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Transatlantic Vodou on the International Art Scene

Catherine Benoît and André Delpuech

Art is a well-established field of inquiry for anthropologists and art historians working on Haiti. Some recurring issues addressed by contemporary scholars are art's origins and the role of external influences in its emergence and development. It is now accepted that the development of Haitian art began before the creation of the Centre d'art, a training and exhibition space developed by the United States artist Dewitt Peters in 1944, and is not limited to the *art naïf* that came to epitomize the country's artistic production in the minds of art historians, art dealers, and artists themselves. A continuing issue, however, is clarifying the relationship between different types of artistic production and Vodou, the Haitian vernacular religion. "Vodou art" has come to define, not so much a specific range of works produced for the practice of Vodou, but artwork whose manufacture is inspired by a Vodou worldview, whether used for a secular or a religious purpose. As a result, many works that have been created for art

dealers, collectors, or museums have been too quickly categorized by buyers or curators, if not art historians and art reviewers, as "sacred art" or "religious art," when not only their function but also their appearance or the story they tell does not exist in a Vodou context. In this sense, the creation of these artworks reveals more about Vodou as a vibrant source of inspiration than it refers to the actual use of these works in a Vodou setting.¹

The emergence on the international art scene of Bizango statues, a new type of sculpture initially represented as originating from secret societies, provides an occasion to partake in this debate. Bizango is the name of a secret society in Haiti,² and the term has recently been used to refer to statues supposedly found in that society's meeting places. In November 2009, the Quai Branly Museum (QBM) acquired a statue presented as the effigy of a Bizango emperor³ (Figs. 1a–b), and one year later was offered a Bizango empress for purchase (Figs. 2a–b). The QBM bought the statue partly to enrich its collection of Haitian artifacts—then amounting to fewer than 100 objects—and partly to have a record of these sculptures' sudden appearance on the international art market and in museums.

These so-called Bizango statues⁴ were exhibited for the first time—but looking quite different from the ones in circulation today—in 1995 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA.⁵ They came onto the international art market and into museums, seemingly out of nowhere, in 2007, when the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (MEG) exhibited more than fifty of them in a show entitled *Le vodou, un art de vivre* (Vodou, a way of life). Since then, more and more of them are seen in museums, art galleries, and at Caribbean art fairs. To date, roughly 200 sculptures are in circulation between Haiti, North America, and Europe. They are bought and sold, traded between galleries, and exhibited in the most prestigious anthropological museums. They are also jealously guarded by collectors in the cellars of Parisian mansions and in penthouses lining New York City's Central Park.

These striking statues—which are presented dramatically in groups, like a small army spoiling for a fight—raise a number of issues. Did they ever have a ritual function within secret societies, or were they made exclusively for artistic and commercial

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(left)
1a–b Dubréus Lhérisson
The Bizango Emperor (early 2000s)
 Padded fabrics, bones, teeth, wood, mirrors, metal, plastic;
 H: 128 cm
 Photo: © Musée du quai Branly, Paris, courtesy Thierry Ollivier
 & Michel Urtado

(right)
2a–b Unknown artist
The Bizango Empress (early 2000s)
 Padded fabrics, bones, teeth, wood, mirrors, metal, plastic.
 H: 137 cm
 Photo: © Patrice Dilly, courtesy Patrice Dilly, Espace Loas,
 Centre d'art haïtien, Nice



purposes? Is the distinction between a ritual object and an art object as clear as all that? What do we know about the secret societies they are supposed to have come from? What can they tell us about new attempts to institutionalize Vodou and transform it into “heritage”?

FREEZE FRAME: THE TRANSACTION

The QBM statue of the Bizango emperor was purchased from a French art dealer familiar with Haiti. He had bought it from two Vodou practitioners, who at the time were *sèvitè* of the Sacred Temple Na-Ri-Véh 777 in Port-au-Prince.⁶ According to him, the statue represented “the Bizango Emperor-Empress, a hermaphrodite,” and went by the name of “Bakala Bizango Bazin,” “number one in the Bizango army,” an army of slaves and freed

slaves who were said to have organized the resistance and struggle against the institution of slavery in the eighteenth century. Bakala Bizango Bazin was a “tailor, sorcerer, and first cousin of the famous Mackandal.”⁸ The art dealer had financed two exceptional rituals in order to obtain it. The first was a ritual of desacralization, because the statue was going to be moved from a sacred to a profane space. The art dealer attended the ritual on the night of September 24, 2008, at the temple of Na-Ri-Véh (Fig. 3). The second ritual involved the replacement of this statue by three statues of lesser rank, captains called Simbo, Diab, and Bizango (Fig. 4).⁹ This occurred at a “ceremony of the Kings” in the same temple, at the beginning of January 2009.¹⁰ The statue was said to have come from a secret society near Bois-Caïman.

This account contained very precise information on the origin and geographical provenance of the statue, its transfer from a secret society in northern Haiti to an *ounfò* in the capital, and on the performance of the rituals enabling it to pass into a profane



TRANSATLANTIC EXPEDITIONS

The QBM's Bizango is no different from all the others in circulation since 2007: All are anthropomorphic, between 1.28 and 1.49 meters high, with some as tall as 1.79 meters. They have an aggressive look and warrior pose and make many spectators feel uneasy. Their surface is sewn together from pieces of quilted material, using the red and black colors of the Bizango secret society, and they are covered with fragments of mirror. Almost all of them have a human skull within the head, and parts of it, such as the teeth, are sometimes visible. Most of them are bloated, maimed, or have amputated limbs. They are armed like fighters, with shields, spears, swords, and chains. Some have horns, while others have large wings. Most are standing, but some are seated on chairs or thrones. In some cases, a warrior hierarchy is explicit through the figures they represent, from simple fighter to captain, general, king, queen, and emperor.

