



For almost three decades, Richard Scheller has been building a world-class collection of African art that has become all but legendary for both its breadth and its quality. Working first as a professor of biological sciences at Stanford University and now for thirteen years as the vice president in charge of research at the biotech giant Genentech, Richard and his wife, Sue, have maintained a relatively modest living situation in the San Francisco Bay Area, but their living room is a stunning treasure trove of African masterpieces. If you haven't had the pleasure of experiencing them there, you'll have a chance to see them in the upcoming exhibition *Embodiments: Masterworks of African Figurative Sculpture* at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, which will be on view from January 31 to July 5, 2015. We had the pleasure of chatting with Richard recently about his collecting and his interest in African art.

Tribal Art Magazine: *You're both a research scientist and an avid art collector. Those of us who know less about the brain than you do generally think of these things as coming from virtually opposite sides of it. How do these two pursuits come together for you?*

Richard Scheller: I like to engage as much of my brain as possible. Just because you're a scientist doesn't mean that you can't derive pleasure from other endeavors. I also like sports and love to play basketball.

TAM: *Your collection is focused almost exclusively on the arts of Africa. Why is that?*

RS: I visited Africa for the first time twenty-nine years ago to see the wildlife there. I felt an immediate affinity for the continent and bought some tourist carvings as souvenirs. Upon returning home, I read some books on African art and saw how really beautiful the sculpture could be. This set in motion both my interest in collecting and my good fortune to be able to actually



Richard Scheller and the Arts of Africa

Interview by Jonathan Fogel



live with these objects. Since that time my wife, Sue, and I have been back to Africa many times, again to see wildlife. I did collect some Oceanic art for a while but eventually consciously decided to focus on Africa and more specifically on figures because that forms a framework that I can comfortably work within.

TAM: *Within Africa, you've brought together a broad array of art styles from a great many cultures, but there are very few duplicates. What sort of criteria do you use for selecting the artworks you acquire?*

RS: In my early reading on African art I was fascinated with the vast diversity of cultures and styles across the continent. So rather than focusing on a particular country, where the borders are generally an arbitrary Western construct, or on a few specific groups, I decided to try to reflect this diversity in my collection. I set as a goal to have one fine example from as many different peoples as possible. I still lack objects from many different groups and many different styles, largely because they are rare and difficult to find. When folks visit, I have a joke about this that I play with my wife. As we are discussing the art, I lead my guests to notice that there are some notable gaps in the collection. This is a signal to Sue that the collection is still growing.

In deciding about actually purchasing an object, the main factor is that it is something I love. I took awhile to develop an eye and to understand what I really respond to. Some of the early objects that I bought appealed to me at the time, but then as I lived with them, they faded. A great object for me is one that I look at every day for years and shake my head thinking how wonderful it is.

I also have studied the great masterpieces of African art in books, museums, and other collections, and I've spent many, many hours on the Yale Archive Website looking at large arrays of objects made by any given people. I have to feel that the object that I am purchasing stands up well against the other objects from that culture.

TAM: *How has your experience with dealers been?*

RS: Generally positive and I've become very close with some of them. After reading a lot of books that presented African art in the context of the aesthetics of the people who created it for their own use—what I would call genuine or authentic—I decided to collect these objects. I met San Francisco dealer James Willis, who is local to where I live, and he got me started in

the correct direction. I'm still good friends with Jim and Lin. I then met a number of European dealers, many of whom I'm now also close friends with. Some of these were very helpful. In particular, when I was on a professor's salary at Stanford, I would often buy an object from Alain de Monbrison and then send checks to him in Paris via US mail for partial payments. Sometimes it took me more than a year to pay for an object. Alain was great about this and never even kept track of how much money I owed him.

TAM: *Working with the dealers you do, you've probably been offered more masterpieces than most collectors.*

What is it in a work of art that really speaks to you?

RS: I appreciate so many different styles, so it's difficult to say that it's just one thing. I remember visiting André Fourquet at his home in Paris decades ago. He always liked having Americans visit because, he said, we "saved France in the war." I don't recall now the specific piece we were looking at, but I remember

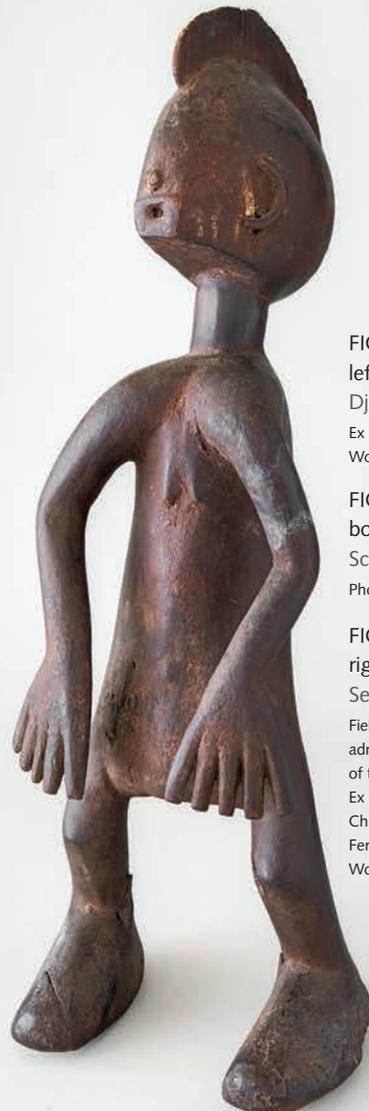


FIG. 1 (facing page left): Standing figure. Djimini, Côte d'Ivoire. Ex Alain de Monbrison, Paris. Wood. H: 50 cm.

