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Citation:

Kelly, JA (2015) "Dahomey! Dahomey!": African Art in Paris in the Late 19th Century. *Journal of Art Historiography*, 12. ISSN 2042-4752

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'Dahomey!, Dahomey!': the reception of Dahomean art in France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

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This essay examines the ways in which art works from Dahomey were discussed and analysed after they were brought to France in the 1890s, following the French conquest of this West African kingdom in 1894. The cultural significance of a number of Dahomean sculptures, which entered the collection of the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum, was clear in accounts at the time. However, later art historical interpretations of the relationships between objects arriving from Africa in Europe and their role in artistic discourse largely overlook this, taking their bearings from artists' own statements about their non-western sources of inspiration. The supposed novelty in Paris of African masks, statuettes and ritual objects in the first decade of the twentieth century, enshrined in artists' accounts, ignored the presence in the city's major anthropological museum of objects which were already regarded as important courtly art from a longstanding historical kingdom. By contrast, the kinds of African art works that artists predominantly looked to were mysterious in origin, made by unknown hands, lacking specific histories.

The reception of Dahomean art works was complicated by the strong associations that developed in the European imagination between this kingdom and the ferocity of its sacrificial practices and fighting forces (for instance its famous women warriors). As this essay shows, these associations strengthened the perceived power of Dahomean art, as well as increasing the prestige of the French in having 'captured' them and brought them back to France. Artists and writers in the 20th century made use of Dahomey and its connotations, evoking the complex relationships between France and the African kingdom turned colony: André Salmon looked back at an image from a popular newspaper pinned on his wall as a child, showing French troops entering Dahomey's capital city Abomey, while Jean Genet invoked Dahomey's pre-colonial past.

Despite its presence in the French cultural imagination, however, Dahomey and its art did not seem to play a significant role as a formative influence for the artistic avant-garde in Paris in the 1900s and 1910s, at least according to the existing historical accounts of this period. That is to say, in the formal appropriations by artists in France from non-Western precedents in the early 20th century, the Dahomean sculptures in the Trocadero museum were notably absent. This essay also suggests some reasons for this absence: the large scale of these sculptures relative to the more collectible artefacts that were coming into the European market from Africa; and, more significantly perhaps, the history and meaning that they already embodied as courtly portraits of Dahomean kings. These were not free-floating 'exotic' objects onto which European fantasies could be projected. Then as

now, they did not fit into a paradigm of cross-cultural appropriation, their anthropological and artistic meanings intersecting in rich and complex ways.

In his 1958 play *The Blacks* (*Les nègres*), Jean Genet invoked the former African kingdom and French colony of Dahomey to represent the spirit of the whole African continent. The publication of his play coincided with the transformation of Dahomey from a part of colonial French West Africa to an independent state.¹ Genet's protagonist Felicity, a black Queen, utters the phrase 'Dahomey! Dahomey!' as a rallying cry: 'To the rescue, blacks from all corners of the earth.'² The reference to Dahomey here, at a time when royal artists in its capital city Abomey were becoming the subject of a new museum in the nascent liberated African country, and when Dahomean cultural heritage began to be officially recognised and its conservation actively pursued, encapsulates its evocative and powerful meanings for a European colonial (and post-colonial) audience. They were reminded of its status as a once-great kingdom with complex rules and customs, including sacrificial rites that led it to become synonymous with a certain kind of heightened savagery in the European imagination.³ Genet suggests a latent force ready to be unleashed again, in a striking passage further on in the play when Felicity's call to Dahomey is repeated:

Sulking Africa, worked in the fire, worked in iron, Africa of millions of royal slaves, deported Africa, drifting continent, are you there? Slowly you disappear, you withdraw into the past, into the tales of shipwrecks, colonial museums, the works of scholars, but I call you back this evening to attend a secret celebration.⁴

Dahomean rulers were of course also in the nineteenth century involved in the passage of slaves. Genet's references to iron also tantalisingly suggest one of the most famous of Dahomey's art works in French collections, the iron sculpture dedicated to Gou, known previously as the Fon God of War, which by the 1950s had

¹ The Fifth Republic was introduced in October 1958, and Dahomey became an official independent state in 1960. Its name was changed to Benin in 1975.

² Jean Genet, *Les nègres*, Paris: Marc Barbezat-L'Arbalète, 1958, 55 (my translation).

³ The Abomey Museum had been planned since the late 1930s, and opened in 1944. A guide by Jacques Lombard and Paul Mercier, two French ethnologists, was published in 1959. The restoration of the Abomey royal palaces had been mooted since early in the 20th century, but in 1960 Dahomey received its first UNESCO funding for their restoration, and they have since been placed on the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger. See Francesca Piqué and Leslie H. Rainer, *Palace Sculptures of Abomey, History told on walls*, Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 1999, 43, available at http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/pdf/palace1.pdf (accessed 12/5/15).

⁴ Genet, 80.

already been shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1935, and would feature as one of the 'masterpieces' of the Musée de l'Homme in 1965 [fig. 1].⁵



Figure 1 Ekplékendo, Akati (19th cent.): *Sculpture dédiée à Gou* (*Sculpture devoted to Gou, God of Iron and Warfare* (front view). Ethnic group: Fon. From: Abomey (Zou), Benin, Africa, (before 1858). Paris, Musée du quai Branly. Wrought iron and wood, h. 165cm. Inv.: 71.1894.32.1, from the Musée de l'Homme.© 2015. Musée du quai Branly, photo Hughes Dubois/Scala, Florence.