Although considered an emperor, the QBM figure is relatively small at 1.28 meters. It stands swathed in a cape, holding a large pair of scissors in its right hand and a walking stick in its left. Its eyes, body, arms, and legs are covered with mirror fragments. A scan showed the presence of a human skull within the head, and within the body a wooden supporting structure, buttons, a pair of Fila sneakers, and small pieces of reflective material that are difficult to identify (Fig. 5). During the desacralization ceremony, two new scarves, one red and one black, were tied round its neck and a cutlass was placed between its legs in the likeness of a male sex organ (Fig. 6).

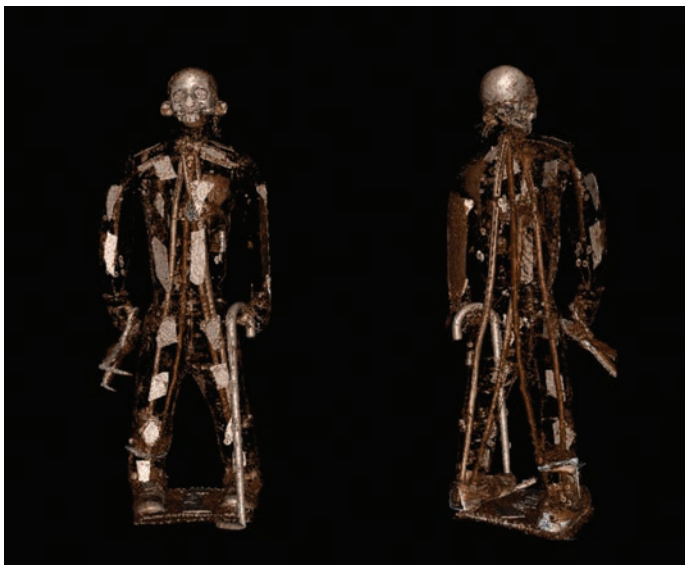
3 The emperor standing in the temple of Na-Ri-Véh during the desacralization ceremony, September 24, 2008, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.
Photo: © Patrice Dilly

4 Simbo, Diab, and Bizango, the three captains installed in the Na-Ri-Véh temple in replacement of the emperor, January 2009, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.
Photo: © Patrice Dilly

space. Bakala Bizango Bazin is a particularly prestigious figure: He features in narratives of the foundation of the Haitian Republic. He is said to be the cousin of Makandal and to come from an *ounfò* near Bois-Caiman, an emblematic site in Haiti's national history because it is where the slave revolt against the French started in August 1791.¹¹

The QBM purchased the Bizango for its aesthetic qualities, to enlarge its collections on the African diaspora,¹² and also to have a material record of the multiplication of Bizango statues in Europe. Bakala Bizango Bazin arrived in Paris in November 2009.¹³ On January 12, 2010, an earthquake destroyed whole areas of Port-au-Prince. Some weeks later, the art dealer owner told the QBM that the Na-Ri-Véh temple had been destroyed,¹⁴ a fact confirmed by another art dealer from Port-au-Prince.¹⁵ The QBM curator André Delpuech, who visited Port-au-Prince in April 2010, was unable to go to the temple or meet the temple's *sèvitè* who had survived the tragedy. Any serious research into the statue thus seemed irreparably compromised (Delpuech 2011).





5 A scan of the Bizango emperor showing a human skull, the wooden supporting structure, buttons, and other small pieces of reflective metal.

Scan: Institut mutualiste Montsouris, Paris, © Musée du quai Branly, Paris

6 Profile of the Bizango emperor during the descalzation ceremony, September 24, 2008, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Photo: © Patrice Dilly

A CONTEMPORARY DISCURSIVE SPACE

We know little about these Bizango statues. Before their spectacular entrance onto the scene in the 2007 MEG show, they had been described on only two occasions: for the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* exhibition in Los Angeles in 1995 and in the first issue of the new series of *Gradhiva* (Celius 2005). In both cases, the account given by anthropologist Rachel Beauvoir (1995, 2005) refers to statues that look quite different from the ones we know today, although they also belong to the collection that was partly displayed in Geneva. The discourse on these statues has been fleshed out since then, but it is still the prerogative of a very small circle of collectors, exhibition curators, and activists fighting to protect and preserve Vodou as cultural heritage.

The MEG exhibition put Bizango on the map internationally.¹⁶ The statues exhibited there were part of the collection of Vodou or Vodou-related objects built up by Swiss-born Marianne Lehmann after she left Lausanne in 1957 to settle in Port-au-Prince with her Haitian husband. After the fall of Duvalier in 1986, impoverished Vodou practitioners began to sell off objects supposedly used in their rituals, and Lehmann purchased all that were presented to her in order to preserve them. In 1989, together with key Haitian personalities, she created the Foundation for the Preservation, Promotion, and Production of Haitian Cultural Artifacts (FPVPOCH), to protect and exhibit her collection of some 2–3,000 items (Figs. 7 a–c).¹⁷ A traveling exhibition, *Le Vodou, un art de vivre*, comprising some 300 items, was rented out to anthropological museums to raise the funds required for a cultural center and museum of Vodou in Port-au-Prince, where her collection was to be permanently exhibited. This show, which opened in 2007 at the MEG (Fig. 8), was displayed in major European anthropological museums through 2012: the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the Museum of World Culture in Göteborg, the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, and the Übersee-Museum in Bremen. In 2012, the collection crossed the Atlantic to be presented first at the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa (Fig. 9), and then at the Field Museum in Chicago (Fig. 10).

