



TRIBAL people

Discreet as he is modest, to listen to Barcelona native Javier Lentini speak, one might get the impression that he would have been happy with acquiring a few objects and an important library, and that these would have been enough to satisfy his passion for beauty and his curiosity about the world. But when one has had the privilege of experiencing the African, Indonesian, and Oceanic artworks in the house in which he lives with his wife, Veneta, it becomes apparent that his quiet demeanor masks the fact that this is a serious collection. Refined and eclectic, the objects express a coherence when displayed together, and they reveal the eye of a collector whose personal adventure, which began more than thirty years ago, is discussed below.

Tribal Art Magazine: *A nation's colonial past or an interest in the European avant-garde art often are cited by collectors as the reason for their interest in tribal art. How did your fascination for this area come about?*



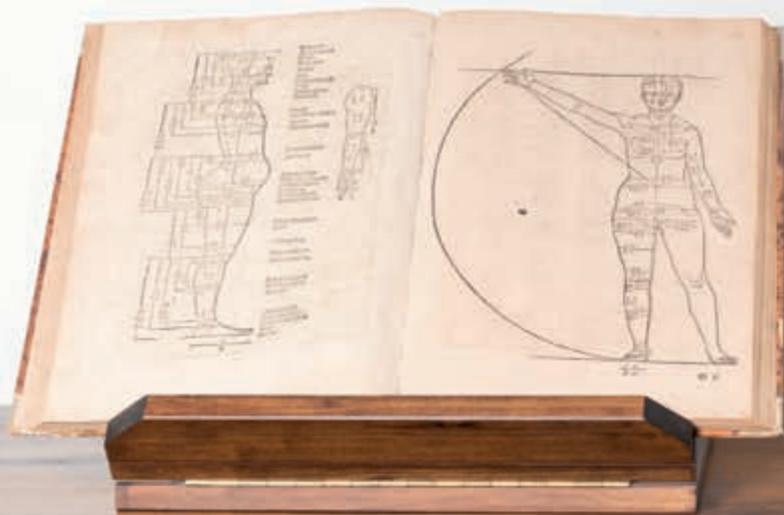
Javier Lentini: Undoubtedly the trigger for me was the many trips I took in my youth with my family. My father, who was a physician and a poet, had a passion for travel and seized upon any excuse to visit other places and discover foreign cultures. Between my fifth and fifteenth birthdays, we had been to Africa, Asia, and the Americas several times. The awareness of the world at large that these travels instilled in me was not commonplace in a Spain that was still under Franco's authority. I recognized the exceptional nature of my experiences and these undoubtedly accentuated my fascination for the things to which I would later be exposed.

Another decisive moment for me was my first visit to the Fundación Folch in Barcelona. My father was a close friend of Alberto Folch-Rusiñol, a collector and the founder of this institution, as well as of Eudald Serra, his ethnologist and artistic advisor. He took me there for the first time when I was only ten years old. I had never really seen



Books and Objects: A Meeting with Javier Lentini

Interview by Elena Martínez-Jacquet



tribal art before and there was so much of it—I was completely overwhelmed. At that tender age, I didn't immediately launch into collecting objects but instead focused on building a library. The books *Africa Negra* and *Oceania* from the Spanish edition of the *Univers des Formes* series became my bedtime reading material. Very few other works on the subject had been translated into Spanish at that time.

Since then, my interest in the arts and cultures of faraway peoples has never waned. I spent my university years studying anthropology and contemporary history, but never missed an opportunity to take elective courses on art history. Later I also studied museology and photography, with a specialty in travel photography, which ultimately led to my professional involvement in publishing.

T.A.M.: *What first put you on the path of acquiring art objects?*

J.L.: In 1981 I was taking courses in London. One of my favorite distractions was to spend my spare time in flea markets, especially Camden and Portobello, which were always lively and exciting places to be. The latter market provided my first opportunities to hold tribal art objects in my hand. Portobello Road was also where I met Anthony Jack, who unfortunately left us in 2012 [see *Tribal Art*, Autumn 2012]. He was a truly tireless scavenger with an unflinching eye, and every week I went to see what new discoveries he had turned up. My first acquisitions were purchased from him—Polynesian and Melanesian clubs, which I resold quite quickly in order to finance my stay in England and to be able to make new purchases. I quickly found that possessing an object was not nearly as fascinating to me as an encounter with a new one.