Genet was writing at a moment when intellectuals in France and its former colonies had begun to engage in serious critiques of colonialism.⁶ This essay will go

⁵ This sculpture, dated to before 1858 and attributed to the Fon artist Akati Ekplékendo, is in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly, and on show in the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, a display of 108 pieces of non-western art selected for their aesthetic merit. See the entry by Marlène Biton in Jacques Kerchache (ed.), *Sculptures: Afrique, Asie, Océanie, Amériques*, Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2000, 110-12, and Maureen Murphy, 'Du champ de bataille au musée: les tribulations d'une sculpture fon', in *Histoire de l'art et anthropologie*, Paris: INHA/ musée du quai Branly ('Les actes'), 2009, <http://actesbranly.revues.org/213> (accessed 12/5/15).

⁶ See for instance Michel Leiris, 'L'ethnographe devant le colonialisme', *Les Temps modernes*, 58 (1950), 357-74, Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Paris: Réclame, 1950 and Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris: Seuil, 1952.

back to an earlier moment around the turn of the century, when the French colonial conquest of Dahomey was still fresh in the mind, and when artists in Europe were apparently about to open their eyes to the art of Africa as a new source of inspiration and viable cultural reference. Sitting amongst these too are 'the tales of shipwrecks, colonial museums, the works of scholars': the mediating contexts of travel accounts, nascent ethnography and the museum that transmitted and transformed information and objects gleaned in the field in their transition from Africa to Europe.

The set of circumstances that allowed European modernist artists to begin to appreciate and draw inspiration from non-Western art forms (especially those from Africa), has been the subject of much art historical speculation.⁷ Combinations of people, dates, places and texts have been mooted, often on the basis of retrospective accounts by artists themselves written or recorded in the 1930s and 1940s. One of the most famous examples of this is Maurice de Vlaminck's account of acquiring African art in 1905, set out in his autobiographical narrative *Portraits avant décès* of 1943. Vlaminck's account of his first acquisition of African objects, which he locates in 1905, appears to locate him as the first European artist explicitly to do so.⁸ In it, he describes going into a bistro in Argenteuil, having spent some time painting the Seine and the nearby quayside:

Sailors and coal-stevedores were gathered round the counter. While sipping my white wine and seltzer, I noticed, on the shelf behind the bar, between the bottles of Pernod, anisette, and curaçao, three Negro sculptures. Two were statuettes from Dahomey, daubed in yellow ochre, and white, and the third, from the Ivory Coast, was completely black.⁹

Vlaminck goes on to describe how these sculptures 'really struck me' in a way that had not been possible previously, having visited the Trocadero with Derain in the past to find there only 'barbarous fetishes'. Suddenly he was aware that these were 'the expression of an instinctive art', providing him with a moment of revelation and emotion. Vlaminck then recounts how he bought the sculptures after having to work hard to convince the owner of the bistro to part with them.

Jean-Michel Paudrat has examined in detail the historical evidence for Vlaminck's claim to have begun collecting African art in 1905, and found it impossible to verify.¹⁰ But if Vlaminck's account has little factual basis, it is

⁷ The major accounts of this include Robert Goldwater's seminal *Primitivism in Modern Art* [1938], New York: Random House, 1967, and the 2-volume catalogue edited by William Rubin, *"Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984.

⁸ See the excerpts published in Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (eds), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art, A Documentary History*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003, 27-28.

⁹ Flam (2003), 27.

¹⁰ Paudrat, 'From Africa', in Rubin (1984), 139. Paudrat claims that Vlaminck's acquisition of the Dahomey statuettes may have taken place in March 1906, but places the real beginnings

extremely interesting as an evocatively embellished, quasi-fictive, recollection of this period. Its setting in the Argenteuil bistro in the company of 'sailors and stevedores' is significant, as this location far from the sea is nevertheless connected to a wider context of international shipping trade and the movement of people and artefacts across oceans, reflecting the trajectories of explorers, missionaries and anthropologists in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A well-known photograph of André Derain's studio in c.1912-13 showing African masks and statues alongside a model ship evokes the same associations.¹¹ The fact that the works that caught Vlaminck's eye were from Dahomey and the Ivory Coast, both important locations in the 19th-century slave trade, is surely of significance: where once human beings were shipped and sold, now their effigies were circulated, providing a connection with living people far from the French dockyard bistro. An implicit irrationality is a theme lurking in Vlaminck's account: the sculptures arrayed next to bottles of exotic liqueurs, him enjoying an afternoon of drinking, the fact that he asked himself whether his exposure to the sun while painting *en plein air* had contributed to his sudden appreciation of these African pieces.

The Dahomean works that Vlaminck described having bought have not been traced. His account does evoke, however, statuettes of a kind that were very similar in appearance and technique to Yoruba sculptures, made of polychrome wood. The works that Vlaminck refers to are small in scale, which is understandable given their probable status as sailors' souvenirs, possibly even what we would now call 'tourist' art that was traded in the ports of the Slave Coast. It was not, as we shall see, the grand courtly art that had been brought back to France with great fanfare when Dahomey fell to the French in the 1890s, whose explicit presence in artists' accounts of their interest in African objects in the early 20th century is bewilderingly sparse. When artists began 'suddenly' to appreciate African art in this period, their own descriptions and subsequent scholarly analyses looked above all to small-scale masks, statuettes and so-called fetishes as of particular interest and inspiration.

Another of the important (and similarly retrospective) accounts of this phenomenon, was Pablo Picasso's notorious recollection of visiting the Trocadero Museum in 1906-7 which he recounted to André Malraux in 1937, and which the latter then included in a publication of 1974. Here, Picasso specifically referred to the impact upon him of 'masks', and created a distinction between sculptures which were already well known to the European public and were perceived as belonging to significant ancient courtly civilisations in Northern Africa and the Middle East, and the more unfamiliar and less 'civilised' works from West and Central Africa: 'The masks weren't like other kinds of sculpture. Not at all. They were magical things. And why weren't the Egyptian or the Chaldean pieces?...Those were primitive [archaic], not magical things. The Negroes' sculptures were intercessors...'.¹²

of an 'encounter with African art' in the autumn of 1906, Paudrat in Rubin (1984), 141. See also Flam, 'Matisse and the Fauves', in Rubin (1984), 214-15.