Parallel to these shows, more Bizango statues were displayed outside museums. More and more exhibitions were arranged and more and more art dealers offered Bizango statues. Two galleries in Port-au-Prince began selling these works as contemporary

art. They supplied Bizango to other galleries in the United States and Europe, as well as to museums of anthropology. The Dutch Afrika Museum bought thirteen statues from a gallery owner in Port-au-Prince in 2009, which were displayed as a major installation the same year as part of the *Roots and More* exhibition devoted to the religions of the African Diaspora (Hübner and Welling 2009). At the end of the same year, Galerie Vibrations in Paris displayed some thirty Bizango statues that had been purchased that June, according to the gallery director in New York (Barbereau 2011). She claimed that they belonged to a *mambo* who had fled Haiti's Duvalier regime in the 1960s for New York, taking with her some thirty statues. She had set up a Vodou temple in New York, where the rites and ceremonies had been performed right up to her death in 1998. It was her grandson who parted with the statues, to the benefit of the Paris gallery (Fig. 11).¹⁸

Actually, the stories told by many collectors and art dealers, either when interviewed by the authors of this article or the curators of the shows, or in their own publications, follow a similar pattern. These stories include six stages: the very first encounter





(above)

7a Several of Lehmann's collection of Bizango statues stored in her house, Pétionville, Haiti, April 29, 2010.

Photo: © André Delpuech

(right)

7b A chained Bizango in Lehmann's house, Pétionville, Haiti, April 29, 2010.

Photo: © André Delpuech

7c Some of the 300 Vodou objects of Lehmann's collection, Pétionville, Haiti, April 29, 2010.

Photo: © André Delpuech



with Bizango statues; their origin; their emotional impact; the urgent need to purchase them; the desacralization process; and finally the desire to obtain more. Here are the steps in greater detail:

1. The encounter with Bizango statues occurs by chance, yet the power of these figures immediately elicits curiosity, strong emotions, and the desire to possess one. For Caroline Barbereau, the owner of Galerie Vibrations, their appeal is irresistible. "In April 2009, a discussion with an American client, a New York designer, stirred up quite a fascinating adventure. He mentioned a collection of Haitian Vodou fetishes for sale in a private apartment in New York. He compared these fetishes to funeral effigies from Vanuatu or the *rambaramp* from Malekula, which are displayed in my gallery. What more could he have said to arouse my curiosity? ... So there I was, one June day in 2009, in a penthouse overlooking Central Park, completely speechless, bowled over, staring at this army from a culture I knew nothing about ... What a shock! What force! The kind of encounter which marks you for life" (Barbereau 2011: 13). And for Marianne Lehmann: "The statues came into my possession by chance. An *oungan* had had a car accident and was killed on the spot. His family began to fear its own statues. They decided to sell them. So they contacted me" (Ypsilantis and Arnaud in Hainard and Mathez 2007: 20).

2. In most cases, the Bizangos' origin and past remain mysterious, linked to secret societies; they are said to come from regions of Haiti where many secret societies operate. The QBM's statue, for example, is said to come from "the province of Le Borgne, a remote region in which these rare and unique rites are pure, and the rituals are authentic."¹⁹ As we have already seen, the Bizango at Galerie Vibrations had supposedly belonged to a *mambo* in exile in New York, while the Lehmann Collection's statues are reported as coming from the Artibonite region, where there are said to be more secret societies than anywhere else in the country.

3. Despite the statues' frightening appearance, their owners find their presence restful. Marianne Lehmann relates: "When I am



alone with them, I am overcome by a great sense of peace. Even if the works are very violent ... They are linked to Haitian independence. I feel serene in their presence because I know I am doing my duty. ... When I am with the Bizango, I feel as I do in a church" (Ypsilantis and Arnaud in Hainard and Mathez 2007: 20–21). Art dealers and collectors find them so expressive and endearing that they find a place for them in their living rooms. By contrast, many visitors to the exhibition commented on the Internet how uneasy they felt when faced with the Bizango army. In the Netherlands, the Dutch *mambo* Maria Van Daalen, who took part in the exhibition *Roots and More: Reis van dees gesten* at the Afrika Museum, offered to "clean" visitors troubled by what they had seen.²⁰



(above)

8 The Bizango army displayed by the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (MEG) in *Le vodou, un art de vivre*. Geneva, Switzerland, December 5, 2007–August 31, 2008.

Photo: Jonathan Watts, © Musée d'ethnographie de Genève

(below right)

9 Home page for the Lehmann Collection show at the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa, Canada.

Photo: Screenshot, July 30, 2015, <http://www.historymuseum.ca/vodou/>

10 Home page for the Lehmann Collection show at the Field Museum in Chicago.

Photo: Screenshot, July 30, 2015, http://vodou.fieldmuseum.org/?_ga=1.133595150.1620851274.1438247455

4. Owners felt obliged to purchase Bizango to preserve and protect what they consider to be Haitian cultural heritage. That is why they say they would not sell the statues to individuals, but only to public institutions or museums. The art dealer who sold the object to the QBM wrote that “I have promised not to sell this very rare item to an individual, since I prefer to see it in a museum in order to make their [the *oungan*] civilization better known.”²¹ Marianne Lehmann bought the first item in her collection when, intrigued by it, she decided to “protect this unique cultural heritage using [her] modest means, even . . . if this requires substantial sacrifices. That is how the collection was born, out of love for Haiti and its people, and out of respect for its ancestral traditions.”²²

5. Before entering profane space, the statue must undergo desecralization, a ritual we describe later. This was the case for the Lehmann Collection's statues and for the emperor and empress (Hainard and Mathez 2007: 23).

