

Press file

# Art du Bénin

Exhibition-event  
at the Marina Palace,  
Cotonou, Benin  
20 February - 22 May 2022

d'hier et  
d'aujourd'hui, de  
la Restitution  
à la Révélation

Trésors royaux  
et Art  
contemporain  
du Bénin



PRESS RELEASE

EXHIBITION-EVENT FROM 20 FEBRUARY TO 22 MAY 2022  
VIP PREVIEW ON 18 FEBRUARY 2022  
PREVIEW IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF BENIN ON 19 FEBRUARY 2022  
AT THE PALAIS DE LA MARINA, COTONOU, BENIN

## **“The Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today, from Restitution to Revelation: Royal Treasures and the Contemporary Art of Benin”**

**Georges Adéagbo**  
**Laeïla Adjovi**  
**Euloge Ahanhanzo-Elèlè**  
**Éliane Aïssou**  
**Ishola Akpo**  
**Edwige Aplogan**  
**Youss Atacora**  
**François Aziangué**  
**Moufouli Bello**  
**Sébastien Boko**  
**Charly d'Almeida**  
**Emo de Medeiros**  
**Épaphras Dègnon Toïhen**  
**Sènamì Donoumassou**  
**Kiffouli Dossou**  
**Ludovic Fadaïro**  
**Dimitri Fagbohoun**  
**Meschac Gaba**  
**Dominique Gnonnou “Kouas”**  
**Romuald Hazoumè**  
**King Houndèpinkou**  
**Nobel Koty**  
**Éric Médéda**  
**Louis Oké Agbo**  
**Thierry Oussou**  
**Yves Apollinaire Pèdè**  
**Gérard Quenum**  
**Rémy Samuz**  
**Julien Sinzogan**  
**Tchif**  
**Cyprien Tokoudagba**  
**Nathanaël Vodouhè**  
**Ponce Zannou**  
**Dominique Zinkpè**

The Office of the President of the Republic of Benin announces the inauguration of a one-off exhibition - event, that will take place between 20 February and 22 May 2022 in Cotonou.

The event is intended to fulfil two separate purposes: it will simultaneously shine a spotlight on the classical art of Benin, the twenty-six royal treasures recently restored by the Quai Branly Museum, and on the contemporary artistic scene of Benin and its diaspora, including both well-established and emerging artists, over a 2,000m<sup>2</sup> exhibition space.

Using a diachronic approach ranging from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and including masterpieces of the past and present, the “Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today, from Restitution to Revelation” exhibition will make the country’s historic and contemporary heritage accessible to both national and international audiences in Benin, the nerve centre of artistic creation and dissemination on the continent of Africa.

The “Contemporary Art of Benin” section includes over 100 works by 34 contemporary artists and will showcase mediums, aesthetics and techniques: paintings, sculptures, installations, video art, drawings, digital art, performance art...

The “Royal Treasures of Benin” section will majestically present a collection of works that have just been returned to their place of creation after 129 years of exile.

Hosted at the Palais de la Marina, home to the Office of the President of the Republic of Benin, the “The Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today: from Restitution to Revelation” will be a highlight of the first quarter of 2022 and will include a number of multidisciplinary meetings both on- and off-site: conferences, screenings and educational initiatives.

This exhibition-event forms part of the dynamic initiated by Benin - both for the reinstatement of its heritage and the expansion of its contemporary art scene - to endow the country with a number of museums of international reach: the Musée de l'Épopée des Amazones et des Rois du Danxome (MEARD) and the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Cotonou (MACC). These large cultural facilities are fully up to date with international standards and are highly anticipated. They are scheduled to be inaugurated by 2024.



**EXPO**  
ART DU BÉNIN  
D'HIER ET  
D'AUJOURD'HUI

**20.02 > 22.05 2022**  
**PALAIS DE LA MARINA**



# Art du Bénin

## D'HIER ET D'AUJOURD'HUI : DE LA RESTITUTION À LA RÉVÉLATION

Trésors royaux du Bénin - Art contemporain du Bénin

AFRIKAFUN - image composée à partir des photos : Trône d'apparat du roi Ghezo © Patrick Griès et Marika Datou Sankofa #4 © Laëlia Adjovi/Loïc Hoquet



PRÉSIDENTIE  
DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE  
DU BÉNIN

[www.expoartbenin.bj](http://www.expoartbenin.bj)

# “Revealing Ourselves to Ourselves in the Best that we have”

## Mr Patrice Talon, President of the Republic of Benin



**“The 26 recovered royal treasures are just the first episode of a series that promises more to come.”**

### **Ceremonial throne of King Ghezo**

Kingdom of Danxome,  
19<sup>th</sup> century.  
Wood, metal  
Returned Dodds Collections  
© Patrick Gries

As I announced on 10th November 2021 at the ceremony welcoming them to the Palais de la Marina, the 26 royal treasures of Benin returned by France are finally here on display for us.

From the north to the south of the country, from east to west and from the furthest of the diaspora, the men and women of Benin of all generations are invited to come and any citizen of the world who wishes to do so.

They're unique cultural works that tell of our history, our identity, and our soul.

Whether statues or carved doors, elaborate thrones, portable altars or glorified staffs, none of them leave us indifferent.

Upon coming into contact with them, there's no doubt that many of you will contemplate their beauty, magnificence and exceptional splendour, signs of the prodigy of their designers.

Upon seeing them, many voices will hail the vision and greatness of the kings that ordered them.

All of this is true, and is only justice to the intrinsic genius of our people.

The present exhibition-event “Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today: from Restitution to Revelation” draws our attention, among other things, to the three wooden statues representing three great sovereigns of the Danxome kingdom.

More than the material (wood) or subject matter (kings), these three statues have one thing in common that few people will notice: they were made by the same artist: Sossa Dede.

Without this artist, without his talent and creativity, these masterpieces that we all admire today would not exist. As the proverb says, “It's at the end of the old rope that the new one is woven”.