¹¹ This photograph is reproduced in Rubin (1984), 225.

¹² Picasso, 'Discovery of African Art. 1906-1097', in Flam (2003), 33.

In the extensive scholarly literature that has arisen in relation to this subject, which used to go by the name of modernist 'primitivism', certain encounters of people, objects and corresponding art works by Western artists appear to have become established truths. One example of this is the connection between paintings by Picasso and Kota reliquary figures from the then French Congo, present in the collections of the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum since the early 1880s, a connection first made by John Golding and reiterated in the work of William Rubin and Patricia Leighton amongst others.¹³ For example, Leighton connects Picasso's *Demoiselles* to a particular object, the Kota reliquary figure brought from the French Congo to the Trocadero in 1883, using this as a crucial example of how Picasso conflated his figures 'with recognisably African forms'.¹⁴ Kota reliquary figures, and similar examples, have borne considerable conceptual weight in the construction of this historical moment of 'primitivism', despite the fact that they are quite modest in scale, particularly in the context of the collection of the Trocadero at the turn of the century. Why should they be seen to be so crucial for this moment? And why, conversely, have sculptures from Dahomey, striking symbolic figures carved on a large scale, one of the focal points of the Trocadero's African collections at that time – carrying with them all sorts of associations about both the perceived power and significance of the Dahomean kingdoms between the 17th and 19th centuries – not played a more central role in scholarly accounts of the cross-cultural artistic encounters of this period? Given that artists did visit the Trocadero museum in the early years of the 20th century, the reasons for privileging certain African art works over others, both at the time and in subsequent art historical readings, poses a historical conundrum, for which this essay will propose some tentative solutions.

Dahomey had a high profile in the French public imagination due to its supposed notoriety as a location for excessive savagery, a perception fuelled by the popular press and by the presentation of Dahomean subjects as living exhibits in the Exposition Universelle of 1900, particularly the notorious 'amazon' women warriors.¹⁵ Dahomey, as Christopher Green has put it '...became almost synonymous as a name with an especially terrifying notion of the "primitive Other", one built around travellers' tales that had produced an entire mythology of human sacrifice and cannibalism'.¹⁶ However, as we shall see, the critical reception and presentation of Dahomean artefacts in the late 19th century provided a very different picture of its

¹³ John Golding, 'The *Demoiselles d'Avignon*', *The Burlington Magazine*, 100: 662 (1958), 155-63; Rubin, 'Picasso', in Rubin (1984), 266-67; Leighton, 'Colonialism, *l'art nègre* and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*', in Christopher Green (ed.), *Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 77-103.

¹⁴ Leighton (2001), 79. For this sculpture, see <http://collections.quaibranly.fr/#ad07c5da-2d82-439e-ad1f-f760d68a1d71> (accessed 12/5/15).

¹⁵ See Suzanne Preston Blier, 'Les Amazones à la rencontre de l'Occident', in Nicolas Barcel et al (eds), *Zoos humains: Au temps des exhibitions humaines*, Paris: La Découverte, 2004, 136-141.

¹⁶ Green, "'Naked Problems"? "Sub-African Caricatures"? *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, African, and Cubism', in Green (2001), 130.

culture, subsumed by the 'dark' Dahomey that is presumed to dominate accounts of the period and subsequently.¹⁷

In the artistic discourses of the early 20th century, references to Dahomey are more nuanced than we might imagine, particularly regarding the status of its cultural products. Beyond Vlaminck's 'witness statement', so difficult to interpret, the kind of evidence that exists for artists' engagement with Dahomean artefacts mainly takes the form of journalistic accounts. The American Gelett Burgess, writing in 1910 about a visit to Paris a couple of years earlier, pointed to artists' interests in non-western objects, and provided a list of precursors for their new 'universe of ugliness': 'I had studied the gargoyles of Oxford and Notre Dame, I had mused over the art of the Niger and of Dahomey, I had gazed at Hindu monstrosities, Aztec mysteries and many other primitive grotesques...'.¹⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire also commented on artists' uses of African and Oceanic artefacts, as well as on the status and function of the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum in his articles for *Paris-Journal* and *Le Journal du soir*. In 'Exoticism and Ethnography', published in 1912, he famously picked out from the 'curiosities' housed in the languishing Trocadero '...that pearl of the Dahomean collection: the large iron statue representing the God of war, which is without doubt the most unexpected of art works, and one of the most graceful in Paris'.¹⁹ [see fig. 1]

For Apollinaire, the interest of this sculpture lay in its departure from figurative conventions: 'The human figure certainly inspired this unusual object. And yet none of the elements that make up this witty and profound invention resemble any detail of the human body. The black artist was evidently creative'.²⁰ Apollinaire's description taps into one of the central questions raised in the Western reception of non-Western, and especially African, works: familiarity and otherness. The God of War is 'like' a human figure as the Western tradition would recognise it, but it is also profoundly 'other': different in every detail, the product of an inventive mind.

In the same year, André Salmon included in his 'Anecdotal History of Cubism' an account of the genesis of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which included a reference, albeit vague, to Dahomean works, as well as reinforcing the distance between such art and that of Egypt:

Already the artist had a passion for the art of the Negroes, which he ranked far above that of the Egyptians. His enthusiasm was not based upon an

¹⁷ On the construction of the image of Dahomey through the press in the late nineteenth century, see Véronique Champion-Vincent, 'L'image du Dahomey dans la presse française (1890-1895): les sacrifices humaines', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 7:25 (1967), 27-58, http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/cea_0008-0055_1967_num_7_25_3088 (accessed 12/5/15).

¹⁸ Flam (2003), 38.

¹⁹ Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Exotisme et ethnographie' (*Paris-Journal*, 10 September 1912), in *Oeuvres en prose complètes*, vol. II (eds Pierre Caizergues and Michel Décaudin), Paris: Gallimard, 1991, 473 (my translation).

