

# The “Shock of the Old” and the Passion of George Lois

By Alex Arthur

*George Lois is a world-renowned advertising “guru” and communications innovator whose long and outstanding career has been the subject of numerous accolades, not in the least a 2008 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that focused on thirty-two magazine covers designed by him for Esquire in the 1960s and ‘70s. Now in his eighties, George remains active today and has been a subscriber to Tribal Art magazine since issue #1 twenty years ago. We speak to him about his passion for art.*



**Tribal Art Magazine:** *As an art director, designer, author, and advertising “guru,” you have been active since the 1950s, which was a revolutionary time in the development of communications and of world awareness in U.S. culture. It was also a time where African art reached new heights of popularity for U.S. collectors. How do you remember your early interest and how it started?*

**GEORGE LOIS:** In 1945, when I was a fourteen-year-old student at the High School of Music & Art (founded by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in 1936 and

the greatest institution of learning since Alexander sat at the feet of Aristotle), we had a daily History of Art class for a full week on “primitive” art and its bold influence on the modernists, based on the avant-garde “Armory Show” of 1913. The class exhibited a juxtaposition of African art with works by Picasso, Brancusi, and Picabia, along with a slide show of the iconic 1915 photos by Alfred Stieglitz taken at Gallery 291. My knowledgeable instructors at M&A positioned African art as an active and ongoing influence in the modernist era.

The Fangs, Bakotas, Lubas, and Dogons knocked me out and influenced my drawing almost as much as the drawings of Elie Nadelman did. I became an instant apostle of the power, form, and ethos of tribal art.

In 1958, when I was twenty-seven, I had a total epiphany when I spotted the newly published *The Sculpture of Africa*, designed by Bernard Quint, an art director at *LIFE* magazine, with text by William Fagg and 408 powerfully photographed black-and-white photos by Eliot Elisofon in a beautifully printed Praeger publication. In a New York nanosecond, I knew African art would become an important part of my life. Which reminds me of an anecdote. In 1969, my copy of this inspiring book was loaned to the then director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas Hoving, for him to study before he met with Nelson Rockefeller about acquiring his spectacular primitive art collection, which was housed at the time at Rockefeller’s Museum of Primitive Art, across the street from MOMA.

**TA:** *How did you select objects for your collection? Were you guided or influenced by other collectors or dealers?*

**GL:** After buying a Lega mask, a Baule *goli* mask, a Mossi antelope mask, and then an Asmat shield at Carlebach (the gallery that was a major source of inspiration in the 1930s and ‘40s for the Surrealists), I found my way to a wondrous gallery next door to Parke Bernet on Madison Avenue, commanded by J. J. Klejman, a Polish émigré to America. Known today as a legendary art dealer, Klejman, with his knowledgeable wife, was the most important and influential dealer of

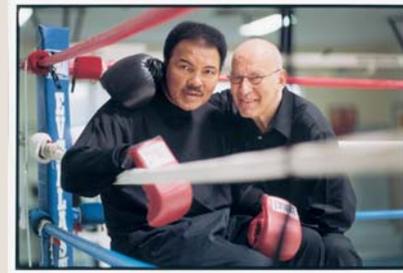


FIG. 1 (left): George Lois and Rosemary Lewandowski-Lois with their remarkable New Ireland *uli* figure, presently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Photo: front cover of *Art & Antiques*, March 1993.

FIG. 2 (above): George Lois with Muhammad Ali.

Photo: David Turnley for *Vanity Fair*, 2003.

FIG. 3 (right): Cover for *Tribal Art* magazine designed by George Lois.

# TRIBAL ART

**"Hey George, that's African—  
Now I know where you got that idea  
for that Esquire cover!"**

MUHAMMAD ALI IN 1997, TO GEORGE LOIS UPON SPOTTING  
A BAKONGO NKISI NAIL FETISH IN LOIS' TRIBAL ART COLLECTION

APRIL 1968  
PRICE \$1

# Esquire

THE MAGAZINE FOR MEN



The Passion of Muhammad Ali



FIG. 4 (above):  
The Loises with their  
Nukuoro and Maori figures  
(second and fourth from  
the right), visiting with  
Bobbie Entwistle and similar  
figures that she had  
brought by for comparison.

Photo: Luke Lois, New York, c. 2002.

FIG. 5 (right):  
Sheila Metzner, *Man Ray*,  
1988. Features Lois' Baule  
mask.

© Sheila Metzner.

FIGS. 6 and 7 (facing  
page): Interior views of the  
Loises' New York apartment  
from a photo essay by Todd  
Selby, 2010.

Images courtesy of The Selby/Trunk  
Archive.







FIG. 8 (above): Rosemary Lewandowski-Lois, *Merchant of the Gods*, 1970. Oil on canvas, 72" x 60".

primitive, ancient, and medieval art in America, a tyrannical but saintly guardian of the world's great treasures. In 1960, dressed in beat-up gym gear, I would wander up Madison Avenue after playing basketball at the "Y" every Saturday morning in lower Manhattan to gaze through the window and drool at the newly acquired Klejman masterpieces.

Frustratingly, I was always denied access at the always locked door by his authoritarian daughter who, along with her parents peering out from the rear of the store, judged my appearance to be that of a bum.

So one Saturday, I asked Rosemary, my Polish-American wife and an accomplished painter, to doll up and stand (in front of me) at the door. One look at my elegant, stylish, statuesque blonde beauty and we gained immediate access as Mr. Klejman bowed and clicked his heels. We were grandly allowed entrance



FIG. 9 (right): The Loises with *Nike* by Augustus Saint-Gaudens (gilt bronze, 1905). Behind is a Calder mobile and a Frank Lloyd Wright "Wisteria" window from Martin House.



FIG. 10: Elaine Ellman, *George Lois and Vitrine*, 1989.

dozens of times thereafter to his private back room and basement to view his stock and discuss art in all its aspects (and listen to his gossip about the best-known of his clientele). Within a few years, first buying masterworks on an installment plan and then with newly acquired purchasing power (when my dynamic advertising agency went public), Rosie and I had acquired a superb array of tribal art. Eleven of the many pieces we pried away from them are beautifully rendered in the 1967 autobiographical portrait of the Klejmans by Lewandowski-Lois (Rosie's professional name). When Mr. Klejman saw Rosie's portrait of him and his wife in their inner sanctum, he hugged her, kissed both her cheeks, and cried "*Na zdrowie, madame*" (a toast meaning "to your health"). The monumental *uli* figure from New Ireland, shown on the far left, today proudly stands

guard at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, one of their greatest Oceanic sculptures.

**TA:** *Did African art ever influence your own work and does it continue to affect you?*

**GL:** Mysteriously, the history of the art of mankind can inspire breakthrough conceptual creative thinking. My knowledge and love of 7,000 years of the art of mankind has always inspired my creative thinking as a graphic designer and mass communicator. With my designer's eye and with my wife's great passion for art, we continue the thrilling experience of living with masterworks chosen (when affordable) from dozens of ancient and primitive cultures. Our spiritual day of worship is spent each Sunday at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where we experience on each visit, without fail, the shock of the old!