Without Sossa Dede and others from the past, there would probably be no Yves Apollinaire Pèdé, Romuald Hazoumè, Moufouli Bello, Julien Sinzogan, etc. >>

**The Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today,  
from Restitution to Revelation:  
Royal Treasures and the Contemporary Art of Benin**

**“Revealing ourselves  
to ourselves in  
the best that we have”**



**“[...] revealing  
ourselves to  
ourselves in the best  
that we have and  
revealing to others  
how, without Benin,  
the world wouldn't  
be quite the world.”**

**Anthropomorphic statue**

Kingdom of Danxome, 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Artist: Sossa Dede  
Wood (iroko), iron, pigments  
Returned Dodds Collections  
© Pauline Guyon

>> This is why it seemed necessary to seize the exhibition of the 26 ancient royal treasures as an opportunity to present the new talents of the Benin art and visual arts scene. Their names are: Fadaïro, Aïssou, Quenum, Tchiff, Hazoumè, Dossou, Donoumassou, de Medeiros, Houndépinkou, Zinkpè, Adjovi, Adé Agbo, Glélé, Gaba, Vodouhè, Tokoudagba, Akplogan, and many others that this exhibition cannot present due to a lack of space.

They work, manipulate and transform canvas, fabric, wood, iron, clay, video, copper, stone, paper, plastic, etc. They're inventive, creative, classical, innovative, seekers, stylists, performers, confusing, impertinent, mystical, playful, spiritual, unexpected, do-it-yourselfers, radicals, dark, sad, desperate, funny... In short, they make us experience the world as they wish, according to their senses and sensibilities, from their perspective.

The work of some of these creators are highly prized abroad, exhibited in the great Western museums, bought by collectors all over the world; these are artists who live off their art. Others have already been noticed or are beginning to make a name for themselves and need support and accompaniment: all of them are Beninese artists, sensitive and who, through their multiple expressions, tell us that the string of Sossa Dede is not worn out. Despite the absence of an educational facility, despite the forced exile in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of these key pieces from the past that could have served as an example or sources of inspiration but that have come back to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these artists have been able to take up the baton, to grasp the invisible rope that had been held out to them and to offer us the artistic treasures of today and tomorrow.

Our generation has decided not to make a mistake: we have chosen to gather them around the old masters, to reveal them to everyone: compatriots, tourists, collectors...

Looking beyond this spotlight, we're creating a setting for them, a home, a museum of contemporary art so as to welcome them and display them even better. We'll place them into a dialogue, in resonance with other creators of their time, we'll circulate them to the museums of the vast world: Venice, Dakar, Paris, Johannesburg, New York, Rabat or Berlin...

The time of restitution is now beginning, and will continue without fail until our objective is achieved. Unquestionably, the 26 recovered royal treasures are just the first episode of a series that promises more to come.

With this same momentum behind us, a time of revelation is also beginning: revealing ourselves to ourselves in the best that we have and revealing to others how, without Benin, the world wouldn't be quite the world.

From yesterday to today, our artists and their works are the best ambassadors of our participation in the universal.

Let's celebrate them.

PATRICE TALON



**Moufouli Bello**  
*Tassi Hangbé* (detail), 2020  
Acrylic on canvas  
250 x 200 cm  
Private collection  
© Moufouli Bello, 2021  
Photo Credit: Yanick Folly



**Julien Sinzogan**

*The reverence* (detail), 2019

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 90 cm

Collection La Galerie Nationale

© Julien Sinzogan, 2021

Photo credit: Yanick Folly



# “The Art of Benin, from the Royal Courts of Danxome to the International Contemporary Art Scene: Retrospective and Outlook”

**Editorial by  
Didier Houénoude**  
Art historian, specialist  
in contemporary art in Benin



**“Artists of the Kingdom of Danxome: Akati Ekplékendo<sup>3</sup>, Sossa Dede<sup>4</sup>, Yèmadjè<sup>5</sup>, have gone from anonymity to public recognition and have become models for some visual artists of contemporary Benin.”**

**Anthropo-zoomorphic statue representing King Glèlè**

Kingdom of Danxome,  
between 1858 and 1889

Artist: Sossa Dede

Wood (koro), pigments and leather  
Returned Dodds Collections

© Patrick Gries

When the historic and highly controversial exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*<sup>1</sup> opened in France in 1989, one of the only Beninese artists who was able to present his work was Cyprien Tokoudagba (born in Abomey in 1939 and died on 5 May 2012), who was apparently the legitimate heir to the court artists of the Danxome kingdom<sup>2</sup>.

The Beninese artists who have appeared since then have shown unparalleled creativity, testifying to an extraordinary vitality of contemporary creation within the country. “Artists of the Kingdom of Danxome: Ekplékendo Akati<sup>3</sup>, Sossa Dede<sup>4</sup>, Yèmadjè<sup>5</sup>, have gone from anonymity to public recognition and have become models for some visual artists of contemporary Benin.

They testify to the development of art at that time, committed to a quest for excellence in production. One of the aims of this production was to celebrate the magnificence of the Fon culture<sup>6</sup> and the kings who represented it.

The Danxome rulers placed artistic genius above all socio-political considerations and therefore hired artists of great renown, regardless of their social and geographical origins.

Prior to the kingdom’s considerable expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, artists were chosen only from among the social elite. They were granted this privilege because they were considered to be to be worthier of proximity with the monarch, and better able to translate the Fon supremacy into artistic and iconographic language.

However, after major conquests in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the criteria for court admission as an artist became more flexible. Artists now came from all walks of life; they could be princes, masters of religion, free men, slaves and even captives of war. The irony of history is that some of these war captives contributed greatly to the artistic influence of the Danxome.