²⁰ Apollinaire, 474.

empty taste for the picturesque. The Polynesian or Dahomeian images appeared 'rational' to him...²¹

Salmon's assessment of the impact of this work upon Picasso echoes Apollinaire's discussion of the God of War, in its emphasis on an otherness that was in its way also inherently logical, with its own coherence and 'rationality', despite apparent difference.²²

Almost a decade later, in his essay 'L'Art nègre' published in *Propos d'atelier* of 1922, Salmon again mentioned Picasso's interest in Dahomean objects, but now revealed the source of his own preconceptions at the time, of that particular African country and its culture:

If I, to whom Picasso showed some examples of Dahomean statues whose purity I could not grasp, glimpsed a savage beauty in them however tempered by a traveller's concept of the picturesque, I still kept a very crude colour illustration from the *Petit Journal*, of the kind that ordinary French people cut out to decorate their walls, showing crimes, catastrophes or military or Republican acts of prowess. It showed the first soldiers of General Doods [sic] entering Abomey, laughing at Dahomean idols with heads like jackals, buffalos or unimaginable monsters.²³

Salmon went on to wish for the existence of a narrative of cultural encounter written not by an artist, but by one of the soldiers involved: 'I always waited for a well-read soldier to write a poignant account of the shock of his old civilised certainties and these monuments of a new beauty, older than any familiar to us. That soldier's book never appeared. The picturesque was blinding'.²⁴

The image to which Salmon referred was probably the cover of the illustrated supplement to *Le Petit Journal* of 26 November 1892 [fig. 2]. This showed French troops confronting and ridiculing 'The Fetishes of Kana' and 'The God of War', as part of the campaign led by General Alfred-Amédée Dodds (whose name Salmon misremembers). Three statues are depicted: one a dog-like form with an elongated muzzle (Salmon's 'jackal'), one a seated female figure holding a bowl on her head, with scarification marks on her chest and face,²⁵ and the third, central

²¹ André Salmon, 'Histoire anecdotique du cubisme' (*La jeune peinture française*, 1912), in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1968, 200 and 202.

²² On the contradictions between the 'rational' or 'reasonable' here and 'the vocabulary of horror' implicit in Salmon's account, see Green, "'Naked Problems'?", in Green (2001), 136 and passim.

²³ Salmon, 'L'art nègre', in *Propos d'atelier*, Paris: G. Crès, 1922, 124.

²⁴ Salmon (1922), 124.

²⁵ A similar sculpture to this can be found in the collection of the British Museum in London, see the Fon 'Caryatid figure with offering' from Benin in Tom Phillips (ed.), *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, London: Royal Academy, 1995, 429.

statue a standing figure holding up a sword and with a bull's head (the 'buffalo').²⁶ At the left in the background of the image the animal heads of further sculpted figures flanking the pillars of a building can be seen. The French soldiers adopt relaxed poses as they stand back and contemplate the sculptures, one gesturing towards them while another smokes a cigarette, hands behind his back.



Figure 2 Front cover of *Le Petit Journal, Supplément illustré*, 26 November 1892. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

If Dahomey was known in the late 19th century for its fierce and powerful warriors, in this image its threat is fully subjugated. King Behanzin's forces are absent, and their stand-ins are three figures of fun wheeled in on a wooden cart, symbolic statues now in the colonisers' possession. The 'God of War', presumably here the central bull-headed figure with the raised sword, was clearly supposed to

²⁶ The same three figures can be seen in an illustration from an account by the sub-lieutenant Henri Morienval *La Guerre du Dahomey*, 1893, 197, an image reproduced in Stanley B. Alpern, *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey*, New York: New York University Press, 1998, between 200 and 201.

be contrasted with the superior military presence of the French, with their array of military equipment. The image also set up a series of loaded contrasts between clothed and unclothed figures, heavy boots and bare feet, white uniforms and a black body. The Dahomean women 'Amazon' fighting forces were another well-known aspect of the kingdom's mythology, while here a woman is only present through a passive seated female figure, seated awkwardly with legs splayed in front of her and holding aloft an offering bowl: hardly ready to resist or attack. The association of Dahomey with the slave trade, whose phasing out was seen at the time as one of the reasons for the kingdom's decline (and thus need to be 'redeemed' by the French colonisers), is also evoked in this image, given the visual echo of the slave auction in the three sculpted figures paraded on the cart.²⁷

There is a power dynamic at play in such images that has to do with proving superiority by belittling the products of a conquered colony. Photographs of the British forces following their 'punitive' raid on Benin City in Nigeria in 1897 show soldiers arrogantly sitting on top of piles of looted booty, arms crossed in a gesture of victorious confidence, while the objects collected in 'retribution' include examples of the 'bronze' sculptures that became so prized (and contentious) on their return to Britain.²⁸ Such images demonstrate the power of the colonising forces, able even to treat the most valued objects of the cultures they encounter with relative disdain. There is an intriguing parallel here with the notorious potlatch ceremonies as seen through Western eyes, particularly those in which (according to observers) displays of great wealth and symbolic importance are paraded and then destroyed.

