



BERNARD DE GRUNNE

TRIBAL
fine ARTS

GREAT WORKS FROM AFRICA
AND THE PACIFIC



Baule statue by the Ascher Master, height : 47 cm

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IS AFRICAN SCULPTURE CLASSICAL ?

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Baule statue, height : 57 cm

Is African sculpture classical ?

William Fagg considers all of African art as classical as opposed to Romantic in the sense that it is accepted by its society whereas the romantic artist will pursue his vision in revolt with society. Margaret Plass offers a more restrictive definition of Classical African art. For her, only the African art which is pure, i.e. unaffected by non-African influences can be called classical¹. As such, it must derive from a tradition in which each artist expresses only the aesthetic and religious values of his own tribe, never trying to escape from its influence. William Rubin, on the other hand, defined classical African sculpture as highly refined, with often intricate workmanship, beautifully polished or patinated surfaces, and a restrained stylized realism². He included Luba and Baule sculpture as examples of this category and contrasts it with the rawness, geometricity and more extreme invention of form such as the Mumuye, the Songye or the Mbole styles. More recently, the art critic Adam Gopnick defined the art of the Dogon as “classical” since it is among the most familiar to the Western eye³.

Let us start with a definition of Classicism. The word “classic and “classical” in modern European languages, shifted in meaning throughout our history. According to the 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the term classic, used in literary analysis, derived from the Latin epithet *classicus* where a “*scriptor classicus*” is contrasted with a *scriptor proletarius*⁴. The metaphor is taken from the writings of the second century Roman writer Servius Tullius, dividing the Roman people into *classes*, those in the first class being called *classici*, all the rest *infra classem*, and those in the last *proletarii*. The epithet classic is accordingly applied to a person of the first rank. In the English it appears in 1599 in the phrase “classical and canonical” which is to mean “of the first rank and authority”. Its meaning expanded further into anything which had order, balance or restraint, as it relates to any creation in the fields of art, architecture or literature.

The word then shifted meaning to anything pertaining to the Greek and Roman cultures which were recognized as having an authoritative excellence, such as in the “Classics.” In the nineteenth century with Goethe and Byron, classical related to a style which was measured, balanced, restrained as opposed to the more effusive “romantic style.” Starting with the publication of Heinrich Wofflin’s study *Classical Art* in 1899, it finally became a art historical term applying to the arts of the Cinquecento during the High Renaissance in Italy. For him, Classical art reverts firstly to elementary vertical and horizontal for major axes of direction, and to the primitive full-face and pure profile aspects; second, it uses the fundamental principle of effect by contrast and the clarity of presentation where multiplicity can be seen as a coherent unity and the parts can be fused into an inevitable whole⁵.

{1} Margaret Plass, *The Classical Art of Negro Africa*, Duveen-Graham, New York, 1957.

{2} William Rubin, ed., *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art*, New York, 1984, vol. I. p.17

{3} Adam Gopnick, Out of Africa, in *The New Yorker*, March 22, 1993, p. 100.

{4} *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, New York, 1911, vol V., p. 448

{5} Heinrich Wofflin, *Classical Art*, New York, 1959, p. 256



Baule statue by the Ascher Master, height : 47 cm

The next step is to analyze the factors which defined Classicism in fifth century Greece and see if they can apply to African statuary. Oddly enough finding an in-depth analysis of classicism in Greek art history is not easy. It is a widely used word but very seldom explained by art historians. One of the most penetrating analysis of Classicism can be found in Pollitt's *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (1972). Since we are analyzing human statuary, I will focus mainly as classical Greek sculptors, as opposed to other achievements in architecture, painting or literature.

One of the main achievements of Greek Classical sculpture was their representation of movement (such as Myron's Discus-thrower) and the contraposto with the visible harmony of counterbalancing forces by arranging the parts of the body in a chiasmic scheme (as in the Doryphoros of Polykleitos), a strong contrast with the hieratism of African statuary. Although the sculptor Phidias must be credited with creating the prototypical standards for the representations of divinities which balanced feelings of being at the same time emotionally disengaged from, but also conscious of, the human condition⁶, the sculptor Polykleitos seems closer to the preoccupation of african artists.

