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Domestication and the Preservation of Wildness
The Self and the Other in Primitive Art Collecting

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Résumé de l'article

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BRIGITTE DERLON AND MONIQUE JEUDY-BALLINI

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Translation from the French by Robert Reay-Jones

Résumé

À partir des données recueillies dans le cadre d'une étude ethnographique menée en France, cet article examine l'ambivalence fondamentale de la perception des objets et de la relation qu'entretiennent avec eux les collectionneurs d'art primitif. La fascination pour l'art primitif est bien sûr étroitement liée au goût de l'exotisme. Mais notre étude montre que l'intégration d'artefacts primitifs à l'espace privé d'une collection artistique implique invariablement un processus de domestication qui permet aux collectionneurs de se reconnaître dans l'objet domestiqué. Bref, les données indiquent que les pratiques et les représentations des collectionneurs sont soumises à une tension entre la fascination de l'altérité et une quête du proche et du familier.

Abstract

Based on the findings of an ethnographic study conducted in France, this paper examines the fundamental ambivalence of the perception of and relation to objects among primitive art collectors. As we guess, the fascination for primitive artifacts is closely related to the taste for the exotic. But our study shows that the integration of primitive artifacts in the private space of an art collection invariably involves a process of domestication that enables collectors to recognize themselves in the domesticated object. In short, the findings suggest that the practices and representations of collectors are marked by a tension between a fascination for otherness and a quest for closeness and familiarity.

It is commonly held that the category of "primitive art," which includes ancient or traditional arts from Africa, Oceania, South East Asia, and the Americas, is a Western construct (Rubin 1987: 5; Connelly 1995: 5; Errington 1998). The modern concept of primitive art—a concept founded on implicit selection criteria—implies a preference for objects that embody a certain idea of the exotic. In other words, collectors will tend to prefer, say, African exoticism to Scandinavian exoticism, the religious as opposed to the secular, or the ancient as opposed to the modern. At the same time, the notion of primitive art also implies a taste for artifacts that reflect culturally familiar values, suggesting a preference for sculptural objects, for noble and lasting materials, for dimensions suited to domestic exhibition, or for anthropomorphism as opposed to amorphism. In short, primitive art is a form of art that is valued primarily for its difference from the known and the familiar, albeit a form of difference that is immediately returned to the fold of the known, the familiar, the customary, and the conventional.

The purpose of this paper is to show that the views of Parisian primitive art collectors—a population examined in a previous study (Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini 2008)—reflect this paradox. As remarked by one collector interviewed for this study: "To collect the first arts, or those we call primitive—i.e., the arts of the end of the world—is

to satisfy a desire for exogamy, a desire not to rest satisfied with remaining among people who have the same skin color as us." In other words, the collector viewed his taste for primitive art as reflecting a desire to step out of his world, as an existential quest for otherness. Yet he also conceived of his passion as a way of "loving oneself through the creative manifestation of a remote culture, of loving oneself through that which is very different from oneself." In this sense, his views also illustrate a common ambivalence found among primitive art lovers generally, namely that art works operate as both an emanation of the other and as an emanation of the self.

Thus, if "it is invariably oneself that one collects," as Jean Baudrillard once put it in positing the notion of art collecting as a "totalization of images of the self" (1968: 128), an inevitable tension emerges when the act of collecting is driven by a taste for the other and the exotic. It is precisely this tension that this paper aims to explore. In particular, we will show how the views and practices of primitive art collectors suggest a relation to objects based simultaneously on familiarity and otherness.

Neither the dialectic between the self and the other, nor the ambiguous relation between the quest for exoticism and the desire for familiarity, are really new topics. To name but a few, psychoanalysts, historians (especially those working on the colonial expansion, the history of museums, the 19th-century world fairs, or orientalism in home decoration, for example), and sociologists or anthropologists studying tourism are all familiar with such topics (Graburn 1976; Stocking 1985; Corbey 1991; Thomas 1991; Labrusse 2011). This paper means to be a building block in a relatively neglected issue, that of the discourses and practices of today's primitive art collectors.

