

Willy Mestach

The fame of Willy Mestach was already well established when I moved to Brussels fourteen years ago and suddenly found myself his neighbor on the Grand Sablon, just next door to this living legend and his remarkable collection. It didn't take long to get acquainted and ultimately friendly with this endearing man, whom I will always picture sitting happily at his old oak dining table, surrounded by masterpieces of primitive art and books, as well as by his own artistic creations: intriguing oil compositions and sculptures blending constructivist and abstract concepts with a touch of Belgian surrealist humor.

Although Willy was an accomplished artist whose work is widely recognized, his main artistic achievement was probably as a collector. He was often tagged as having an "artists' eye," a statement that is all but insulting with regard to Willy. His large collection was amassed over more than half a century of passionate attention to detail and careful selection, and if he made the "mistakes" that every collector makes, they were seldom visible. Instead, his choice of quality, his love of geometric perfection, and his sensitivity to the magical qualities in an object resulted in a unique coherence despite there being so much diversity in the collection. Everything he owned possessed some sort of extraordinary quality. Thanks largely to Marc Felix, his collecting genius was exposed to a wider audience through the exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in 1991 and at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1992, and through the accompanying catalog *The Intelligence of Forms: An Artist Collects African Art*, edited by Evan Maurer.

Willy started collecting in the 1940s at a time when fantastic objects were still coming from the then Belgian Congo and could be acquired at reasonable prices. He became renowned as an expert in Songye art and dedicated much time to assembling files of references. Through buying (and selling) his "finds" from the flea markets of Brussels, former colonials, and the many antique dealers in the nascent Sablon neighborhood, Willy was able to hone his eye and

enlarge the scope of his passion to include remarkable items from other areas of Africa, as well as the occasional Eskimo, Ifugao, Easter Island, or other random object that appealed to him. As his collection became legend, Willy received visits from virtually every important dealer and many collectors passing through Brussels, and it was again published in 2007 in conjunction with the memorable exhibition held during *BRUNEAF XVII* titled *Mestach: L'Africain*.

Willy was multifaceted, sometimes the temperamental artist and other times the calm sage with a bounty of wisdom to share. I remember a friend telling me how Willy was sent by Marthe, his wife, to buy a chicken for dinner. Willy duly bought the chicken but stopped to chat with some friends in a bistro. Two days later, he was found at the other end of town, swinging a chicken over his head and was promptly returned to his habitual sanctuary, the ever-patient Marthe in wait.

His range of collecting interests was nearly infinite, from a group of stringless violins crafted only for practice to Greek helmets and other classical antiquities. After a near-death experience in 1999, he also developed an interest in shamanic and natural objects.

So many people could write eulogies of affection and respect for Willy, and with these few words I hope that I have represented them with some justice. While he is already missed by the many who knew him for his innate charm, wisdom, vision, taste, humility, generosity, and a score of other qualities, I believe that in a sense he will continue to exist forever. Willy was truly one of the great collectors symbolic of the twentieth century. While the life of such a man is impossible to summarize in words alone, the heritage of visual clues that Willy Mestach has left us should continue to influence the appreciation of world art for eternity.

Alex Arthur



Jacques Hautelet

I first met Jacques Hautelet some twenty-five years ago. Primarily an Asian art dealer at the time, I had become fascinated with African weapons and a generous tip put me in touch with a former Belgian colonial living in San Diego. A few small deals later, I decided to visit Jacques on one of my trips to California. After spending an afternoon looking at pieces and getting to know each other, he respectfully asked his wife, Brigitte, if this Texas traveler could spend the night. She said yes, and thus began one of the most significant friendships of my life.

Jacques was a private dealer. His first collection had already been published in *Traditional Arts and History of Zaire* by François Neyt, and now he and Brigitte were enjoying the gentle climate of San Diego. Jacques lived a quiet life. He enjoyed his food, loved his garden, and took pleasure in research as well as buying and selling African art from his home of-



fice. Never greedy, always correct, Jacques was the quintessential "gentleman art dealer."

Twice a year, Jacques returned to Brussels. He once told me that he took great pleasure meandering through the Sablon after dinner, looking at the windows of art galleries and chocolate shops. During the day, he would hunt for pieces and visit friends developed through a lifetime of shared interests.

His love of African art seeded many important museum and private collections. Often behind the scenes, without ego, gifted by the pleasure of the deal. His first love, however, was Brigitte. Never have I known a couple so lovingly devoted to each other. The quiet elegance of their shared union—never rushed and satisfied with a life intelligently orchestrated—was truly inspirational.

As I say goodbye to my friend and mentor, I will continue to be inspired by the memory of a most special gentleman. Jacques once said, "African art has been good to me." I must add that Jacques Hautelet has been good to African art.

Joel Cooner