the collector makes every effort to ensure that the pieces joining the collection are no longer in use and will not deprive the community of practitioners.

It is important to note that in the case of any request to claim authorship of the pieces in the museum, or to question the origin of their acquisition, the collector will give himself the means to study their relevance. To date, however, no such request has been made to the Château Vodou.

We would like to express our thanks for your attention so far and hope that you will enjoy your visit of the Château Vodou.

We remain at your disposal,

Marc et Marie-Luce Arbogast
The Board of Administration
The museum team and its supporters.