



Osaru Obaseki, photo Charles Ofikhenual

Back to Benin: New Art, Ancient Legacy

Ten Nigerian artists take a contemporary look at the history, culture, and philosophy of the Kingdom of Benin

**Save the Date! Press conference
Thursday, February 19
10:30 a.m. Invitation to follow.**

From February 21, Museum de Fundatie will organize the exhibition *Back to Benin: New Art, Ancient Legacy*. In November 2025, Museum de Fundatie formally transferred ownership of the only Benin bronze plaque in its collection to its rightful heirs*. This act of restitution forms the basis of *Back to Benin*, an exhibition featuring 10 contemporary artists from Nigeria with an Edo background**. The exhibition displays works in various media that testify to the power of the Edo visual language, which now takes on the multifaceted forms of international contemporary art.

The artists were invited to create new work inspired by Ama O Ghe Ehen (mudfish plaque), the restituted Benin bronze plaque. Through drawings, paintings, illustrations, sculptures, textiles, photography, video, and sound installations, the artists explore the extensive and well-documented history and heritage of Benin. They position ancestors, deities, and historical figures as anchor points for understanding Benin's evolving heritage as well as its present. In this way, the artists show that the legacy of the kingdom has always been and will remain a living language.

Beatrice von Bormann, director/president of Museum de Fundatie: 'These artists exhibit their work all over the world and are part of an international art scene. At the same time, the Edo heritage, the stories, myths, history, and present of the Kingdom of Benin remain the starting point for their art, which makes it incredibly powerful and fascinating'.



Victor Ehikhamenor, *Holy Hallow*, 2025, installation with 7 perforated handmade papers, courtesy the artist. Photos: Charles Ofihikhenual

Some works in the exhibition

Sanctuary

Victor Ehikhamenor, *Holy Hallow*, 2025, installation with 7 perforated handmade papers.

In his work, **Victor Ehikhamenor** combines traditional Edo iconography with contemporary abstraction. In this way, he explores subjects such as spirituality and memories. In *Holy Hallow*, he incorporates objects from museums in Europe and North America, which were probably taken at the same time as the plaque. In doing so, he creates what he calls a sanctuary. The selected objects are present as shadows of themselves. Each object is represented on paper by thousands of tiny perforations, similar to the details on the Ama.

The papers hang in the air and their silhouettes come to life on the surrounding walls, making them seem both present and absent. A soundscape completes the installation and reinforces the sacred aura. Ehikhamenor thus transforms the space into a place of remembrance and devotion.



Phil Omodamwen, *Queen Idia*, 2025, lox wax process, 213 x 58 cm, courtesy the artist

Magical powers

Phil Omodamwen, *Queen Idia*, 2025, lox wax process, 213 x 58 cm.

Queen Idia is legendary as the first woman to hold the title of Iyoba (Queen Mother), an important position within the Beninese leadership. She was the

mother of Oba Esigie, who reigned from 1504 to 1550, and played a crucial role during his reign. She formed an army that helped her son win one of his most threatening wars against the Igala kingdom. Queen Idia was said to possess magical powers. There are many representations of her in bronze heads, ivory masks, and pendants, several of which were looted during the British expedition (1897). **Phil Omodamwen** has created a larger-than-life portrait of the queen, inspired by historical images of her but with his own interpretation.

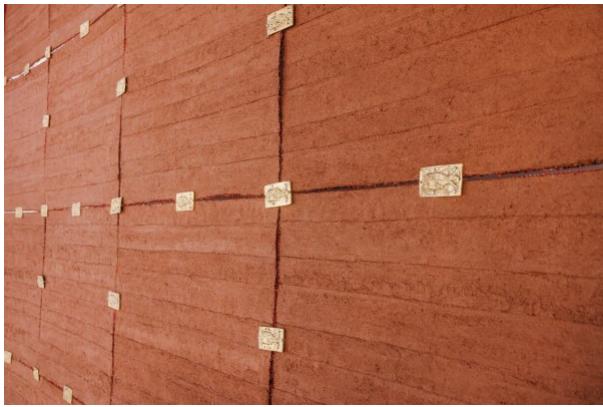


Favour Jonathan, Ukhurhe, 2025, stainless steel, bronze, 260 (h) × 33 (w) × 43 (d) cm, courtesy the artist

Sculpted Heads

Favour Jonathan, Ukhurhe, 2025, stainless steel and bronze.