Before getting to the heart of the matter, let us begin with a few words about our ethnographic inquiry and its approach in the field of studies on primitive art collection.

In the 1980s, U.S.-based scholars working in a wide range of fields (history, comparative ltterature, anthropology, art criticism) and claiming allegiance to postcolonialism began to adopt a critical approach to Western relationships with the material culture of formerly colonized people. The politics and poetics of the collections in the field and the museographic exhibitions were strongly criticized. As a category, primitive art collectors, often discredited for their "received ideas" (Price 1989), were targeted as emblematic figures of the neocolonial tendency of the West to appropriate the world and to shape "non-Western arts in its own image" (Clifford 1988: 193). Even if it did not prevent some previously and presently famous collectors to be valued for their personal contribution to prestigious collections (Gianinazzi and Giordano 1987; Hooper 1997; Desveaux 2002; Arnold and Thom 2012), the sheer force of this condemnation has probably impeded attempts to adopt an ethnographic approach to today's primitive art collectors. With some notable exceptions (Corbey 2000; Bonnain 2001), they have been largely overlooked by social scientists.

Inspired by this observation, our survey on French primitive art collectors started in 2000 and aimed to examine how they intellectually reappropriate extra-European art pieces, how they invest them with their own imaginary frameworks, and how they experience their intimate relation with them. As ethnologists, our aim was to adhere to the principle of axiological neutrality in order to understand their discourse and practices from an emic perspective. Interviewees included about 50 men and women ranging in age from 30 to 75 years, drawn from highly differentiated social origins and circumstances. They owned collections that varied significantly in geographical origin, size, financial value, and in the main sources used to pursue items (purchased in the country of origin, auction rooms, flea markets, galleries, exchanges, or through inheritance, etc.). All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. In the following text, the only collectors whose names are mentioned are those whose writings are quoted. Even if the derogatory connotations of the term "primitive" have prompted the scientific community and art world to look for substitutes such as "exotic," "tribal," or "first," we use here "primitive art" because this category of art history is the one employed by the majority of French collectors.

Distanciation and Integration

The act of incorporating a new item in an art collection amounts to assigning it a place in a pre-existing whole—in other words, "re-territorializing" it by simultaneously removing it from its original or previous context and incorporating it in the world of its new owner. There is nothing natural about this process. Rather, it is the result of a construction process involving both material and psychological resources that reflect conscious or unconscious strategies designed to appropriate and in some sense domesticate the object.

The process of removing an object from its original or previous context begins at the very first encounter with the object. Whether it occurs in a bush village, an art gallery, another collector's gallery, or a salesroom, the initial encounter is often seen as a predestined event. Accounts of "finds" often emphasize the unpredictable nature of such encounters, with some collectors reporting that they were never even supposed to be in that place at that time or that they were fortunate to spot the object among a mass of diverse items in a visually saturated environment. There is also a tendency to emphasize the irresistible attraction exerted by objects imposing themselves upon their future owner. According to some collectors, a work might have "winked at me," "beckoned me," or "called out to me." These accounts suggest that the experience of appropriation is underpinned by a belief that the object is made and designed for me. As Sartre observed, "To own is to have for myself, i.e., to be the end of the existence of the object.... The owner is the raison d'être of the owned object" (1983: 679). For primitive art collectors, positing that the object was destined to be theirs is a way of convincing themselves that the bond between the object and its previous owner was purely contingent and provisional, or even—in the case of objects acquired in situ—a purely utilitarian relationship.

