Number 106 **WINTER 2022**

EUROPE €22 - U.S.A. $25 - CANADA $32 - U.K. £18

TRIBAL ART

Quarterly Journal of the Art, Culture, and History of Traditional Cultures and New World Civilizations

Sacred Spirits: Songye in Naples • Maya Artists at The Met

Black Indians of New Orleans • Moshood Olúsomo Bámigbóyè • Bari Sculpture from South Sudan • In the Enchanted Isles • Samir Borro

People, Auctions, News ...

CONTENTS

TRIBAL ART magazine
WINTER 2022 XXVII-1 / number 106

CONTRIBUTORS TO THE WINTER 2022 EDITION

Najwa Borro is an independent curator and researcher specializing in the arts of Africa.
Sarah Boukamel is in charge of interpretation in the arts of sub-Saharan Africa at the Ecole du Louvre.
Steve Bourget is curator of the American collection at the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.
Bertrand Goy is a member of the Société des Africanistes and has authored many works on the history of tribal art.
James Green is the Frances and Benjamin Benenson Foundation Associate Curator of African Art at the Yale University Art Gallery.
Bernard de Grunne holds a doctorate in art history and is an expert and an art dealer.
Roland Kaehr is a former assistant curator at the Neuchâtel Museum of Ethnography.
Laura Filloy Nadal is associate curator for the Arts of the Ancient Americas at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Gigi Pezzoli is a researcher specializing in the arts of Africa linked to numerous Italian institutions and an exhibition curator.
Joanne Pillsbury is the Andrall E. Pearson Curator for Art of the Ancient Americas at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Dominik Remondino is a historian and art historian.
Nicolas Rolland is an art historian specializing in indigenous art. A dealer, he is also an advisor to the Spiritan Museum of African Art.
Jean-Baptiste Sevette is a photographer who has worked for the Swiss Archaeological Mission in Sudan.

www.tribalartmagazine.com

Editor in Chief
Jonathan Fogel
jonathan@tribalartmagazine.com

Editor in Chief of the French Edition and Special Issues Manager
Elena Martínez-Jacquet
elena@tribalartmagazine.com

Production Manager
Françoise Barrier
info@tribalartmagazine.com

Circulation Manager
Dorothée Duval
admin@tribalartmagazine.com

Copy Editors
Arthur Cronos - www.typofinders.com
Gaëlle Cueff, Caroline Gross

Translations
David Rosenthal, Françoise Barrier

Prepress
Graficazeta (Lodi, Italy)

Printing
Cassochrome (Waregem, Belgium)

Publisher and Artistic Director
Alex R. Arthur
alex@tribalartmagazine.com

General Manager
Pierre Moos

Legal Advisor
Yves-Bernard Debie
ydb@matthysdebie-avocats.eu

Correspondents
Antonio Aimi
info@antonioaimi.it

Ari Birnbaum
a312@zahav.net.il

Winfield Coleman
winfield1@mindspring.com

Julian Harding
julian-harding@hotmail.co.uk

Noëlle Rathmell-Stiels
rathmellstiels@gmail.com

Arnold Wentholt
awentholt@casema.nl

Special thanks to:
Chris Boylan, Julie Casemore, Michael Hamson, Susan Kloman, Diana Loffredo

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Dorothée Duval
Tel.: +32(0)67 877 277
Fax: +32(0)67 210 177
admin@tribalartmagazine.com

ADVERTISING
Françoise Barrier
Tel.: +32(0)67 877 277
info@tribalartmagazine.com

TRIBAL ART (ISSN 1379-1940)
is published quarterly for $25 per issue
by Primedia sprl
BP 18
Arquennes, Belgium

POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to:
TRIBAL ART Magazine
BP 18 - 7181 Arquennes (Belgium)

ADVERTISERS

FIG. 1 (left): Samir and Mina Borro attending the opening of a Zone 3 Abidjan gallery, 1990s.
Photo © SMB archives.

