

# Golf in the City of Blood: the Translation of the Benin Bronzes in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain and Germany

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Sir,—Foreigners have often been known to state that wherever an Englishman wanders in distant parts of the globe, the safety-valve to his excessive vitality must be appealed by knocking about a ball in some form or other. Now, few people reading their morning papers three months ago at home, with the horrors of city so graphically depicted, would have conjectured that within four weeks of the final charge on the city walls, the ringing sound of the cleek and the call of "Fore!" would be heard resounding in the same sanguinary vicinity. Such was the case, however, a good nine-hole course (which would compare very favourably with many British inland courses) being at that time in full swing and working order.

[...]

The chief drawback we found on first starting was the huge quantity of human skulls and bones which littered the course ; and, sad as it is to state, our best green happens to have been made on the turf immediately beneath a tree known as the "crucifixion tree," on which many a poor slave breathed his last.

I am, Sir, &c,

Benin City, West Africa,

C. H. P. C.

April 18th. 1897.<sup>1</sup>

This letter, originally headed *Golf in 'the City of Blood,'* was written by an officer stationed in Benin City. It does not just provide an interesting title for this paper, but it additionally gives

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<sup>1</sup> Friday June the 18<sup>th</sup> 1897 *Golf: A Weekly Record of Ye Royal and Ancient Game*, p. 295; Issue 362.

an idea about the way Britain viewed its colonies at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After Britain took over Benin on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 1897, the punitive expedition was not only regarded as a portrayal and success of British colonial power, but also as the justified punishment of ‘uncivilized savages’ that ‘cruelly slaughtered’ a British expedition only one month before.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the British press and public became increasingly interested in the Kingdom of Benin in West Africa. But the interest in the City of Benin and its culture did not subside after the events of the expeditions had been described and repeated extensively.<sup>3</sup> The immediate press coverage of the expeditions in Britain has already been discussed by Coombes (1994), this paper will address the latter period of Benin's public and academic reception which has not been done before.

After months of accounts of the savageness of the Edo, the people of Benin, the arrival of the so-called Benin bronzes<sup>4</sup> puzzled ethnographic museums scientific publications and the public press in Europe. This paper examines the reception history of the bronzes in Britain and Germany between 1897 and 1901. In just these few years the reputation of the Benin bronzes was changed from war booty, to scientific objects, and finally to works of primitive art.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it presents translation studies as a means to examine how ethnographers

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<sup>2</sup> A British expedition which was supposed to renegotiate trading commitments was struck down on their advance to Benin City. After what came to be known as the Benin Massacre, the British Foreign Office quickly send a punitive expedition to take over the City and dispossess their leader. For more detailed accounts on these expeditions, see (Igbafe 1982; Collings 1982; Ryder 1969; Barley 2010).

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough analysis of Benin history, social life and customs, see (Bradbury 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this study the castings from Benin are referred to by the generic term ‘bronzes,’ though it needs to be said that a variety of different alloys, including copper, tin and lead, had been used in different quantities. This use of different alloys is important for the dating of single bronze pieces, see Picton (2012).

<sup>5</sup> A good example of the popular imagination with regard to the ‘primitive’ and the discrepancies to the qualities of their artistic works is Fry (1937).

and art historians represented the other by describing their visual culture. By doing so, this study assesses the importance of the ethnographers' writings and the extent of their international collaboration on the development of the notion of 'primitive art.'<sup>6</sup>

### **Cultural translation studies**

In *Representing Others*, Sturge mentions the 'metaphorical uses of the word "translation," which sometimes proliferates as a general label for any kind of mediation, change, or confrontation with difference' (2007: 13). While the benefits of the use of translation theory in the contemporary ethnographic museum practice is widely acknowledged (Neather 2008; Sturge 2007), this paper extends the metaphorical use of translation in order to use its theories as methodological tools in the approach of historic ethnographic and art historical writing.

By studying and mediating a people, including not only their language but also their customs, as well as their material and visual culture and their relationships to other peoples, the contemporary anthropologist makes a culture accessible, through his or her translation, to another culture that inhabits a different space and sometimes even a different time.<sup>7</sup> This was similar in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though fieldwork was not as commonly exercised and the study of 'primitive' peoples was more concentrated on their material culture than their language.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Several studies have been published that mention this development in other contexts, see for example Caygill and Cherry (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Fabian (1983) discusses the notion of the ethnographic present and the problems it conjures for the histories in anthropological research.

