

Clamra Célestin

Devoted Collector, Ancestral Guardian

Interview by Joshua Dimondstein

In the following interview Clamra Célestin tells us about his lifelong involvement with African tribal art, from his boyhood in Chad to his present life in New York and Paris. His early experiences with the art as healing implements offer insights beyond those collectors usually have. And his observations from the perspective of an African collector provide us with food for thought.

Clamra's life as a collector is indeed a case study. From his early years of buying contemporary African sculpture to satisfy a hunger for the art to his advanced connoisseurship of African tribal art, his story contains much to which we can relate. As happens with so many of us, there was a turning point after which he was able to recognize authentic ritually used ancestral art. In his case, this happened during his apprenticeship with famed collector Werner Muensterberger. Clamra's sense of purpose as a collector and ancestral guardian has freed him from the conflicts often found in the pursuit of collecting tribal art. He is a dedicated collector who continues to learn, trusts his instincts, and remembers his *raison d'être*.

Clamra and I met for this interview in his flat in New York City. Though we've been friends for



FIG. 1 (above): Pipe bowl. Bamun, Grasslands, Cameroon. Terracotta. Ex Werner Muensterberger.

FIG. 2 (below): Clamra Célestin, New York, 2017. The large Songye figure is ex Allan Stone. Photo: Joshua Dimondstein.

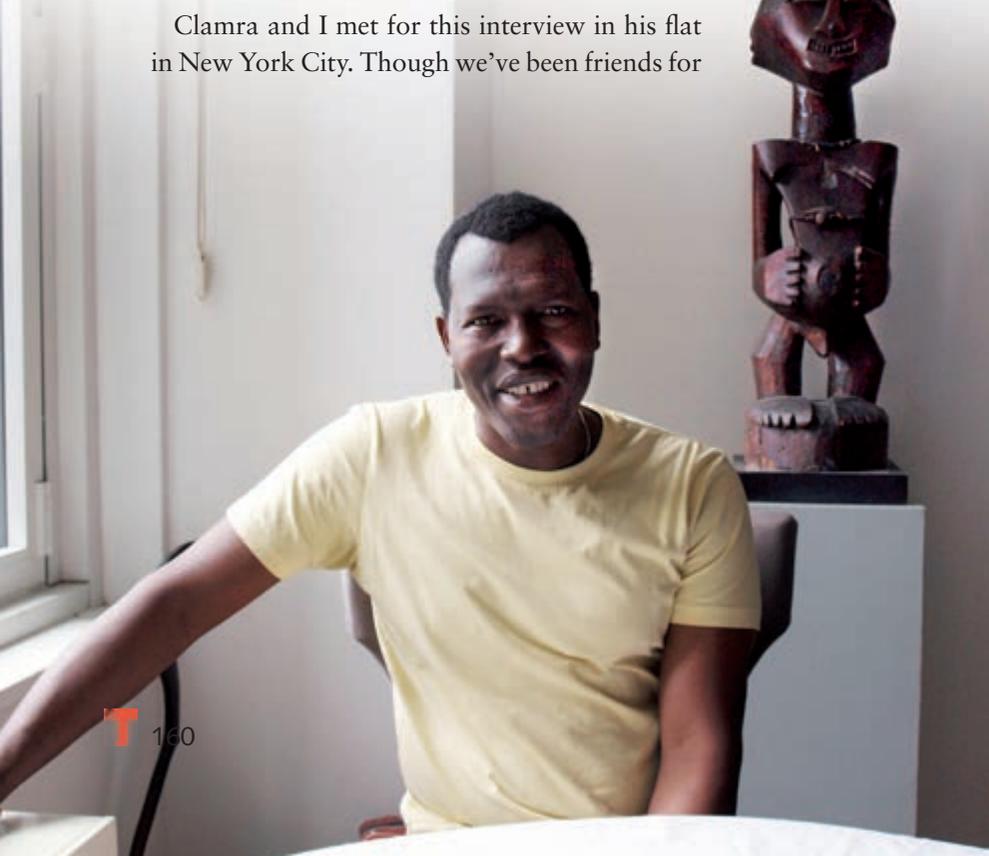


more than fifteen years, I now know him better. I look forward to reading his memoir, scheduled to be published in English at the end of this year by Ohio University Press. The French version, titled *Fils du Ciel: De Kindiri à Manhattan*, was published by l'Harmattan in Paris in 2011.