SAMIR BORRO

A Lifelong Quest

Interview by Nicolas Rolland
Comments collected by Najwa Borro
and Sarah Boukamel

I can't remember when I first heard the name Samir Borro mentioned, but I do remember that it was always part of my mental image of African art. It came back regularly and discretely in the books that I as a beginner and not yet a professional continually read and reread. Along with that of his wife, Mina, it was a name that appeared as provenance, usually seen at the ends of photo captions of often-extraordinary objects. I couldn't really form a picture of what kind of man this might be. The surname evoked the East as much as it did Africa, and it turned out that I had reason to be confused. I asked questions. He was spoken of as an important dealer, but even more so a collector, a man of refined taste, who had one foot in Africa and the other in Europe.

When one day I decided to pursue my passion and become a dealer, he had been retired for a few years. In my perception, he was part of a pantheon of unattainables that I thought I would never have the opportunity to meet. As the years passed, I continued to hear things about him here and there—about his estate in Brussels, the sofa he liked to receive on and rarely left, his kindness, and of course, about his collection. The possibility of a meeting no longer really crossed my mind anymore, but a friend who was visiting Brussels suggested I join him to visit Samir Borro. I didn't hesitate. In due course, a beautiful white stone building stood before us. An old watchdog barked when the doorbell rang, and we entered carefully. The relics of an African art dealer's life were everywhere. There were masks, figures, drums, sculpted posts, and doors in the foyer, on the walls of hallways with fading paint, and on the wooden walls of the huge staircase. Sitting on the sofa in the center of the vast living room, surrounded by his wife and daughters, Samir Borro greeted us like old friends. The room was filled with objects, from floor to ceiling, but the vast house with its old-fashioned charm was not just a showcase for an extraordinary collection. A family lived there happily, and they filled every room with their warm and gentle presence. People came and went. Samir offered us a coffee—Lebanese, of course. We furtively looked at the objects around us, but he playfully told us to grab them, to touch them. And so, while handling works that I had hitherto only been able to admire in books, we conversed about his life and interests in an easy and natural manner.

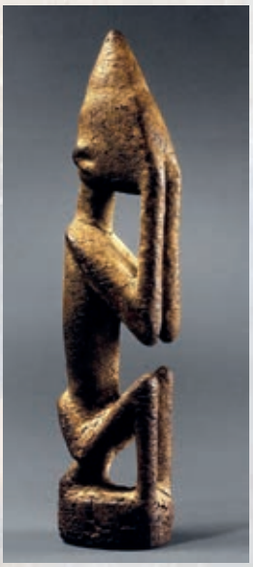


FIG. 2 (above): Seated figure. Tellem-Dogon; Mali. 13th–15th century.
Wood. H: 22 cm.
Ex Jean Herment.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 3 (right):
Portrait of Samir Borro by Merton Simpson, 1993.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 4 (lower right):
Left to right: Paolo Morigi, Merton Simpson, and Samir and Mina Borro at a Sotheby's auction, London, 1970s.
Photo © SMB archives.

Nicolas Rolland: *You're from a Lebanese family that settled in Côte d'Ivoire at the beginning of the twentieth century. You were born, grew up and spent an important part of your adult life there, although you have been living in Brussels for about thirty years now. How would you describe your connection with Africa?*

Samir Borro: I am African, and Côte d'Ivoire is my country, so my connection with Africa is umbilical and visceral. My family has been there for four generations, I was born there, and I grew up in a village between the sea and the lagoon. I know Côte d'Ivoire like the back of my hand because I traveled all over the country for years while I worked for the family's coffee and cocoa business. My in-depth knowledge of the area was a vital factor in the development of my understanding of the country's spirit and its incredible sculptural traditions. Côte d'Ivoire represents everything I love. I think African, I eat African, and I speak several dialects. I also try to maintain the lifestyle I enjoyed in Côte d'Ivoire in all the other places I've lived, with friends that have come to visit, my children, my animals, and, of course, my collection. I left the country with the hope of returning, with a longing that could be compared to how one looks forward to slipping back into one's own bed after an extended trip. Circumstances led to my settling in Brussels in 1993 with my wife, Mina, and our seven children, and I'm happy in this city. But my heart is always there.