Indeed, Polykleitos was remembered as the foremost exponent of the principle of symmetria, "commensurability of parts" in arts. He wrote a treatise known as the *Canon* in which he sought to demonstrate that such philosophical qualities such as the "perfect, the good or the beautiful" can only be expressed through a harmony of parts in sculptural forms and its geometrical proportions. He started with the human figure, organically differentiated into torso, limbs and parts of limbs, and subsequently tried to ascertain how these parts related to each other and to the whole. As Pollitt explains: "the goal of Polykleitos' system of symmetria was to describe an ideal nature in man. (...) He also concentrated on harmonizing opposing force⁷. Polykleitos' approach worked so well that, although no original sculpture by his hand survives, one can easily "feel" the presence of a harmonious system in the numerous Roman copies of his work.

Interestingly enough, the origin of his canon with its focus of numerical proportions for the human body was probably musical and came from the Pythagorean school (active in the sixth century B.C.) and their observations that harmony in a musical scale which can be expressed in a limited group of mathematical numbers had a spiritual value which lead to the contemplation of the "divine."

Let us examine two remarkable Baule statues as African examples. Both are representations of seated masculine figures with elaborate beards, one in fibre, the second carved in wood. Seated statues generally are connected to the *asie usu* or the spirits of the bush, which are secondary divinities whose favours are gained through statuettes.

I have attributed elsewhere the first figure with the braided fiber beard to an anonymous Baule sculptor which I named the Ascher Master. This artist, the Asher Master, produced at least four other standing male figures and one female standing figure.

{6} Jerome Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*, Cambridge, 1972, p. 99-100

{7} Idem, p. 108



Baule statue, height : 57 cm

This statue by the Ascher Master with its intensity of the expression, the beauty and modelling of the body and its wonderful intense red patina, shows such formal features in the overall naturalistic modelling as the gesture of the bent left arm with a large ivory bracelet at the wrist, the finely carved upswept crested coiffure, the treatment of the surface with a lush patina. All these elements give the piece its stark immobility, its stability and its strict logical composition in order to give the fickle *asie usu* spirit the desirable aspect of harmony, peacefulness and quiet.

The artist, who carved the second statue with the wooden beard, approached his task differently. He wanted to give us a sense of dynamic equilibrium. He made the head turn to the right and the long beard pointed in the opposite direction, one hand pulling the tip of the beard, the other holding a cup, the knees bent inwards, and the person is seated on an off-balanced two-legged stool, the two other legs by a brilliant short-cut are the sitter's own legs. The antelope horns have been carved into the hair of this figure, probably an indication of its spiritual power since they are a type often filled with medicine. Here the interplay of carefully delineated volumes and well defined elements brings together a whole which is tricking in its precise sense of off-balance and its judicious rhythmic arrangement.

Instinctively, one would label the Ascher Master statue as more "classical" in the manner of Phidias and the second artist a Baule Polykleitos showing already a "baroque" touch with the visible harmony of counterbalancing forces by arranging the parts of the body in a chiasmic scheme similar to Polykleitos' Doryphoros. I would consider this second artist more gifted by fusing in one sculpture the classical canons of Baule statuary with the dynamic tension and asymmetry associated with the chaotic, wild fickleness and sometime aggressiveness of the bush spirit.

Our journey started in Fifth century Greece. Paul Guillaume's can bring it back full circle when he talks about African classical sculpture: "it is like music in its succession of repeated and contrasting sensuous forms, its continuities and subtle alterations of a theme. A person may have learned to appreciate the plastic qualities of Greek sculpture, in some measure, to follow with delight its flowing curves and smooth surfaces. He will find, occasionally, a curve or a plane as pure and graceful as the Greek he admires, but it will be mixed in with other radically different, with rough, jagged, unsymmetrical, bristling or swollen shapes, with abrupt and apparently unrelated transitions⁸."