6. The statues are never sold alone but always in groups, as though buyer had to feel they were purchasing part of the Bizango army. Galerie Vibrations had more than twenty figures on show. In the Lehmann Collection, which has more than a hundred,²³ the figure of General Trois Létan was soon joined by that of his wife and their child, which Marianne Lehmann intended to buy (Hainard and Mathez 2007: 20). As for the QBM's single Bizango, many art dealers were keen to bring his solitude to an end. In October 2010, the art dealer who had sold the “emperor” to the QBM proposed an “empress” to keep Bakala Bizango Bazin company. In 2013, another dealer suggested that the museum should buy another twenty statues for its collection: “If Branly wants 20 pieces, why do you not order from me? I can sell 20 pieces to you for 50,000.00 Euros including transport to Paris. It will take 12 to 18 months. I honestly think they will be a powerful addition to Branly's collection. You display them in a dark room, with spotlights on them.”²⁴

FRONTIERS: TRADITION, CREATION, COMMODIFICATION

So although in April 2010 it was no longer possible to visit the Na-Ri-Véh temple, other stories were circulating in Port-au-Prince concerning Bizango exhibitions in Europe and the origin of the Bizango purchased by the QBM. These accounts, complemented by email exchanges and interviews with artists, art dealers, collectors, and anthropologists, suggested a different genealogy for these statues, one rooted in trans-Atlantic fantasies about Vodou, centered this time on the world of secret societies.

Several art dealers in Port-au-Prince maintained, first in 2010 and then in 2012, that when he saw the photo of the QBM's Bizango in the exhibition catalogue *Le Louvre invite J.M.G. Le Clezio* [The Louvre welcomes J.M.G. Le Clezio], artist Dubréus Lhérisson declared that he was the artist, and that he himself had sold the statue to the Na-Ri-Véh temple (Delpuech 2011). Dubréus Lhérisson had been the apprentice of Ceus Saint-Louis, better known by the name of Ti Bout, one of the great leaders of *rara* groups and a well-known artist of *rara* flags and costumes, which he made in his workshop.²⁵ Lhérisson learned from him the art of flag-making, to which he added a personal touch by padding them on both sides, giving them a quilted look (Consentino 2013: 39). The Bizango statues' style is similar to that of the effigies made of fabric used by the *rara* bands of the 1950s and 1960s. After Ti Bout's death, Lhérisson joined up with David Boyer, also a flag maker, and founded the Kongo Laroze studio in Port-au-Prince, where they made objects using recycled materials and pieces of haberdashery. After the 2010 earthquake they opened a new studio in Léogane, some twenty-five miles from the capital, where Lhérisson has now relocated on his own.





(counterclockwise from left)
 11 One the Bizango statues held by Galerie Vibrations, Paris, April 2010.
 Photo: © André Delpuech

12 Dubréus Lhérisson, *Spirit Migration: the Flowing, the Fleeting, the Spectral* show, BrutEdge gallery, Jersey City, NJ, January 12–March 8, 2014
 Photo: <http://arcthemagazine.com/arc/2014/01/open-house-at-brutedge-gallery/>

13 Dubréus Lhérisson's work *Bizango Mèt Bitasyon* makes the cover of a luxurious contemporary art book edited by Renée-Paule Yung-Hing, *Art contemporain de la Caraïbe. Mythes, croyances, religions et imaginaires* (Paris: Éditions Hervé Chopping, 2012). *Bizango Mèt Bitasyon* is dated 2006 and is part of the collection of the Ateliers Jérôme in Port-au-Prince (Haiti).



Dubréus Lhérisson himself is well known on the international art market. His works are regularly exhibited at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market and in galleries. In January 2014, his Bizango statues were put on show at the BrutEdge gallery in Jersey City as part of the exhibition *Spirit Migration: The Flowing, the Fleeting, the Spectral* (Fig. 12).²⁶ His work is also published in journals such as *IntranQu'illités* (2014: 187) devoted to Haitian literature,

where a photograph of one of his Bizangos illustrates a poem by Quebec-born and New York-based writer Madeleine Monette. Another of his Bizangos is on the cover of *Art contemporain de la Caraïbe: Mythes, croyances, religions, et imaginaires*, a work that presents itself as the most up-to-date authority on contemporary Caribbean art (Fig. 13; Yung-Hing 2012).²⁷ Additionally, the name Lhérisson figures on some labels of the Bizango exhibited by the MEG, suggesting that he made them.²⁸ Yet at the time, he was not contacted by those who conceived the exhibition, although that would have helped establish whether he really made the statues for the secret society they were supposed to have come from, and when the statues were made.

THE BIZANGO DOXA

The story of the Bizango's origin and functions is narrated as self-evident. Sellers—whether art dealers or Vodou priests—museum curators, and collectors all seemed to share the same version of the history of the secret societies, and all take for granted that they belong to a specific material culture. This defines a *doxa* in the fields of art and heritage, in Bourdieu's sense of “a set of inseparably cognitive and value-laden presuppositions, which must implicitly be accepted in order to belong [to the field]” (1997: 145). A *doxa* circumscribes the limits of discussion

and banishes divergent views. Yet what do we really know about Haitian secret societies? Very little, in fact. They are represented in three different ways: in the Haitian popular imagination, by anthropologists, and by people linked to the FPVPOCH founded by Marianne Lehmann.

Haitians who say they have never seen or taken part in these societies consider them to be groups who lay down the law in rural areas. They are feared; even mentioning

their name inspires terror. They can reputedly be seen at night, and special music signals that groups of secret society members are at large. People make themselves scarce to avoid meeting them. Members never go out without their “passport,”²⁹ which guarantees safe passage if they come across a member of a rival society.