<sup>8</sup> None of the ethnographers featured in this study had been to Benin their knowledge of the City and its inhabitants was acquired from eye-witness accounts of officers, traders and other officials, and from the study of material that their museums acquired after the punitive expedition.

Nevertheless, it was the ethnographer's task to explain the frequently used, and mostly unfamiliar, signs featured in the objects, sufficiently for his readership to understand the message. To do so, he had to be able to or, in the case of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographer, try to decode the message of these visual signs and mediate their meaning verbally. As part of this action he could select which objects of his collection to concentrate on and how much information to give. Moreover, it was his descriptions and choice of words that would determine whether a piece of non-European visual culture was seen in a positive or negative light by his readers.

Today, cultural translation studies are more concerned with the translation as it happens within the space of the ethnographic museum (for example House 2005; Neather 2008; Ravelli 2006). Scholarly articles in specialised journals are written for academics as part of an intellectual discourse, while museum displays, and in most cases their associated catalogues, are mainly constructed for the public. But ethnographers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were largely unconcerned about the public; museums were not a place for a general public to be educated, but a place for an already Educated public to be able to study a collection and arrive at their own judgements and associations.<sup>9</sup>

One of the theories of translation studies that can be of use for this kind of historical study is Venuti's translation strategies of domestication and foreignization, a theory that further engages with the role of the translator in the reception of a foreign culture in the European coloniser's home country. In his 1995 book, *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti states that the invisible translator is an illusion created, as a result of the Western reviewers and readers expectation of reading a fluent version of a text without any, for them cultural, stylistic and linguistic peculiarities. Venuti emphasizes that 'a fluent translation is

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<sup>9</sup> For example, see Penny's (2002: 147-148) discussion on the introduction of *Schausammlungen* and the ethnographers reactions to it.

immediately recognizable and intelligible, "familiarised," domesticated, not "disconcerting(ly)" foreign' (Venuti 1995: 5).

The meaning of a text, as well as of an image, is firmly rooted in the culture that envisioned it. As Derrida argues, 'meaning is an effect of relations and differences among signifiers along a potentially endless chain,' as in a text or in an image, 'it is always differential and deferred, never present as an original unity' (quoted by Venuti 1995: 17). These relations and differences are original to the culture and historical period in which the text or image was produced. By replacing the chain of signifiers with a different chain of signifiers, whether linguistically or visually, the translator determines the meaning of the foreign text or image as he or she understands it, under their specific social circumstances and in their historical period. Like any other interpretation, this process is governed by pre-existing notions of superiority and inferiority, which, especially within the relationship between coloniser and colonised, determine its outcome. The translator provides his audience with a text or image that is intelligible in their culture, by interchanging the unique cultural, linguistic, and visual features of the source, but 'risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text' (Venuti 1995: 18).

Venuti's notion of the invisibility of the translator is an important part of two differing strategies of translation; foreignization and domestication. In the words of Schleiermacher, foreignization 'leaves the author in peace, as much as possible and moves the reader towards him,' domestication, on the other hand 'leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him' (Venuti 1995: 19-20) Hence, the translator can either chose to 'register the linguistic and cultural difference' of the source and make this visible in his translation or he reduces the 'foreign text to target-language cultural values' and, thus, heightens the intelligibility of the translation for his readers (Venuti 1995: 19-20).

## Domesticating the foreign

With regard to the reception of the Benin bronzes it is possible to trace the development of their introduction into art historical research by applying Venuti's method. Even though there are no strict limits between the two aspects it is still possible to trace foreignization and domestication efforts in the discourse on the Benin bronzes in the first years after their arrival in Europe. Ethnographers as well as authors of popular texts, like the letter published in *Golf*, first foreignized the culture of the Edo. In a particularly violent form they stressed the differences to present the Edo as savages (for examples see Coombes 1994). Once the Benin bronzes came to Europe, and their artistic value was determined, ethnographers and art historians started to lay emphasis on influences from, and similarities to, European art, thus, domesticating the casting technique and the visual qualities in order to elevate the bronzes to the discussion of art.