The royal court became a place with a decisive role in the kingdom’s emergence and artistic influence. When, among the prisoners of war, there was a craftsman whose works fascinated the king, the latter changed his status so as to make him a protégé. He would be set up near the palace and provided with everything that he needed to flourish in his work. >>

**The Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today,  
from Restitution to Revelation:  
Royal Treasures and the Contemporary Art of Benin**

**“The Art of Benin, from the  
Royal Courts of Danxome to the  
International Contemporary Art Scene:  
Retrospective and Outlook”**



**“The artistic  
landscape in  
Benin has indeed  
undergone quite  
a spectacular  
evolution in recent  
years.”**

**Ishola Akpo**  
*Trace of a Queen XVI,*  
(detail) 2021  
Photo, collage  
on cotton paper, thread  
45.5 x 60 cm  
Collection of the artist  
© Ishola Akpo, 2021

>> From the bas-reliefs that adorned palaces to the famous ceremonial thrones and the *appliqué* on fabrics, the royal court was the laboratory for these many objects of art and/or worship that can be found in museums both in Benin and in the West.

The Fon considered that the “possession of art” was a divine gift given to the elect by *Aziza*<sup>7</sup>, the genius of inspiration. The seal of *Aziza* conferred on the marked artist a genial inspiration, but above all an extraordinary technicality which placed him, despite himself, in a certain marginality: admired but also challenged for the trade he had with the spirits. The position of a being driven half crazy and/or half divine by inspiration, both blessed and cursed, echoes, the myth in the Western world of the artist who is outside and beyond ordinary humanity.

The king-patron did more than just provide artists with good living and work conditions, he also dealt with the training of the next generation. The children of ministers and crown princes were also placed under the wing of the artists’ group leaders.

The figure of the *danhoméno* artist, as one can imagine, is not far removed from that of the Renaissance masters who were in charge of a large number of pupils and apprentices and who devoted their entire lives to developing their art.

Contemporary Beninese creation, even if it no longer follows the old logic of a sponsor and a producer, has endeavoured to reproduce excellence in creativity.

The artistic landscape in Benin has indeed undergone quite a spectacular evolution in recent years. The regular work of artists’ associations, professionals, art lovers and patrons has made the Benin art scene an important platform for contemporary art in sub-Saharan Africa.

The success of Beninese artists can be attributed to local and foreign patrons, but first and foremost to the artists themselves, whose private initiatives have made it possible to structure an environment that was once difficult to grasp. The birth of the National Gallery of Benin (LGN) is a response to the need to consolidate the world of contemporary art professionals, and the eagerly anticipated Museum of Contemporary Art of Cotonou (MACC) augurs well for the unprecedented visibility that will benefit the creation of visual artists in Benin. These structuring bodies and institutions are appearing at a time when contemporary Beninese art seems to be reaching maturity.

A clear indicator can be seen in the fervour of an artistic creation that is more and more constant, regular and renewed. One must also take note of the gradual emergence of a local market made up of Beninese buyers, who are increasingly interested in the work of their contemporaries.

The various spaces that have been created in recent years to promote artists have made it possible to maintain a steady output of work that used to fluctuate. The Beninese artists who have understood the stakes of a dynamic artistic scene have appropriated the different media and modes of artistic expression that enable them to reach a wider audience.

Of course, the themes are varied, although they seem to touch transversally on the ontological, sacred (especially the role of voodoo) and identity issues.

While this multifaceted and complex question seems to be reflected in the productions of Beninese artists, it nevertheless does not obscure their growing interest in other themes, in the history of humanity that they approach through their own history or their cultural affiliation.

The challenges of today's world, the existential anxieties of our societies and the future of human beings are some of the questions reflected upon by Beninese visual artists. The many addressed topics reflect the liveliness of artistic production, which is reflected in the multifaceted use of media.



**“Today,  
generations  
of visual artists  
are coming together  
to [...] lead us  
to see  
beyond mere  
illusion.”**

**Éliane Aïssou**  
*Ati okuku dé imolè (from the  
invisible to the visible)*  
(detail), 2019  
22 Assen, photos,  
text projection and voice-over  
720 x 670 cm  
Artist's Collection  
© Éliane Aïssou, 2021

The exhibition aims to show the vitality of contemporary creation and the diversity of the explored artistic media. There is no longer a transmission hiatus as was the case during the colonial penetration that led to the destruction of the Kingdom of Danxome. Today, generations of visual artists are coming together to jointly raise the curtain drawn by Parrhasius and thus lead us to see beyond mere illusion.

1. This exhibition has acquired an almost mythical aura today and is considered by many as the “*Big Bang*” that gave birth to contemporary African art as it was conceived until recently on the current art market. For other more critical professionals, Magicians of the Earth will have been at the root of one of the greatest misunderstandings about art from the African continent. The idea of the curators of the exhibition to show European and non-Western art together in a gigantic exhibition to commemorate the Bicentenary of the French Revolution was to rehabilitate the peoples whose culture had been scorned by France. The exhibition venues are significant in this respect: the Grande Halle de la Villette and the Centre Pompidou.

2. A kingdom that existed on the territory of today's Republic of Benin and that was founded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Aja populations that emigrated from the Kingdom of Tado in present-day Togo. It is known for its art and culture and for the fierce resistance of its last

king, Gbèhanzin, to French colonial penetration.

3. Akati Ekplékendo is known as a blacksmith craftsman and artist born in Kpingni, in the Dassa-Zoumè region north of Abomey. A prisoner of war, he became an important court artist of the Danxome. He is credited with the statue of the god Gouis attributed to him, as well as the great ceremonial sword Gougouba.

According to oral tradition, Sossa Dede was a son of King Agonglo (1789-1797). A prince trained in sculpture and music, he distinguished himself in these two arts. He is credited with the Bochio (anthropomorphic statues with heads and bodies of lions and sharks) of the kings Glèlè and Gbèhanzin.

5. The Yèmadjè family originates from Za, near Tindji, on the Abomey plateau. King Agonglo, having been informed of the fame of the tapestry-maker Yèmadjè, invited him and all his family to Agbomè. He “endowed him and married him”, thus making him an

*Ahossi* (queen, wife of the king). Yèmadjè therefore benefited from enormous advantages that gave him access to all parts of the court, including that reserved for the king and his wives. Very early on, he created great works of *appliqué* canvas, while becoming the king's special dresser as well as his confidant.

6. The Fon culture is said to be the result of the cultural mixing that took place between the Aja invaders and conquerors and the indigenous populations, mainly the Guédvi who lived on the Abomey plateau.