As for anthropologists, few have explored or got close to these societies. In *Le Vaudou haïtien*, Alfred Métraux (1958) reports how Haitians dreaded the secret societies. In his 1970s research on the secret societies of the Artibonite valley, Michel Laguerre describes how these societies came into being under slavery, were modeled on African secret societies, and instigated the slave revolt of 1791 (Laguerre 1980, 1989). Since then, they have been involved in administering justice separately from the official judicial system and in political activities, particularly when integrated by François Duvalier into his network of influence. According to Laguerre, they take their name—Bizango—from the spirit that protects the enslaved, a name that originally designated a warrior population inhabiting the Bissagos Islands, south of Senegal, in the seventeenth century. Laguerre's analysis is confirmed by Wade Davis in a chapter on Bizango in *Passage of Darkness* (1988), a work principally devoted to the figure of the zombie.

Lastly, there is a discourse in circulation today, held by a very small group of people directly linked to the FPVPOCH or to the



institutionalization of Vodou, which is in many respects diametrically opposed to the popular discourse on secret societies. Here, rather than being feared, secret societies are honored and described as a political alternative to Haiti's governments, none of which have had the interests of the Haitian people at heart. The anthropologist Rachel Beauvoir, a member of the FPVPOCH and a consultant for the Lehmann Collection exhibition, describes the origin and function of these secret societies in *Savalou É*, a book cowritten with Didier Dominique (Beauvoir-Dominique and Dominique 2003). She claims that they originated in groups of maroons under slavery, that they go back to Amerindian times, and that they are modeled on African secret societies. They reputedly led the revolt against slavery, and their struggle continues, now against a State that only serves the interests of the most powerful. These societies had always protected the *ounfò* from campaigns to eradicate them, which had been waged throughout Haiti's history. The system of slavery determined Vodou's material culture and the artistic expression of these secret societies, the choice of materials, and their symbolism. The outward appearance of the artifacts expresses the violence of slavery, which still persists today (Beauvoir 2005).

In an interview given to Valério Saint-Louis on a Long Island (NY) cable TV channel,³⁰ Max Beauvoir, an internationally known

chemist, *oungan*, and leader in the institutionalization of Vodou, maintained that the societies designated as "secret" were in fact "sacred." In his view, they are a social group within Vodou of Taino and Arawak Amerindian origin. Their role is not to worship a god but to protect society. They have a political role and impose their law. They do operate secretly, insofar as their members are unknown to the population at large, but when they move around at night, it is to settle scores with crooks and criminals, which is why they will never be encountered by blameless men and women. It is they who carry out the social punishment of zombification,³¹ a practice Beauvoir considers to be less cruel than capital punishment, because no one loses their life.

The perspectives of Marianne Lehmann and Rachel Beauvoir on Bizango statuary belong to this latter discursive space. The fifty-three statues exhibited in the MEG reportedly came from an *ounfò* in the Artibonite Valley, but no date is available for when they entered the collection. The way they are displayed suggests that they represent the army of maroons (or their spirits) who fought the French colonial army to put an end to slavery and to win independence for Haiti. The exhibition catalogue of the Canadian Museum of History show in Gatineau describes the identity and role of some of these statues (Peressini and Beauvoir-Dominique 2012).

DESACRALIZATION AND ENTRY INTO THE WORLD OF THE PROFANE

Anthropologist René Devish argues that the opposition between the sacred and the profane only seems to be uncompromising. Objects may belong to both worlds, but at different moments of their history. A profane object becomes sacred through the addition of an "active presence" (Devish 1973: 84). Conversely, desacralization is the operation by which an object leaves the universe of the sacred—for example, a place of worship—for the world of the profane. The ritual of desacralization is rarely described or even mentioned in the specialist literature.³²

The QBM's Bizango was desacralized at Na-Ri-Véh in the presence of the art dealer who sold it to the museum. One year later, he attended the desacralization of the empress, this time in Port-au-Prince's main cemetery (Fig. 14).³³ According to the *sèvitè* of Na-Ri-Véh, the items must be desacralized because they contain the spirits of Bizangos, who must be sent back to where they came

14 The desacralization of the empress in the Port-au-Prince cemetery, 2010.
Photo: © Patrice Dilly

15 One of one of the Afrika Museum's television commercials for its 2009 exhibition on the religions of the African diaspora, *Roots and More: Reis van dees gessen* [Journey of the Spirits]. This ad represents a winged, saber-wielding Bizango bounding out with a flash, like Batman, to invite visitors on a journey with the Vodou spirits.
Photo: Screenshot, July 30, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/5034617>





16 Afrika Museum's Bizango installation (early 2000s, artist "unknown" although it is Dubréus Lhérisson's work). This installation was titled *The Night Watch*, after one of Rembrandt's most famous paintings (see Figure 17). Photo: Screenshot, <http://www.inoudeansichten.nl/ansichten/afrika-museum/p62811-berg-en-dal-afrika-museum-de-nachtwacht-van-haiti-bizango-beelden.html>

17 Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* (1642; oil painting; 3.63 m x 4.37 m), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Photo: © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

from by being placed in a bottle during a ritual in a cemetery.

A fitting comparison would be with *minkisi* statues from the ancient Kingdom of Kongo, which are often the high point of exhibitions on African statuary. *Minkisi* (singular *n'kisi*) are the material expression of a spirit's power in the form of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic sculpture, the best known of which are wooden statues studded with nails. They are the "reservoir" or a "charge" of an identifiable power (MacGaffey 1993). The preparation and content of the charge constitute, in Nanette Jacomijn Snoep's terms, a "rebus" relating to the identity and powers of the force that occupies the statue (Snoep 2005: 103). Before entering European collections, *minkisi* were desacralized "by having some or all of their charge removed" (Snoep 2005: 104).