Quite soon after, with the money I had made buying and selling the clubs I had obtained from Anthony Jack, I acquired what I consider to be the first work of tribal art that is still part of my "selection." I prefer the terms "selection" and "ensemble" to collection and see them as more apt descriptors for my particular process. It was a Bembe figure and I still own it because its beauty still speaks to me. I found it completely by accident at a generalist antiques dealer in Spain, and it was the only piece of tribal art in his shop. I was seduced by this sculpture and was able to buy it by paying over time. Since then, it has been published in Raoul Lehuard's *Art Bakongo: Les Centres de Style*, then in Marc Leo Felix's *Art & Kongos* (in which the drawing of the piece accurately shows it with its broken foot), and again in the exhibition catalog for *La Figura Imaginada*, produced by the Fundación La

FIG. 1 (top left): Comb. Lwimbi, Angola. 19th–20th century.

H: 15.9 cm.
Ex Jean and Noble Endicott, New York.
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FIG. 2 (middle left): Veneta and Javier Lentini in their living room. On the table in front of them is a Sango reliquary guardian figure from Gabon; a bowl, *umeke la'au*, from Hawaii; and a Lobi stool, *daàká*, from Burkina Faso.

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FIG. 3 (bottom left): Group of three objects from the Democratic Republic of the Congo arranged with a copy of the first edition of the *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion* (Four Books on Human Proportions) by Albrecht Dürer, published in Nuremberg in 1528. From left to right: a Hema Janus figure, a Kusu figure, and a Luba *lubuko* divination pounder from the Middle Luvua workshop.

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FIG. 4 (right): Ceremonial flute stopper. Sawos, Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea. 17th–18th century.

H: 46 cm.
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Caixa and shown at various venues throughout Spain in 2004 and 2005.

T.A.M.: *So it was possible to make discoveries in a country like Spain, even though tribal art had not really caught on there?*

J.L.: This find was about the only “off the grid” acquisition I was able to make. The only other piece I found under similar circumstances is a powerful Okak Fang reliquary figure from Equatorial Guinea; however, I no longer own it. When I was starting, I bought primarily on the Parisian market in galleries or at auction during a time when it was in a kind of “golden age.” Having said that, I didn’t ignore the Spanish dealers. Although there weren’t many of them, they had very high standards and were internationally known. I owe much for the objects I have to Ana and Antonio Casanovas, who have been active for more than twenty years in the tribal art field, as well as to David Serra, whose reputation is well established, and to Guilhem Montagut, a dynamic young man whom I expect will have a long and bright future in the business.

T.A.M.: *It sounds like you never really felt isolated with your interest in tribal art on this side of the Pyrenees.*

J.L.: The Spanish tribal art community, and especially the one in Barcelona, is small, but it has always struck me as especially enthusiastic and close-knit. Between 1960 and 1980, the Fundación Folch, which I mentioned before, was a fascinating microcosm unto itself. In the two following decades, there were several important museum exhibitions in Barcelona that helped bolster cohesion among local aficionados. I collaborated in the production of one of them—*Islas de los Mares del Sur* in 2001 at the Fundación La Caixa—and in 2004 served as consultant and advisor for another, *El Primer Eros*. At this point, we Barcelona collectors have been friends for a long time. We dine together often and see each other at international events. None of us ever really feels alone.

T.A.M.: *What is your approach to collecting?*

J.L.: Since my purchase of the Bembe figure, I’ve followed more or less the same path. I am one of those focused collectors who makes no more than one, two, or three acquisitions a year. I don’t look, I find. When I see an object I’m interested in, I take my time to examine it and to compare it with other examples of the same kind that I know from books or elsewhere. My slowness can be attributed to the fact that I see myself above all as a student

FIG. 5 (right):
Figure, *asie usu*. Baule,
Côte d’Ivoire. 19th century.
H: 40.5 cm.
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Santiago Borthwick.