The kingdom of Abomey was captured by the French forces in 1894, after a campaign lasting nearly 20 years. King Gezu, who had ruled between 1818 and 1858, signed a commercial treaty with France in 1851, but his successor son Glele (reigning 1858-89) had provoked a series of hostilities between France and Dahomey. A first French military expedition led by Dodds in 1890-91 against King Behanzin (reigning 1889-94) was followed by a second in 1892, which led to the eventual surrender of Behanzin and the capture of Abomey and other strategic sites in Dahomey. While the sculptures shown on the cover of *Le Petit Journal* apparently did not make their way back to France, another group of Dahomean works did, and aroused considerable interest. Dodds, born in Senegal to a French father and Senegalese mother, seized a number of 'trophies' from the beleaguered city to which the departing Dahomeans had set fire: three large wooden statues of Dahomey's kings [see figs. 3 and 4], as well as four relief doors from the Palace of Abomey, which the soldiers had discovered half buried in the earth, and thus preserved from harm, and which were given to the Trocadero in 1893. Despite the image discussed above showing the French soldiers making fun of Dahomean sculptures, the French

²⁷ On Dahomey's ailing slave trade, which was supposedly continuing clandestinely, see the preface by E. Levasseur to Edouard Foà, *Le Dahomey: Histoire-Géographie-Moeurs-Coutumes-Commerce-Industrie-Expéditions françaises 1891-1894*, Paris: Hennuyer, 1895, xi.

²⁸ See for example the photograph in the collection of the British Museum published by Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, 8.

clearly identified another set of works from the former kingdom as holding great symbolic religious and political meaning, hence the importance of 'capturing' them and taking them back to France with them. These works were joined by a royal throne from Cana (a town which was the burial site of previous Dahomean kings), and by the iron God of War in 1894, taken by Captain Eugène Fonsagrives from Ouidah, Dahomey's major port.²⁹

The Trocadero museum in the early 1890s did already contain a few Dahomean sculptures: artefacts collected by a colonial administrator in 1889 and by Edouard Foà between 1886 and 1890, given to the museum in 1891.³⁰ Foà's collection also contained a large number of 'objects', as well as musical instruments and textile samples.³¹ But the new looted material from Abomey, Cana and Ouidah that came to the museum in 1894 was seen as much more significant, due to the context of its acquisition. An article by Guy Tomel in *Le Monde illustré* published on 10 February 1894, discussed the new art works that had arrived in the Trocadero, and quoted from a letter sent by Dodds to the French Marine Ministry dated 26 January (and apparently received on 1 February) announcing the surrender of Behanzin.³² The symbolism of the material shipped back to France by the conquering troops was made clear in this journalist's account:

Will Behanzin be kept in Senegal, banished to some penitentiary colony or interned in France? No resolution has yet been made in this respect: but what is certain is that his throne is no more...except in the Trocadero where it features among the objects General Dodds brought back from Dahomey...³³

Tomel's account also described how the four palace doors were buried as Abomey was attacked, conjecturing that this meant that 'Behanzin and his followers probably attached a great value to them'. His article is notable for the connection it makes between the 'glory' of the successful French colonial military campaign and the corresponding worth and value of the objects looted, as if to justify the former via the latter.

Far from being objects of ridicule, then, the 'monumental pieces' from Dahomey that were brought back to France were 'the most beautiful specimens of black industry that we own',³⁴ and the three statues of particular interest:

²⁹ Gaëlle Beaujean-Baltzer, 'Du trophée à l'oeuvre: parcours de cinq artefacts du royaume d'Abomey', *Gradhiva*, 6 (2007), 70-85, <http://gradhiva.revues.org/987> (accessed 12/5/15).

³⁰ Paudrat in Rubin (1984), 131.

³¹ These are searchable as a collection linked to Foà on the Musée du Quai Branly website, see <http://collections.quaibrantly.fr/#9ca6ed27-a724-48c3-bf4d-74b29e03dc8d> (accessed 12/5/15).

³² Guy Tomel, 'Le trône de Behanzin', *Le Monde illustré* (10 February 1894), 87 and 90.

³³ Tomel, 87.

³⁴ Tomel, 87.

Upon seeing them we cannot help but think of the monstrous idols of the ancient Phoenicians. But their Moloch or Astarte did not have such well thought-out forms. We are far here in any case from the crude fetishes of New Caledonia.

In the rudimentary art of barbarous peoples there are stages of development. Our new protégés, the Dahomeans, seem to occupy one of the highest of these. What is more they have always been taken for one of the most talented black races.³⁵

The inherent value to the French of these objects probably also accounts for the attention paid to one of the three statues of kings then displayed in the Trocadero: the supposed effigy of King Glele in the form of a man-lion.³⁶ According to Tomel's account, this was damaged by the subjects of King Tofa in Porto Novo during its transit to France, who apparently recognised their former enemy and attacked his sculpted head with swords.³⁷ A new head was carved in France by the Trocadero's conservator, Jules Hébert (1854-1952), following drawings made by Fonsagrives of the statues in their original state.³⁸ While this statue was apparently damaged while still in Africa, parts of the Abomey palace doors were allegedly damaged by the Parisian public while on display at the Trocadero, the copper plaques that once protected their corners pilfered by visitors.³⁹

One of the important factors in Tomel's high valuation of the objects from Dahomey was, according to his account, their legibility and recognisability. Tomel's assessment coincided with the 'rankings' of ethnographic objects published by the archaeologist Edme-François Jomard in 1862 which was seen as formative for the evolution of the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum by its founder, Ernest-Théodore Hamy. In Jomard's 'methodical classification' of non-Western artefacts, first place was reserved for representations of the human form:

...we know that in many countries there are...natives who turn their hand, not without success, to imitating portraits, even to the composition of whole figures and figurines, in relief, with original physiognomies and dressed according to their situation, their caste, their profession, giving to each one the colour of their race and their distinctive character.⁴⁰

³⁵ Tomel, 90.

³⁶ Tomel identifies this as the most 'impressive', 90.

³⁷ Porto-Novo had been a separate kingdom at the end of the nineteenth century, ruled by King Tofa since 1874, and continually coming into conflict with Dahomey and requiring French protection. It became the capital of French Dahomey.

³⁸ I can find no trace of Eugène Fonsagrives' drawings. Fonsagrives gave the God of War to the Trocadero.

³⁹ This is suggested by Maurice Delafosse in one of his articles on the Dahomean material, 'Le Trône de Béhanzin et les portes des palais d'Abomé au Musée ethnographique du Trocadéro', *La Nature*, 1090 (21 April 1894), 328.