While *Golf in 'the City of Blood'* does not mention the Benin bronzes, its topic and language are a part of the ambivalent reception of Edo people and culture. On the one hand, the author argues that 'the chief drawback [...] was the huge quantity of human skulls and bones which littered the course,' (*Golf* 1897: 295) and thus foreignizes the Edo as savages. On the other hand, by describing this 'good nine-hole course [...] (which would compare very favourably with many British inland courses)' (*Golf* 1897: 295) it is also possible to trace the domestication of the space of the city itself. In this case, the domestication was not used to promote Edo culture as worthy of contemplation, but to promote British colonialism and its civilising mission.

Generally, the publications of the first few months after the Benin Expedition struggled between highlighting the Edo as savages and pointing out the differences between Edo and European culture, and admiring the highly developed bronze art, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

was regarded as an index of civilisation.<sup>10</sup> This is why the foreignization efforts, prior to the admittance that the bronzes and their design were indeed made by the Edo, are torn between the highlighting of the excellence of the work and the connection of the bronzes to so-called primitive rites.<sup>11</sup> At this time, foreignization is not used, as intended by Venuti, to promote cultural differences that are unique to the source culture and might enrich the target culture. Instead, various examples show that it is rather used to stress the savageness of Edo culture.<sup>12</sup>

Alan Boisragon, a survivor of the so-called Benin Massacre as well as a part of the Benin Expedition, gives his account of the Benin Wars and the horrors he had seen in his book *The Benin Massacre* (1897). By stating that in the City of Benin were 'sacrificial altars, on which were placed the gods - carved ivory tusks, standing upright, on hideous bronze heads,' (1897: 186-187) he irrevocably connects the bronzes and ivories with 'primitive beliefs,' stressing their difference from European religious art and civilised beliefs. This foreignization is even further increased when he explains that 'in front of each ivory god was a small earthen mound on which the wretched victim's forehead was placed' and that 'when the expedition took Benin City they found these altars covered with streams of dried human blood, the stench of which was too awful, the whole grass portion of the Compounds simply reeking with it' (Boisragon 1897: 186-87).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Darwin (1871) and Haeckel (1868) both refer to the arts as a part of cultural evolution.

<sup>11</sup> Newspapers where this struggle is noticeable are for example *St. Paul's* (24, 31 July 1897), *Illustrierte Zeitung* (26 May 1898).

<sup>12</sup> Newspapers and books where this kind of negative foreignization is visible are for example Bacon (1897), Boisragon (1897), *The Illustrated London News* (17 March 1897).

<sup>13</sup> This find of hundreds of dead bodies is in fact due to two distinct reasons. On the one hand, less important people and slaves were not given a proper burial, but laid to rest in the 'bad-bush' outside of the city (Igbafe 1979: 71) and on the other hand, a mass sacrifice of people captured during the 'massacre' is thought to have been a last desperate attempt to ward off the imminent invasion (Collings 1982: 103). Indeed, the sight of post-war Benin

By February 1898 Henry Ogg Forbes, a botanist and consulting director of the Mayer Museum in Liverpool, published his paper *On a Collection of Cast-Metal Work of High Artistic Value From Benin*. In this essay he focuses on ‘the wonderful technical art displayed in [the bronzes] construction, their profuse ornamentation, and the high artistic excellence of nearly all of them, [which] quite astonished students of west African ethnology, as the product of that, now, at all events, more, than less barbarous region in the Niger Delta’ (Forbes 1898: 49). He introduces his article by giving a report of ‘the barbarous massacre,’ and the subsequent ‘Punitive Expedition [...] to bring to account the perpetrators of this terrible outrage’ (Forbes 1898: 49).

In his title Forbes calls the bronzes cast-metal work, but the termination bronzes which stands for a certain nobility and value, and already highlights them as important, has been used from a very early date onwards. Forbes’ title juxtaposes the more neutral ‘cast-metal work’ and the judgement that they are of ‘high artistic value.’ At the same time he opens the article with the events of the Benin Wars which emphasizes the bronzes presence in Europe as the spoils of war. This contrast of different significances foreignizes the bronzes by implying that the artistic value is only imminent because of their status as war booty.

Moreover, Forbes, as many other ethnographers at the time, was very rigorous in advocating the savageness of the Edo by quoting from a book by Reginald Hugh Spencer Bacon (1897), and his private letters, as trustworthy eye-witness accounts. He makes sure that his readers understand that the Edo are situated much lower on the evolutionary scale than

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must have been horrific and the ways in which the officers and press reported about it might be interpreted as an attempt to distance the coloniser from the realisation that in the not so distant past, London, Paris and the like had themselves been the sight of public executions and that the River Thames was effectively a running sewer.

