

TRIBAL people

# An Encounter with a Creator of Images

## The Photographic Approach of Hughes Dubois

Interview by Elena Martínez-Jacquet

“There are as many ways of photographing as there are photographers, just as there are as many ways of looking at an art object as there are people who look at it.” This sentiment, which Hugues Dubois expressed at the beginning of the interview below, invites an additional thought that this photographer, whose lenses have captured so many masterpieces but who is restrained by modesty, would never state: “Not all ways of looking at an object are of equal value.” That said, Dubois’ way is certainly exceptional. It is sensitive, respectful, analytical, and curious, and it testifies to a deep knowledge of and intimacy with the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas developed in the course of a career that has already spanned more than thirty years. Yet nothing really predestined this son of an industrialist in Belgian Picardy, whose first professional endeavors were in the areas of marketing and advertising, to become the creator of more than 30,000 photographs taken for the most major players—private, commercial, and institutional—in the tribal art world. We had the opportunity to speak with him about how he got started and to discuss his relationship with tribal art.

**Tribal Art Magazine:** *Nowadays, your name is in the credits for almost every publication devoted to tribal art. But, as you so often say, that took a long time to come about. Would you tell us about how you first encountered tribal art?*

**Hughes Dubois:** At the time, I was working as an artistic director in an advertising agency in Brussels, which obligated me to be in contact with many photography studios. One of the best known of these was that of Roger Asselberghs, whom I met in this context. One day, while I was in his studio, François Neyt and Jacques Blanckaert arrived with a Hembra

figure for him to shoot for *La Grande Statuaire Hembra du Zaïre* (1977). I was completely fascinated by this object’s personality. Photography had fascinated me since my childhood, but I never thought I could make a career of it. I let everything go to work with Roger. For a year, I was his third assistant—the one who did the dishes at the studio—but gradually became more and more involved in the actual photography, working alongside him. We did lots of advertising shoots and, from time to time, we photographed objects. There was a wonderful synergy between us, but he didn’t tell me much about the objects and I wanted to know more about these remarkable art pieces that had been entrusted to us.

Later I began to work for myself as an advertising photographer and had another even more pivotal encounter, this one with Emile Deletaille. With him I --really learned to see. The photo was important, but the object came first. I began to collaborate with Emile on a publication on Pre-Columbian art that he had been working on with two other collectors, Gérald Berjonneau and Jean-Louis Sonnery. After the book, titled *Rediscovered Masterpieces of Mesoamerica* (published by Editions Arts 135), appeared in 1985, we immediately embarked on a second project, *Chefs-d’Oeuvre Inédits de l’Afrique Noire*, which served as a prelude to the opening of the Dapper Foundation in Paris. Because of this book, Michel Leveau of the Dapper