Bernard DE GRUNNE

{8} Paul Guillaume et Thomas Munro, *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, New York, 1968, p. 34 et 64.

Africa

I. SONINKE, MALI

Ancestral Statue
Wood, oily dark patina
Height : 54 cm

date | A.D. 1240 – 1410 (C14 Zurich, Dr. Bonani, ETH n° 32227)

provenance | Collected by Emil Storrer, Zurich around 1952
Max and Berthe Kofler-Erni, Riehen

publications | René Wassing, *African Art : Its Background and Traditions*, New York, 1968, p. 244, cat. 41
René Wassing, *L'art de l'Afrique noire*, Bibliothèque des Arts, Paris, 1969, p. 252, cat. 41
Elsy Leuzinger, *Die Kunst von Schwarz Afrika*, Kunsthhaus, Zürich, 1970, p. 28, n° A8
Elsy Leuzinger, *The Art of Black Africa*, Studio Vista, London, 1972, p. 31, n° A8
Lorenz Homberger et alii, *Mensch, Mythos, Maske, Kunstwerke aus Afrika, Ozeanien Mittel- und Südamerika*, Musée Hans Erni, Luzern, 1988, n° 8
Mary Nooter et alii, *Secrecy. African Art that Conceals and Reveals*, The Museum for African Art, New York, 1993, p. 206, cat. 80

exhibitions | Zurich, Kunsthhaus, *Die Kunst von Schwarz Afrika*, October 31, 1970 – February 10, 1971
Essen, Villa Hügel, *Afrikanische Kunstwerke. Kulturen am Niger*, March 25 – June 13, 1971
Luzern, Musée Hans Erni, *Mensch, Mythos, Maske, Kunstwerke aus Afrika, Ozeanien Mittel- und Südamerika*, May 28 – November 20, 1988
New York The Museum for African Art, *Secrecy. African Art that Conceals and Reveals*, Spring 1993



Emile Storrer in Mali, circa 1950
Archives : Michael Storrer





Africa

II. TELLEM, MALI

Village of Banani IV
Statue
Wood, encrusted patina
Height: 52 cm

date | A.D. 1255 +/- 45 years (C14 Zurich, Dr. Bonani, ETH n° 34591)

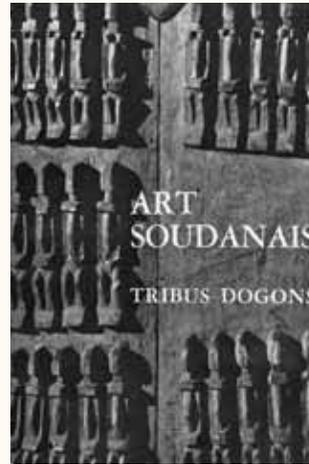
provenance | Collected in situ in Banani IV by Pierre Langlois in 1952
Collection Bertie Urvater, Brussels 1954- 2005