FIG. 5 (above):
Samir and Mina Borro at the opening of their Paris gallery at 13 rue Bonaparte, 1979.
Photo © SMB archives.

N.R.: *Since your family was in the coffee, coconut, and cocoa business, nothing really predestined you for a career in the art world. How did you become involved with African art?*

S.B.: I've always been a collector by nature—a passionate one, at that. As a youngster, I collected stamps for several years. I've also loved animals since I was a boy. I was touched by their purity and their beauty, and I could admire them for hours. I lived surrounded by animals—does, mongooses, civets, genets, pangolins, monkeys, and dogs, of course. I've always had dogs. But my exposure with African art occurred as a result of my regular trips into the bush to deal with coffee and cocoa suppliers. One day I witnessed a masquerade performance involving a Dan mask. That was a sublime experience, and at that point I began to buy objects I liked. The people around me at the time didn't understand what I saw in African sculpture. They made fun of me, considered my interest bizarre, perhaps faddish, a bit crazy, and even ridiculous. There was a kind of disdain and condescension in their attitude, but I've never needed the validation of others. I have always been a free thinker, and I continue to be so to this day.

N.R.: *When you decided to get involved in the art business in the 1960s, were you aware of the art market in Europe and the United States, and the extent of the museums, galleries, and collectors that you would later become acquainted with in the course of your many trips there? How was all that seen in Africa?*

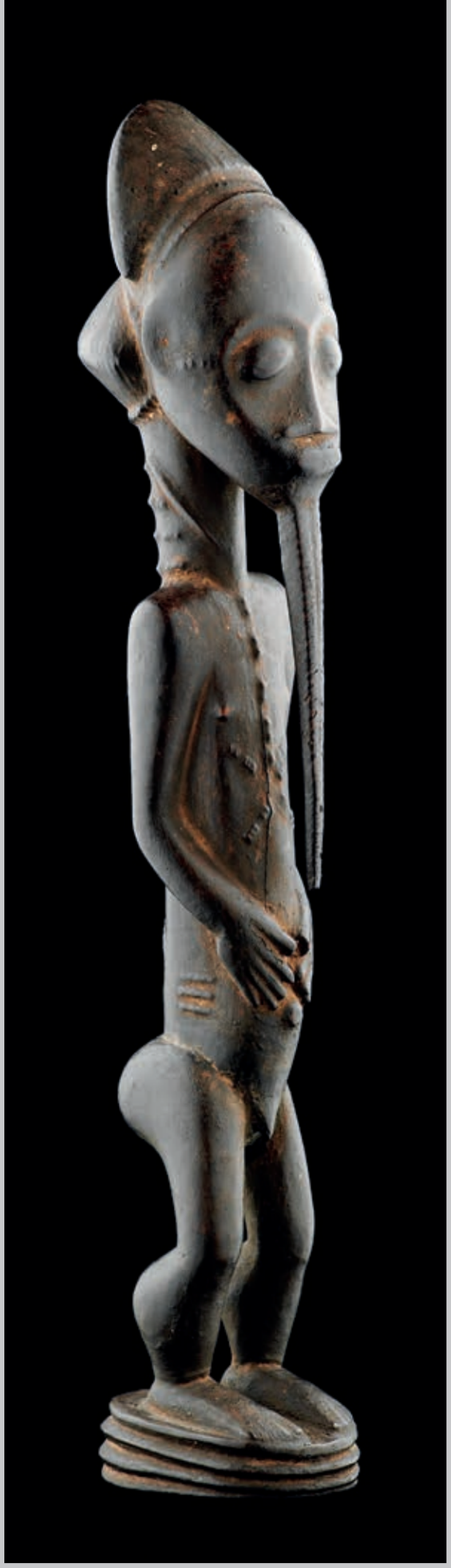
S.B.: No, I was not aware of it. I would never have imagined that pieces could attain the prices they command in today's market. I learned about the existence of this market later through my encounters with others. How was all that seen? I honestly can't tell you. When I began, my approach wasn't commercial. I had never imagined I would be an art dealer. The desire to keep collecting, among other circumstances, led me to the profession. It took time for me to develop a real knowledge base, and it grew gradually out of my interactions with local dealers in Abidjan's Plateau area and the Western dealers who came through to buy objects.