Europeans: 'I do not believe in any of the figures being gods of the Beni;<sup>14</sup> nor do I believe they were far enough advanced to worship any person or figure' (Forbes 1898: 57). Forbes, further emphasizes his distrust of the idea that the Edo were capable of producing civilised art by suggesting that the bronzes might have been 'the spoils of some campaign,' or that 'the city may have been of Abyssinian or even Egyptian influences [...] but that, through intercourse with the low coast tribes, they became demoralised and gradually degenerated into their present low civilisation' (Forbes: 1898: 71).

The only time Forbes uses vocabulary traditionally used for European art, is when he suggests that the origins of the bronzes lay in Europe itself: 'The mystery that surrounds the makers of these wonderful art works [...] cannot be resolved by the data we as yet possess. The probability is that art may have been brought to the west coast hinterland by some European trader, prisoner, or resident, [...] and the art may have flourished only during the lifetime, or residence there, of these artificers, or for only a short time after their departure' (Forbes 1898: 69). In this passage Forbes attempts to domesticate the bronzes by indicating that they might be of European heritage, while portraying the Edo as the ultimate other to European civilisation.

C. H. Read and O. M. Dalton at the British Museum pointed out that they were 'puzzled to account for so highly developed an art among a race so entirely barbarous as were the Bini' (Read and Dalton 1898: 371). Their paper *Works of Art from Benin City*, given at the Royal Anthropological Institute at the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 1897, was later published as the first scientific article on the Benin bronzes. They stress the status of otherness of the Edo by declaring that they were 'cowards, and second-rate fighting-men' (Read and Dalton 1897: 369).

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<sup>14</sup> While Edo is the name of the wider language and culture of the people living in the area around the Benin Kingdom, the Beni, or Bini, are the people of Benin City itself.

But while Read and Dalton foreignize the Edo they also begin to domesticate their art by comparing its technique to those of the Italian Renaissance, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was still seen as the pinnacle of European art. According to them ‘this *cire-perdue*<sup>15</sup> process is that by which many of the finest Italian bronzes of the best period were produced’ (Read and Dalton 1897: 372). However, at the same time they cannot escape pointing out the contradiction as ‘we thus find the Benin savages using with familiarity and success a complicated method which satisfied the fastidious eye of the best artists of the Italian Renaissance’ (Read and Dalton 1898: 372). What is most significant in this study is that they decided to title this article *Works of Art from Benin City*, and they constantly refer to the bronzes as works of art.<sup>16</sup> They give the reason for calling the bronzes works of art themselves, by saying: ‘Men perhaps in some cases possessing mechanical skill, who, like [...] some Portuguese craftsmen in Dahomey two centuries later, would have been highly appreciated at the native court’ (Read and Dalton 1898: 364). They suggest that the bronzes might not have been made by the Edo, or at least that the technique might have come from Europe.

In Germany at this time, Felix von Luschan, keeper of the Department of Africa and Oceania at the Völkerkundemuseum in Berlin, published the first German scientific paper on the Benin bronzes. In *Antiquities from Benin* von Luschan generally calls the bronzes ‘works of art’ or ‘old Benin-Art’ (von Luschan: 1898). Only when he talks about the illustrations of musical instruments on the bronzes - and, thus, refers to their ethnographic value - does he choose a term like pictorial work, rather freer from value judgement. By doing so, von

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<sup>15</sup> This is also known as the lost wax process, recently it has been discussed in the exhibition *Bronze*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 15 September - 9 December 2012 (Ekserdjian 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Only a few months later Dalton published an article titled *Booty from Benin* (1898) in which he painstakingly avoids to use the phrase ‘works of art’ in describing the bronzes, just as in any subsequent publication by these two employees of the British Museum.