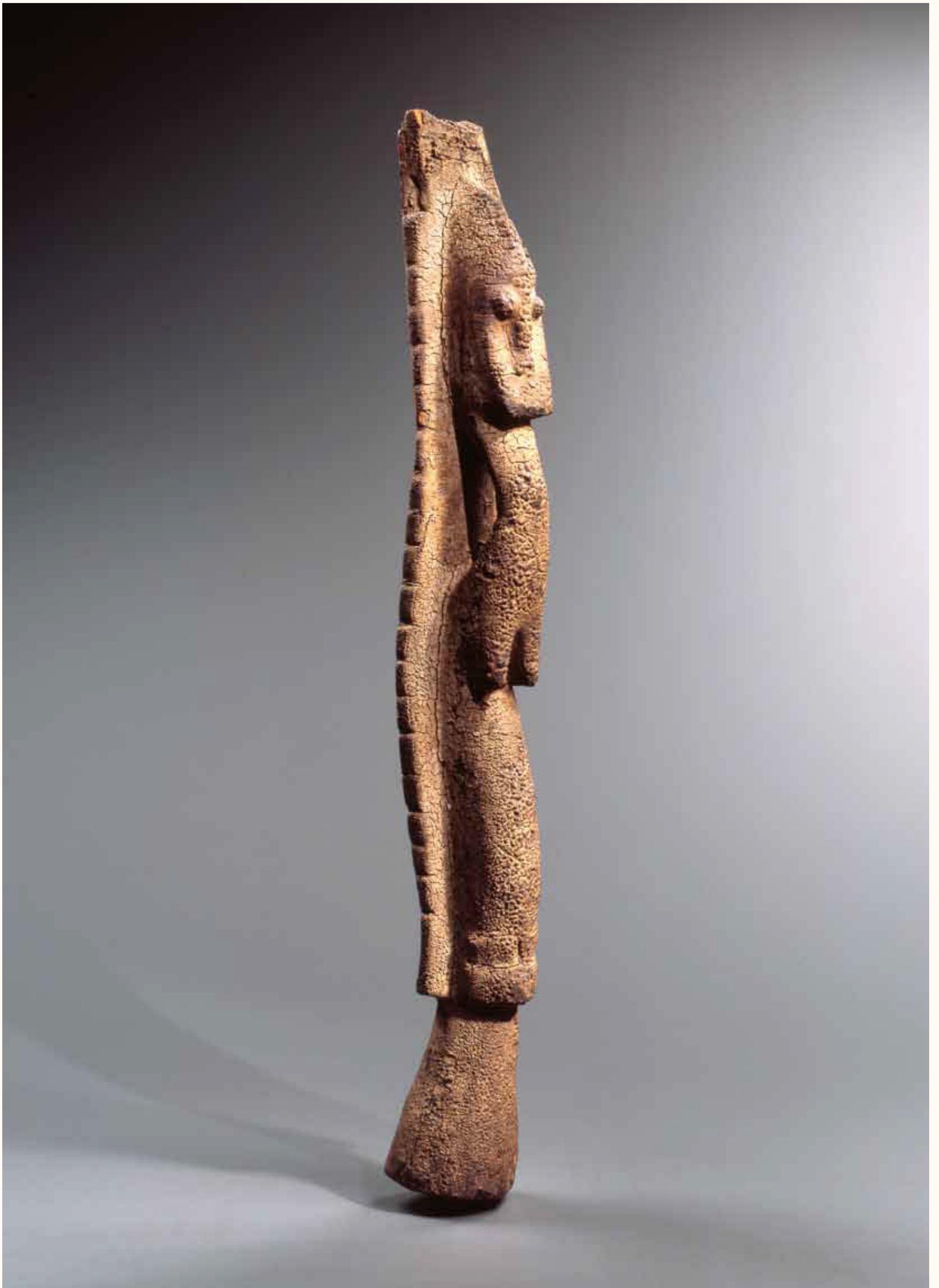
publication | Pierre Langlois, *Art Soudanais, Tribus Dogon*, Brussels, 1954, p.24, Fig.12

exhibition | Brussels, Palais des Beaux Arts, *Art Soudanais. Tribus Dogon*, October 30 – November 21, 1954



Bertie Urvater, circa 1960





Africa

III. DOGON, MALI

Master of the Slanting Eyes
Statue
Wood, rich encrusted patina
Height : 78 cm

date | A.D. 1820 +/- 40 year (C14 Zurich, Dr. Bonani, ETH n° 30296)

provenance | Emile Storrer, Zurich, 1958
Charles Ratton, 1959-1961
Private Collection, 1962-present

publication | Ezio Bassani, *Arts of Africa. 7000 ans d'art africain*, Grimaldi Forum, Monaco, 2005, N° 72a, p. 188

exhibition | Monaco, Espace Ravel Grimaldi Forum, *Arts of Africa. 7000 ans d'art africain*, July 16 – September 4, 2005