⁴⁰ Jomard, 'Classification méthodique des produits de l'industrie extra-européenne ou objets provenant des voyages lointains, suivie du plan de la classification d'une collection

The final place in Jomard's schema, class 10, was reserved for what he called 'objets de culte', which in a footnote were revealed as taxonomically impossible: 'The rank that cult objects occupy is outside all classification'.⁴¹ The Dahomean statues of Kings Gezu, Glele and Behanzin were of course both 'portraits' and 'cult objects'. These two poles mapped out, arguably, the contested terrain of the reception and evaluation of non-western objects in late 19th-century and early 20th-century Europe, where writers and theorists struggled to make them fit into both established Western categories for art works and art production, and to correspond to ethnographic models of understanding.



Fig. 3 'Emblèmes des rois dahomiens, Guezou (le coq), Glé-lé (le lion), Behanzin (le requin)', and 'Behanzin and his family', from Eduoard Foà, *Le Dahomey. Histoire–Géographie–Moeurs–Coutumes–Commerce–Industrie–Expéditions françaises (1891–1894)*, Paris: Hennuyer, 1893, facing page 53.

The status of the Dahomean royal statues as portraits was implicit in an image published in Foà's account of the time he spent in Dahomey between 1886 and 1890, where the three statues are shown in juxtaposition with an image of 'Behanzin and his family'.⁴² [fig. 3] Behanzin is seated in this image, and wears his kingly robes, while around him his sons and other members of his family are arranged, some with arms crossed in poses of defiance. The warring gesture adopted by the three statues pictured above them, which Maurice Delafosse would

ethnographique complète' (1862), reproduced in Ernest-Théodore Hamy, *Les Origines du Musée d'ethnographie* [1889], Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1988, 274.

⁴¹ Jomard 'Des Collections ethnographiques' (1845), in Hamy (1988), 257.

⁴² Edouard Foà, facing page 53.

describe as 'that of a boxer preparing to attack'⁴³, along with drawings of the reliefs on the palace doors come together to create an image of royal power and influence.

Foà's account, although referring to a period he spent in Dahomey prior to its subjugation by the French, was published in 1895, after the material in this image had been installed in the Trocadero. This image then also served to validate the acquisition of the Dahomean artefacts, and to reinforce their connection to the Dahomean royal family. While many of the objects that arrived at the Trocadero during the late 19th century were from unknown sources and of unknown function, collected by missionaries or travellers, the collection of Dahomean sculptures and reliefs represented a rare example where their origins, and significantly, their connection to real living people, were known.

The arrival of the looted material from Dahomey at the Trocadero and its subsequent display was the subject of three articles in *La Nature* in 1894 by the anthropologist Maurice Delafosse. The first of these on the 'Statues of the Kings of Dahomey', published in March, opened with a strident rebuke to anyone who might doubt the artistic value of the former kingdom's artefacts:

One opinion, which is unfortunately quite widespread, tends to see blacks in general and the Dahomeans in particular as inferior beings, incapable of any elevated or artistic feeling. The few objects that we could save from the Abomey fire and which are exhibited at the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum are here to prove the opposite.⁴⁴

Delafosse's optimism was however tempered by his perception that these works were nevertheless relatively crude in execution. In fact he traced a development in artistic skill through the statues of Gezu, Glele and Behanzin respectively, based on their relative ages: that of Gezu being already about 75 years old and the most crudely carved, while that of Behanzin showed 'a real progress, a more vivid care for form, a more meticulous care for detail'.⁴⁵ The three sculptures thus presented a potted history of the development of Dahomean art.

In Delafosse's reading, the statue of Gezu was meant to represent the grandfather of Behanzin as a man-cockerel, in keeping with his nickname 'the cock', and its wooden surface bore traces of a series of metal blades and nails that once adorned it, intended to represent feathers.⁴⁶ The statue was later thought to have been erroneously identified with a Dahomean king, and instead to be a so-called power figure or *bocio* common among the Fon.⁴⁷ Its role as the cornerstone to the

⁴³ Maurice Delafosse, 'Statues des rois de Dahomé au Musée ethnographique du Trocadéro', *La Nature*, 1086 (24 March 1894), 263.

⁴⁴ Delafosse (March 1894), 262.

⁴⁵ Delafosse (March 1894), 262.

⁴⁶ Delafosse (March 1894), 262.

⁴⁷ The misidentification was first posited by Emmanuel Georges Waterlot in 1926, in the study he produced as the first in the series published by the new French Ethnological Institute, *Les Bas-Reliefs des Bâtiments royaux d'Abomey (Dahomey)*, Paris: Université de Paris, 1926. The sculpture formerly thought to be Gezu was moved from display and put into

Dahomean dynasty of kings though, at this moment in the late nineteenth century, was significant. To include Gezu, and to position him as the formative ancestor of his successors had a strategic value, given that he was thought of as the 'good' king in recent Dahomean history from the French point of view: the appeaser who had entered into contact and signed contracts with the French, allowing for trade and the presence of missionaries, and the 'humanitarian' ruler who had toned down the notorious Dahomean sacrificial 'customs'. His two sons, by contrast, under pressure from their priests and 'Amazon' warriors, were seen to have relapsed into more elaborate and cruel sacrificial practices, as well as actively flouting agreements with the French.⁴⁸

If Gezu was painted a brown-red colour with striped brown and yellow shorts, Glele, the lion-man, was painted red with green shorts, his fur represented by marks in the wood while his hands and feet remained recognisably human.⁴⁹ Behanzin, the shark-man, had a green head and black body. The latter statue had already lost the bottom part of its jaw before being taken by Dodds and his soldiers: jaws, according to Delafosse, which were intended to symbolically devour Europeans, based on the imagery of a royal sceptre also acquired which represented a shark biting a white person.⁵⁰ These meanings shed further light on the importance of acquiring these works for the conquering French. Delafosse also pointed to scenes of Europeans fighting with Dahomeans in the palace door reliefs, where the latter were 'always victorious'.⁵¹ To overcome a people whose military confidence was inscribed extensively in their visual iconography was doubly gratifying: a coup of high political value.