Joshua Dimondstein: *Tell us about your involvement with African tribal art and how it affects your life today.*

Clamra Célestin: I first saw African art as African fetishes. And by fetishes I mean sculptures that could overcome harmful forces, both animate and inanimate. I grew up with the art in this context and still feel that it is part of my DNA.

When I was four years old I contracted malaria, as I did many times in my youth. In my village we had a medicine man named Yonda. He had many fetishes, both statues and masks. When people were sick they would go to his house and he would care for them. So whenever I had malaria my parents would take me to Yonda and I would stay with him for a couple of days. The fetishes were there and were part of the treatment. Every time I recovered, I and everybody else in the village believed that the fetishes were a large part of the cure. The treatments were a secret and you'd see the fetishes only when he was using them to cure.



When I was around nine years old, I underwent the rites of passage of becoming a man. The initiation rituals in the bush took around a month, and at the end the boys would parade back to the village wearing the masks used in the rituals. The masks contained spirits and the young men who were dancing the masks embodied the spirits. The two together would give life to unseen forces and the initiated boys could then represent the power of the masks. In this way I experienced the masks.

There was a civil war in Chad when I was around fifteen. It was horrible; I witnessed a lot of bloodshed and carnage. Once I saw a family of fifty-three Muslims massacred with machetes. When I returned to my village, I told the story to my father, who said I had to undergo a cleansing even though I didn't participate in the killing. Just witnessing it, he told me, could someday lead me to kill, either by passion or by accident, or it could cause me to enjoy watching future human carnage. My father understood how traumatized I was and sent me to undergo a week-long healing. I was treated by a medicine man and then placed into the bottom of a well for the final portion of the healing. I vividly remember the medicine man wearing a mask as he was preparing me for the ritual. He presented a statue to me that he said was a god of the water who could protect me during my cleansing. He told me I needed to be familiar with him, to take care of him, and to respect him because the relationship that I had with the spirit infused in this figure would enable it to help me during the final three days of the ritual, which I spent in the well, deprived of food and sleep.

By the time of the massacre I was already a Christian, having been converted by baptism in a Jesuit school. I couldn't really go back to the "pagan" practices of my village, but I needed to undergo the cleansing ritual to remain there. Without the ritual it was believed I wouldn't recover and could become a killer myself, and so without the ritual I would have been expelled from my village. And after working with the medicine man, being assisted by the fetishes and undergoing the ritual, I did feel transformed. Despite my Jesuit education and having lived for many years in France and America, I still believe in the invisible world of the dead and its presence



FIG. 3 (above):
Ritual platform.
Yoruba, Nigeria.
Wood.
Ex Dimondstein Tribal Arts, Los Angeles.
Photo: Scott McCue.



FIG. 4 (left):
Standing female figure.
Bamana, Mali.
Wood. H: 45 cm.
Collected by Frederick H. Lem in Ganadougou, Sikasso region, Mali, c. 1934.
Ex Helena Rubinstein, Paris/New York, acquired before 1949; Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 1966; Pace Primitive, New York, 1996; private collection; Sotheby's, Paris, 2013.
Photo courtesy of Sotheby's.



FIG. 5 (above):
Mask. Bassa, Liberia or
Sierra Leone.
Wood, fiber, metal.
Ex Leonardo Vigorelli, Milan.
Photo: Marco Leonardo.

in the masks and figures. And, then, sometimes I question that belief.

I've said a lot about how I was involved with African tribal art as a child. I'll briefly answer the second part of your question—how the art currently affects my life today—in the context of the first: Looking at the tribal art in my New York apartment gives me energy when I'm feeling tired. I have a sense that I am taking care of it while it is taking care of me. And it keeps me connected to my roots.