N.R.: *A number of scholars have studied the emergence of the African art market in the first half of the twentieth century. Their research largely has focused on the evolution of the market in Europe and the United States, but the structure of African networks and the role that African dealers themselves played at the source have been largely neglected. As one of the continent's foremost dealers, what can you tell us about the market there? How is it structured? Who are the players?*

S.B.: In Côte d'Ivoire, everything was concentrated in the market in Abidjan's Plateau neighborhood. It was the "tourist market," across the street from the Hotel du Parc. There was everything there—both authentic works and copies. I learned a lot from the local dealers, and notably from Dieou Gaston, an important dealer of Gere origin who was one of the few located outside the Plateau. His huge gallery in Marcory was full of objects that fascinated me. There was also Don Bosco, the secretary general from the town of Duekoue. He was a well-known collector and dealer, and the most expensive at the time. I also remember Yoro Diakité, a Senufo dealer based in Korogho; Baba Keita and Mamady Sylla in Bouaké; another important dealer named Kaourou; as well as a few Europeans like Jean-Paul Delcourt and Georges Loiseau—who had an exceptional collection of Côte d'Ivoire art—and, later on, André Blandin.

N.R.: *Searching for objects has taken up a major part of your life, and it requires two things: a practiced eye and financial resources. How did your sense of discernment develop?*

S.B.: The quest for objects was immediate and all-consuming. It still keeps me busy and will until my final moment. As far as the quality of the objects is concerned, one has to have the eye—and that can't be bought. One either has it or one doesn't. In all modesty, I think I can say I got lucky. I bought forms I found seductive pretty much instinctively. I believe there is such a thing as an intelligence of forms. I've always enjoyed looking, and I trust my eye. I've honed it with love and experience. At the time, there were only a few books on the subject, and we didn't have the benefit of visual references to compare with, aside from those provided by our visual memories. It wasn't until I was in Europe that I was able to complete my learning process through specialized publications. As I mentioned,



FIGS. 6a and b (left and above): Standing figure. Baule; Côte d'Ivoire. 19th–early 20th century. Wood. H: 41 cm. Ex René Rasmussen. Samir and Mina Borro Collection. Photo © SMB archives.

FIGS. 7a and b (above and right): Standing figure. Baule; Côte d'Ivoire. 19th–early 20th century. Wood. H: 35.5 cm. Samir and Mina Borro Collection. Photo © SMB archives.

I began with dealers in the Plateau area, and then continued with people I met in Europe: René Rasmussen, Robert Duperrier, and Charles Ratton. Those were the biggest dealers at the time. Thanks to them, I became an expert in Paris in 1979, when they sponsored my membership in the Compagnie Nationale des Experts. Merton Simpson also played a key role in my life. I became acquainted with him through Duperrier, and we kept in close touch after that. We were always together, until the end. He was my mentor. He showed me marvels I saw nowhere else. What a beautiful time!

N.R.: *People in Europe tend to think that important pieces could be had for low prices in the field, but haven't the best works always been expensive, even in Africa?*
S.B.: In Africa, some dealers were more expensive than others, of course. Everything depended on the piece's owner, and that remains the case today. It's rare for a masterpiece to get picked up for peanuts. Quality has a price.

N.R.: *Early on you also acquired a number of works from prestigious collections in the United States and Europe. It must have been a struggle to get such fine pieces.*
S.B.: I did indeed buy a lot in the course of my trips to the United States, Germany, Paris, Holland, and all over the place. I sometimes missed getting objects in Africa that I later found in Europe. I was very young when I started. I sold objects thinking that I would find more of the same type or by the same sculptor, but I often wound up having to wait ten or even twenty years to come across similar objects or find examples by the same hand. Another difficulty, of course, was maintaining a commercial inventory of beautiful pieces for sale while remaining a collector of those same objects. Today I have an extraordinary collection thanks to sixty years of work and passion. I have devoted my life to African art. I have given it my absolute all. Everything.