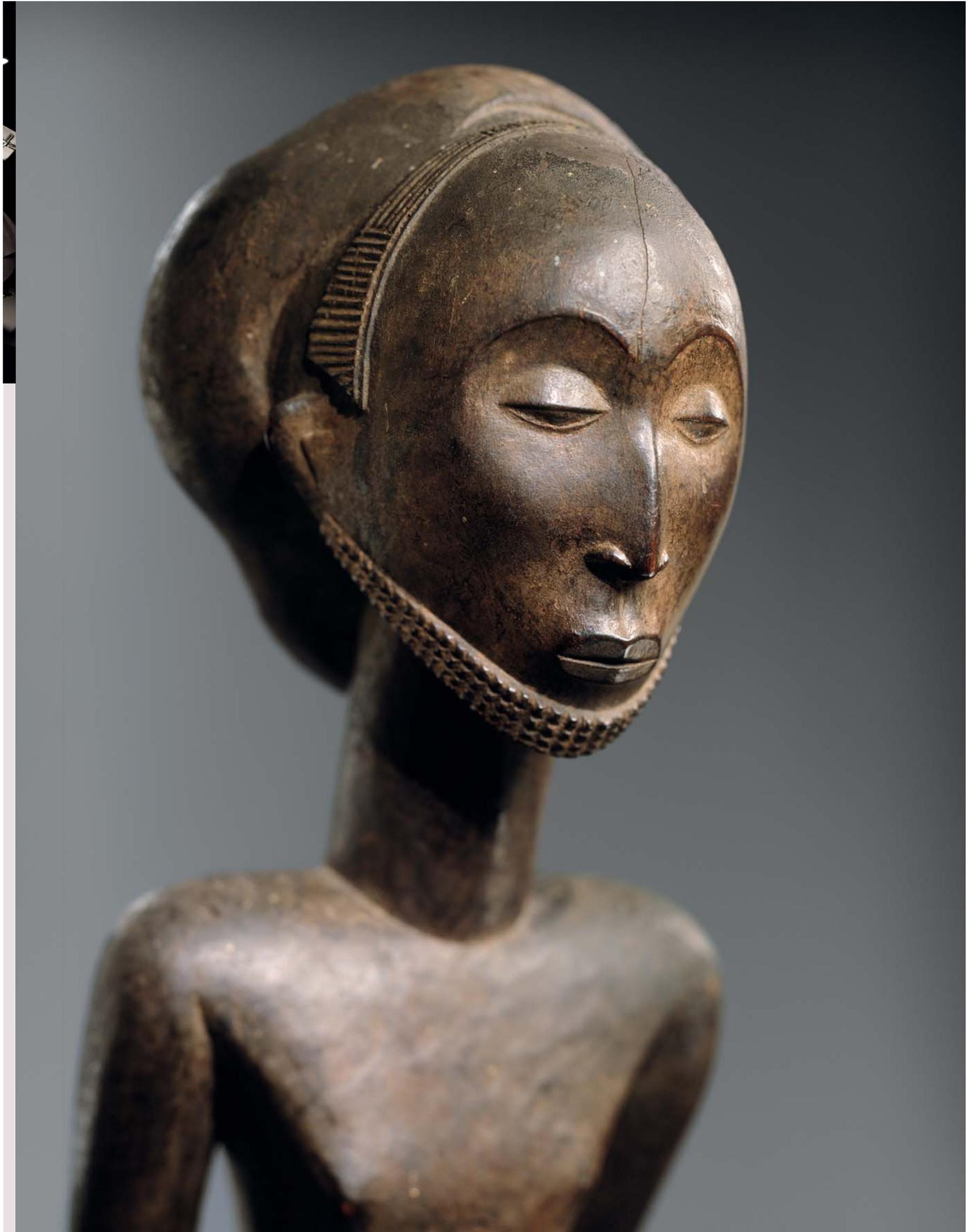
FIG. 1: Hughes Dubois working on the exhibition *Formes & Façons* for the Musée de Bagnes (Switzerland) presented at the Mauvoisin Dam, 2013.

FIG. 2 (below): Image of a model canoe from Wuvulu island for Kevin Conru’s remarkable book *Bismarck Archipelago Art*, 5 Continents Editions, 2013.

FIG. 3 (right): Image of the Hembra figure from DR Congo owned by Jacques Blanckaert, which was Dubois’ first encounter with tribal art.

All images © Hughes Dubois.