7. Genius of the pantheon of southern Benin to which the inspiration of artists is attributed. Often represented (notably by Tokoudagba) in the form of a being with a human body and the crown of a deciduous tree as its head.

Trésor  
royal  
du Bénin  
Bénin

Royal  
Treasures  
of Benin

# From Colonisation to Restitution

**The 26 works  
presented in  
this exhibition  
are the first to be  
returned  
to Benin by France.  
They have returned  
to the land  
of their ancestors.**

On 17 November 1892, the French general Alfred Amédée Dodds entered Abomey, the capital of the Danxome kingdom, after two years of merciless warfare. French troops looted the palaces and the city. At this time, Dodds and his troops seized important royal property that they brought back to France.

During the subsequent period, France organised a colonial space that it exploited under the name of Colony of Dahomey and Dependencies. With the decolonisation of the 1960s, many countries demanded the return of property carried off during the colonial period. These appeals went unanswered for several decades.

It was not until 2016 that France admitted the legitimacy of the request of the government of President Patrice Talon, despite restitution remaining legally impossible under French property law.

In November 2017, President Emmanuel Macron affirmed in his speech at the University of Ouagadougou the willingness of the French to begin restitutions. The process finally got underway.

On 24 December 2020, the law on the return to Benin of 26 cultural objects was promulgated in France as an exception to the principle of inalienability of French public collections.

On 9 November 2021, the act of physical transfer of ownership of these 26 properties to the Republic of Benin by the French Republic was signed at the Elysée in the presence of President Patrice Talon and President Emmanuel Macron.

The next day, the 26 works of the royal treasures of Abomey arrived in Cotonou in a plane specially chartered by the Beninese government and were received at the Palais de la Marina during an official ceremony.

After decades of pleas and waiting, the 26 works presented in this exhibition are the first to be returned to Benin by France. They have returned to the land of their ancestors.

# Chronology of Restitutions

## **1890**

Outbreak of war between the French and the Danhomeans following the different interpretation of the Cotonou Treaties and the protectorate of Porto-Novo.

## **17 November 1892**

French troops enter Abomey and loot the palaces and the city. Dodds and his troops seize royal objects.

## **1893 – 1895**

General Dodds donates objects to the Museum of Ethnography of the Trocadéro, the future museum of Mankind, including the 26 objects that have now been returned. From 2000, they are kept at the Musée du Quai Branly.

## **1957**

Return of an Ashanti stool to Ghana by the Queen of England on the occasion of Ghana's Independence celebrations.

## **1960**

The Congo asks Belgium to transfer the "Museum of the Belgian Congo" to Kinshasa.

## **1969**

Pan-African Cultural Manifesto of Alger insisting on the need to recover objects and archives looted by colonial powers.

## **1975**

About a hundred pieces from the museum in Tervuren (Belgium) are returned to Kinshasa after long negotiations.

## **7 June 1978**

Speech by Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of UNESCO, on the need to rebalance the world's heritage between North and South, pleading "for the return of an irreplaceable cultural heritage to those who created it".

## **1982**

Pierre Quoniam, the then director of the Louvre Museum, wrote a report advocating the restitution of African heritage. None of its recommendations are implemented in the following four decades, and the report is forgotten.

## **26 August 2016**

Official request by President Patrice Talon of the Republic of Benin to the French State for the return of cultural property carried off during colonisation.

## **28 November 2017**

French President Emmanuel Macron, during a speech at the University of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), expresses support for a possible return of African heritage to Africa by 2022.

## **23 November 2018**

Presentation of the report "Restituer le patrimoine africain" commissioned by Emmanuel Macron to Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian and Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese economist. France then decides to return 26 works looted by General Dodds to Benin.

## **16 November 2019**

Signing in Cotonou of the Joint Work Programme between Benin and France for the strengthening of their museum and heritage cooperation in the context of the restitution of cultural property.

## **24 December 2020**

The French National Assembly passes Act no. 2020-1673 on the restitution of cultural property to the Republic of Benin and the Republic of Senegal. This law specifies that actual restitution must take place within one year.

## **09 November 2021**

Signing at the Élysée Palace of the deed of transfer of ownership of the 26 works to the Republic of Benin, under the leadership of the two heads of State.

## **10 November 2021**

The 26 works returned by France are back in Benin.

## **20 February 2022**

Opening of the exhibition: *The Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today, from Restitution to Revelation: Royal Treasures and Contemporary Art of Benin* at the Marina Palace in Cotonou.

*“Returning a work of art or a document to the country that produced it means allowing a people to recover part of its memory and identity, and proving that, in mutual respect between nations, the long dialogue of civilisations that defines the history of the world is still continuing.”*

*Amadou Mahtar M’Bow,  
UNESCO Director-General from 1974 to 1987*



**Gate of the Royal Palace of Abomey**

Kingdom of Danxome, ca. 1889  
Polychrome wood, pigments, metal  
Artist: Sossa Dede  
Returned Dodds Collections  
© Pauline Guyon

*E nɔ yin avɔkɔ bo nɔ dɔ́ Dada ja a*

*“It takes more than finery to announce ‘the king is coming’.”  
Putting on the king’s clothes is not enough to claim the crown.*

**Anthropo-zoomorphic statue  
depicting King Behanzin**

Kingdom of Danxome, between 1889 and 1892  
Artist: Sossa Dede  
Wood (koro), iron, pigments  
Returned Dodds Collections  
© Patrick Gries

*Wé òu ò'asen xóme o e ma je tanyinò  
ji a ó, e nò je dexoka ji*

*"Dancing in the hut of the assen, if one does not fall  
on the priestess, then it will be on the ritual calabash"*

*The space inside the hut of the assen is sacred.  
It is reserved for recollection, and dancing there could  
lead to considerable sacrilege.*

**Asen hotagantin**

Kingdom of Danxome, 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Copper alloy, ferrous alloy, iron, wood  
Returned Dodds Collections  
© Pauline Guyon



*Kini kíní asi nò wàdan hu adān  
dó nyaxe dó vi tɔ le jí!  
Mímè kinì asi e nò nyàxe dó dada mìtɔn,  
nùmesen mìtɔn jí le díè!*