I had to fight to get some of those objects. And I had to be bold too. At the René Rasmussen auction on December 14, 1979, Merton Simpson had told me that I wouldn't be able to acquire the Baule figure (lot 29) because there were some extremely wealthy clients going after it. I replied that "even if they are ten, a hundred, or a thousand times richer than I am, I will have it!" I did what I had to do, and I got it (FIG. 6).

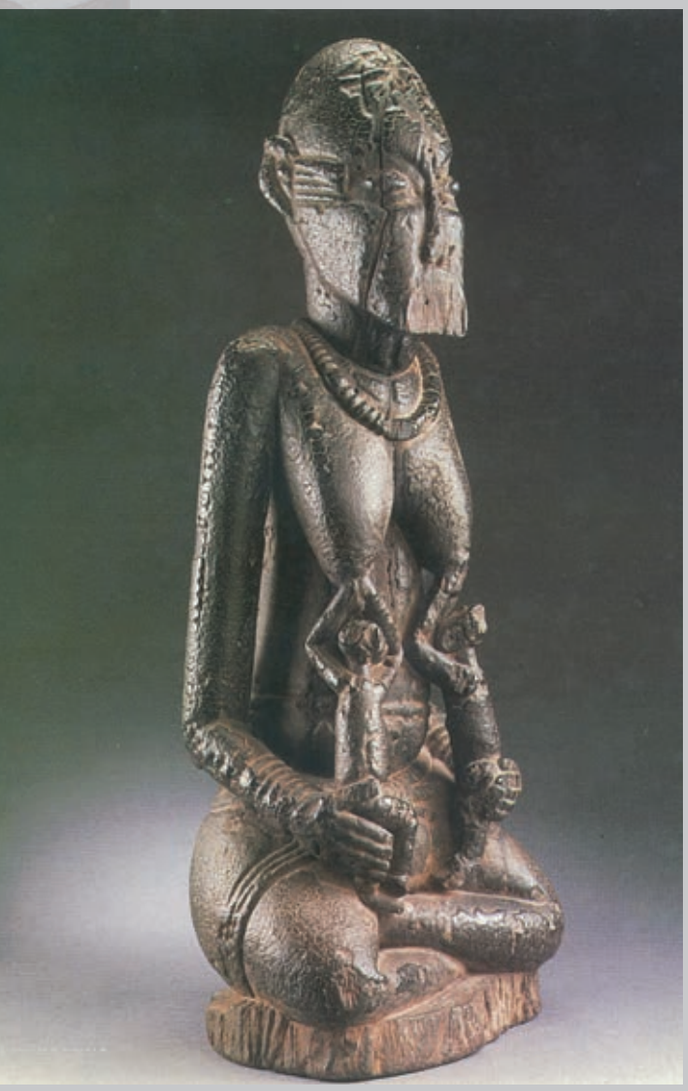
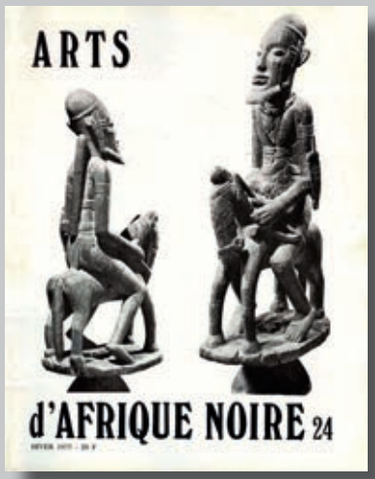


FIG. 8 (left):
Samir and Mina Borro's 1979 greeting card featuring a maternity figure with twins. Djennenké; Tounkari Mountains, Mali. 10th–12th century.
Ex Almamin Diongassi, Paris; Samir and Mina Borro, Brussels.
Private collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 9 (below):
Cover of *Arts d'Afrique Noire*, winter 1977 (no. 24) showing an equestrian figure. Djennenké; Mali. 13th–15th century (C14: 1250–1450).
Ex Émile Deletaille, Brussels; Samir and Mina Borro, Abidjan; Ben Heller, New York.
Minneapolis Institute of Art, inv. 83.168 (Aimée Mott Butler Charitable Trust, Anne S. Dayton, Mr. and Mrs. Donald C. Dayton, Mr. and Mrs. William N. Driscoll, Clarence G. Frame, and Mr. and Mrs. Clinton Morrison).
Photo © SMB archives.