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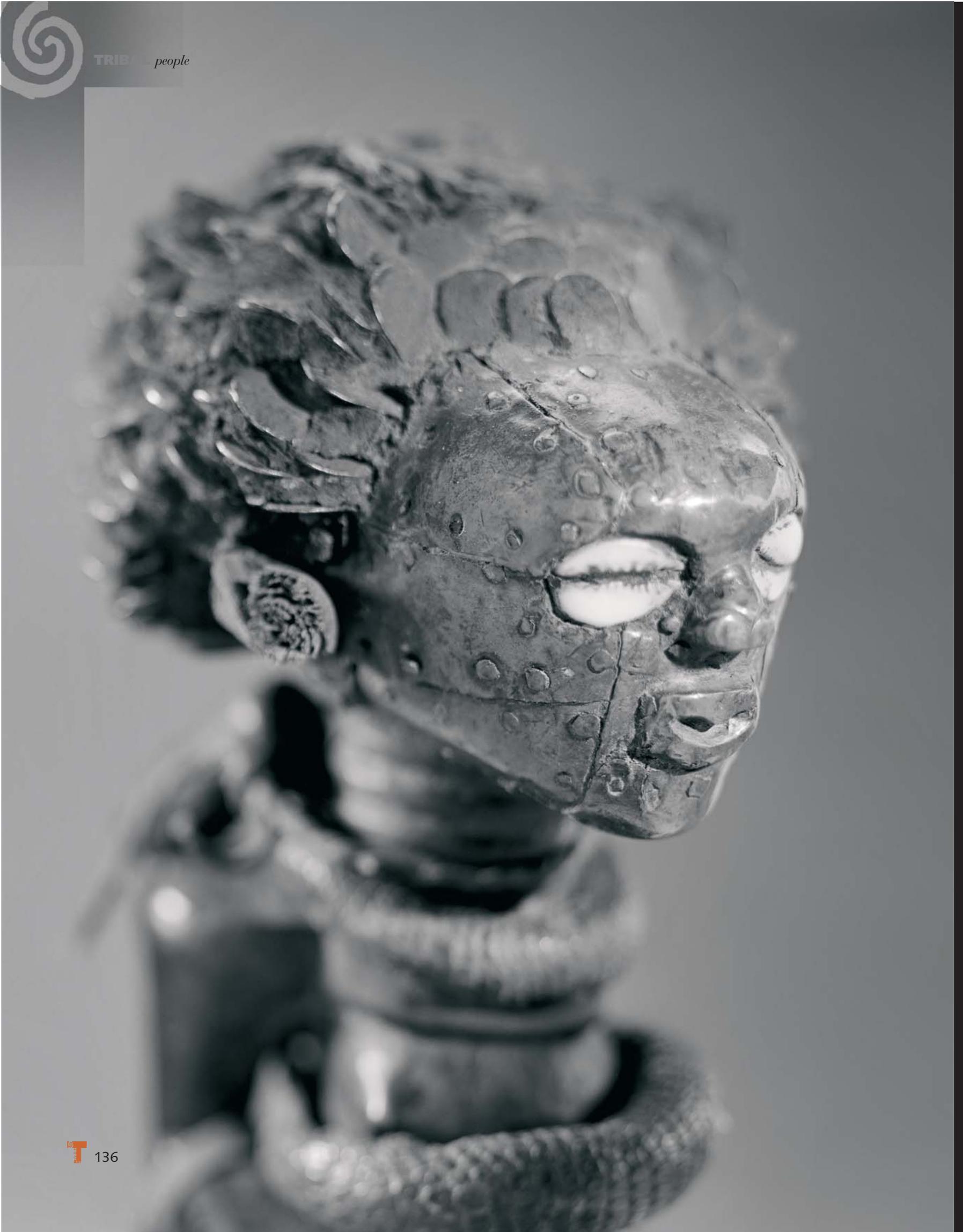




FIG. 4 (left): Portrait of a Songye figure from DR Congo for the exhibition *Le sensible et la force*, 2004. For many visitors, this little-known work from the Musée Africain de Namur was a revelation.

FIG. 5 (top): Image of a relief from the temple at Borobudur in Java, part of the current project called *Borobudur, un certain regard*.

FIGS. 6a and b (above and right): Images of Kota reliquary guardian figures from Gabon for the catalog of the Kota exhibition staged by Galerie Yann Ferrandin in September 2011 during the *Parcours des Mondes*.



FOLLOWING TWO PAGES  
FIG. 7 (left): Images of a Kuba box from DR Congo taken for the catalog for the exhibition *Réceptacles* at the Musée Dapper, Paris, 1997. The object on black with the shadow falling forward is in keeping with the style used for some publications by this institution.

FIG. 8 (right): Closeup of a figure from a Luba carytid stool from DR Congo published in Bernard Dulon's catalog for the *Biennale des Antiquaires*, Paris, 2006.

learned of my work and I became the photographer for his institution. After that, I got to know all of the major players in the tribal art world in Paris and elsewhere. The first book I did for Dapper was *Art et Mythologie* in 1988. For this project, I made the rounds of European collections in Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Portugal, and elsewhere. What a privilege! The pleasure I found in this was all the greater because at that time not many of the objects had been photographed before. Every new publication led to discussions on how shots should be handled—one could create a new style or take a new artistic direction—and my advertising background worked well with that. That has changed now that photographs are taken and retaken right and left. There are exceptions to be sure—gallery owners like Bernard Dulon, Yann Ferrandin, and Kevin Conru (on whose new book *Bismarck Archipelago Art* I had the privilege to work) come to mind, as does publisher Eric Chysels of 5 Continents Editions, for whom I am shooting images at the moment. I am also collaborating with my companion, Caroline Leloup, who is acting as artistic director for a publication by the Baur Foundation in Geneva.