J. D.: *Years ago when we first met, you had many pieces of decorative art from Africa. Looking around your apartment now, I see only high-quality works of African tribal art. Please talk about your evolution as a collector.*

C. C.: The knowledge and passion that I've gained from living with good pieces have driven my evolution. When I was growing up in Chad, I never had a chance to study the pieces as creations of art and beauty. In Chad we dance the masks as part of a ritual, but when it's over, the pieces get put away.

The first time I saw Werner Muensterberger's apartment full of great African tribal art, it was a very powerful experience for me. Instinctively, I felt I wanted to learn all about it. But seeing a great piece and owning one are two very separate things.

Soon after seeing Werner's collection, I was back in Africa and bought quite a few pieces in Nigeria and Cameroon. I was told crazy stories of the importance of the pieces I was being offered, and I brought them back to America. They turned out to be fakes. When I began to understand the difference between the original works of art and the copies, I sold the copies at the flea market. Over time I've learned well. I have a good eye and can spot a good piece. But one thing I've learned is you have to have money to put together even a small collection of good tribal art. Even though you might have a good eye, without money a good collection is not going to happen. You can get only what you can pay for.

J. D.: *Do you have any thoughts or feelings you'd like to share regarding the disproportionate number of white collectors to black collectors of African tribal art? Do you*

have any suggestions that might help increase the number of African and African-American collectors?

C. C.: One day, if I have the resources, I'd like to take my collection to Africa and open a museum. We need more great museums in Africa that can teach people. Visiting museums could get collectors, both Africans and foreign visitors, interested in learning about and collecting the art.

A high degree of sensitivity and education is needed to get people interested in collecting African tribal art. Africans have the sensitivity to the art that comes from watching and participating in the dances in the villages. But then it requires a level of education that enables one to see the pieces as works of art that one would want to live with. For many in America, including African-Americans, there has been a prejudice associating art from Africa with sorcery and black magic. This propaganda has stigmatized the art, and many African-Americans turn away from their heritage rather than embracing it. I remember Werner



FIG. 6 (above):
Kneeling female figure.
Lumbo, Gabon.
Wood.
Ex Leonardo Vigorelli, Milan; Joel
Greene, San Francisco.
Photo: Marco Leonardo.

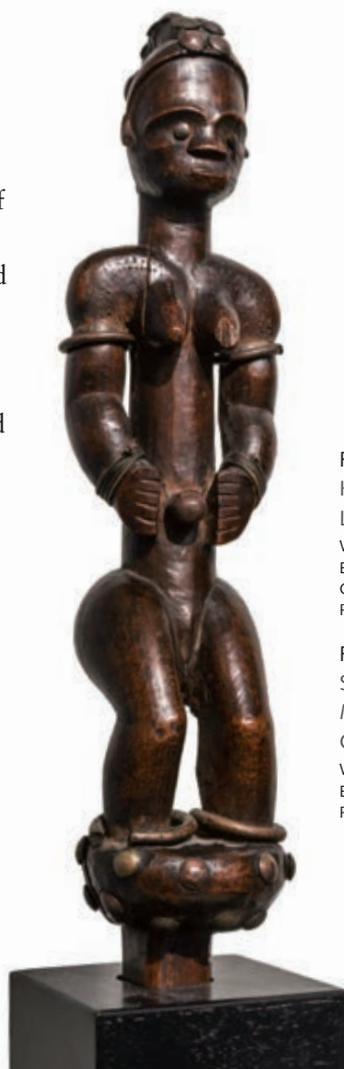


FIG. 7 (left):
Staff top.
Mabea Fang, Southern
Cameroon.
Wood, brass tacks.
Ex Pace Primitive, New York.
Photo: Marco Leonardo.

used to tell me that collecting this art could connect African-Americans to their roots.

If African tribal art were to become more mainstream, people would perceive it as being “in” and the market would grow. In America there has been a lack of the kind of appreciation historically found in Europe, where it has been recognized and greatly appreciated for a long time. The inspiration and influence that African art had on artists such as Picasso, Matisse, and Modigliani shows its importance in the art world. In America there are many Africans and African-Americans financially able to collect African tribal art, but how to get them interested in doing so? It’s about education. Perhaps for some it needs to be understood as an investment opportunity.

