

The West argues that it is in Africa's best interest to allow the works to remain with them because Africans do not possess the technology to preserve and protect the works and because the works will be stolen again from Africa.

We have a situation whereby there are more Benin artworks outside than within Benin. A writer has observed that 'the last place to go if you want to see Benin art is Benin itself, very little of it is left in the city...if you want to see Benin art works, you have to travel from Leningrad to California...to the splendid mansion of a Swiss millionaire near Berne, to Copenhagen and New York...' <sup>4</sup> This is clearly absurd, considering that the objects in question are records of the lives of these people. Now, any Benin child wishing to learn about his predecessors will first have to apply for visa from the descendants of those who despoiled his forebears' altars, an application which is more certain to be denied him. The alternative is for him to resort to books, hearsay or the internet as has been suggested by some warped minds who feel that virtual copies are good substitutes for the real objects. This, to say the least, is robbery and deprivation. These are some of the issues that should serve as backdrops against which Peju Layiwola's exhibition of recent works titled *Benin1897.com* is to be appraised.

### ***Benin1897.com***

The exhibition can be viewed as a reaction to the touring exhibition of stolen Benin artefacts, titled, *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Art from Nigeria*, which toured major cities in the West from 2007 to 2008 but was not deemed fit to be shown in any African country. This is scandalous and a deliberate continuation of the oppressive and insensitive culture of the West. *Benin1897.com* could not have come at a better time and from a better person/artist than a descendant of the Benin royal lineage, in the person of Peju Layiwola, whose stolen patrimony is the subject on focus. With this exhibition, she has not only brought back to the public domain the violence visited on her maternal forebears, city-state and culture, but also the hypocrisy and lopsidedness of justice in world affairs. Since it is a favourite pastime of the West to label Africans, particularly Nigerians, as scammers, fraudsters etc., we might as well ask: what thievery can be greater than such perpetrated by the West, even in contemporary times, on people's heritage and hard-earned resources? For every big African thief there is a battery of western institutions aiding and abetting. The illicit excavation, looting and trading in prohibited ware are instigated and backed, largely, by the West. There are more Nigerian stolen petro-dollars stashed in Western institutions than in Nigeria, making the West a haven for thieves on a global scale. The Yoruba had anticipated such with their apt proverb: "An accomplice is even the greater thief," for without his backing, the theft may not have materialised. So, the same logic that daily proclaims Africans as scammers should also condemn countries like Britain, Germany, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, France, the US etc. for housing stolen African artefacts and petro-dollars. Not to do so is to be hideously partial and dishonest.

The major exhibits in *Benin1897.com* are real and conceptual reproductions based on the history of the violation of Benin, and the numerous stolen original artworks now domiciled in museums, galleries and private collections in the West. Whereas the original Benin metal works were made in brass (but popularly referred to as bronze) using the lost wax technique, the reproductions for this exhibition are in terracotta, calabash and polyester. It is noteworthy that though Benin is more famous for her bronze works, she also produced great works in ivory, terracotta and wood. By this medium (terracotta) Layiwola, apart from exercising creative liberty and cutting costs, may also be making subtle statements about the ongoing illegal excavation of Nok terracotta in the northern part of Nigeria.

Layiwola's approach is not to reproduce all known Benin works but to make symbolic representations by way of a few heads and plaques. *1897.com* (fig. 53), the title work and an