Emile Storrer, circa 1970
Archives : Michael Storrer





Africa

IV. DOGON, BOUMBO TORO STYLE, MALI

Ancestral couple
Wood, brass rings, metal eyes, iron necklace, fiber strings
Height: 57 cm

provenance | Probably Emil Storrer, Zurich, 1950's
Max and Berthe Köfler-Erni, Riehen, 1960's
K.-H. Krohn collection, Eckenfoerde

publication | René Wassing, *L'art de l'Afrique Noire*, Paris, 1969, cat. 43, P. 253





Africa

V. YORUBA, NIGERIA

Divination Cup
Wood, reddish patina
Height : 30,4 cm

provenance | Mr. Willem.E. Geyskens, Diest, Belgium, circa 1965
Private Collection, Belgium





Africa

VI. FANG, GABON

Reliquary Guardian Figure
Wood, dark oily patina
Height : 72 cm

provenance | Art Market, possibly Paul Guillaume, Paris, circa 1930
Collection of Hassoldt Davis, New York (1903-1959)
By family descent



Paul Guillaume, circa 1930
Archives : J.P. Paudrat, Paris





Africa

VII. KONGO KINGDOM, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Mother and Child
Wood, polished honey-coloured surface
Height : 33,3 cm

provenance | Collected by Engineer Pierre Lombard between 1902 and 1905





Africa

VIII. KONGO KINGDOM, VILI STYLE, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Nkisi Power Figure

Wood, fabric, European-manufactured mirror, encrusted patina

Height : 28 cm

provenance | Collection of Mrs. Frans Olbrechts, Wezembeek-Oppem
Pierre Darteville, Bruxelles



Jean Van Noten. Portrait of Professor Frans Olbrechts, 1973, Ethnographic Museum Antwerp, EM, AE 77.37.274 (*Olbrechts-Maurissens*, 1977)





Africa

IX. KONGO KINGDOM, VILI STYLE, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Power Figure

Wood, fabric, European-manufactured mirror, brass tacks, encrusted patina

Height : 26 cm

provenance | Collected in the Yombe region between 1924 and 1929 by Dr. Albert Collard, Directeur de Laboratoire de l'Institut des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique
Vittorio Mangio, Milano





Africa

X. YAKA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Headrest
Wood, smooth rich brown patina
Height : 16, 5 cm

provenance | Marcel Coard, Paris, July 17 1934
Charles Ratton, Paris, inv ; n° 8079, 1934-1962
Private Collection

exhibition | Paris, Théâtre Edouard VII, *La Sculpture des noires d'Afrique*, December 1936 - January 1937, n° 8079



Charles Ratton, circa 1930
Archives : Guy Ladrière, Paris





Africa

XI. KUBA KINGDOM, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Royal cephalomorphic palm wine cup
Wood, Smooth brown surface
Height : 27 cm

provenance | Belgian Colonial before 1940





Africa

XII. LUBA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Nkisi female figure
Wood, oily dark patina, European varnish
Height : 30,5 cm

provenance | Colonial Collection N° 19140
Collection Herman Schilz, Antwerpen, before 1930, N° 653 / Sch 7

publication | F. Olbrechts et A. Maesen, *Tentoonstelling van Kongo Kunst*, Antwerpen, 1937 n° 653

exhibition | Antwerpen, Stadfeestzaal, *Tentoonstelling van Kongo Kunst*, 24 december 1937- 16 January 1938



Drawing by Olbrechts of the Luba statue, 1937



Photo of the Schilz collection in his garden in Antwerp, 1937
Archives : Ethnographic Museum, Antwerp





Africa

XIII. LUBA SHANKADI, MWANZA STYLE, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Nkisi figure
Wood, European beads, fabric
Height : 30 cm

provenance | Private collection Belgium, before 1920





Africa

XIV. TABWA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Ancestral statue
Wood, dark encrusted patina
Height : 44 cm

provenance | Jean-Pierre Jernander, Brussels, before 1975
Collection of H.R.H. La Grande Duchesse Joséphine-Charlotte de Luxembourg, Luxembourg.

