

From Painting to Africa:

A Conversation with Michel and Natacha Lequesne

By Elena Martínez-Jacquet

It's well known that the *Parcours des Mondes* in Paris is a time for exchanges and encounters between tribal art aficionados and enthusiasts. At the recent 2013 event, we received an invitation from Michel and Natacha Lequesne to visit their collection, which includes about 100 pieces, mostly from Africa and a few from Oceania as well. In the intimate setting of their Parisian apartment, and in the company of Azande, their majestic Maine Coon cat, we spoke with them about their taste in contemporary art and their fascination for tribal art.



said, "You don't know me. I came by the other day. I have a fever, but I can come in a week. I'm interested in the Jalisco object in your window. What price can you make me?" He gave me a figure. I negotiated with some success, pointing out that this was the first object of this kind I had ever bought. All of which is to say that I made my first acquisition on the telephone.

T. A. M.: But you weren't a novice collector.

M. L.: No, I wasn't. I had been collecting modern painting since 1955. That Viera da Silva canvas hanging on the wall was my first acquisition in that area.

T. A. M.: Let's get back to tribal art. Did the fever you had when making your first purchase go on to become a real collecting fever, if you'll forgive the pun?

FIG. 1: Natacha and Michel Lequesne in their living room with Azande and surrounded by some of their collection.

Photo: Alex Arthur.

FIG. 2: Funerary vessel. Jalisco, Mexico.

Terracotta. H: 43 cm.
Photo: Alex Arthur.

Tribal Art Magazine: *Dr. Lequesne, as a physician, you'll certainly agree that there are all kinds of patients. What kind of collector are you, given that we already know that you're one who has kept the first acquisition you ever made?*

Michel Lequesne: Yes, I have indeed kept my first non-European acquisition. It's a Jalisco funerary vessel from Mexico's ancient West Coast culture, a kind of thinker in a meditative pose with its chin on its knee. It was love at first sight when I saw it at Henri Kamer's in 1963, but I didn't dare go into the gallery at that point. A few days after I saw it, and while I was ill with a high fever, I picked up the telephone, called Kamer, and





FIG. 3: Sculpture.
Tellem, Mali.
Wood. H: 59 cm.
Photo: Alex Arthur.

FIG. 4: Figure of a musician. Bamana, Mali.
Wood. H: 89 cm.
Ex Pierre Harter.
Photo: Alex Arthur.

M. L.: Not really. As a matter of fact, I think of myself more as an “aficionado” than a “collector.” In the 1960s, I navigated the waters of “primitive art” quite moderately and cautiously. I bought a Tellem figure, again from Kamer, who was married to H  l  ne Leloup at the time, and she recently selected it for exhibition at her Dogon show at the Mus  e du Quai Branly. My first wife acquired a very old Bamana figure with remarkably prominent buttocks, and I also bought a small Lega at the flea market. It’s not ivory, but bone.

When I first started acquiring art, I bought mostly nonfigurative paintings and furniture. Fortunately, there was no old family furniture in the first apartment that my wife and I lived in, but we did have a Poliakoff, the Viera da Silva, and two works by Simon Hanta   on the walls already. It was really as a function of the paintings we acquired that I purchased Spanish and French Haute   poque furniture, which still gives me great pleasure today. My eye sees harmony between this kind of furniture, modern painting, and tribal art objects. There’s a coherence there that there wouldn’t be with Louis XV or XVI furniture. We find that our objects integrate nicely into the landscape of our apartment.

In the course of my trajectory as an art lover, there came a time when painting became out of reach. I turned my attention to the tribal art I liked because it was more affordable at the time. In the last twenty years, my purchases in this area have outnumbered those in other fields even though I still often fall in love with paintings. I can make these acquisitions thanks to the sale of a Dubuffet that I bought with great difficulty in the early years, relying on the loan of a friend, whom I paid back over a period of five years. I kept the painting for forty years before I could let it go, but that allowed me to procure several choice objects, for example, this male Bamana musician figure, which is among the most beautiful of its kind known. It formerly belonged to Pierre Harter.

T. A. M.: *These objects are very different from one another. What attracts you to them?*

M. L.: I don’t like the term “collection.” My wife Natacha and I buy what we fall in love with, object by object. It is not our ambition to have five different kinds of Jaliscos or all the main types of Tellem sculptures. What we have put together is certainly heterogeneous, but it’s coherent to us. We’re attracted by various treatments of forms in tribal art but particularly the





FIG. 5: Doorlock fragment.
Senufo, Mali.
Wood. H: 30 cm.
Photo: Alex Arthur.



FIG. 6: Detail of a paddle.
Solomon Islands.
Wood, pigment. H: 153 cm.
Photo: Alex Arthur.



somber ones. No “Louis XV Baule” for us, by which I mean overly elaborate, with a thousand tresses and scarification marks.