*"Lionesses are more terrible than lions,  
because they have the young to defend. And we,  
the Amazons, we have to defend, the king,  
our king and our god, kini kini."*

*Extract from an Agoodjié song*

*Kini means "lion". Amazons identify  
with ferocious lionesses and protect King Glélé,  
whose emblem is a lion.*

**Tunic of a soldier  
or Agoodjié**

Kingdom of Danxome, 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Cotton  
Returned Dodds Collections  
© Pauline Guyon





Art contemporain  
du Bénin

Contemporary  
Art  
of Benin



**Romuald Hazoumè**

*Pantalonnade*, 2014

Plastic, shoe heels and copper

28 x 25 x 18 cm

Courtesy Galerie Magnin-A, Paris

© Romuald Hazoumè, ADAGP, 2011

Photo credit: Romuald Hazoumè

# Contemporary Art of Benin

**“The strong ideas that emerge touch on bonds: those that are woven with others, the transmission of knowledge and emotions, making creators powerful intercessors.”**

Contemporary artistic creation, in Benin and within its diaspora, presents a diversity of forms and aesthetics. The creators, with multiple backgrounds and profiles, autodidacts or graduates of art schools, use their works to express their unique vision of contemporary Benin, nourished by the sap of tradition and a desire to explore anew its legacies and heritage, in a language undergoing constant renewal.

This exhibition “Contemporary Art of Benin” reflects the artistic commitment and ontological questions that animate Beninese artists and which they echo in their creations, through various media. It offers an immersion in the universes overflowing with confirmed and emerging artists of the contemporary Beninese scene and translates, through this display, the vitality and intensity of the creativity of the visual arts of Benin.

This exhibition is also intended to be educational: to open to Beninese audiences a universe still too often viewed as elitist and/or sealed off. The strong ideas that emerge touch on bonds: those that are woven with others, the transmission of knowledge and emotions, making creators powerful intercessors.

The selection of artists comprising each of the three parts of the exhibition, **Recurrence-Variations, Transition(s), Transgression-Hybridisation**, is based on the developed themes, the materials used and the various media that are mobilised. This is a proposal, an invitation to cabotage from islands to archipelagos, to the exploration of an artistic mapping in permanent movement, without seeking to freeze or normalise it and with no attempt to be exhaustive.

# 34 Contemporary Artists from Benin

## Récurrance Récurrance recurrence variations Variations Variations

Cyprien Tokoudagba  
Yves Apollinaire Pèdè  
Kiffouli Dossou  
Ludovic Fadaïro  
Dominique Enonnou "Kouas"  
Euloge Ahanhanzo-Eilèlè  
Épaphras Dègnon Toïhen

## transition(s) Transition(s) Transition(s)

Dominique Zinkpè  
Ishola Akpo  
Moufouli Bello  
Laeïla Adjovi  
Rémy Samuz  
Julien Sinzogan  
François Aziangué  
Youss Atacora  
Edwige Aplogan  
Éliane Aïssou  
Nathanaël Vodouhè  
Tchif  
Thierry Oussou

## Transgression Transgression transgression hybridisation Hybridation Hybridation

Georges Adéagbo  
Sènami Donoumassou  
Sébastien Boko  
Gérard Quenum  
Dimitri Fagbohoun  
Emo de Medeiros  
Romuald Hazoumè  
King Houndépinkou  
Meschac Gaba  
Ponce Zannou  
Louis Oké Agbo  
Éric Médéda  
Nobel Koty  
Charly d'Almeida



**Youssef Atacora**  
*Kondo the Shark* (detail), 2019  
Acrylic on canvas  
200 x 150 cm  
Collection La Galerie Nationale  
© Youssef Atacora, 2021  
Photo Credit: Darios Tossou



**“How can  
the invisible  
be expressed  
and made  
visible?”**



**Kiffouli Dossou**  
*The Forest*, 2016  
Wood  
40 x 30 cm  
Private Collection  
© Kiffouli Dossou, 2021  
Photo Credit: Darios Tossou



**Yves Apollinaire Pèdè**  
*Gou*, 2018  
Appliqué on canvas  
262 x 156 cm  
Yves Apollinaire Pèdè estate  
© Yves Apollinaire Pèdè, 2021  
Photo Credit: Yanick Folly

“An ancient  
kingdom,  
populated by  
the whispers  
of a forgotten  
reign...”



