



TRIBAL *People*

A Passion for Himalayan Masks

By Elena Martínez-Jacquet

An Encounter with Rosa Amorós

FIG. 1 (above): Rosa Amorós in her apartment in Barcelona. At the center of the cabinet behind her is the first Himalayan mask acquired by her and her partner, Gustavo Gili.

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FIGS. 2–5 (right): Group of four Himalayan masks from Nepal and India that were included in *Enigmas de las Montañas*, in Cuenca in 2005 and later in Guyancourt.

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An impassioned and fascinating personality hides behind Rosa Amorós' frail and discreet appearance, and her eyes light up when the word "art" is mentioned. A recognized artist in her native Spain, her life was centered around her studio and at the Escola Massana in Barcelona, an art and design center where from 1971 until 2005 she taught ceramic arts, the discipline in which she most distinguished herself creatively. She was also a regular presence at museums, exhibition venues, and art fairs. She shared twenty years of her life with Gustavo Gili, an editor and book publisher specialized in the engravings of great Western artists such as Picasso, Miró, Saura, Michaux, among many others, as well as in art, design, and architecture, prior to his passing in 2006. Together they

assembled a tribal art collection that is as eclectic in its composition as it is coherent in spirit. A group of about 100 Himalayan masks has a preeminent place among the many works from Oceania, Africa, and southern and western Asia that make up her collection. Just prior to the opening of the Museu de Cultures del Món in Barcelona, Rosa hosted us in her studio to talk about her fascination with Himalayan art and about her journey as a tribal art collector, which she largely pursued outside the major centers for tribal art.

Tribal Art Magazine: *Judging by your activities and relationships, it seems like modern art might be your natural milieu, just as it was Gustavo's, yet you became collectors of non-European art. How did that come about?*

Rosa Amorós: It's true that we were immersed in modern and contemporary art, and we even had a collection we valued greatly of paintings and drawings by important artists, especially those with whom Gustavo had established friendships as a result of his work as a publisher. But we never really felt the need to become collectors in the area. We gravitated toward tribal art in a very natural way, almost unconsciously, at least at the beginning.

Gustavo and I developed a sensitivity for tribal art over the course of our visits to all kinds of museums—of contemporary art, archaeology, natural history, and, of course, anthropology—both in Europe and the United States. Discovering important collections was always a source of joy and inspiration for us and, of course, the perfect pretext for traveling. And then one day we realized that many of the objects from Africa, Oceania, and Asia whose forms we so greatly admired were actually affordable to us and that opportunities to acquire such pieces existed in Barcelona, even if at the time—in the early 1990s—our city was, and continues to be, on the “periphery” of the tribal art market. We bought our first object, a Hembra *soko mutu* mask from the Democratic Republic of Congo from Federico Benthem, who dealt primarily in Pre-Columbian art but occasionally had African works as well. More pieces followed this first acquisition (which I still have) in rapid succession.

T. A. M.: *So you started with African art and the Himalayan material came later?*

R. A.: Not really, no. It might seem surprising for the time and place in which we found ourselves, but the Himalayas fascinated us from the very beginning of our collecting days. Our third acquisition of tribal art was a Nepalese Gurung mask, which we found with another local dealer, Eudald Daltabuit, who specialized in Asian art. The combination of coarseness and expressiveness that this object displayed seduced us at first sight, even before we knew it was from the Himalayas. After that, several years passed before we acquired another mask from this area. The main reason for that is simply that this type of object was scarce on the market then. The political problems in the region at the time exacerbated the isolation it already experienced due to its inaccessible geographic location. Also, buyers for masks with the brutal and primitive aesthetic qualities that the traditional societies of the Himalayas created were hardly to be found on every street corner.

T. A. M.: *What encouraged you to continue in this area?*

R. A.: Gustavo and I acquired a few more Himalayan masks more or less serendipitously before we decided to look for more of them actively. The emotions we experienced in the contemplation of each new powerful and mysterious mask and the pleasure we took in scrutinizing details and nuances ... well, there is such freedom in Himalayan art! These artworks were immensely satisfying to us. Moreover, since our approach to art and the object was always purely formal, it really didn't matter to us that there was so little information available about Himalayan art at the time. There was a dearth of publications on the subject, no typological studies existed, and no precise provenances were available. Nevertheless, collecting in this area was a simple choice for us to make. That I should pursue this adventure further, even after the loss of Gustavo, seemed to me very clearly to be the right thing to do, even if it was very difficult at first.

T. A. M.: *How did you manage to assemble more than a hundred masks while based in Spain?*

R. A.: We were able to make some fine acquisitions without leaving Barcelona thanks to the dealers mentioned above, and also thanks to Antonio and Ana Casanovas, who most notably made it possible for us to purchase an interesting group of masks assembled by Max Maxwell from his widow, who lived in Ibiza at the time. Ultimately, though, we did have to leave Spain to really fill out the collection. We understood that this was going to be necessary very early on. We began to establish relationships with international dealers, and, beginning toward the end of the late 1990s, we started attending non-European art events such as the *BADNEA* fair in Brussels, which is now called *BRUNEAF*.

In those days, the Himalayan art network was very small, even in France and Belgium. It was made up of travelers like Jean-Pierre Girolami, who had begun trekking in the mountains many years prior to that and was able to find fine masks off the usual beaten paths. Some dealers with a primary specialty in Asian art showed them sometimes as well. We found pieces with Renzo Freschi in Milan, François Rabier in Brussels, and, of course, in Paris with François Pannier, who, with his *Toit du Monde* gallery, can be considered a true pioneer in the field. Fortunately, much has changed since then and it is not unusual now to see Himalayan masks in tribal art galleries shown side by side with African and Oceanic objects. Young dealers like Joaquin Pecci in Belgium and Renaud Vanuxem and Alain Bovis in Paris have become very active in the field during the last five or six years.