The restoration of the statue of Glele (the lion-man) by the Trocadero's technician was surely significant. Many artefacts which entered the museum's collection in this period were partial and fragmentary, and their status as such arguably bolstered European perceptions of their role in 'rescuing' cultures on the brink of collapse (the premise of what is now called 'salvage' anthropology). Here, the statue was not only 'saved', plucked from the fire that the Dahomeans had set, but also restored to its 'original' state by Hébert, the Trocadero's sculptor-technician. It was clearly seen as important enough to warrant a reconstruction. This was in contrast, for example, to the fate of artefacts like the Kota reliquary figures, whose 'sculptural' element was preserved, while the bundles of ancestral bones to which they were affixed and which formed an integral part of their meaning and function, were routinely discarded and did not make it back into European ethnographic museums. Indeed, Salmon in 'L'art nègre' described the ways in

storage, see Beaujean-Baltzer. It was included in the Royal Academy in London's extensive survey of African art, see Phillips (1995), 431. The most exhaustive account of the *bocio* as a genre is given by Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology and Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

⁴⁸ Delafosse (March 1894), 264-5.

⁴⁹ Delafosse (March 1894), 263.

⁵⁰ Delafosse (March 1894), 263.

⁵¹ Delafosse (March 1894), 263.

which unwanted appurtenances were (deservedly) left behind by collectors to focus on the 'naked beauties' of Africa sculpture.⁵²

The restoration of the sculpture of Glele implied its 'realism': its portrait status, and proximity to something the Western artistic canon could understand, meant that it could be reinstated. Hébert made mannequins for the Trocadero's displays and for the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, which portrayed groups of prehistoric people, a new approach to anthropological display which was a success with the public.⁵³ Known for his use of plaster, wax, painted glass eyes and real human hair to striking effect, Hébert had also created an acclaimed effigy of the Sumerian ruler Gudea for the Exposition, and the Smithsonian in Washington had acquired his figures of African natives in 1886.⁵⁴ His work on the figure of Glele raised it to the status of a prominent and significant courtly statue.

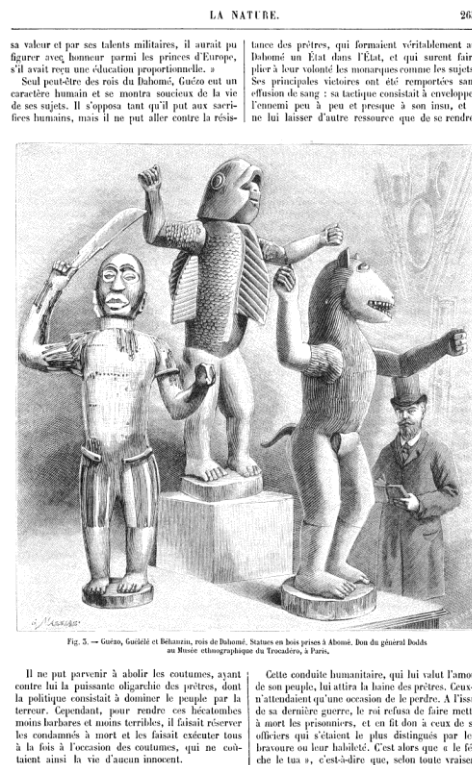


Figure 3 Maurice Delafosse, 'Statues des rois de Dahomé au Musée ethnographique du Trocadéro', *La Nature*, 1086 (24 March 1894), 265.

⁵² Salmon (1922), 122.

⁵³ See Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985, 136.

⁵⁴ Jean M. Evans, *The Lives of Sumerian Sculpture: An Archaeology of the Early Dynastic Temple*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 41-42.

An etching of the three statues *in situ* published in Delafosse's account in *La Nature* showed a top-hatted visitor standing behind them holding a small book and observing them, either making notes or sketching, suggesting their significance [fig. 4]. Their impressive size was also emphasised in this image, as the male figure appeared totally dwarfed by the sculptures, which appeared to be installed on a large, high plinth. A photograph of the group in the museum in 1895 shows a different configuration of the three portraits, with Gezu now in the background on a slightly higher plinth, Glele to the left and Behanzin to the right. The main plinth was about a foot and a half from the floor, making the elevation of the sculptures less marked than that in the etching: clearly the manufactured image is designed to heighten the effect made by the works. In an account of the sculptures published by James Frazer in *Man* in 1908, he refers to the effect of their size: 'On a recent visit to Paris I was struck by three life-size wooden statues in the Trocadero Museum, which represent three kings of Dahomey— Guezo, Guelelé, and Behanzin— all more or less completely in the form of animals'.⁵⁵ Frazer went on to include translated excerpts from Delafosse's article of March 1894.

Delafosse's approach to the Dahomean material in the Trocadero was striking for its emphasis on the historical accuracy of the sculptures and their historical context. In the second of three articles he wrote about the throne taken from Cana and the Abomey palace doors, describing the former as a 'real historical piece, giving us the most authentic information about the king's entourage and the ceremonies of his court'.⁵⁶ Like Tomel before him, he pointed to the use of different coloured skin tones in the figures that made up the throne, indicating different racial types: European, African and Arab.⁵⁷ While such comments might seem distastefully racist to us today, we have to put Delafosse's perspective in particular in the context of his own intellectual interests, especially as he identifies some of the women depicted as Fulani. Aged only 24 when writing these articles, and having just finished his studies in Arabic at the Ecole spéciale des langues orientales in Paris, Delafosse went on to serve as a colonial administrator in Ivory Coast and Sudan, where he took a particular interest in Muslim Africa, pre-colonial history, and the complexity of ethnic and caste identity in French Sudan.⁵⁸ Delafosse's approach to understanding the Abomey palace doors showed an interest in building an iconographical tradition, as he cross-referenced the motifs of a snake, a boat and an executioner cutting off a prisoner's head to similar designs observed in Dahomey by Repin in 1860, and appearing in accounts by Forbes and Skertchly in 1851 and 1874 respectively.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ J.G. Frazer, 'Statues of Three Kings of Dahomey', *Man*, 8 (1908), 130.