Many new collectors are buying African artworks as investments. I hear about their experts and their advisors—one says one thing about a piece, the other another. And although an artwork may have been made for ritual use and used extensively, this kind of collector often cannot really say if they themselves truly appreciate it. They end up buying it because the advisor tells them it’s a good investment. Though this may work for some, this doesn’t seem to me to be the way to bring in new collectors who are instinctively drawn to and are passionate about the art.

Maybe there would be more African and African-American collectors if some of the great galleries and even some of the auction houses hired more African and African-American experts and advisors. These are people who have an affinity with their community. They could bring in and educate new African and African-American collectors about the art. But I don’t really see this happening.

FIG. 8 (right):
Hyena mask.
Bamana, Mali.
Wood.
Ex Lance Entwistle, London.
Photo: Marco Leonardo.

FIG. 9a and b (below):
Large head.
Lobi, Burkina Faso.
Wood.
Ex Alan Brandt, New York; Michael
Oliver, New York.
Photo: Marco Leonardo.



J. D.: What advice would you give collectors of tribal art who are just beginning the adventure?

C. C.: Frankly, I don’t have any advice to give new collectors. When someone is drawn to the art and starts collecting, they must already have the sensitivity to the art and the passion for collecting it. If they’re going for it on their own, they already have it in their heart.

But once someone gets started, I’d tell them that there are going to be mistakes, that they’re going to get hurt, and to be prepared for that. There’s no way one can become a

great collector without living with and getting to know fakes. You shouldn't be discouraged when you realize you've bought a fake. It's part of the learning curve. Eventually you'll get it right and will begin building a fine collection. This is what happened to me.

You have to develop relationships with people in the tribal art community. But don't develop a relationship with just one dealer. You should open your eyes and your mind and listen to other people. Having a close relationship with a reputable dealer that you trust can be the key. But you should research the pieces that you are buying and the prices

It's very challenging because I don't have the resources to both help my village as much as I'd like to and to buy art, which is my passion. It's a delicate dance. I like to do both things with the idea that someday my collection can be used for larger causes in Chad.

I mentioned that I received an education in a Jesuit school. That meant that I was taken hundreds of miles from my parents to live in and attend the school. I don't think this is the right thing for a child in the twenty-first century to have to experience. The students should have good schools in their own communities. So I go back every year and do what I can to help the

you are paying for them. When you are starting out, get the opinions of experienced people about the pieces you've bought. It will become clear which dealers are selling you good pieces at the right prices. Asking for the opinions of others is one thing, but I'm not suggesting you depend on somebody to tell you what to buy. We all need to depend on each other, but the feeling of what you should buy has to come from within you.

J. D.: *You usually travel to Chad once a year. In what ways are you still involved in your country of origin?*

C. C.: I have a large family in Chad: thirty-eight siblings and more than three hundred cousins, nieces, and nephews. And everyone is in Chad; I'm the only one in my family who has left my village. But the blessing of having a large family comes with a lot of responsibilities. I like to go back and see my family and I'm also very involved in building the community over there. I started a school in 1993 and it's really doing well. For the first time a graduate from the school recently went on to become a lawyer.

schools in my country. The villages still have no running water, no electricity, and lots of malaria. In the past I've provided resources to help address these issues, but now I'm just focused on education in Chad, though I do still get calls when someone in my village is sick or needs help.

As I said, one day I'd like to have my collection in a museum in Chad. There is nothing like this there now. We don't even teach art in the schools. When I go there, I discuss with my friends how we can realize this. We're still working on it.

FIG. 10 (below): Male antelope dance crest, *chi wara*. Bamana, Mali. Wood, fiber, resin. Ex Dimondstein Tribal Arts, Los Angeles. Photo: Marco Leonardo.