Luschan clearly separates the parts in which he cites the bronzes as ethnographica from those in which he refers to their artistic value and importance outside of the newly established science of ethnography. Von Luschan makes sure that, as the first article on this topic, it can be quoted from either perspective - while in the process refraining from classifying it as belonging to either domain. It is important to note here that these domains were not as clearly defined as they are today and that most scholars worked in academia as a whole. Nevertheless, most scholars also affiliated themselves with a particular discipline, even if the boundaries were vague.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, von Luschan stresses the 'African style' (von Luschan 1898: 149) of the bronzes and highlights their real importance as being in the fact 'that we discovered a native and monumental art for Benin of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century at all' (1898: 153). He gives the credit of the style of the art as well as its production to the Edo themselves and vehemently contradicts any other explanations. Thereby he positively foreignizes the bronzes. Yet, he likewise domesticates them by comparing the work to European art, concluding that 'at least single pieces are equal to contemporary European art and are executed with a technique that generally stands at the top of the accessible' (von Luschan: 153). In von Luschan's opinion, it is 'already entirely obvious' that 'this is actually native art and that the now available Benin bronzes were designed and executed by African Negroes' (von Luschan: 153). He adds that 'especially opposed to the, in some colonial circles prevailing, contempt against Negroes, this evidence also seems to have some kind of general and moral impact' (von Luschan: 153). Thus von Luschan emphasizes that in the light of discovering a highly executed art work, like the Benin bronzes, Europeans should reconsider their perspectives on other peoples.

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<sup>17</sup> This holds especially true for German scholars, as the internal institutionalization of the circle of physical anthropologists was quite organized (Massin 1996: 84) and Karl Woermann constantly referred to himself as an art scientist (Woermann 1924).

The official publication of the British Museum, *Antiquities from the City of Benin*, denied the Benin bronzes a status as art in its title, but granted them the privilege of an extensive study published as an expensive book, including 32 tables printed in high quality on a canvas mix. Read and Dalton incorporated the Edo's own history and customs on the first couple of pages and did not start, as many others did at this time, with the beginning of European trading relations, or the massacre and the Punitive Expedition. While Read and Dalton did not use the term art and referred to the bronzes as primitive art, which can be argued as closer to the idea of 'primitive craft' than a western notion of art, they likewise granted them the connotation of antiquities. Although, antiquities are not as valued as art,<sup>18</sup> an ambiguity but not a contradiction, this term still has positive associations and places the bronzes on a par with important ancient objects. All of the curatorial departments in the British Museum were and still are called the antiquities departments; thus, the Benin bronzes were classified as of a status with other collections in the museum but separated from European high art by calling them primitive.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, when they are speaking about possible European influences they point out that 'it is strange that [...] no single piece has occurred that can be attributed to [the Edo's] European teachers. It was to be expected that the Portuguese brass founders, in teaching their native pupils, would have produced models of their own, and that these would have survived, if indeed they had not been among the most valued possessions of the king' (Read and Dalton 1899: 19). Stating that European models would most probably have been 'among the most valued possessions of the king' (Read and Dalton 1899: 19), points towards the

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<sup>18</sup> Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary defines antiquity as: 'A relic or monument of ancient times; as, a coin, a statue, etc.' (1913: 66) and art as: 'The application of skill to the production of the beautiful by imitation or design, or an occupation in which skill is so employed, as in painting and sculpture; one of the fine arts' (1913: 85).

<sup>19</sup> As an example of similar conclusions, see Mack's book on Emil Torday (1990).

difference between European high art and native art: its value. By establishing the teacher - pupil relationship between the 'Portuguese brass founders' and the natives, Read and Dalton, assert the European civilising mission, yet they also domesticate Edo art practice by comparing it with European art academies. Dalton's remark that 'Benin enjoyed an artistic renaissance, of which these bronzes are the evidence' (Dalton 1898: 428), adds to the domestication of Edo art practice by applying the vocabulary of European historical tradition to it.

The tendency of the debate on the Benin bronzes to shift back-and-forth between attitudes of domestication and foreignization, whether positive or negative, slowly faded out as the new century beckoned. This is most visible in von Luschan's paper at the VII Congress of Geographers (von Luschan: 1899) which marks the beginning of a general domestication of Benin art fully promoting the artistic value of the bronzes. Von Luschan points out Benin's long standing trade relations with African and European countries and stresses that they cannot be seen as 'from every kind of foreign culture completely unsoiled children of nature' (von Luschan 1899: 611). In this way, he includes Benin art in a global history of traditions and influences. Moreover, by his efforts to promote the view that 'you cannot regard and treat Negros as 'savages'' and 'that the culture of the so-called 'savages' is not a worse one, but only a different one to ours,' he undermines the branding of 'primitive' (von Luschan 1899: 612) This can be seen as an act of domestication of the Benin bronzes, as in order to elevate the bronzes to art, the description of their makers as savages had to be negated.