I've sometimes had to make exchanges. I have never missed a great object on account of its price. I'm also a gambler. I've played a lot of poker, for example. Playing the game is an important part of a dealer's profession. The quest for objects also makes the adrenaline flow, and acquisitions are sometimes made in unusual circumstances. For example, Rasmussen long refused to sell me another Baule figure, but he finally agreed to as an expression of friendship. We'd shared wonderful moments together, especially at my place in Côte d'Ivoire. He subsequently sold me many important works that I have kept. He was an extremely refined man. He loved gardens and spending time looking at flowers. He had exquisite taste.

Sometimes an object would be described to me, and I would spend three sleepless nights just imagining it. And then there were objects that obsessed me. I am thinking specifically about one of the world's most important works of African art in wood: a tenth- to twelfth-century Djennenke maternity figure. I had to borrow and spend a fortune to get it, and I hadn't even seen it, even on a photograph. That seems unbelievable when I talk about it today. I had only heard it spoken of because the piece was legendary. It had been in Paris since at least the 1950s. It belonged to a dealer named Almamin Diongassi, who had categorically refused to sell it and turned down many offers. Diongassi and Amadou Koulibali were two major Malian dealers who regularly visited Paris. In the 1970s, Diongassi passed through Abidjan on his way to Bamako. In the course of an evening hosted by the Sylla brothers—friends of his that I was also very close to—he mentioned for the first time possibly being willing to part with the piece. I didn't know it then, but that turned out to be the last time I saw him. He died the next week. A month after his passing, his family invited me to Mali, and negotiations were held in the presence of the Syllas and of two other Malian dealers, Moussa Diané and Kissima, who were opposed to my being allowed to obtain the sculpture. When the transaction finally concluded in my favor, they called Diongassi's representative in Paris and told him, "You may relinquish the object to Mr. Borro." And I kept it for twenty-eight years (FIG. 8).



I remember another important piece, a Djennenke equestrian figure as old as the maternity, which is now in the Minneapolis Institute of Art. I had only seen it in a photograph. When I found out one day that it was in Belgian dealer Emile Deletaille's possession, I jumped on a plane and flew to Brussels. I offered him ten objects that together were worth more than what he was asking for the equestrian. The piece was so beautiful that no one could understand why Deletaille would consider letting it go. So everyone thought it must be a fake. I spent fifteen years proving it was authentic. I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York one day and I offered them the figure on the condition that it be dated with a Carbon 14 test. The museum was interested in the work and agreed to test it. At the same time, Ben Heller, a New York modern art dealer and a collector of African art, heard about the object and called me. He wanted to