publications | Marie-Louise Bastin, *Introduction aux Arts d'Afrique Noire*, Arnouville, 1984, p.361, fig.387
Roberts, A.F. et Maurer, E.M. (ed.), *Tabwa The Rising of a New Moon : a Century of Tabwa Art*, Michigan, 1985, p.137, n°30, et p.236, Fig.96

exhibitions | Washington National Museum of African Art, *Tabwa The Rising of a New Moon : a Century of Tabwa Art*, January-March 1986
Ann Arbor, Michigan, The University Museum, April-August 1986
Tervuren, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, October-November 1986





Africa

XV. BONGO, TONJ STYLE, SUDAN

Carved by Kwanja Gete
Ancestral Post
Wood, metal wire, eroded surface
Height : 83,6 cm



Bongo statue by Kwanja Gete
Private collection
Height : 140 cm





Africa

XVI. YAO, MALAWI

Ancestral Couple

Wood, reddish-brown patina

Height male figure : 74,5 cm

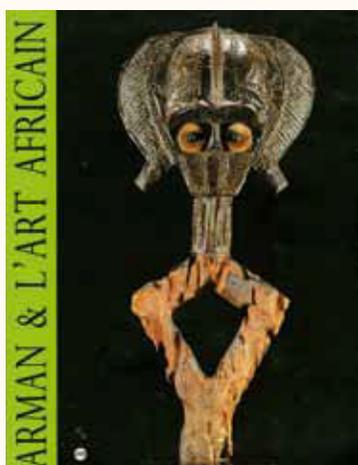
Height female figure : 70 cm

provenance male figure | Mrs. René Marteau, Brussels, circa 1960
Sotheby's London, Tribal Art, London, March 1990 Lot 196
Collection Armand Arman, New York, 1990-2001
Bernard Dulon, Paris, 2002
Private Collection, France

provenance female figure | Paris, Drouot, Blanchet & associés, May 7, 2004, lot 71 bis

publications | Alain Nicolas et alii, *Arman et l'art africain*, Marseille, Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, 1996, p. 153
Alain Nicolas et alii, *African Faces, African Figures. The Arman Collection*, Museum for African Art, New York, 1997, p. 187
Robert Neuberger et Anne Leurquin, *Arman l'Africain*, Paris, Galerie Bernard Dulon, 2002, n° 23, p. 83

exhibitions | Marseille, Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, *Arman et l'art africain*, June 23 – October 30 1996
Paris, Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, December 3 1996 – February 17, 1997
Köln, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum für Völkerkunde, March – August 1997
New York, Museum for African Art, Fall 1997





Pacific

XVII. LOWER SEPIK RIVER, SINGRIN STYLE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Ancestral male figure
Wood, Shell beads, dark reddish patina
Inagaki base
Height : 67,6 cm

provenance | Maria Martins, New York and Paris, before 1940



Maria Martins in her New York studio, circa 1946 (Deitch and Naumann, 1988 :Cover)





Pacific

XVIII. LOWER SEPIK RIVER, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Ancestral Male Figure
Wood, dark brown surface
Height : 82,5 cm

provenance | N° RMe 100 in white paint on left shoulder blade
Early Expedition N° $\frac{6.33.39}{7}$ on the right shoulder blade
Hélène and Philippe Leloup, Paris, 1982