⁵⁶ Delafosse (April 1894), 328.

⁵⁷ Delafosse (April 1894), 327; Tomel, 87.

⁵⁸ Delafosse's most famous work on this subject was the three-volume *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, Paris: Larose, 1912.

⁵⁹ These references make up some of the important primary source accounts of Dahomey in the mid-nineteenth century: the British naval commander Frederick E. Forbes', *Dahomey and the Dahomans, being the Journal of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey and Residence at his Capital in the years 1849 and 1850*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851; the

Delafosse's accounts of the Dahomean material at the Trocadero situated them not only within the context of their pre-colonial history, but also drew attention to their imbrication within the colonial conflict itself. A third article focused on the sculpture that Delafosse identified as the 'God of War', basing this identification on descriptions in the accounts of Skertchly and Burton before him of the 'Dahomean Mars' 'Bo' or 'Gbo'.⁶⁰ Again Delafosse drew attention to the use of realistic detail in the production of the sculpture from cast and hammered iron, pointing to its articulation of calf muscles by working the metal after casting, and to the clearly delineated toes and nails of the feet: 'I am insisting on all of these details, as they indicate the scrupulous care the artist has taken to copy reality'.⁶¹

The material used in this sculpture, metal, and its absence in the established accounts of Dahomey, led Delafosse to conjecture that it had been created recently. While we now know this not to be the case, it is significant that the anthropologist saw it as emblematic of colonial contact, its limbs made from melted down ships' anchors, 'probably no longer used, abandoned at the coast and collected by the natives', its pedestal a piece of armour plating from a European ship or cannon cover.⁶² Delafosse went on to speculate that the sculpture was itself created in response to French aggression, essentially a piece of war art:

The officers of the king resident at Ouida, seeing that this town would be the first to be attacked by the French, and wanting to encourage the population to resist, probably made this statue using materials found on the beach: the Dahomean army evidently believed that the terrible spirit of war, pleased with such a beautiful statue, could not fail to provoke terror and flight in the French ranks. The statue probably wasn't beautiful enough for the spirit, or the French had a Mars more powerful than Gbo on their side; at any rate this latter had the misfortune to see his useless idol turned into an ethnographic object. In any case, we should not complain.⁶³

Delafosse's commentary was prescient in a sense, as the sculpture is now believed to have been seized as war booty by King Glele during a raid on the town of Doume in western Benin in about 1860, where the sculpture was taken along with its maker, Akati Ekplékendo.⁶⁴

This sculpture has had a fascinating afterlife, as we have seen at the beginning of this essay. From being a spoil of war twice over, it went on to be

former French naval surgeon Dr Repin's 'Voyage an Dahomey', *Le Tour du Monde*, 1 (1863); and British entomologist J. Alfred Skertchly's *Dahomey as it is, being a narrative of eight months' residence in that country*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1874.

⁶⁰ Delafosse, 'Une statue dahoméenne en fonte', *La Nature*, 1105 (4 August 1894), 146. The British explorer Richard Burton's *A mission to Gelele, king of Dahome* had been published in 1864 (London: Tinsley Brothers).

⁶¹ Delafosse (August 1894), 145.

⁶² Delafosse (August 1894), 147.

⁶³ Delafosse (August 1894), 147.

⁶⁴ Beaujean-Baltzer.

lauded as a masterwork of African art by Apollinaire in an essay of 1912, and then in its presentation in exhibitions of African material from the 1930s onwards. In a later comment made by the artist Henry Moore in the early 1960s, the sculpture (then in the collection of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris) was stripped of its history and meaning, becoming a collection of junk-like assembled parts, described as the figure 'that has the butcher's hooks and bits of chain hanging from its hat, and a skirt made from a bit of waste tin'.⁶⁵

If the God of War sculpture went on to become great art, its anthropological dimension arguably suffered as a result. The other Dahomean sculptures that have been the subject of this essay did not receive such sustained attention, either as art or for their anthropological significance, until later in the 20th century.⁶⁶ All of these Dahomean works, moreover, appeared to play little role in artists' encounters with non-Western forms as sources of inspiration in the early 20th century. The Dahomean royal portraits and associated material were arguably too personalised, too loaded with a specific history and connected to real living people (Behanzin lived in exile in Martinique and Algeria until his death in 1906). They were also too large (unlike small-scale 'collectible' objects that could be kept in artists' studios) and too closely associated with a kind of 'high' and precious court culture, like that of Egypt, which did not fit with a need to supposedly rescue from oblivion objects that had been overlooked as too crude, too strange, too 'other'. Perhaps, too, artists in Europe avoided artefacts which were loaded with a colonial context they found politically uncomfortable, preferring objects which appeared to float free from this framework, brought together in anonymous accumulations in ethnographic museums, or traded amongst sailors and dealers in the bars and galleries of Paris. Onto these private, appropriated 'fetishes' they could project their own interests and fantasies. Dahomey, on the other hand, was too real to handle, and too historically and symbolically rich to be subjugated by the European hand, eye and mind.

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⁶⁵ Henry Moore in conversation with John Russell, December 1961, in Alan Wilkinson (ed.), *Henry Moore: Writings and Conversations*, Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2002, 122.

⁶⁶ For instance see Preston Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form*, London: Laurence King, 1998, and the exhibition *Artistes d'Abomey*, Paris: Musée du Quai Branly, 2009.