Are Bizango authentic? That is, do they originate in ritual or sacred uses, if one accepts that having served in a ritual is one of the criteria defining the authenticity of African objects (Steiner 1999)? Or are they artistic and profane works? How relevant is this question, given how permeable the frontiers are between artistic and religious objects? The objects used in Vodou are produced by craftspeople or artists who very often are *sèvitè* with workshops in the *péristil* of their *ounfò*.³⁴ They manufacture objects for others in their *ounfò*, for craft markets, and for art galleries.³⁵ They sell their ritual objects to collectors if they encounter financial difficulties. So the difference between sacred and profane statues would be, as Devish grasped, that the Bizango has been "charged" with a spiritual force, or "inhabited" before it is installed in the *ounfò*. When it leaves the sacred space of the *ounfò* or of the secret society for the profane world, this force is removed from it: It is desacralized.

How meaningful is it to talk of authenticity here and to draw such a line between a ritual object and a work of art? If we were to adhere to this dichotomy, we would be unable to understand the fluidity of an object's life cycle, nor the commodification of local crafts, under the influence of the Western consumption of objects due to the expansion of capitalism (Philips and Steiner 1999).

BIZANGOMANIA

The success of Bizango statues exemplifies how Vodou has become a dramatized show for tourism and trade ever since the World's Fair held in Port-au-Prince in 1949–1950. This process continues the Western representation of Vodou conveyed by popular



myth, Hollywood, and many institutions, relating it to "naïve" religiously inspired art, with museum exhibitions on the "sacred arts of Vodou" (Cosentino 1995). With the travels of Bakala Bizango Bazin from Bois Caïman to Paris, Western fantasies reached new heights by associating Vodou with secret societies and making these societies the site of underground political resistance ever since the colonial period. The numerical explosion of Bizango statues on the European and North American art markets also signals that a new stage has been reached in the discovery and invention of Vodou for an international audience and its recasting as cultural heritage. While ostensibly representing warriors who fought for the abolition of slavery, exhibitions reinforce the dramatization and diabolization of Haiti.

Dramatization: We urge readers to look at the Afrika Museum's television commercials for its 2009 exhibition on the religions of the African diaspora, *Roots and More: Reis van dees gesten* [Journey of the Spirits]. The exhibition was crucial for this museum of anthropology to reposition itself as a museum of contemporary art (Kleuskens et al. 2010). The museum considered it to be the most important exhibition ever mounted there and launched a nationwide marketing campaign using newspaper



ads, television spots, and billboards. The exhibition's emblem was a winged Bizango with a saber who bounded out with a flash, like Batman, to invite visitors on a journey with the spirits (Fig. 15). The installation of Bizango statues was designed to be the highlight of the exhibition (Fig. 16). The Bizangos were legitimated in a globalizing and universalizing history of art by calling the installation *The Night Watch*, after the title of one of Rembrandt's most famous paintings (Fig. 17; Hübner and Welling 2009). Interestingly, there was no mention of the name of the artist, Dubréus Lhérisson, and so the installation could be called anything at all. The Field Museum in Chicago added to this dramatization by putting Bizango statuary on the home page and every screen of the exhibition website for *Vodou: Sacred Powers of Haiti*, thus endorsing confusion between Vodou and secret societies, although this was contrary to the theme of the exhibition.³⁶

Diabolization: The statues have something unsettling about them, and many visitors considered them so horrifying that warnings sprang up on blogs, advising against going to see the exhibitions. Having these statues as the centerpiece of exhibitions on Vodou sustains the confusion between Vodou and Bizango secret societies, whereas Haitians do not collapse the two and dread the secret societies. Presenting these as an underground network of resistance to Haiti's political and judicial system unveils what is supposed to be the most hidden part of Haitian culture.

Are Bizango figures created to satisfy North American and European consumers, who can never get enough of Haiti? Who has heard of these figures in Haiti itself? One could argue that secret societies demand absolute secrecy. Would it not be more ethical to keep this underground resistance network secret, while at the same time elucidating the genealogy of this material culture that seems to have been created *ex nihilo*? What would the members of these secret societies think of such displays, if these societies really were sites of resistance against state power?

Carlo Célius has shown convincingly that the Lehmann Collection's aim to preserve Vodou as cultural heritage is closely related to Vodou's restructuring by activist organizations, some of which support a monotheistic Vodou headed by a leader and founded on its own "bible" (Célius 2009). These associations were created immediately after Jean-Claude Duvalier's fall from power, in order to protect the *ounfò* from Protestant groups who assassinated Vodou priests on the pretext that they had

supported the Duvalier regime. But it is not certain that one can really talk of a "restructuring of Vodou." This "association-based Vodou" exists principally for an audience abroad, particularly international organizations and NGOs, who establish public policies using the network of Vodou temples to reach the faithful (Benoît 2007). This development of Vodou is opposed both by those who practice a lineage-based Vodou as part of a daily life linked to spirit and family ancestors and by some of the organizations that compete for political leadership. We argue that these exhibitions define a new stage in the development of European and American representations and constructions of Vodou, promoting new art figures.³⁷ The "imaginary barbarian," to quote the title of a work by Laënnec Hurbon (2008), seems to take on any number of ever-burgeoning forms.