Pacific

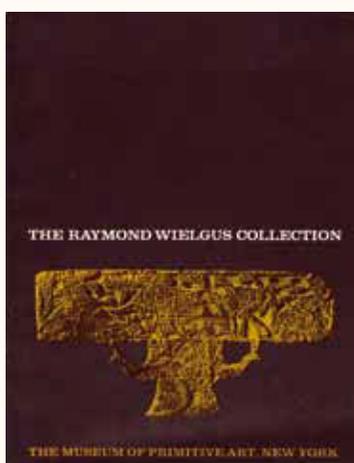
XIX. IATMUL, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Seated male Figure
Wood, eroded reddish surface
Height : 50,8 cm

provenance | Collected by Father Franz. Kirschbaum, of the S.V.D (Societas Verbi Divini)
at the village of Tshessbandai between 1925 and 1930
Possibly Missionary Museum, Vatican
Possibly Henri Kamer, Paris
Julius Carlebach, New York, before 1956
Raymond Wielgus, Chicago, 1956- 1970, n° 56-45
Mr and Mrs William Struve, Chicago, 1971-75
Walter Randall, New York, 1975-79
John Friede, New York, 1979-2003

publications | Raymond Wielgus, *The Raymond Wielgus Collection*, New York, The Museum of Primitive Art,
1960, n° 30 and illus. n° 2
Allen Wardwell, *The Raymond and Laura Wielgus Collection*, Chicago, The Arts Club, 1966, n° 31
Allen Wardwell, *The Art of the Sepik River*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 1971, n° 60, p. 39

exhibitions | New York, The Museum of Primitive Art, *The Raymond Wielgus Collection*, 1960
Chicago, the Arts Club, *The Raymond and Laura Wielgus Collection*, September 26- November 2, 1966
Chicago, The Art Institute, *The Art of the Sepik River*, October 16 – November 28, 1971





Pacific

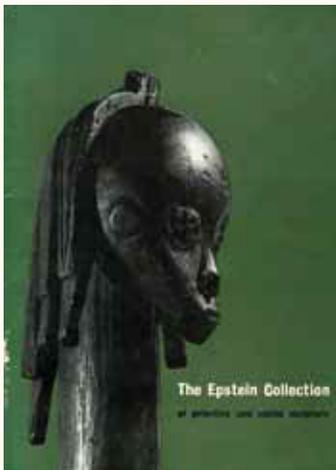
XX. MALAKULA ISLAND, VANUATU

Mask
Wood, polychrome surface
Height : 39 cm

provenance | Sir Jacob Epstein, London, before 1940
Carlo Monzino Collection, Lugano, 1961- 2002

publications | William Fagg, *The Epstein Collection of Primitive and Exotic Sculpture*, London,
The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1960, n° 164
Ezio Bassani et Malclom McCleod, *Jacob Epstein Collector*, Associazione Poro, Milano, 1989, fig. 430

exhibition | London, The Arts Council of Great Britain, *The Epstein Collection of Primitive and Exotic Sculpture*,
25 March-23rd April, 1960





Pacific

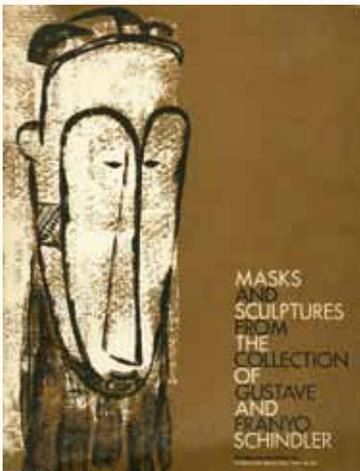
XXI. EASTER ISLAND

Dance Paddle (rapa)
Toromiro wood, light to dark brown patina
Height : 86,25 cm

provenance | Probably John J. Klejman, New York
Collection Gustave and Franyo Schindler, New York before 1966

publication | G. Schindler, *Masks and Sculptures from the Collection of Gustave and Franyo Schindler*,
New York, 1966, Fig.43

exhibition | New York, The Museum of Primitive Art, *Masks and Sculptures from the Collection of Gustave
and Franyo Schindler*, 1966









TRIBAL
fine ARTS

GALERIE BERNARD DE GRUNNE
180 avenue Franklin Roosevelt
B-1050 Brussels
BELGIUM
Tel. : + 322 5023171
Fax : + 322 5033969
Email : grunne@skynet.be

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Conception graphique, photogravure et impression :

Snel Grafics
21 rue Fond des Fourches
4041 Vottem, Belgique



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