

The New York Times



ELLIOTT VERDIER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A Painter Explores His Royal Roots

For Roméo Mivekannin, a French act of restitution to Benin is personal.

By FARAH NAYERI

PARIS — Even the palace doors were carted away. When French forces colonized the kingdom of Dahomey in the 1890s, they overthrew the ruler, King Behanzin, and looted everything left behind: elaborate thrones; ceremonial scepters; half man, half animal statues. The priceless treasures ended up in museums in France.

Soon, France will return 26 of those treasures to Benin, the West African nation

where the kingdom once was.

To one young contemporary artist, Roméo Mivekannin, this act of restitution has deep personal significance: He is King Behanzin's great-great-grandson. Raised in Benin and now living in France, Mivekannin, 34, has started exploring his royal roots with a series of large paintings, using strips of old bedsheets that are dipped in voodoo potions and then patched together. Rather than showing his ancestor at the pinnacle of his majesty, Mivekannin portrays the king as a fallen ruler, driven into exile.

As France is facing up to its colonial past, the artist is examining the many ways in which that past has shaped his own identity.

“That France is returning these treasures is a very meaningful gesture,” he said in a recent interview. “It’s a way for France to reset its relations with the nations of Africa.”

The 26 royal artifacts — all housed at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris — are the first set of objects to go back to sub-Saharan Africa since President Emmanuel Macron promised in 2017 to return some of the 90,000 pieces in French museums.

Their restitution required the French Parliament to approve of special legislation, a painstaking process that took two years. The logistics of the transfer, which the new

Roméo Mivekannin examines his own history in his work. “Behanzin, His Three Wives Standing, His Three Daughters” depicts his ancestors, including King Behanzin of Dahomey.

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law says must happen in 2021, are being worked out by the government of Benin, a Quai Branly spokesman said.

The return of the treasures is sure to burnish King Behanzin's legacy even further. He is a major figure not just to his relatives, but to people all over Africa, according to Gaëlle Beaujean, who oversees the Africa collections of the Quai Branly and wrote her doctoral thesis on the Dahomey treasures. Because the king ran a powerful army of male and female warriors and allied astutely with France's rival European powers, "it took the French a long time to colonize Dahomey," she said. When French forces finally advanced on the king's palace in Abomey, he set it ablaze, and fled north to organize a resistance.

Had he ruled at another time, he would have lasted longer, Beaujean said. "Behanzin was unable to govern properly, because he was dragged into the colonial conquest of Africa by the Europeans," she said. "He ended up alone, in exile, with a very small part of his family."

His descendants made sure to keep his reputation alive.

Mivekannin remembered hearing his grandmother — the king's granddaughter — praising Behanzin's resistance to the French invaders. She described him as "a very intelligent man who wouldn't let the Europeans have their way," Mivekannin said.

By then, Mivekannin's grandmother was leading a modern, urban existence in Cotonou, Benin's largest city. Yet she constantly reminded the boy of his royal lineage, Mivekannin said. Visitors from Abomey gave her a royal greeting, kneeling before her and pressing their forehead on the floor. When the young Mivekannin asked for sneakers like the ones his friends at school were wearing, he said his grandmother had told him that he didn't need any: He was a king, and kings never wore what regular people did.

Sent to France in 2004 to finish secondary school, Mivekannin faced a starkly different reality. For the first time, he was made to feel like an outsider because of the color of his skin. He said people viewed him as belonging to a completely different social category — one of blue-collar immigrants, child minders and household help.

After studying architecture in Toulouse, the city in southern France where he now lives with his wife and son, Mivekannin took up sculpture before switching to painting. His first works were abstract, and the response of a French gallerist shook him, he said. "The man said: 'You're Black. This is modern art. Why don't you tell your own story?'" he recalled. "I took it very badly, packed up my artworks and walked out. I

felt I was being reduced to the color of my skin."

"Then I realized that you need to confront your own history before you can move on and do something else," he said.

Mivekannin found inspiration in a 2019 exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris: "Black Models: From Géricault to Matisse," which focused on the African and Caribbean models pictured in French masterpieces. He started producing his own versions of 19th-century paintings on bedsheets and replacing the heads of one or more figures with his own.

In his version of Manet's "Olympia," he is the Black maid bearing the bouquet; unlike her, he looks right at the viewer. In his monumental interpretation of Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa," which was shown at the 1-54 African art fair in Paris in January, he appears as three of the shipwrecked figures.

Mivekannin said he decided to represent his royal ancestor after his first visit to the Palace of Abomey, anonymously, with a group of German tourists. "I knew that, deep inside, I was connected to this place," he said. "I felt regenerated. It was like a homecoming"

Why not show the king at the peak of his powers? "When I left home and moved to Europe, I realized that there was so much of my family history that I didn't know," he replied. "I discovered that my great-great-grandfather suffered enormously in exile. My work shows the hidden aspects of a family's life."