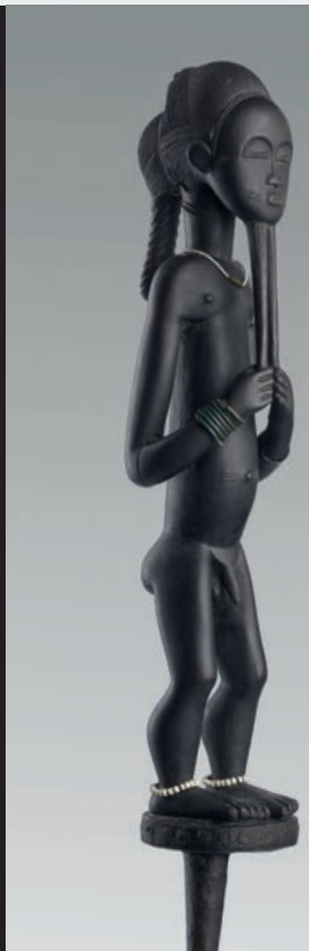


FIG. 10 (above):
Mask. Baule; Côte d'Ivoire.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 41 cm.
Ex Roth-Inghofler; Adrian Schlag.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 11 (above right): Mask.
Baule; Côte d'Ivoire.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 31.5 cm.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 12 (right):
Scepter. Baule; Côte d'Ivoire.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 75 cm.
Ex Walter Kaiser, Stuttgart.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 13 (far right):
Mask. Baule; Côte d'Ivoire.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 18 cm.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 14 (above): Mask. Dan; Côte d'Ivoire.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 26 cm.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 15 (left): Comb. Ashanti; Ghana.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 25 cm.
Ex Aimé Kerchache.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 16 (top right): Spoon. Senufo; Côte d'Ivoire.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 31 cm.
Ex René Rasmussen.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 17 (right): Container. Senufo; Côte d'Ivoire.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 24 cm.
Ex René Rasmussen.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 18 (right):
Mask. Dan; Côte d'Ivoire.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 22 cm.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

acquire it without even waiting for the test results. I went back to the Met, where they had already pulled a sample. I took the piece back and sold it to him. A month later, curator Susan Vogel got the results: eleventh to thirteenth century, very nearly the same age as the Djennenke maternity. I gave Heller the original of the test, took a copy with me, and had a photograph of the equestrian figure published on the cover of *Arts d'Afrique Noire* along with the Carbon 14 test results (FIG. 9).

N.R.: *Your collection is made up of groups of objects that are representative of the main West African cultural areas. Is there one, or are there several, of these varied forms of religious and sculptural expression that you prefer?*
S.B.: It has given me great pleasure to assemble groups of works that I have meticulously selected. These were put compiled over the years and classified by subject or type of object (combs, pulleys, gong beaters, stools, statuary, masks, etc.), by geographic regions that aroused my interest, by workshop, or even by specific hand. Putting together groups like this was also about wanting to study variations, successions of designs, figures, and

FIG. 19 (right):
Reliquary guardian figure. Kota; Gabon. 19th–early 20th century.
Wood, copper, brass. H: 55 cm.
Ex Loed Van Bussel.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIGS. 20a and b (below):
Cup bearers. Yoruba; Nigeria. 19th–early 20th century.
Wood. H: 47 cm.
Ex El Haj Inoa.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

forms the nuances and details of which are revealed only when they are viewed with like examples.

The consistent thread lies in their quality. One cannot establish a hierarchy of works based on geographic origin, though I obviously have a special predilection for the sculpture of Côte d'Ivoire, as well as for that of Nigeria (Yoruba at first, and then Cross River), and Mali (Dogon and Bamana). But in truth, beauty is everywhere, isn't it?

N.R.: *Umberto Eco has said that the true collector is more interested in the chase than in the actual fact of possession. What do you think? Could you live without all of these objects around you?*
S.B.: The chase rather than possession? Not necessarily, and the proof is that I've kept some

FIG. 21 (above left):
Head crest. Igala; Nigeria.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood, pigment. H: 30 cm.
Ex Guennegez collection.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 22 (above):
Head crest. Ijo; Nigeria.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood, pigment. H: 30 cm.
Ex Hans Schneckenburger, Munich.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

FIG. 23 (left):
Head crest Yoruba; Nigeria.
19th–early 20th century.
Wood, metal, pigment. H: 50 cm.
Ex Bryce Holcombe, New York.
Samir and Mina Borro Collection.
Photo © SMB archives.

objects for more than sixty years. I have always loved art more than anything, and I still do. I have lived surrounded by objects in a room I have hardly left for thirty years. In the end, it's fair to ask the question: do I own these works, or do they own me? I am inhabited (99.99% inhabited, because there has to be little space for other things). I live with my collection, and when my wife isn't here, I sleep in the living room with my pieces. When I get up in the morning and have my coffee, they are there in front of me. When I get ready for bed, they are there in front of me. Sometimes I feel the need to see a particular piece urgently. I immediately ask my children Najwa or Faouzi to bring it to me. Of course, I think about the future of this collection, about what will happen to it when I am gone, but that is a difficult question. I want it to be in good hands—those of people who appreciate, love, and really understand the works, or those of a serious institution devoted to celebrating African art as it should be celebrated. I want my collection to be seen everywhere in the world, and in Africa too, and to give people the opportunity to admire it.