**Euloge Ahanhanzo-Glèlè**

*Royal Dance*, 2021

Terracotta

44 x 27 x 25 cm

Artist's Collection

© Euloge Ahanhanzo-Glèlè, 2021



**Dominique Gnonnou “Kouas”**

*The Guardians with Combs*, 2002

Wood, braided plant rope (dotôkan),  
iron, kua blue

205 x 38 x 20 cm each

Collection La Galerie Nationale

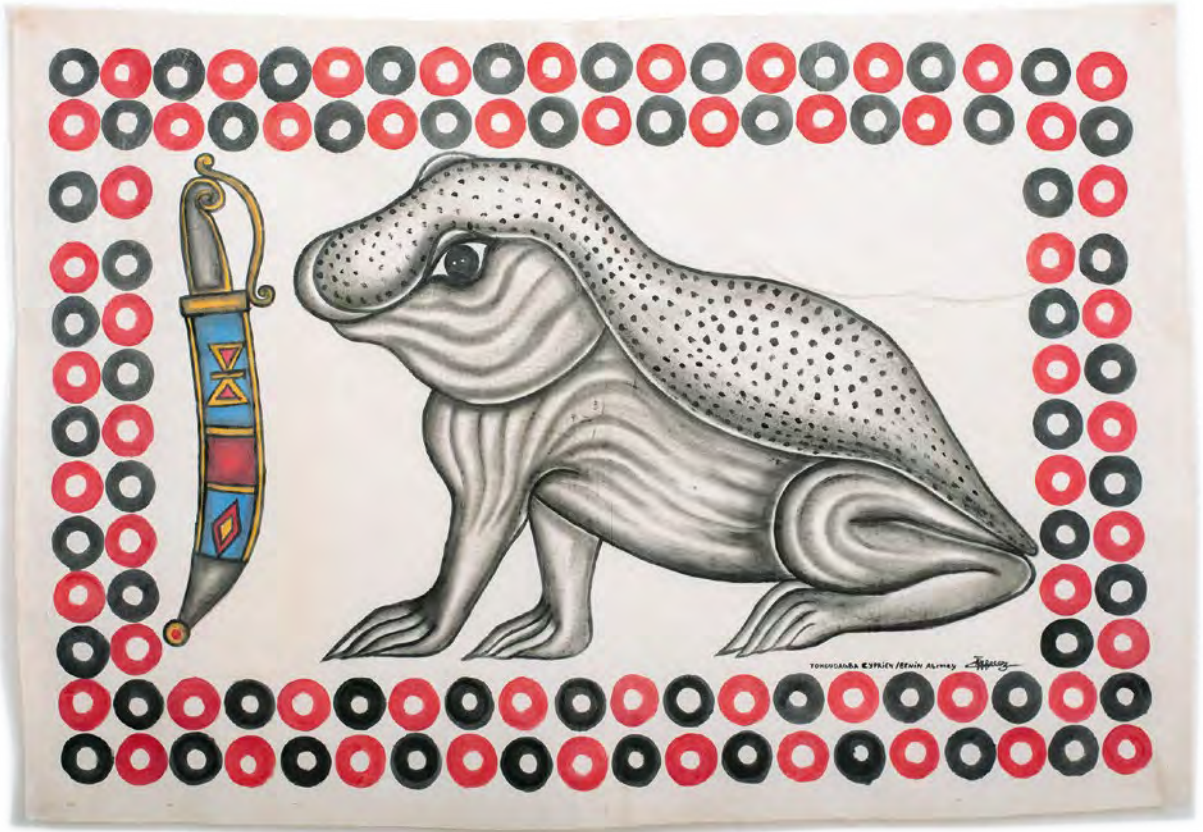
© Dominique Gnonnou “Kouas”, 2021

La Galerie Nationale, Cotonou

Photo credit: Yanick Folly



Exhibition-Event from  
20 February to 22 May 2022  
Palais de la Marina, Cotonou, Benin



**Cyprien Tokoudagba**

*Tôhossou*, 2008

Oil on canvas

100 x 145 cm

Tokoudagba Cyprien Estate

© Cyprien Tokoudagba, 2021

Photo Credit: Yanick Folly



**Épaphras Dègnon Toïhen**

*The Living*, 2021

Teak stump

100 x 90 x 80 cm; 60 kg

Artist's Collection

© Épaphras Dègnon Toïhen, 2021

Photo Credit: Darios Tossou

# transition(s) Transition

# Transition (s)

This sequence offers a selection of works that explore, in an exchange between Past and Present, the historical figures, spirits and ancestors that punctuate memories and nourish imaginations. The artists lend body and life to the myths and legends by giving them a physical form and by placing them in a historical context. The representation of the feminine, in its magnified attributes, is one of its core lines.

Under the tools of **Dominique Zinkpè, Ishola Akpo, Laeïla Adjovi and Rémy Samuz**, women are in turn warriors, princesses, queens, women of power, angels and goddesses. The place given to them by the artists is that of “conduits of memory and history”.

In this way, the woman becomes the link between the past, the present and the future. This noble and deified vision of women places them in a position identical to that of Legba, with the mission not only to build for our benefit effective means of mediation towards the ancestors and the gods, but also to contribute to better re-humanise our world.



The Artists

**Dominique Zinkpè**

**Ishola Akpo**

**Moufouli Bello**

**Laeïla Adjovi**

**Rémy Samuz**

**Julien Sinzogan**

**François Aziangbé**

**Youss Atacora**

**Edwige Aplogan**

**Éliane Aïssou**

**Nathanaël Vodouhè**

**Tchif**

**Thierry Oussou**

Exhibition-Event from  
20 February to 22 May 2022  
Palais de la Marina, Cotonou, Benin

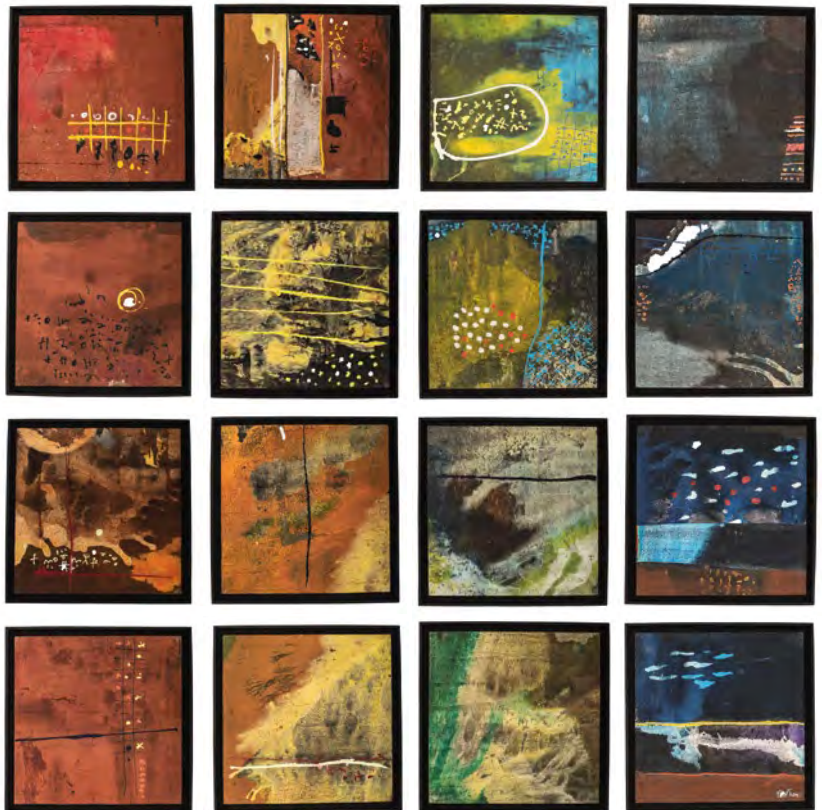


**“The artists  
lend body  
and life  
to the  
myths and  
legends.”**

**Julien Sinzogan**

***The Return of the Spirits, 2021***

Oil on canvas  
214 x 220 x 180 cm  
Artist's Collection  
© Julien Sinzogan, 2021  
Photo Credit: Yanick Folly