A NEW DEPARTURE: RADIANT ENERGIES

Just when we thought we had finished this paper, chance had it—but was it really chance? ...—that, on October 9, 2014, we were put in contact with the *sèvitè* of the Na-Ri-Véh *ounfò*, and a few days later we managed to track down Dubréus Lhérisson. Both could confirm that Lhérisson made the QBM's Bizango. The *sèvitè* told us that the energy that had inhabited Bakala Bizango Bazin, and had been returned to its origin in northern Haiti thanks to the desecralization ceremony, had reappeared there the previous day in anticipation of our phone conversation. It also radiated out from the QBM: The energy of one of the precolonial Amerindian objects had not been removed in a desecralization ritual and so still "inhabited" it.³⁸ In the course of our conversation with this *sèvitè*, the full complexity of the "charge" became apparent, like the "rebus" constituted by the different energies placed in a *minkisi*. When we contacted the *sèvitè* of the Na-Ri-Véh *ounfò* again, in March 2015, he was expecting our phone call: The Amerindian talisman was radiating from the crown of the Bizango queen, who had appeared to him in a dream the night before. The emperor Bakala had not become one of those "inanimate [museum] objects" stripped of their power, as is usually the case of African artwork exhibited in museums (Dupuis 1999).³⁹

Hence the opposition of authentic versus fake should not be understood simply in terms of the commodification of ritual artifacts. The Na-Ri-Véh *sèvitè* insists that the creative power of the artist should be taken into account:

So are these objects Bizango or are they not? I have an answer. My answer? They are Bizango. What is closer to God than an artist creating a work of art? Who is God? God is first and foremost a creator. Whether it is through speech or through acts that he creates, he is a creator. There is nothing closer to God than an artist. The artist who creates a Bizango to sell it or something else, by creating that Bizango he becomes in that instant Bizango. As soon as you start talking of Vodou and secret societies, at that moment you yourself become a believer in Vodou.

These objects, whatever the reason, are created to be what they are; They are Bizango objects.

Before creating something, the artist spends time at the temples, he asks questions, he sees, he is inspired, he falls asleep, he wakes up. Then the next day he creates something in an altered state. There is no other way. We think the energies of the world do not exist and yet they are. It is the same thing for these artists, they are; and they are in an altered state. They create something, and then they themselves are awestruck.⁴⁰

Dubréus Lhérisson has confirmed that he is the inventor of these Bizangos covered with pieces of padded fabric.⁴¹ He first imagined a Bizango one afternoon when he was inspired to create a dramatic work that would leave no one indifferent. He has made dozens of such statues and considers them all to be “authentic” because they are “antic”: the *sevitè* “charged” them with “a spirit which is one, two, or three centuries old” before placing them in various *ounfò* (Fig. 18). They were sold to or exhibited in Europe and North America’s most prestigious anthropological museums, mostly without any mention of authorship by the art dealers nor by the curators. It is perhaps because the creator was stripped of his identity that the awe-inspiring character of these statues could be maintained and that Bakala Bizango Bazin traveled from the Belair district of Port-au-Prince right into the Louvre and Quai Branly Museums.

Notes

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1 The literature on the history of Haitian art is vast. A very succinct introduction to the current scholarly debates on Vodou art includes Brown (1995); Celius (2005, 2008, 2015); Cosentino (1995, 1996, 2013); Farquhason and Gordon (2012); Lerebours (1989); and Mosaka (2007).

2 For Wade Davis, Bizango is indeed the name of a secret society, which has different names in different regions, but it refers more precisely to the rites of the secret society Sanpwèl (Davis 1988: 249).

3 Inventory number 70.2009.48.1.1-4.

4 So-called Bizango, because these statues first became publicly visible in art galleries in Port-au-Prince and in museum exhibitions outside of Haiti, with no investigation of their origins except when they were displayed as the work of an artist, although the artist’s name was not always mentioned. For ease of reading, we shall use the *ad hoc* term “Bizango statue” or just “Bizango” here.

5 A “Bizango sanctuary” was also displayed at the Spanish Cultural Center of the Dominican Republic in 2001 (Beauvoir-Dominique 2005: 67). Soraya Aracena told André Delpuech on July 19, 2014, in Santo Domingo that no Bizango statue had been displayed with this altar. In 2001, Soraya Aracena organized the 8th Festival Antropológico de Culturas Afroamericanas de Santo Domingo and coordinated the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Arpotaciones Culturales Haitiana*.

6 Although it is now common to call male Vodou officiants *oungan*, we prefer to employ the term used by our interlocutors, namely *sevitè* (servant, he who serves the Vodou spirits called *lwa*), which puts the emphasis on

relations to Vodou spirits through family ancestry rather than on the commercial operations of the cult. The term *mambo* is used for priestesses. *Ounfò* is the term for the space and the buildings, including the rooms of the *lwa* (Vodou spirits), where Vodou is practiced.

7 The information in quotation marks that follows was conveyed to André Delpuech by the art dealer in the many emails exchanged during the negotiation and after the acquisition of the work, between July 2008 and October 2010.

8 In the historiography of the Haitian revolution, Mackandal is considered to be either a Vodou-practicing leader of a group of maroons who carried out large-scale poisonings of European colonizers, or a *bokò* (witch doctor) whose knowledge of poisons was used not against the colonizers but against the enslaved, who settled their interpersonal conflicts using poison. For this debate, see Geggus (2002).

9 For a list of ranks in the Bizango secret society, see Davis (1988: 250–51).

10 According to an email from the *sevitè* of the Temple of Na-Ri-Vêh 777 to the gallery owner, sent on January 11, 2009, the ceremonies took place over the period January 4–11, 2009, with a last part to be performed on January 17 of that year.

11 For an overview of the debates and different historiographical approaches to the Bois Caïman gathering, see Lerebours (1989), Geggus (2002), and Geggus and Fiering (2009).