Another strategy commonly employed by collectors to appropriate objects and assert their ownership involves imagining that the object owes its very existence to them—a strategy already identified by Sartre, who argued that "to have is, first and foremost, to create." In other words, appropriation provides the subject engaged in an act of appropriation with a sense that objects only exist through her by virtue of the function or meaning she assigns to them and by virtue of the raison d'être she confers upon them. As Sartre observed:

> By owning them, I elevate them to something approaching a functional existence; my life may thus be said to have a creative power precisely because, by virtue of its continuity, it perpetuates the possessed quality of each and every one of the objects in my possession: through me, I draw the collection of my surroundings into being with myself. If they were taken away from me, they would die, just as my arm would die if it were torn from my body. (1983: 680)

In other words, the assumption is this: it is not simply that an object is designed for me; it is also made by me. In other words, the act of identifying a work of value, of detecting its qualities before others, of exhibiting it and of making it known to a wider audience is seen as an act of creation. As noted by one interviewee: "To find an object is, in some sense, to create it." Another interviewee observed:

> For me, collecting art is a form of creation. It means giving an object a new lease of life and a new identity and allowing it to be seen. I've been able to bring items back from the dead by having them mounted on a plinth, photographing them and getting them published, loaning them [for prestigious exhibitions] and allowing them to circulate around the world, and giving them a new life after they'd fallen into the hands of seedy second-hand dealers. Sure, sooner or later they'd have got out into the world somehow, but what I do is to give them an identity. That's the creative side of the collector's work!

As suggested by the reference to plinths, collectors will often seek to put their mark (or signature) on a newly acquired item. For example, the mere act of revealing the form of a sculpture by removing dead vegetable matter from it amounts to altering the appearance of the object in order to satisfy certain aesthetic preferences. Over time, the artifact may also acquire particular marks or traces left as a result of the collector repeatedly handling the object (sebaceous secretions, sweat, nicotine stains, etc.). After parting company with an artifact, a collector may come across—and instantly recognize—the very same item years

later in another collection simply because of the distinctive marks left upon it when the item was in her possession. Note also that if it fits with the item's pedigree, the name of the artifact will have as much significance as the other traces—in this instance, the immaterial traces—left by it.

The Territories of Domestication

Among primitive art collectors, most of the preferred ways of valuing and exhibiting objects stem from a desire to domesticate them. For example, the act of mounting an object on a plinth may stem from a desire to see and present the object from a new perspective, to ensure that the object works in harmony with other items in the collection or, conversely, to present the object as a singular and unique artifact. The way in which an object is exhibited invariably reflects a perspective that seeks to be unique and singular. Depending on whether the item can be touched or is exhibited in a glass cabinet, is isolated or exhibited among other items, is positioned alongside similar items or exhibited among other art forms, or is left in darkness or lit by spotlights, the artifact may be perceived as a mere trinket, a museum specimen or an art object, valued as an antiquity, or for its modern aesthetics and appearance, or given meaning and significance as one item in a series, or as a standalone item.

The practice of exhibiting artifacts in ways unrelated to their original function and of making playful use of them—which may involve, for example, hanging up a Baoulé stool or using an effigy as a coat-peg or a hanger—also represent forms of domestication. The specific location of the object in an interior space—for instance, in a bedroom rather than the entrance hall, in the parents' bedroom rather than the children's bedroom, or on a desk rather than on the wall—is an individual expression of the close relationship that the collector (or the collector's family) wishes to forge with the object.

Collectors also emphasize the importance of flexibility in the way an item is exhibited. According to one collector with a particular interest in masks, the use of multiple systems "throughout the apartment, designed to ensure that items are constantly in motion," is a way of ensuring that he is constantly developing and improving his knowledge and understanding of items in his possession. In some cases, the itinerary of an item inside its owner's home is a reflection of the degree to which it has been "tamed." For instance, an overmodelled skull or an effigy encrusted with sacrificial materials or patina may initially be put to one side—as if in "purgatory," to quote the term used by one interviewee—before eventually being allowed to join the other items once the collector's partner, who was initially repulsed by the item, had become accustomed to it.