**Tchif**

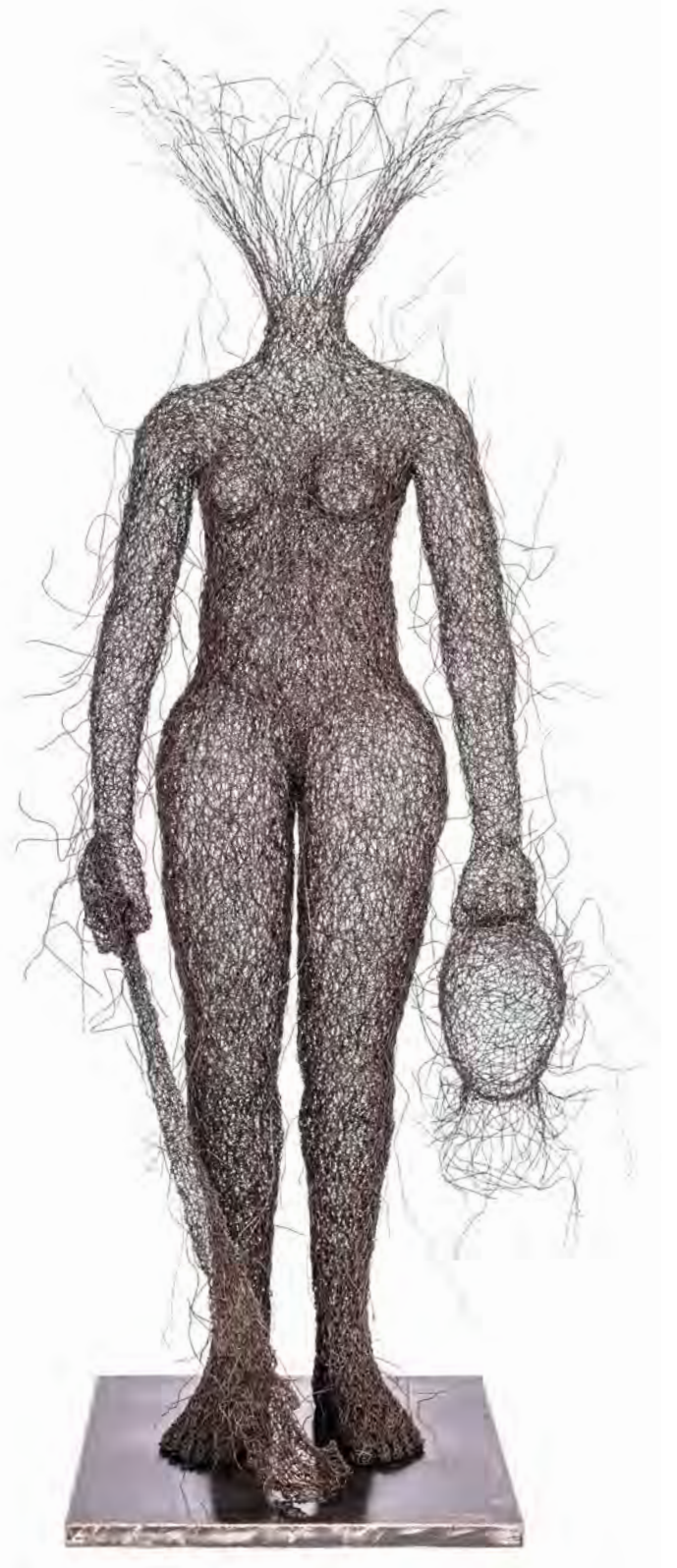
***Untitled, 2021***

Mixed media/acrylic on canvas  
250 x 250 cm  
Artist's Collection  
© Tchif, 2021  
Photo Credit: Yanick Folly



**Ishola Akpo**  
*Trace of a Queen XIV*, 2021  
Collage on cotton paper, thread  
79.5 x 62 cm  
Artist's Collection  
© Ishola Akpo, 2021

**“In this way,  
the woman  
becomes the  
link between  
the past, the  
present and  
the future.”**



**Rémy Samuz**  
*Amazon*, 2021  
Wire  
214 x 84 x 60 cm  
Artist's Collection  
© Rémy Samuz, 2021  
Photo Credit: Yanick Folly

Exhibition-Event from  
20 February to 22 May 2022  
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**Thierry Oussou**  
*Impossible is Nothing*  
2016-2018  
Video, duration: 9'54"  
Artist's Collection  
© Thierry Oussou, 2021



**Nathanaël Vodouhè**

*Metaphor*, 2020

Sculpture, burnt wood, pigments

Triptych:

226 x 25 x 25 cm

150 x 25 x 25 cm

226 x 22 x 22 cm

Collection La Galerie Nationale

© Nathanaël Vodouhè, 2021

Photo Credit: Fréjus Fioffi

# Transgression Transgression Hybridisation Hybridisation Hybridisation



## The Artists

**Georges Adéagbo**

**Ènami Donoumassou**

**Sébastien Boko**

**Gérard Quenum**

**Dimitri Fagbohoun**

**Emo de Medeiros**

**Romuald Hazoumè**

**King Houndépinkou**

**Meschac Gaba**

**Ponce Zannou**

**Louis Oké Agbo**

**Éric Médéda**

**Nobel Koty**

**Charly d'Almeida**

Introspection is at the heart of this sequence. The questions asked by the artists comprising it are existential in nature.

There lie, in these questions, concerns about the future of man and his projections towards better horizons, about the hybridisation of which he is the subject and his quest for identity that cannot be carried out without transgression.