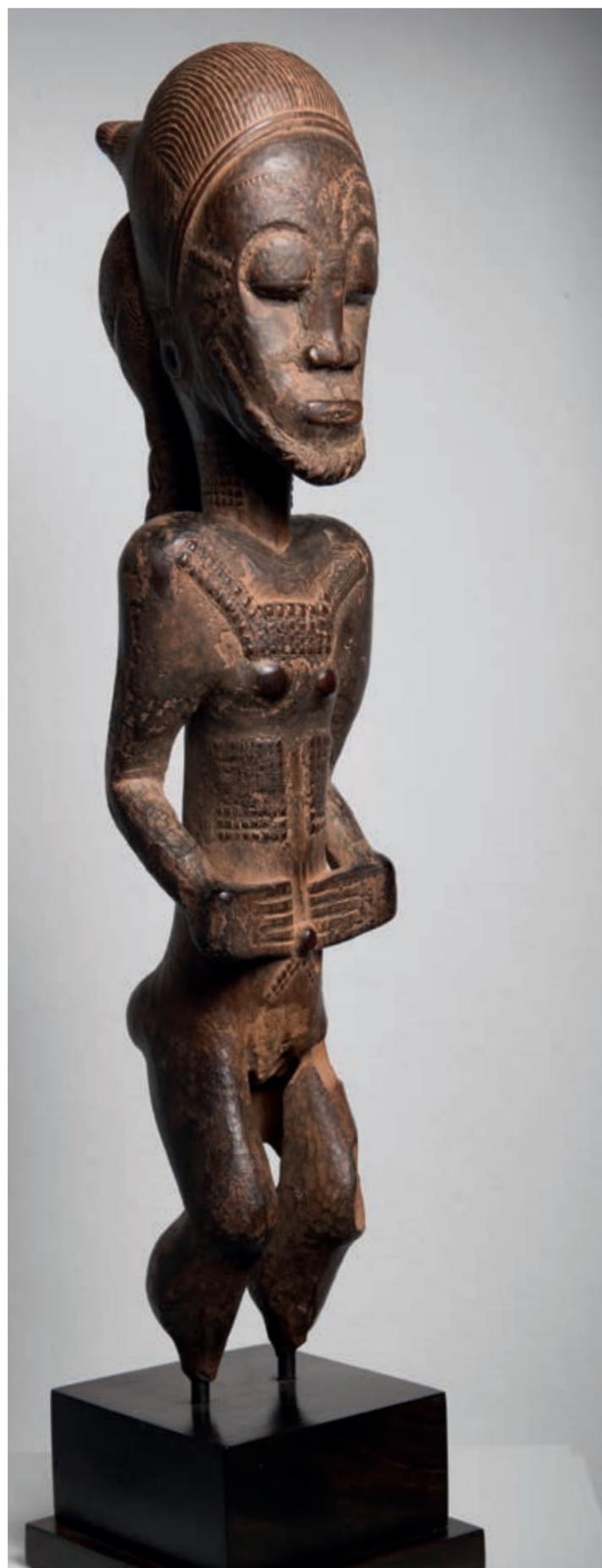


FIG. 6 (above): Figure.
Bembe, DR Congo.
19th century.
From *La figura imaginada*, Fundación
La Caixa, 2004.

FIG. 7 (right):
View of a chest in the
Lentinis' living room
showing a Baule *asie usu*
attributed to the Master
of Essankro and a Dan
mask, both from Côte
d'Ivoire; a Bamun mask
from Cameroon; and an
Ifugao *bulul* from Northern
Luzon, Philippines, dating
from the 15th to the 18th
century.
© *Tribal Art* magazine, photo
by Santiago Borthwick.



FIG. 8 (above):
Figure. Bembe,
DR Congo. 19th century.
H: 18.5 cm.
© *Tribal Art* magazine, photo
by Santiago Borthwick.

FIG. 9 (right):
Mask. We-Bete, Côte
d'Ivoire. 19th–20th century.
H: 34 cm.
Ex. Luciano Lanfranchi, Italy.
© *Tribal Art* magazine, photo
by Santiago Borthwick.



and a scholar. I take as much pleasure in building my knowledge through the reading of specialized works and visits to museums as I do in developing my collection with new acquisitions. For every one or two artworks I add to my collection each year, there are between forty and sixty new books that enrich the shelves of my library, which is to say that the scales are certainly tipped in favor of books. While they certainly aren't in the same price range as objects, the proportion nonetheless illustrates my strong interest in research and study.

T.A.M.: *You emphasize the importance of books as part of your collecting experience. Are there other factors, such as specialists or other collectors?*

J.L.: Generally speaking, I have developed my interests in a personal way, without significant mentors. That having been said, I have of course been inspired by the example of other collectors. For example, I discovered the Raymond and Laura Wielgus Collection when the book *Affinities of Form: Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas* was published by Indiana University Art Museum in 1996, and this proved to be a determining moment for me. While I do not pretend to have put together an ensemble of objects of an importance equivalent to theirs, I do feel a certain affinity between their approach and my own. Their sensitivity, their eclectic taste, and their restraint as buyers (their collection included only about a hundred pieces) both lit the way for me and confirmed to me the validity of my approach.

Another source of inspiration I would add also derived from a book. I am referring to Xavier de Maistre's 1794 work *Voyage autour de ma chambre (Voyage Around My Room)*, which gave particular meaning to my way of living with objects. I like to say that thanks to my artworks, I can experience a sense of travel and of contact with other cultures and other aesthetics without having to leave home.