12 The Haitian collections inherited from the Musée de l’Homme are very small, not to say insignificant: The QBM has only ninety-eight objects, apart from archaeological Precolumbian items, which is surprising given the historical links between Haiti and France and the fascination with Vodou. Most items come from two sources: from Michel Leiris (some twenty objects acquired in 1949) and from Kurt Fischer (sixty-four objects acquired between 1949 and 1950). Only one item comes from Alfred Métraux. On the marginal place of the Caribbean in French museography and the social sciences, see Benoit (2009).

13 See André Delpuech, “Bizango figure from Haiti,” acquisition records, QBM archives, 2009. The Bizango statue was immediately displayed in the QBM before being moved to the Musée du Louvre from November 5, 2011–February 6, 2012, as part of the *The Louvre Invites J.M.G. Le Clézio—Museums Are Worlds* event. It was then returned to the QBM’s permanent exhibition space, where it is presented as a work of contemporary art.

14 Art dealer, email to André Delpuech, January 30, 2010.

15 Port-au-Prince art dealer, emails to André Delpuech, July 15, 2010.

16 In a review of the exhibition catalogue, Donald Cosentino expressed his bewilderment at the sudden appearance of this statuette. He deemed its proper place to be an art gallery, not an ethnographic museum, writing, “to me, these creatures resemble nothing more than the menagerie of space aliens Lucas created for his intergalactic bar scene in *Star Wars*. I am bewildered by it. Provenance for these pieces is almost entirely missing. Nothing was documented or photographed *in situ*. Most scholars and Vodouisants have never seen anything like these Bizango pieces in any temple, it’s as if an entire parallel world of Christian sacred art, some visual analogue to the Dead Sea Scrolls, had suddenly turned up in somebody’s attic. This is an art show about Vodou the way Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* is an art movie about Jesus. It should not have been mounted in an ethnographic museum. It belongs in some hip gallery in Chelsea, alongside the works of Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, or Chris Ofili (all of whose own visual tactics include some Vodou-like refiguring of the pre-Vatican II Catholic iconography they grew up with). Now there’s a story yet to be told!” (Cosentino 2009: 252).

17 <http://fpvpoch.atspace.org>

18 Art dealer, personal communication to André Delpuech, Paris, April 16, 2010.

19 Art dealer, email to André Delpuech, October 19, 2009.

20 <http://surrealdocuments.blogspot.com/2008/11/Vodou-art-and-mysticism-from-haiti.html>

21 Art dealer, email to André Delpuech, September 9, 2009.

22 Opening address, Anthropological Festival of Afro-American Cultures, Spanish Cultural Center, Dominican Republic, 2001 (Beauvoir-Dominique 2005: 66).

23 Marianne Lehmann, personal communication to André Delpuech, April 29, 2010, during a tour of her collection in her house in Pétionville, Haiti.

24 New York art dealer, email to André Delpuech, June 9, 2013.

25 These are music bands linked to *ounfò* or secret societies who parade during Lent, immediately after the carnival parades (see McAlister 2002).

26 <http://arc.themagazine.com/arc/2014/01/open-house-at-brutedge-gallery/>

27 The work by Dubréus Lhérisson, *Bizango Mèt Bitasyon*, is dated 2006 and is part of the collection of the Ateliers Jérôme at Port-au-Prince.

28 “The recurrence of the name of Lhérisson on a certain number of captions on the labels [of the Bizangos] might indicate the name of a Haitian artist” (Schinz 2008: 373).

29 Every member of the Bizango secret society carries “travel papers,” called a “passport,” on his or

her person, in order to move around without being attacked by a rival group. The passport names the bearer's secret society and territory. It contains the itinerary taken from one place to the next and the authorizations from other secret societies to cross their territory (see Davis 1988: 267).

30 Max Beauvoir, television interview by Valerio Saint-Louis, *Tele Image*, Channel 115, Long Island, NY. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lPA8nqeTec>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx26H7nyoFE>

31 An operation by which an individual is reduced to a zombie. Zombies have had a spell cast on them that brings the dead back to life and destroys the individual's humanity so as to enslave her entirely.

32 Anthropologist Françoise Dumas-Champion (2008) has analyzed the desacralization of the ritual objects of Reunion Island healers when they were transferred to another healer or on their deathbed.

33 Gallery owner, email to André Delpuech, October 14, 2010.

34 The *péristil* is an area of the *ounfò* with a roof covering, where Vodou dances and rituals are performed.

35 Elizabeth McAlister (1995) gives a vivid description of how a bottle she had bought from a *bokò* (a member of a secret society), that she thought was an art object, proved in fact to be part of a Vodou symbolic system: It was "charged."

36 <http://www.fieldmuseum.org/at-the-field/exhibitions/Vodou-sacred-powers-haiti>

37 See Richman (2008) for his analysis of the relations between the fantasies of American tourists and artists concerning Haiti and the development of a Haitian naïve religious art. See also Célius (2008) for the role of the international scene in the development of certain artistic movements.

38 *Sèvitè* of the Sacred Temple of Na-Ri-Véh 777, personal communication to Catherine Benoît, October 9, 2014.

39 If we follow Anne Dupuis's analysis and overview of books on how African artworks are displayed in museums, this retention of charge is unusual. In order to enter the museum, "animate objects" must precisely lose "their soul, their spirit, the presence which inhabited them" (Dupuis 1999: 987).

40 *Sèvitè* of the Sacred Temple of Na-Ri-Véh 777, personal communication to Catherine Benoît, October 9, 2014.

41 Dubréus Lhérisson, personal communication to Catherine Benoît, October 18, 2014.

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