

The Guardian

African art needs to come home - and this is why

The absence of artistic treasures is a huge loss to African countries' economies and contributes to a loss of national and personal identity

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Wed 21 Oct 2015 05.27 EDT Last modified on Fri 6 Oct 2017 08.14 EDT



African art dots museums across Europe and North America, gracing countries where many Africans would be hard pressed to get a visa. In the Neues museum in Berlin, the bust of Queen Nefertiti is lit and kept at a temperature to mimic conditions in Egypt. Its grace radiantly reflects the meaning of her name: “the beautiful one has come.” For Egypt and Africa, however, the beautiful one left. Nefertiti has been in Germany since 1913, despite the fact Egypt has demanded she be returned home.

Some argue that African art should stay in foreign countries, because with its wars and poverty, Africa lacks the institutions and resources to protect these

precious works. Besides, there is the question of ownership: some say many of these treasures were bought in the marketplace and that they belong to the buyers.

But the counter argument questions the legitimacy of such purchases, alleging theft and looting by westerners. And as many point out, Africa is not a single country; the entire continent is not melting in wars and without any capacity to keep its treasures safe.

The problem is that by focusing on these polarised arguments, the real reason African art needs to come home gets overlooked: the absence of artistic treasures is a huge loss to Africa's economy and society. Arts Council England estimates that every £1 of salary paid by the arts and the culture industry generates an additional £2.01 in the wider economy, by "attracting visitors; creating jobs and developing skills; attracting and retaining businesses revitalising places; and developing talent". There are no such estimates for Africa, but arguably every additional pound is more important to Africa than to England, and the economic loss associated with missing art - or conversely, the economic gain from the return of art - are significantly larger in Africa.



The 1,700-year-old Axum Obelisk was brought to Rome after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1937 and was returned in 2005 after years of campaigning by the African nation. Photograph: Gregorio Borgia/AP

The value of art goes beyond simple economic value. Art can be educational, life-enhancing and help to define our personal and national identities. The absence of historical art creates an emptiness in the history and heritage of many African countries, and we believe impacts personal motivation, creativity and innovation.

There have been some government efforts to return African art to Africa. For example, from France to Burkina Faso, and from Italy to Ethiopia. There are also a few private efforts by rich African individuals to buy back African art. And there are calls on donors to channel aid to build and strengthen cultural institutions in Africa.

Between the polar arguments for and against the return of art, there is a middle ground: repatriate African art without a transfer of ownership, using a mechanism similar to foreign investment, but replacing the profit motive with a social impact objective. An example of such potential foreign cultural investment (FCI) could be Germany building a branch of the Neues Museum in Egypt and

relocating Nefertiti (along with other Egyptian art currently not displayed) to that branch.

The revenue generated by the branch would complement official aid and benefit the local and the national economy of Egypt. Or, the New York's Metropolitan Museum could open a branch in Cameroon and display the Bangwa Queen there. Relocating art to Africa via FCI would also make use of the stockpiles of art that gather dust in the back rooms of museums and art galleries. Promotion of this mechanism would require a global stocktaking of African art and cultural assets held in foreign museums, and there are currently no reliable estimates.

Improving governance in the destination country in Africa, reducing regulatory barriers, and promoting skill development would be key to the success of FCI. A minuscule effort in this direction is the British Museum's Africa programme, which works with museums across Africa to share skills for mutual benefit. Louvre Abu Dhabi, a collaboration between France and the United Arab Emirates, has also created a space for "dialogue between civilisations and cultures". Such mutual sharing of art and cultural property could be extended to rich and poor countries worldwide.

FCI would greatly complement the efforts by African governments to promote meaningful cultural tourism. Efforts to attract FCI could include renovation of museums, transport and communication infrastructure, training local staff and experts, enhancing research capacity, and hosting international art festivals. A well-mounted effort would promote cultural diplomacy and demonstrate that African and global leaders value African art and respect African heritage. And above all, this could even inspire a new generation of African artists.