In private spaces, the meaning of an object is determined by the whole formed by the existing collection. Depending on whether it plays on differences or similarities, the physical proximity of an item to other objects often enables collectors to develop a particular view or conception of the world, as one interviewee indicated:

> You have to have owned thirty objects and to have bought the thirty-first in order to understand that it can't be positioned just anywhere in your collection. What happens is that bonds develop between different items. You can't always put an item alongside another. It can happen that two items kill each other off. Sometimes, if you isolate an item and put it on its own, you may get to see something that no one else can see. Then you put a second, third, or fourth item. And by the time you get to the seventh, a common structure will have started to emerge that shows the items in a different light.

> To possess is to understand. It is to understand the object in itself but also to construct series that help to understand objects in relation to one another and to illustrate a particular view or intention. One item added to another may form a sentence, and a sentence may form a chapter and a collection an entire book. Seeing a collection helps to understand the collector and to comprehend their vision of things and their outlook on the world.

In some cases, a particular outlook or vision may come to resemble a personal cosmology. For instance, one collector classified his artifacts using various contrasts and oppositions (such as mineral vs. vegetable, "cold" vs. "hot," or metaphysical vs. expressive), thus organizing his

collection on the basis of a binary representation of the world.

Some accounts suggest that the desire to understand may be seen as a metaphor of the desire to tame and domesticate. As an act of appropriation, the desire to understand is not a desire to understand objects in themselves but rather to understand them for oneself. Collectors tend to interpret objects in the light of their own personal values rather than seeking to understand them from the point of view of the uniqueness and singularity of the artifacts viewed as exotic objects. Hence the metaphor of domestication used by some collectors to describe their desire to understand the items they own:

> The collector's instinct is similar to the hunter's, except that a hunter kills his prey. My goal is to capture the animal so that I may continue to experience the pleasure it gave me when it was free. If I could catch a bird's flight, it is the bird's flight that I would want to collect, because ultimately what interests me is to have something I want to understand for as long as I want it. My collection is nothing but a desire to understand.

In a different vein, the fact of conferring a name or a personality on an object (which often involves some form of humour or literary reference) may be seen as a form of socialization, as can the act of describing the object as if it were a real presence, of speaking to it, or of using love or family metaphors to describe it (Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini 2012). Some collectors also practise daily rituals—for instance, by saying "hello" to the same item every morning or by touching the item before going to bed.

Preserving Wildness

However, the domestication of objects—a tendency observed in the various practices and relationships described above—should not be taken to mean that the primitiveness of the object is altogether erased or forgotten. Crucially, primitiveness is not an intrinsic component of the object but rather an attribution or a fantasy.

The fascination for primitive art is often underpinned and sustained by a myth of origins and by an interest in the sacred, magic, and rituals. This fascination reflects engrained assumptions about the original (and generally religious) function of an object as a mediator enabling access to or contact with an intangible world (of gods, spirits, ancestors, etc.). Some collectors acknowledge their fascination for primitivism by openly admitting their need to believe that objects "carry centuries of history behind them," that such objects are "loaded" with meaning and history, and that their use—related, for example, to the exercise of power or imbued with symbolic meaning—is anything but trivial. As one collector put it: "I know it's ancient, beautiful, mythical, and all that, but if someone told me it was used to go to the market, that would really bother me!" According to another collector, who liked to think that the mask he owned had been worn in "ritual conditions," primitive art owes its uniqueness and specificity to "the kind of purity that is characteristic of the collector's fantasy." It may also be explained by a fascination for "virgin societies"—societies characterized by a "cosmic relationship to things," something in the West is assumed to have lost.

Otherness and alterity—the taste for which is also a matter of aesthetics—can be expressed in the appearance of the object:

> …mythology, the Djenne, snakes, and also mystery, the fascination for a primitive world with its deformed bodies, pustules and pimples, snakes coming out of the eyes and the mouth, snakes coming out of the stomach or the back. There's a fascination [for otherness and alterity]—both a mythological and an aesthetic fascination.

In short, the decision to collect frightening masks, strange sculptures or human skulls often stems from a desire to challenge and reshape one's engrained perceptions and assumptions by rejecting entrenched cultural values, assumptions, and frameworks.