### **Art historical interest**

While ethnographers were actively translating the bronzes into a domesticated version of art, art historians in both countries became interested in their artistic value. However, as far as it is possible to distinguish the disciplinary affiliations, it is notable that while ethnographers justified calling the bronzes art, the art historians had to justify their interest in the bronzes. In

December 1898, *The Studio*, a magazine for fine and decorative art which though published in England had a European readership, included a paper on the Benin Bronzes. *Primitive Art from Benin* was written by the anthropologist and museologist Henry Ling Roth (1898a), whose book *Great Benin: Its Customs Art and Horrors* (1903) became one of the most popular books on Benin at the time, and remains a still widely consulted text by laymen and scholars alike.

How and why the collaboration between anthropologist and art magazine came about is not known, but the fact that it did implicates two very distinct features: The art historical interest in the bronzes shown by the article appearing in *The Studio*; and the fact that it is not written by a conventional art historian, but by an anthropologist indicates Roth's and the editors caution of not placing the bronzes too affirmatively into the art historical discourse as it existed at the time. Unlike most articles on the bronzes at this time, including his own *Notes on Benin Art* (Roth 1898b) from just five month earlier, Roth does not mention the Benin Wars in this study. Furthermore, he does not use other particularising features, like the discussion of Benin's geographical position, its culture or its customs. Nevertheless, while refraining from giving native accounts of Edo history, as Read and Dalton did, he does mention an account from 1746 by David van Nyendael, a Dutch traveller (Roth 1898: 174).

For the publication in *The Studio*, Roth also changed his approach to the bronzes from those of his other publications. This is evident in the terms he used for the bronzes: While in his earlier article as well as in his book, he used the term art on its own, in the title of *The Studio* commentary he refers to it as primitive art or decorative art throughout the article. Moreover, he frequently refers to the decorative qualities of the iconographic elements in the bronzes rather than their possible metaphoric or symbolic meanings. Thus, according to him 'animals such as catfishes, snakes, etc. are continually met with as decorative adjuncts apparently quite apart from their fetish or symbolic value' (1898a: 179).

When discussing an ivory armlet, which served as an example for various pieces of jewellery made in ivory and bronze, Roth notes that ‘the whole shows rather fertility on the part of the artist in planning a difficult piece, and consummate skill in the elaboration than any beauty in design; it is, nevertheless, a piece of work which, for the ingenuity displayed in its production, cannot fail to be admired’ (1898a: 181). But when discussing foreign elements, as he claims feature in many artworks, he adds that ‘part of these elements consist of European forms which the native mind, so prone to copy, has not failed to hand down to us’ (Roth 1898a: 184). He is, thus, acknowledging the Edo to be skilled craftsmen but at the same time indicating that they either copy European designs - or their art does not show any beauty in design at all. The fact that an art magazine, concerned with the European concept of fine and decorative art, decided to publish this article is a further step towards the domestication of the bronzes. But it is also anxious to point out that any similarities to European art and design stem from a common origin, a European origin.

As far as it is possible to distinguish between the different scholarly fields the first art historian to write about the Benin bronzes was Karl Woermann, the director of the Picture Gallery in Dresden. According to a review by Henry Thode (1900), Woermann was the first within his discipline to include the art of the *Ur- und Naturvölker* (primal and natural peoples) in an extensive study of art.<sup>20</sup> Peculiarly, while he was the first art historian to write about the Benin bronzes he was also one of the strongest representatives of Social Darwinism (Hawkins 1997) writing on this topic. The first volume of *Die Geschichte der Kunst aller*

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<sup>20</sup> One very important earlier study on the Art of non-European peoples is Ernst Grosse’s *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (1894) However, Grosse was an anthropologist and the mere fact that, as the review (Thode, 1900: 485) suggests, that it was in the consciousness of the people at the time that it was in fact, Woermann, who was the first to publish such a study. I’m very sorry, but could you please add at the end of this footnote: For a study on Ernst Grosse’s work see van Damme (2010).