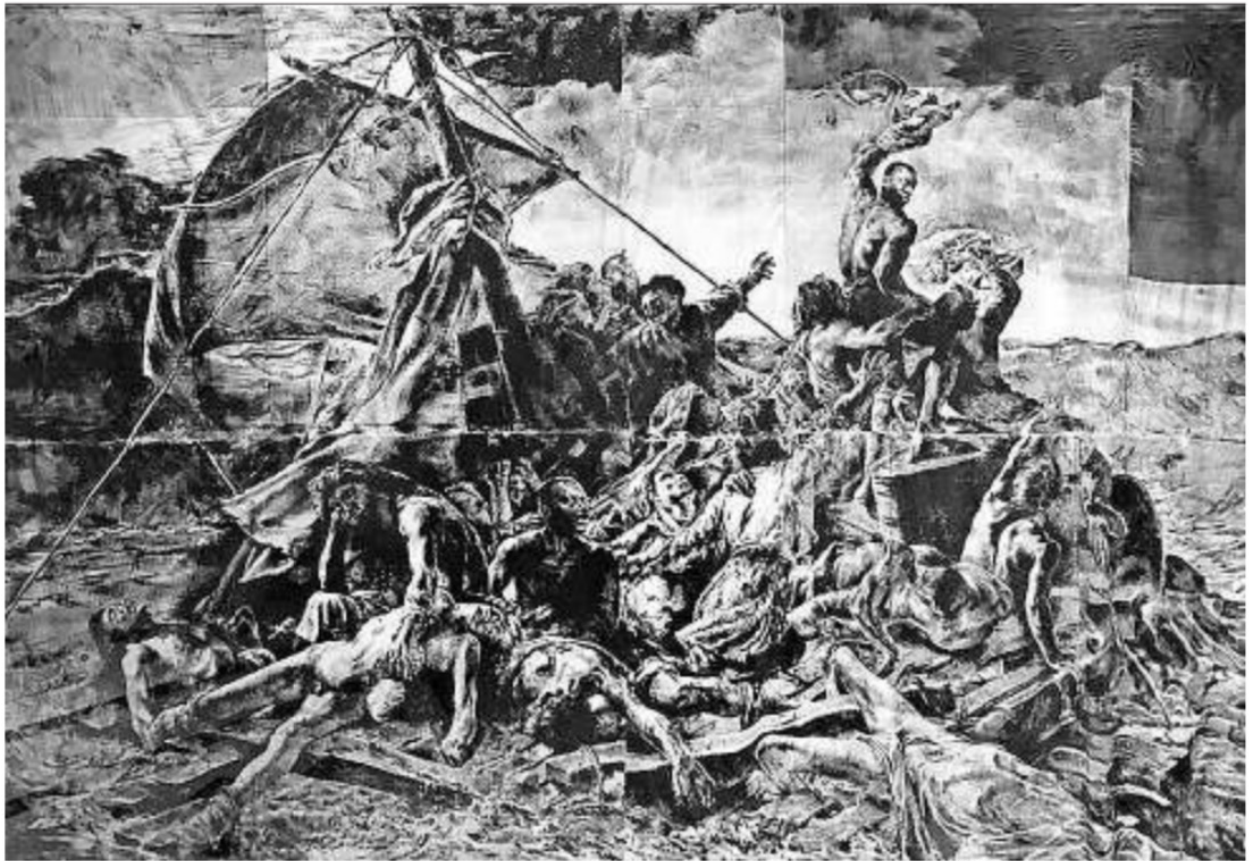
The series on Behanzin, which the artist is still working on, is scheduled to go on show later this year at the Galerie Eric Dupont in Paris. In an interview, Dupont said he was "totally blown away" when the artist stopped by a couple of years ago and spread his sheet paintings on the gallery floor. He signed on to represent the artist in Europe soon afterward.

"History is always told by the same people," Dupont said. "Roméo's work poses genuine questions. It tries to put things in their place."

Cécile Fakhoury, Mivekannin's gallerist in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, said that although the artist was descended from kings, he also felt a kinship with Black people who were the descendants of slaves. "There's a perpetual battle going on inside him," she said. "His work is all about this dual identity."

Mivekannin said that the return of the ancestral treasures would be a major personal milestone. When the works were looted more than a century ago, he said, "we were dispossessed, handicapped. A piece of something was torn off."

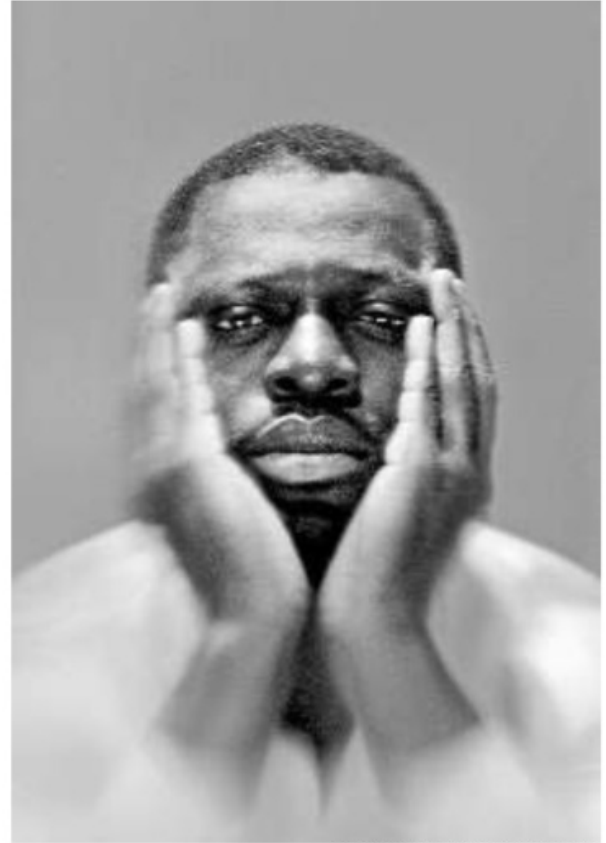
"Now, it's being put back," he said. "The king is finally going back home."



ROMÉO MIVEKANNIN AND GALERIE CÉCILE FAKHOURY



ROMÉO MIVEKANNIN AND GALERIE ERIC DUPONT, ELLIOTT VERDIER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



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Top: Roméo Mivekannin's "The Raft of the Medusa, After Théodore Géricault" is based on a painting at the Louvre. Mivekannin's face appears on three of the figures. Above from left: A likeness of Mivekannin's face from "Behanzin, His Three Wives Standing, His Three Daughters"; "I realized that you need to confront your own history before you can move on and do something else," the artist said.