Restoration—which, as noted above, can also be a form of "domestication"—may also be designed to return objects to their original "wildness" by re-establishing (supposedly) primordial components. For example, one collector explained his habit of carving eyes to be placed in the eye sockets of Polynesian statues in order to reflect his conception of their original truth. Speaking of the collector in question, a close relative observed: "If there was a gaze once upon a

time, it was important for it to be restored," while at the same time doubting that the statues ever had such eyes. Another collector explained that he had restored the beautiful shine of an African stool that had been carefully cleaned and polished by a villager before giving it to the collector. He explained: "This one I waxed and polished to death because it was once so beautiful!"

Other practices stem from a desire to promote a form of transcultural continuity in the physical treatment of objects, as shown by the custom of wearing Oceanian body jewelry or of polishing effigies with products identical to those used in indigenous rituals.

However, the desire for continuity is more commonly expressed by focusing on the "contextualization" of objects; that is, their spatial location in a collection. This may involve, for example, reconstructing a small domestic altar in front of a fireplace or an imposing underground Mayan temple, or may take the form of more allusive or transposed forms involving a mass of objects kept in darkness. For instance, one well-known Parisian collector with an abundant collection resembling a "forest of a museum" took "perverse pleasure in getting people to explore it using a torch" (Hourdé 2001: 7).

Among some collectors, the (literal) tendency to entomb objects is coupled with a belief or suspicion that objects preserve their original sacredness and, therefore, their potential dangerousness. One collector confessed:

> I'm scared! Whenever I buy a new item, I always pay close attention to everything that goes on around me for a while. If I were to experience a misfortune ... I'd probably get rid of the object. After all, they come from deeply religious societies. It's not that I'm superstitious, but ... I have a certain respect for that kind of thing, so I try to be careful.

If the fear experienced by the collector is validated by subsequent events, one solution is to part with the item by selling it or giving it away. In such cases, it is as if the power of the collector's belief in a threatening form of primitiveness—a primitiveness serving to preserve the object's "wildness"—had made it impossible to tame the object. To avoid having to part with an object, collectors will often engage in a radical form of "domestication": exorcism. George Ortiz, who developed what he termed a "quasi animistic emotional relationship" with the objects he owned, openly admitted to fearing the ire of an "evil" African mask that he had put up for sale and which he decided to buy back at the last minute in order to have it exorcized (de Roux and Paringaux 1999: 330).

There are cases where the rejection of the object, though dictated by questions of aesthetic incompatibility, is described in terms of the repudiation of an untamed (or untamable) presence. Here is how Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller described his rejection of a stone artifact that was deemed too large to be included in his collection:

> Usually ... what happens is that there's a kind of honeymoon period. Typically, I'll place the item in my bedroom or the adjoining room, and if need be I'll remove whatever else happens to be there. [However, the item in question] just wouldn't fit in with my other sculptures, whether African, Oceanian, or Greco-Roman, or indeed anything else. I grew tired of trying [to make it fit in], and the item itself also grew tired of my ineffectiveness. [It] was sent to a warehouse used to store valuable objects. Whenever I pass nearby, I can hear it screaming with rage and I put my hands over my ears. (1983: 20)

Both Tamed and Wild

In reality, the distinction made between practices aimed at reducing or downplaying the Otherness of art objects and attempts to maintain or even produce Otherness is not clear-cut, with collectors generally reflecting both tendencies simultaneously. In other words, the findings highlight the complexity of the relationship between collectors and primitive art—as shown, for example, by the ambivalent relationship to ethnographic knowledge.

Our research suggests that many collectors aim deliberately to keep ethnographic scholarship at arm's length, focusing instead on whatever happens to suit their fancy. Consider the following account:

> I really like exorcism daggers. I like the idea of a dagger being used in an imaginary battle. I love ideas like that! The metaphysics of Olmec axes! The axe of the world! The stone

> of immortality! It's the transfiguration of a purely utilitarian object. It's the kind of thing that fills me with wonder.