Our approach is aesthetic and not ethnographic. We understand the people who are interested in the significance of these objects to the people who made them, the traditions they represent, and their ritual uses, but we don’t really delve systematically into this kind of research. That is not to say that we don’t document our objects—we buy and read many books—but our approach is not so much to obtain extensive documentation before a purchase as to conduct an “enquiry of curiosity” afterward.

T. A. M.: *Looking at the kinds of pieces you have taken interest in—a Madagascar Sakalava bird and an extremely weathered Cameroonian Batoufam statue, for example—it would seem that you have a certain sensibility for weathered wood and other materials.*

Natacha Lequesne: Ah! That’s mainly me. I push us to acquire these kinds of works!

T. A. M.: *So the collection is built with two voices. Are you a collecting couple or two collectors who are married?*

M. L.: We have been married for twenty-five years. My wife got the bug after about ten.

N. L.: Yes, I had a bit of trouble with the African aesthetic at first. It seemed hard to me, a bit oppressive. But then, as I explored galleries and museums, my eye became more receptive and I began to participate in this adventure. Once I realized that I could share my husband’s passion, I allowed myself to become involved.

M. L.: And now Natacha acquires pieces on her own!

N. L.: And no less captivating ones!

T. A. M.: *So the answer is two collectors who are married?*

N. L.: That’s one way of seeing it. After a day at the *Parcours des Mondes*, we’ve sometimes each come home with our “own” object. But most often we encourage each other. One of us supports the other in the idea that an acquisition is worth making even if in certain cases it does not exactly correspond to his or her taste. And we give each other presents—generally pieces that we’ve seen together but for one reason or another did not purchase right away. An example would be this beautiful Senufo lock. It spoke to me



FIG. 7: Reliquary guardian figure. Mahongwe, Gabon.
Wood, metal. H: 24 cm.
Photo: Alex Arthur.

FIG. 8: Figure. Batoufam, Cameroon.
Wood. H: 83 cm.
Photo: Alex Arthur.



when I came upon it in Alain Bovis' gallery, but I couldn't decide right away. When I came by the next day, Alain welcomed me and, with a smile on his face, said, "You must act more quickly, Madame Lequesne!" Little did I know that it had been Michel, wanting to give me a surprise gift, that had beaten me to the punch.

M. L.: And sometimes we quarrel about who will be the one to buy a piece. Because each of the works you see here belongs to one or the other of us. It's important to us that it be that way.

T. A. M.: *Which acquisition has given you the most satisfaction? And, conversely, do you have any regrets?*

M. L.: I am particularly happy to have this Solomon Islands paddle since I greatly appreciate the aesthetics of this area. For a long time, I collected Africa almost exclusively, but more recently, I've made some fine Oceanic acquisitions. I'm still happy to live with the things I acquired earlier—Harter's Bamana, this powerful Senufo mask with its modernist construction, and that Sakalava bird which resembles a Brancusi sculpture. These works attracted my attention immediately and they have stood the test of time. And that is an essential test. Like in a marriage, you always ask yourself if it will last. I'm also very proud of this Mahongwe reliquary guardian figure. Generally I'm not looking for a particular piece and I buy the object that I see and that seduces me. But this was an exception—I had always wanted to own a Mahongwe and I finally found one with Ana and Antonio Casanovas. And not just any one. This one is among the twenty or so of the type that Jacques Kerchache found in Gabon in 1967 in one of the wells into which either missionaries were in the habit of throwing pagan idols, or into which the objects were placed by the tribe itself to hide and preserve its sacred objects.

T. A. M.: *And have there been any major disappointments?*

M. L.: Rarely, fortunately. Some objects have lost some of their appeal over the course of time. Especially at the beginning, an aficionado does not always correctly gauge the longevity of what the eye seems to promise. It's a difficult evaluation to make and one that is independent of the object's price. I've made some modest purchases of works that continue to give me pleasure. Too bad about some initial mistakes—I have no regrets and it's better that way.

T. A. M.: *Since you live with your collection, what is the nature of your relationship with your objects?*

M. L.: I must admit that when we are very busy, I almost don't have time to look at them. One must be present and available in order to appreciate these works. Receptivity increases when things are calm and tranquil.

N. L.: We regularly rediscover our objects. When we come back from vacation, for instance, we turn on the lights and look at a great number of objects one by one. It's a moment of real pleasure, like becoming "reacquainted."

M. L.: Yes, completely ... but I also have a project that I plan to realize in the near future. I would like to free up a wall and install a sort of niche in it, into which my wife and I could put a single object for a while to see and admire it in a new and different light, freed up for a time from the works around it.

N. L.: An ephemeral museum!



FIG. 9 (top): Michel Lequesne in his consultation room.

Photo: Alex Arthur.

FIG. 10 (left): Mask. Senufo, Mali/Côte d'Ivoire.

Wood. H: 50 cm.
Photo: Alex Arthur.

FIG. 11 (right): Figure of a bird. Sakalava, Madagascar.

Wood. H: 72 cm.
Photo: Alex Arthur.