T.A.M.: *What must an object have in order for you to want to acquire it?*

J.L.: Great quality! It's as simple and basic as that. The *sine qua non* is that the object needs to be the best of its kind that I have ever seen. I know that I will never have the means to own a great Tshokwe Tchibinda Ilunga, to name but one example, but rather than acquire one of average quality, I have made my peace with that fact and have recently consoled myself by purchasing what is in my opinion the most beautiful example of a Lwimbi (a people related to the Tshokwe) comb that I have seen in

all of my years of activity in the tribal art market. To state this more simply, I am moved to want to possess an object when it appears to me that it could not be better and that it is formally the most perfect example of what it is. That said, I certainly acknowledge that there may be more important objects and ones whose provenance may be more prestigious. I'm not arrogant enough to believe that I own the ultimate masterpiece of any given style.

T.A.M.: *You mentioned that from the beginning, you have never hesitated to sell or exchange some of your pieces in order to acquire others. Some might think that this is more the approach of a dealer than of a collector. What do you think about that, and what criteria do you use to determine what objects you will give up?*

J.L.: Actually, many collectors do the same thing, but not all admit it as openly as I do, and I respect that. Like many others, I don't have a budget large enough to allow me to purchase pieces regularly without having to sell some of my others. That doesn't make me a dealer, though. The term doesn't apply because I have never made a sale in order to generate revenue that would finance my lifestyle. Only the desire to own a new object I am attracted to can lead me to give up another I have had in my home.

If I am able to part with an object without too much regret, it is simply because I am not an accumulator. For a long time I lived in a 450-square-foot apartment with more than 3,000 books. It goes without saying that I didn't have room to show sixty or seventy works of art there. However, living with the pieces I buy has always been vital to me. I have to see them every day, so the option of placing some in storage does not come into play. Although I now live in a more spacious house, nothing has fundamentally changed. As far as I'm concerned, the objects need to breathe. I like to think that I am following the precept of the architect Mies van der Rohe, who famously said "less is more." Moreover, because I am curious by nature and eager to make new "voyages around my room," I must have new objects, so I must distance myself from others.

To answer the second part of the question, I have rarely sold or exchanged an object that I would not buy back if the opportunity presented itself. In other words, I did not give up those pieces because I no longer thought they were interesting or because I had tired of them. There may have been a few exceptions to that rule because, after all, my eye has become more refined and demanding over the years, but on the whole, it remains true.



FIG. 10 (above):
Equestrian figurine.
Karo-Batak, Sumatra,
Indonesia. 19th century or
earlier.

H: 18.5 cm.

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Santiago Borthwick.

T.A.M.: *How has your eye developed over the course of your long interest? Are you still moved by the same kinds of pieces you reacted to at the age of twenty?*

J.L.: Essentially my eye has gained confidence over time. It has also become more demanding. On the other hand, my tastes have changed very little, at least to the extent that an object of great quality has always been and remains what gives me pleasure. I have always been eclectic in my selections, and I have never favored one area or style over another. I am interested in a wide variety of art, whether it comes from Africa, Oceania, or Indonesia.

T.A.M.: *Despite the heterogeneity of your "selection," the objects in it share one common factor in that they all have a figurative aspect. Is that intentional?*

J.L.: Generally speaking, yes it is. I primarily have masks and figures that represent anthropomorphic forms. This isn't really surprising, though, since tribal art is essentially anchored in the representation of either nature (men and animals) or of the supernatural (spirits and ancestors). I own a small group of objects that don't adhere to this, even if they do maintain some relationship to the human body. For instance, I have a small collection of East African labrets, mainly from Ethiopia and Sudan, of which I am extremely fond.

T.A.M.: *Let's conclude this interview with a more personal question. In recent years, Veneta, the woman who is now your wife, has come into your life. Do you now collect as a couple?*

J.L.: Yes, absolutely! After having been a solitary collector for more than thirty years, it is a new and stimulating experience for me to be accompanied in the evolution of my passion. Veneta was a complete neophyte in this field when we met. Knowing that tribal art had such an important place in my life, she became interested in it, and I must say she has very quickly developed an eye of her own for objects. I must also say that her sensitivity, her perseverance, and her ability to analyze (her university studies in the field of criminology shine through) have considerably enriched my own approach to objects. She helps me see the objects we are offered in a fresh and rigorous way, and she always reminds me of the current state of our ensemble in such a way as to help us judge whether a given piece will fit into it harmoniously. It goes without saying that we now go to all the fairs and the galleries together, and that each of our acquisitions is made in common agreement.

FIG. 11 (right):
Full view and detail of a stilt step,
tapuva'e. Marquesas Islands.
18th century.
H: 28.5 cm.
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Borthwick.