**T. A. M.:** *You have also photographed classical antiquities and Islamic art, among many other types. Is there a particular pleasure you find in photographing tribal art?*

**H. D.:** Yes. I have had—and still do—other areas of interest, but tribal art has become the real focal point of my photography. All of it—African, Oceanic, Pre-Columbian. . . . To me it represents one of the most extraordinary forms of human expression in existence. Great tribal statuary takes me places, it teaches me something every day, and it never ceases to move me.

**T. A. M.:** *Can you define your approach? How do you consider a piece you will shoot? Do you encounter objects that need to be treated differently?*

**H. D.:** I look at everything in the same way because my eyes are mine (and they're blue!). That said, my way of seeing is informed by the memories of all the objects I have held in my hands. Nowadays, the choice of angle is even more important than it was when I was just beginning to understand African art through photography. Now I am better able to identify the unique qualities that an object has and what should be highlighted in an image of it. What is important to me now is

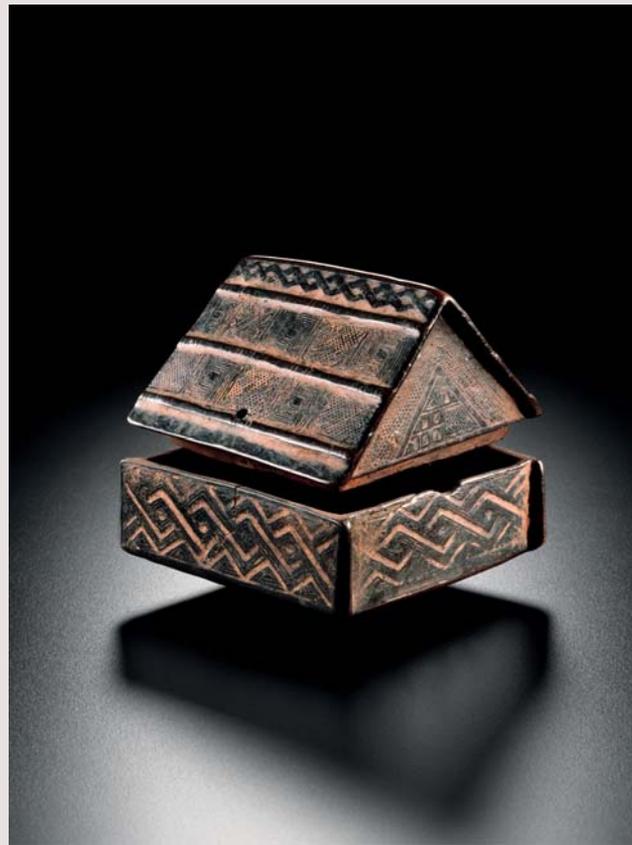
to emphasize what distinguishes an object in relation to others of similar type that I have seen and to capture its essential features. I want to convey the emotion of the piece and, even more importantly, its soul.

**T. A. M.:** *How do you go about doing that? With lighting perhaps?*

**H. D.:** Yes, absolutely. I feel a bit like an illustrator. In fact, my first forays into the art world were drawings I began making when I was twelve years old. Now I'm more like an illustrator for whom light is a more important tool than a pencil. Of course, this combines with the choice of angle, which is fundamental to rendering the tensions inherent in an object's lines.

**T. A. M.:** *Isn't there some worry that your desire to emphasize these things so strongly may sublate the original sculpture and distance the image from it?*

**H. D.:** Not for me. I see my work as a kind of illumination. Through the use of light, I seek to make every detail and expression vibrate, but I don't go beyond that. I am a craftsman in the service of art made by someone else. In the end, a photographer is like a musician. He interprets a work that has already been written. My score might be Dogon, or Songye, or even the Fiji Islands, but I always take pains to remain faithful to it. It is far more important to me that the reaction to my work be that the piece is beautiful rather than that the photograph is. There was a time when photographers were expected to produce dramatic and even theatrical images, but I firmly believe in remaining minimalist and completely sober when confronted with an object. That doesn't mean that my work



lacks subjectivity. Every photo shoot actually forces me to take a stance.