Another interviewee made the following observation:

> I've never gone out of my way to read loads of books about what artifacts were originally designed to be used for. That's why the process of being transported into a new world is so automatic, so violent and so deep. It's very strange; ultimately, the less I know about an object the more likely I am to feel transported by it!

Jean-Paul Chazal gave the following account of his reluctance to find out more about the original function of items in his collection: "Any knowledge of the utility of the work and of the original society in which it was created serves to objectify the sculpture and to de-poetize it, thus weakening our magical bond with it!" (2000). In other words, knowledge of the original context may represent an obstacle to the psychological investment of the collector in the object, which only has value as an item in a collection if the collector is willing to invest herself in it. The desire for knowledge thus represents a reductive, reifying process which, by binding the object to its society of origin, inevitably threatens the mystical ("magical," "poetic") bond that its owner wants to forge with it. A complete re-appropriation of the object would imply a deliberate attempt to put aside or at least partially ignore what the object meant or represented for its creators. The collector and psychoanalyst Werner Muensterberger argued a similar point. In his view, ethnographic knowledge serves to enclose and confine objects in a rigid definition of their society of origin and is therefore in contradiction with aesthetic emotion, an experience that remains heavily dependent on what the imagination and the unconscious project onto the object (Muensterberger 1979: 9-10). Yet the practice of attempting to "tame" objects by isolating them from their origins in order that they may feed fantasized projections may also be seen as a way of preserving their otherness—the otherness that underpins and explains their power of fascination.

For collectors, the power of a primitive artifact lies in its irreducibility and, in particular, in all that we are unlikely to know about it: its age, its provenance, its local meanings, the identity and intentions of its creator, the conditions of its discovery, its history, etc. However, the most intriguing mystery remains the very existence of the object—that is, the mystery of the extraordinary human (or superhuman) genius at its origin. A common question is, "How is this object even possible?"

> What we have here is something that simply cannot be explained!
>
> A Kota—where does something like that come from? How does it arise out of a thought?
>
> [Some] objects resist me. For example, *korwar* artifacts put up resistance. What is this? How should we interpret it?
>
> [The object] resists me because I am unable to possess it completely, to understand it. It is inexhaustible.
>
> I am utterly astounded and in complete admiration! I ask myself, who are these men that the racist mindset holds to be less advanced than us and yet who are capable of going so much further than us[?]
>
> I feel completely exhilarated. What does it mean? Why?

The surrealist poet and art collector André Breton conceived the position and layout of heterogeneous items in his collection as "a genuine work of poetic creation.... [In his workshop he forged] close bonds that he would allow to proliferate and create meaning—albeit an absolutely mysterious and impossible meaning [which he] described as 'the unbreakable core of the night'" (Dufour 1994: 23-24).

The emotional impact of an object also has to do with the sense of being in the presence of something that ultimately escapes us. In other words, there is an assumption that the object connects us with an indefinable universe, an "invisible" world (Pomian 1978) or, at any rate, a world other than the world of common reality. This world is a foreign geographical, temporal, and mental land, a land through which the mind escapes, but also, inseparably, that which escapes it.

"There is always a corner of the veil that asks not be to be lifted; ... such is the condition of enchantment" (Breton 1979: 168). In short,

to cultivate a certain mystery around primitive art works is to preserve the "wildness" that gives them their charm.

The Art of the Self, the Art of Others

The practices and processes that reduce or exacerbate the otherness of an object may at times appear to be inseparable. However, as shown by the complex perception of ethnographic knowledge among art collectors, these practices may also operate in isolation. Consider, for example, the links between primitive art and modern or contemporary art.

There is a belief among some collectors that works of primitive art have a far greater material, aesthetic, and expressive power and are far more original than modern Western works of art. A lover of African art who had loaned an Osyeba statue for the 1984 *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art—an exhibition devoted to the "affinities of tribal and modern art"—expressed his delight at the public's preferences in the following terms:

> The primitive art works destroyed the [modern] paintings and sculptures. My Osyeba was put next to a Brancusi—a magnificent Brancusi. My favorite pastime at the opening was to stand next to the cage and listen to people's reactions. What I found was that people were on the whole far more interested in my Osyeba than they were in the Brancusi. The Osyeba killed the Brancusi.