FIG. 2 (facing page bottom): Richard Scheller, 2014. Photo © Susan McConnell.

FIG. 3 (facing page right): Male figure. Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire. Field collected by a French administrator in the first part of the 20th century. Ex Alain de Monbrison, Paris; Christine Valluet/Yann Ferrandin, Paris. Wood. H: 55 cm.



FIG. 4 (left): Ogbom figure/headcrest. Eket, Nigeria.

Collected by Bernard Muhlack, c. 1968. Ex Pierre Darteville, Brussels; Bernrd de Grunne, Brussels.

FIG. 5 (above): Figure. Chamba, Nigeria.

Wood. H: 45 cm. Ex Pierre Darteville, Brussels (acquired in Jalingo, Nigeria, in 1968). Martial Bronsin photo archive shows figure with corncob under the right arm at time of collection.



saying that I usually didn't like objects from that particular culture, but that I did indeed like his example. He replied, "Of course there were ones that were great works of art, otherwise, the people would not have made them." I suppose that's the piece I'm always looking for.

TAM: *Is there a single acquisition that has given you particular satisfaction? And is there an especially memorable piece that got away?*

RS: I can't really think of a single piece that has given me so much more satisfaction than others that it stands out. Each has its own story of how I came to find it, pay for it, appreciate it, and so on. As for the ones that got away, sure, there have been many. But I always know there will be a new adventure and tend to move on quickly rather than focus on the past.

TAM: *To what degree does a sculpture's original purpose affect the way you perceive it? That is, do you tend to be interested in the anthropological aspects of a given artwork, its formal aesthetics, or both?*

RS: I am first and foremost driven by formal aesthetics. However, I do enjoy understanding the anthropological qualities of how the objects were used and the meaning of each in the context of the society it came from. In many cases, these objects are really all that remains of so many great and interesting cultures.

Also, of course, an understanding of how the objects were used can be very important in understanding the differences between an authentic object and one that was made to look original but is not.

TAM: *You've been collecting for quite a while by now. Given the way your collection has grown and the fact you've been able to access increasingly important pieces over the years, how has the African art market changed from your perspective?*

RS: The market has changed in many ways. The most notable, of course, is that the prices have dramatically increased over the decades that I have been collecting. I also think that there are many more objects being marketed as genuine that are not. I have no problem with reproductions except when they're sold at the price of an original piece.

Also, with the economic downturn of five or so years ago, the middle and lower-end objects have become much more difficult to sell. It will be interesting to see if things ever return to the way they were before that happened.



TAM: *There is a major exhibition of your collection with an impressive accompanying catalog coming up in early 2015 at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. How did this come about and what will its impact be?*

RS: About five or so years ago, Kathy Berrin (then the de Young's curator for the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas) and I had the idea to put on a show to share the collection with the people of the Bay Area and other visitors to the museum. I began to work with two other friends at that time to get the material ready for this. Manuel Jordán, the scholar of Chokwe art, began to build a Website with my pieces in order to compile provenance information. I also met a great photographer, Robert Kato. I would bring the objects a few at a time to Robert's house and, after some experimenting, we found a way to photograph them that appealed to both of us. He used all natural light and would spend hours with an object before he found the view that he felt revealed the spirit of the piece. When Kathy retired from the de Young, the project shifted to another curator there, Christina Hellmich, who has brought the project to realization. I've also had the pleasure to work with Lesley Bone, the museum's head conservator. With this great team of Manuel, Robert, Lesley, Christina, and myself, we've been able to put together the show and the book. I've enjoyed this project but am also happy it is nearing the end, since it also was a lot of work.

In conjunction with all this, I'm in the process of donating a number of pieces to the de Young, which I hope will benefit its African art collection. The contents of that donation will be made public around the time of the opening. As for the bulk of my collection, I plan to continue to live with it, hopefully for a very long time.



FIG. 6 (far left):
Standing figure.
Luluwa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.
Ex Pace Primitive, New York; Oldman Collection, Liverpool.
Wood. H: 39.2 cm.

FIG. 7 (top left):
Male and female figures.
Tabwa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.
Wood. H: 40 cm (female) and 44 cm (male).

FIG. 8 (bottom left):
Seated figure.
Chokwe, Angola.
Ex Alain de Monbrison, Paris.
Wood. H: 24.5 cm.

FIG. 9 (right):
Male figure.
Fang, Gabon.
Ex Paul Guillaume (archive no. 601), Paris; Pierre V\'erit\'e, Paris.
Wood. H: 58 cm.