**T. A. M.:** *You undoubtedly have held more masterpieces in your hands than most. Has that inspired you to become an art collector?*

**H. D.:** No, I can't be a collector. Firstly, because it's not in my nature, and secondly, because I don't need to be one. When a collector brings an object to me in my studio, it's as if it belongs to me for a time. However, that doesn't mean that I don't own three or four objects.

**T. A. M.:** *What objects have you most responded to over the course of your career?*

**H. D.:** When I was getting started, I had a particular affinity for Pre-Columbian art, because of my encounter with Emile Deletaille. But if I had to choose an object, I would certainly be inclined to pick a piece from Hawaii, whether a utilitarian object like a bowl or something like a figure or a cape or a headdress. I find the art from this area absolutely fascinating.

**T. A. M.:** *In addition to your studio activity, you have done some other very interesting projects. The exhibition *Le Sensible et la Force* (Sensitivity and Power) at the *Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale* in 2004, which was accompanied by a catalog, comes to mind. Tell us a little about projects like this.*

**H. D.:** Very early on, at the beginning of the 1990s, I saw things in objects—interesting angles—that my clients didn't ask to be highlighted in images of them. I found it frustrating not to be able to focus on them and decided to take shots like that for myself. When you put a camera on a tripod, the first image you see of an object is rarely well focused. But although the piece might appear a bit blurry in this unpolished state, the very absence of that polish gives the object a certain presence, a personality and even a human quality, which can be quite powerful. That impressed me so much that I began to take pictures that I call "object portraits," in which I allow myself a little blurriness and I don't worry about other aspects of technical perfection. The object becomes a photographic subject.

With regard to the MRAC exhibition you mentioned, I wanted to photograph Tervuren's Hemba figure. Ancestor figures were of particular interest to me at the time because I saw them as an exceptional vector for exploring the ideas of family, affiliations, and relationships. I talked about this with Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, the museum's curator of ethnography, but nothing worked out at first. Some years later, though, she approached me with a proposal for an exhibition. Rather than just exhibit my work, I suggested we produce a presentation of a specific corpus of pieces. We changed from Hemba to Songye because the museum's collection is richer in that material.

This exhibition made some of my clients request portraits of this type from me. I found that a bit disturbing because this kind of work was, and remains, my "secret garden." In recent years, these personal

photographs of mine have evolved toward a sculptural approach, which I am not yet showing. In any event, it is certainly true that my studio work has been enhanced and enriched by these more sensitive and intimate photographs, which I continue to take whenever I come across a piece that particularly moves me.

**T. A. M.:** *Are you presently working on other projects of this kind?*

**H. D.:** Yes—we are going to Borobudur in Java to work on a project that is very dear to Caroline's and my hearts. We're producing a publication and an exhibition, as well as an original portfolio like the one I made for the *Le sensible et la Force* exhibition. It's going to be called *Borobudur—Un Certain Regard* (*Borobudur—A Certain View*). We're taking pictures of bas-reliefs that tell the life story of Buddha.

The shots are being taken at night, with my lighting and that of the full moon. The night is our darkroom and the site is a studio under the open sky.

**T. A. M.:** *Is it important for you to know about an object's original context, that is, the function it was made for? Does information of this kind help you formulate your approach to a piece?*

**H. D.:** Yes, absolutely. It helps me to understand what to bring out and emphasize. To properly render the effects of materials that might include both rough and polished metal, for example, it is essential to understand what needs the object filled. For this, you have to experience a great many pieces and learn from books as well as other kinds of encounters. I learned a great deal about African art from people like Philippe Guimiot, Hélène and

Philippe Leloup, Max Itzikovitz, Jacques Kerchache, Bernard Dulon, and a host of others whose names would be impossible to mention here but who have made a profound impression on me.

That having been said, all of this knowledge I have acquired in one way or another really only helps me know what not to do. It tells me nothing about what I should do.

**T. A. M.:** *To conclude, what is there left to learn after thirty years of looking at works of tribal art?*

**H. D.:** I can only answer, "everything!" Each and every beautiful object is a unique and fascinating encounter.