The supposed superiority of primitive art—described in terms suggestive of violence and savagery ("destroyed," "cage," "killed")—is a common assumption among those involved in collecting both forms of art. The emphasis tends to be on "the total dimension of tribal works," the aesthetic power of which goes hand in hand with the expression of a form of "authenticity" related to their indigenous use. The notion of art for art's sake hardly applies in the case of a Fang or Bakota artifact. The assumption is that the object is a creation designed to fulfill a functional purpose that is internal to the community in which it was created—a purpose evidenced by the traces of its original use. These traces may sometimes be valued and examined as evidence or material for understanding the men that left them there in the first place—a trace of their corporeality, an almost intangible bond serving as a "bridge" between their former and new owners, the vehicle of a simultaneously tactile and mystical communication with strangers remote in time and space.

Despite being loved for its singularity, primitive art is also valued for what it shares with other art forms. Among other things, collectors often emphasize both the differences and the similarities between primitive art and European art. Seemingly unfazed by potential accusations of ethnocentrism or anachronism, collectors often draw analogies that reduce the formal or conceptual gap between arts from different times and places:

> For me, this mask is a Brancusi! It's the *Endless Column*. It's the sky and the falling rain: you climb a ladder, you enter through the eyes and you get to the granary. That is, in a nutshell, the life of the African peasant and his concern to avoid drought in order to feed himself. It's no different from what happens in our culture—in fact, it's the same thing. Once you're familiar with them, signs and symbols like these no longer seem exotic since we have similar symbols of our own: the ladder is a sign of reaching up into the sky. For instance, in religion, you have Jacob's ladder—a very important symbol in our iconography. Provided you know where to look, there are many ways of drawing connections. Personally, I can't see any difference between the primitive arts and modern art. I feel a sense of brotherhood with all the peoples of the planet. We are all governed by the same laws of gravity, heat, cold, sex, death. A somewhat comforting thought.

Primitive art is thus seen as reflecting transcultural realities and as expressing human universals: the fear of inadequacy, the desire for fertility, the fear of death, the desire to transmit, etc. While exotic indigenousness may be a key criterion for collectors, what also fascinates them is that "which exceeds indigenousness" (Ciarcia 2001: 344) and that points to a common humanity—specifically, the universality of art. The admiration for the inventiveness of indigenous artists—as singular and often anonymous individuals—tends to be superseded by the celebration of human genius. In other words, and to reiterate, the fascination

for primitive art is underpinned by an ambivalent search for both Otherness and familiarity.

While it may be true that any art collection is a construction of the self (Simmel 1964; Baudrillard 1968; Belk 1988; Elsner and Cardinal 1994; Pearce 1995; Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini 2012), the findings of this study suggest that primitive art collections tend to be characterized by the central role of Otherness in the process of constructing collections. Typically operating off the beaten track, the aim for primitive art collectors is often to discover unknown territories—territories imagined as being most remote in time and space from the collector's familiar world. However, the choice of an object also tends to be informed by a perceived closeness to it. The preference for items rarely sought after by other collectors is often explained by the sense of being an outsider oneself, of being somewhat at odds with one's environment. The lack of interest in objects that symbolized opulence in their society of origin is commonly explained by a personal distaste for ostentatious wealth. The quest for authenticity is explained by the desire to break away from the complexities of the Western world. The value and quality of an object are thus assumed to reflect the quality of the individual. As noted by one of the interviewees: "We only buy what resembles us." However, the same interviewee was also at pains to emphasize that resemblance was not enough to erase or override a sense of otherness, with the collector marvelling at the dual mimetism of certain primitive art works that evoke both the face of their Western owner and the original landscape in which they were made—such as Dogon artworks reminiscent, in his view, of the Bandiagara cliffs.

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