Our identity is still under construction. It captures the elements that provide us with the context in which we live, but is also enriched by the contributions of our past, our multiple histories, myths and legends that have shaped our world.

The gods, old or new, the cyborg-like characters of **Gérard Quenum**, the Afro-futuristic robots of **Emo de Medeiros** or the vaporous shadows of **Ènami Donoumassou** are a measure of the man that we are in the process of making. A hybrid that is shared between the human being, the machine and the divine.

“There lie,  
in these  
questions,  
concerns  
about the  
future  
of man.”



**King Houndépinkou**

*The Widow of Light :  
Bleeding in while Shining out...  
Free Yourself*, 2019

Westerwald white stoneware  
(Germany), Betta clay (Benin),  
Tamba ochre stoneware (Japan),  
white glaze, silver  
52.5 x 36 x 36 cm

Artist's Collection  
© King Houndépinkou, 2021



**Louis Oké Agbo**

*Sun of Africa 1*, 2020

Colour print

90 x 60 cm

Artist's Collection

© Louis Oké Agbo, 2021

“A hybrid  
that is  
shared  
between  
the human  
being, the  
machine  
and the  
divine.”

**Dimitri Fagbohoun**  
*The Woman in Us*, 2021  
Mixed media on paper,  
glitter, glue, gold powder  
65 x 50 cm  
Private Collection  
© Dimitri Fagbohoun, 2021



**Charly d'Almeida**  
*Witnesses No. 1*, 2019  
Metal assemblage  
77 x 150 x 14 cm  
Artist's Collection  
© Charly d'Almeida, 2021  
Photo Credit: Yanick Folly



Exhibition-Event from  
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**Emo de Medeiros**  
*Vodunaut (Hyperdiver)*, 2012  
Acrylonitrile butadiene styrene,  
cowrie shell, smartphone, steel, NFC tag,  
polyvinyl chloride, paint, HD video  
32 x 32 x 35 cm  
Artist's Collection  
© Emo de Medeiros, 2021



**Gérard Quenum**  
*B Gravitation*, 2017  
Acrylic on canvas  
Diptych, 170 x 120 cm each  
Artist's Collection  
© Gérard Quenum, 2021

**Ishola Akpo**

***AGBARA Women Project***

(detail), 2021

Installation: 2 photos + 1 tapestry,

80 x 120 cm each

Artist's Collection

© Ishola Akpo, 2021



## Practical information

### Opening days and times:

From 20 February to 22 May 2022

Thursday and Friday from 3:00 pm to 6:30 pm

Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 am to 6:30 pm

**1 monthly event night  
every last Saturday of the month  
from 7 pm to 10 pm**

 [www.expoartbenin.bj](http://www.expoartbenin.bj)

 Art Du Bénin

 @artdubenin

 @artdubenin

Free public exhibition, online booking.

### Off-site

Meetings and debates, performances,  
screenings, artist studio tours.



**Dimitri Fagbohoun**

*Wings*, 2021

Weaving wire

Dimensions vary, (approx. 2 m)

Private collection

© Dimitri Fagbohoun, 2021



**Éric Médéda**

*Untitled* (detail), 2020

Acrylic on canvas

130 x 170 cm

Roufaï Collection

© Éric Médéda, 2021

Photo credit: Yanick Folly

Exhibition-Event from  
20 February to 22 May 2022  
Palais de la Marina, Cotonou, Benin



## Royal Treasures of Benin

Under the patronage of the  
Presidency of the Republic of Benin

Under the supervision of the Ministry of  
Tourism, Culture and Arts of Benin

Exhibition curator

**Agence Nationale de Promotion des  
Patrimoines et du Tourisme du Bénin (ANPT)**

Managing Director: José Pliya

Director General: Edmond Toli

Director of the museums' programme:

Alain Godonou

Scenographic direction

Scenography: Les Crayons

Nicolas Béquart

Marion Rivolier

Vania Peskine

Museography: Decalog

Jacques Bocquet

Alban Gassaud

Hélène Lemaire

Graphics:

Fabien Hahusseau

Julien Courtial

Lighting: Aura Studio

Vyara Stefanova

Mathilde Camoin

Tom Chabbat

Production companies

Furniture, fixtures and fittings:

Matières à Penser

Plinths: Version Bronze

Audiovisual production

Opixido

Photo credits

Alamy Stock Photo

Pauline Guyon

Press relations

Agence Communic'Art

**Press  
contacts**

Communic'Art:

Anais Tridon – atridon@communicart.fr – +33 (0)7 81 31 83 10

Adèle Godet – agodet@communicart.fr – +33 (0)6 30 79 44 80



## Contemporary Art of Benin

Under the patronage of the  
Presidency of the Republic of Benin

Under the supervision of the Ministry of  
Tourism, Culture and Arts of Benin

Exhibition curator

**The National Gallery**

General Manager: Léa Awunou Roufaï

Artistic and Commercial Director:

Yassine Lassissi

Artistic Council of the National Gallery

President:

Deputy Secretary-General of the Presidency:

Aristide Djidjoho

Members:

Deputy Director of the ANPT: José Pliya

Task officer for the President

of the Republic: Coline Toumson-Venite

Member: Idelphonse Affogbolo

Scenographic direction

Scenography: Les Crayons

Nicolas Béquart

Marion Rivolier

Vania Peskine

Scenography implementation:

Afrofusion Espaces and Design

Péroline Gonçalves

Museography: Decalog

Jacques Bocquet

Alban Gassaud

Hélène Lemaire

Graphics:

Fabien Hahusseau

Julien Courtial

Lighting: Aura Studio

Vyara Stefanova

Mathilde Camoin

Tom Chabbat

Production companies

Furniture, fittings and fixtures:

ATC-IB, Matières à Penser

Plinths: Arec et fils

Installation of audiovisual systems:

Arec et fils

Press relations

Agence Communic'Art

Press file

# Art du Bénin

Exhibition-event  
at the Marina Palace,  
Cotonou, Benin  
20 February - 22 May 2022

# d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, de la Restitution à la Révélation

Trésors royaux  
et Art  
contemporain  
du Bénin