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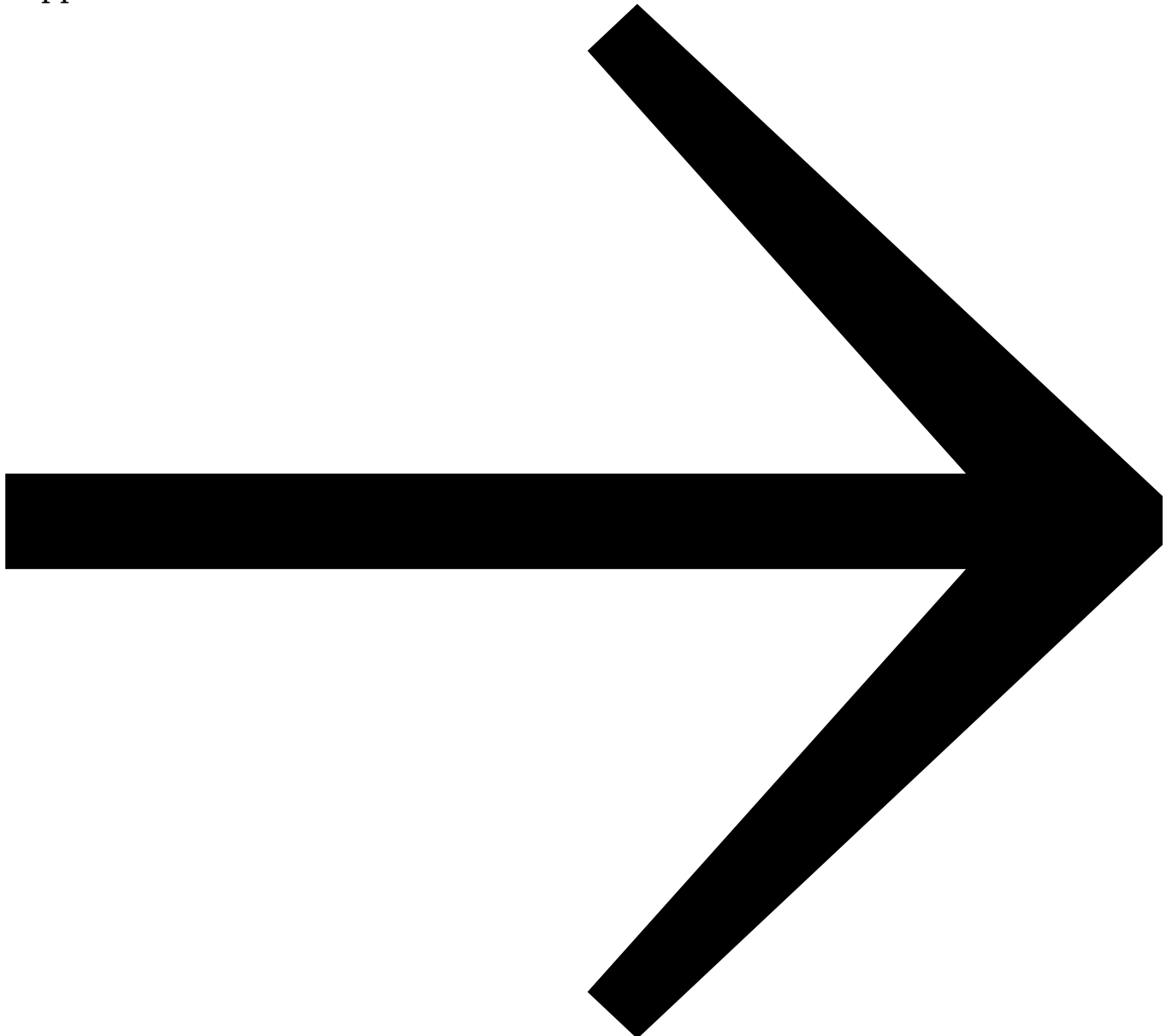
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