*Zeiten und Völker -The History of art of all Times and Peoples-*, is titled *Die Kunst der vor- und außerchristlichen Völker -The art of the pre- and non-Christian peoples-* (Woermann 1900). Here, Woermann distinguishes between *Naturvölker* (primal or natural people) and *Halbculturvölker* (half-cultural people), dedicating half of the section to each group of peoples. In the Social Darwinistic fashion he subdivides both of these two parts according to the three age system of Stone, Bronze and Iron Age. He first discusses prehistoric art, using chapter titles such as 'Early Stone Age' or 'Middle Bronze Age' and, in the second part, he uses the same terms to refer to the different styles of non-European art. By structuring both parts to fit the same titles he strengthens the Social Darwinistic perspective.

Woermann categorizes the Benin bronzes as being part of 'the art of the natural and half-cultural people with knowledge of metallurgy' (1900: 67). He begins this chapter by stating that 'the boundaries between natural peoples and cultural peoples are blurred' and that 'for us it does not depend on the name but on the stage of evolution.' He quotes Leo Frobenius, the foremost German ethnographer of the time saying that 'the Africans Africanised every matter' (Woermann 1900: 67-68) Furthermore, he says that 'of all the works of artistic castings amongst Negroes, Benin stands at the top' (Woermann 1900: 72). He goes on to say that they were 'for some years the cause of the biggest stir in Europe' and briefly mentions the distribution of works sent back from Benin between the biggest museums in Europe. In a short account of the representational character of the bronze heads he states that 'the best of them, especially the best one in the Museum in Berlin, show a striking truth to nature in the creation and reproduction of the Negro type and the Negro individual, and at the same time an excellence of the casting that only the mature art of the cultural people can produce something of a similar kind.' He thus emphasizes the artistic importance of these pieces in a very factual manner before he goes on to describe the different figures and objects that can be seen on the bronze plaques.

Both of these examples show how art magazines and art historical books were conveying an ambivalent response to the Benin bronzes. *The Studio's* editorial voice collaborating with an anthropologist, as well as Woermann, trying to consider a world history of art from the 'primitive' beginnings onwards, were both seeking to discuss non-European art while not granting it the same value and importance as European high art. To do so, in his article in *The Studio*, Roth avoids applying the word art without using preambles like primitive or decorative. Woermann, alternatively, fell back onto Social Darwinistic systems as a way to present prehistoric and non-European art as the predecessor of European art. Yet, the simple fact that the art world slowly started to recognize Benin visual culture as art and not just considered it as part of the scientific research of ethnography is the evidence of the beginning of a domestication of the Benin bronzes. This tendency of the domestication of the visual culture of the other in the art world grew steadily until it eventually peaked in the '80s, above all in the controversial, 1984, Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. Since then, numerous studies have been engaging with a better way of exhibiting and working with non-European art, indicating a transition to a positive foreignization.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

In the first few months after the Benin Expedition and the final suppression of the Edo, stories like the building of an impromptu golf course in Benin became big news. However, as the excitement over the Benin bronzes grew, the sensationalism diminished. Instead, the scholarly - and to some extent also the popular - press started to negotiate the importance of the bronzes for different fields of study as far as these could be defined. The published writings, presented in this paper, have revealed a generally positive development of the

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<sup>21</sup> For more information on the MoMA exhibition see Ivan Karp 'Other Cultures in Museum Perspective in Karp and Lavine, 1991.

reception of the Benin bronzes in both Britain and Germany. While popular newspaper articles on the Benin Wars openly expressed a strong disapproval of the Edo people and their customs and culture, a focus on the technical and aesthetic aspects of the bronzes and the ethnographer's 'translation' of them slowly changed the common attitude towards Edo visual culture and even compelled Europeans to reevaluate their views of the Edo themselves. In just four years, the reputation of the bronzes changed from the debris of a barbaric kingdom to the remains of a lost high culture.

Once established as genuine African work, the bronzes were regarded as works of art. Here, it has been shown that this early development was primarily led by ethnographers. The use of Visual Translation Studies as an addition to existing art historical methodologies in the approach to the material history of non-European visual culture, reveals that the ethnographers translation of the visual culture of other peoples is an integral part of our understanding of the reception of World Art in Europe. This translation of non-European culture is a product of power relationships and it is the translator, or in this case the ethnographer, who holds the power of determining how the colony is seen in Europe.

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