This work reinterprets the Ukhure, a sacred object in Edo culture used to summon spirits and communicate with them. Usually made of wood, the Ukhure is approximately 120 cm high and divided into segments with carved heads and other symbols representing ancestors or deities. Jonathan's Ukhure is a large metal sculpture in honor of Ovia, the river goddess and symbol of peace, strength, ancestral wisdom, and providence. **Favour Jonathan** tells this story in a contemporary form but with ancient symbols such as the mystical water jug that Ovia received from her father, which turned her tears into a river.



Osaru Obaseki, Armored, 2025, Sand painting (red earth on woven and de-woven material), bronze cast connecting mudfish plates, stringed bronze iconography pendants, 320 × 430 cm, courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Ofikhenua

Monumental structure

Osaru Obaseki, *Armored*, 2025, Sand painting (red earth on woven and de-woven material), bronze cast connecting mudfish plates, stringed bronze iconography pendants, 320 × 430 cm.

Osaru Obaseki delves into the worlds of materiality, history, cultural identity, social dynamics, and the complexity of colonial and postcolonial narratives. Obaseki's installation *Armored* is based on the symbolism of the mudfish's ability to thrive both on land and in water and interweaves various forms of ancient Beninese art, iconography, motifs, materials, and architecture. The work is visually reminiscent of the monumental structure of the Great Wall of Benin, the fortification wall around the city and the kingdom, but also of the ancient houses made with red earth in the same distinctive pattern seen in Obaseki's work. Bronze pendants of a mudfish, a bell, an ancestral head, a leopard, a crocodile, and a warrior all hang from pieces of wire in the lower part of the installation. With this, Obaseki reflects on the ways in which societies protect their identity when faced with challenges and try to save what is at stake in the transformation process.



Ama O Ghe Ehen, bronze, Edo, 18th century Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria. Photo: Martijn Schmidt

Ama O Ghe Ehen (Mudfish plaque)

The bronze plaque with a relief commonly identified as a mudfish was originally made in the Kingdom of Benin. The plaque was purchased in 1937 by the museum's founder and director, Dirk Hannema, after a presentation by Dutch art dealer Carel van Lier of approximately 40 other objects from the collection of Charles Ratton, a famous art dealer from Paris. Like many other Benin bronzes that ended up in museums and private collections around that time, it is very likely that the piece originated from the violent plundering of the Kingdom of Benin by the British in 1897.

*On November 10, Museum de Fundatie in Benin City (Nigeria) restituted a Benin bronze plaque from its own collection. The restitution was made by the director of Museum de Fundatie, Beatrice von Bormann, to the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) of Nigeria. In February 2025, the NCMM concluded a management agreement with the Oba (king) of Benin for the control of Benin's antiquities, including the repatriation, conservation, storage, and exhibition of these artifacts. This agreement is a collaboration between the NCMM and the Royal Court, which acts as custodian of Benin's heritage.

**The Edo, also known as the Benin, are the people of Edo Province in Nigeria, the former Kingdom of Benin, with Benin City as its capital.

Back to Benin: New Art, Ancient Legacy

21 February - 7 June 2026

Exhibition Back to Benin: New Art, Ancient Legacy



Osaru Obaseki photo Charles Ofikhenual (15).jpg



Queen Idia (1).png



Holy Hallow.jpg



Favour Jonathan - Ukhurhe.jpg



Osaru Obaseki Armored(8).jpg



BENIN BRONS - Martijn Schmidt -4195.jpg

For more information

Museum de Fundatie Zwolle

Press Office

Boris de Munnick

+ 31 6 22 978 444

pr@museumdefundatie.nl



Photo: Pedro Sluiter

About Museum de Fundatie

Museum de Fundatie is one of the most important museums in the eastern Netherlands. It showcases artists from various disciplines and backgrounds, identifies new talent, and works closely with various educational institutions in Zwolle. The museum has an international program and is deeply rooted in Overijssel. Museum de Fundatie is open to everyone and offers a varied program, ranging from older to contemporary art and design. Museum de Fundatie manages two art collections: the Fundatie Collection (owned by the Hannema-de Stuers Fundatie Foundation) and the art collection of the province of Overijssel. Temporary exhibitions and presentations from the collection can be seen at two locations: Museum de Fundatie in Zwolle and Heino (Kasteel het Nijenhuis), with its sculpture garden.