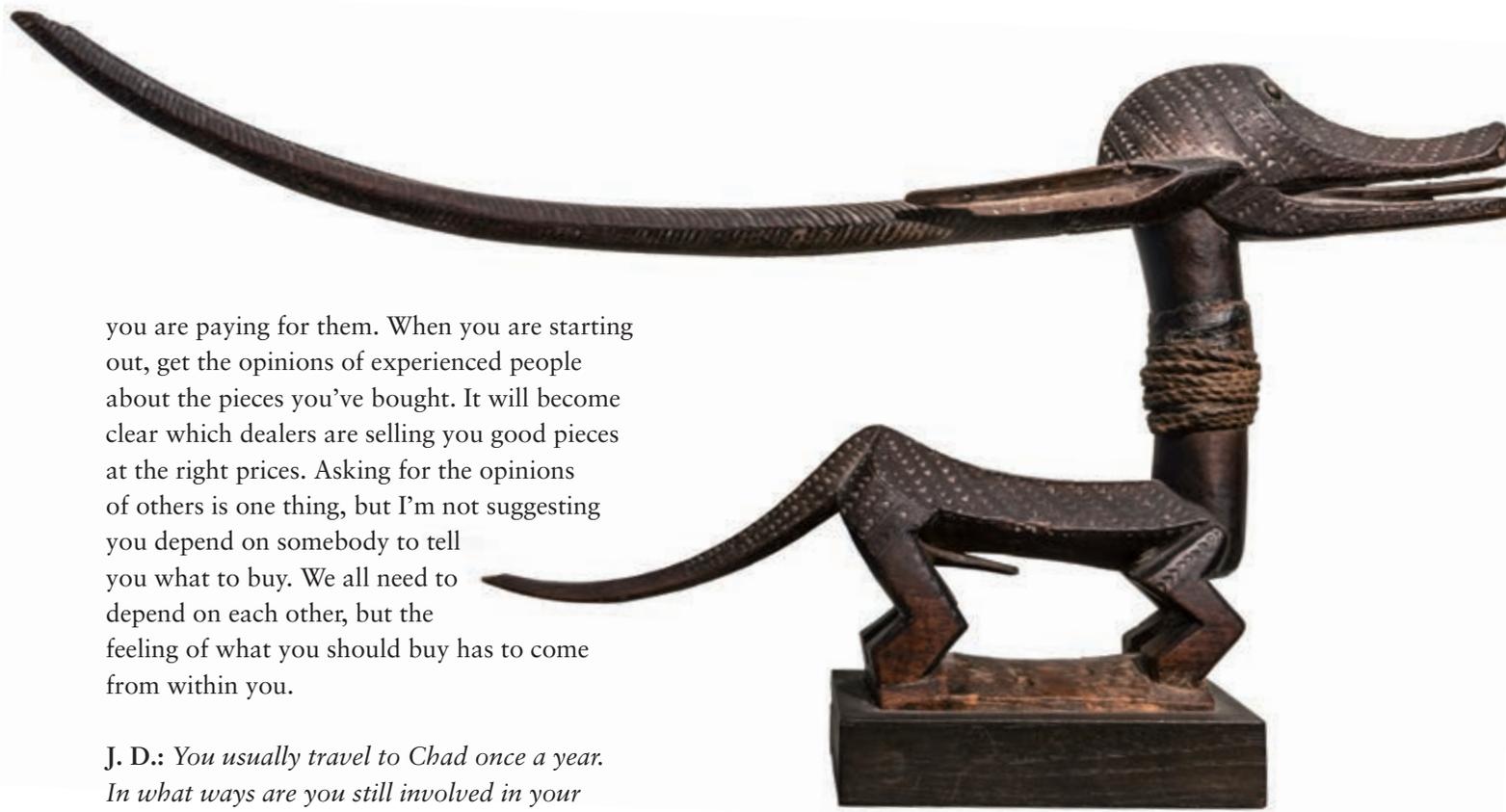


FIG. 11 (right): Hide mask. Lega, DR Congo. 19th or early 20th century. African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) hide, domestic chicken (*Gallus gallus*) feathers. H: 25.4 cm. Collected in situ by Nicolas de Kun between 1948–1960. Ex Julius and Josefa Carlebach, New York (1963); Zafira and Itzhak Shohar; Sotheby's, New York, 2012. Photo courtesy of Sotheby's.

