



Patric Didier Claes

When did you open your first gallery, and what did you know about art dealing at the time?

I've been a dealer for almost 20 years. I came to Belgium from Congo as a teenager, and at 19 I began traveling back to Africa to find works to resell to gallerists here in Brussels and in Paris. I moved to my current space two years ago, after running a smaller gallery for eight years closer to the antiquarians' district around the Place du Grand Sablon. I went from 40 square meters to 350, and I now have the entire house.

Was art part of your life growing up? What drew you to the business?

My father was a curator at the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaïre, in Kinshasa, so growing up I saw nothing but African art. But to be honest, I only started in the business to make ends meet. It was a trade before it revealed itself to be a passion—whereas for most dealers, it's the other way around.

Is there somebody who early on gave you good advice?

I schooled myself but learned a lot from selling to old-time dealers, such as

Marc Felix and Pierre Dartevelle. I'm among the young dealers, but my journey has been more comparable to theirs. I started with the basics by going to Africa, seeing the fakes, the forgers at work, and some of the last genuine pieces to come out of the continent. Unfortunately, many dealers today have never set foot in Africa. Some still know their trade perfectly, but others have terrible gaps.

How did you choose your specialty? I specialize in objects from Congo, in Central Africa, because it's where I come from. About 12 years ago, I began looking at West Africa, at countries like the Ivory Coast and Gabon. Still, Congo is what I know best, and it is difficult for anyone to leave me stumped. In this field I can identify something from a distance of 50 meters. I can sometimes even recognize an object that is still wrapped just by touching it. In other areas, I can spot genuine objects but I'm less self-assured.

What is your personal taste in art, and how does it influence the type of art you show?

Congolese objects are the most elaborate African artworks, with an incredible diversity across 400 different ethnic groups. I call it the "art of the forest," since it comes from distant tribes without any social status. I particularly like objects that relate to Surrealism—these artifacts that have become incredible sculptures. African art, at its core, was not made as art, except perhaps for royal statues. Instead, everyday objects became extraordinary works. There is an incredible level of artistic creation in a world where formal art movements were absent.

What is the most challenging part about running a major gallery today, and how do you deal with it?

Finding works and treasures of great quality. Good pieces are extremely rare, and Africa has been emptied. It has been a dozen years since I brought a piece out, so I mostly work with older collectors, people who bought in the 1970s and 1980s or inherited from

AGE: 38

HAILS FROM: Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo

PRESIDES OVER: Galerie Claes, Rue Van Moer 7, Brussels 1000

SPECIALTY: African art and antiques

FIRST GALLERY SHOW: An exhibition of more than 100 African ethnographic objects, 1998

VITAL STATS

grandparents who bought in the 1920s to 1940s. To be honest, I think that if most of these objects hadn't been collected by colonials and researchers, they would no longer exist. It can be hard to accept, but even as African heritage has been pillaged, it has also been protected.

In which art fair do you most enjoy participating?

The Biennale des Antiquaires in Paris: You're in the Grand Palais, with 100 of the greatest dealers, including the three best in my field. They all make an incredible effort and you see absolute masterpieces. TEFAF Maastricht is much more business-oriented. I've been doing the Brussels Antique and Fine Art Fair for eight years, and it is the most beautiful Belgian fair. Unfortunately, there aren't enough good dealers to create a fair for only African art.

What has been one of the most memorable experiences of your career so far?

Last year at BRAFA, I presented just one piece: a Nkonde nail fetish from Zaïre, a true unseen gem that I'd never imagined I could find. It came from an old colonial family with whom I negotiated for more than eight months, beating out Christie's in the process. I had always fantasized about presenting a single knockout work at a fair, so I took out a large booth to showcase it. It caused quite a stir. I sold it to a Belgian collector, one of my best clients, for over €1 million.

Beyond the art world, what are you passionate about?

I'm impassioned by all human creations. I particularly enjoy modern architecture and 1970s Scandinavian design. ▣