

AFRICAN GENIUS

DOES IT MAKE SENSE TO TALK ABOUT ETHNIC ART? CAN'T WE JUST TALK ABOUT ART, IN GENERAL? "INDEED, THE TERM "ETHNIC" CARRIES A RHETORICAL ACCENT, BUT IT IS GENUINELY CHALLENGING TO CATEGORIZE NON-WESTERN ART USING OUR JUDGMENT PARAMETERS. PERHAPS THE ACCENT IS DEROGATORY, BUT IT IS ALSO TRUE THAT SINCE THE LAST CENTURY, WHEN WE STARTED EXAMINING THIS TYPE OF ART, WE ASSOCIATED IT WITH ADJECTIVES LIKE ETHNOGRAPHIC, ECOLOGICAL, TRIBAL..."

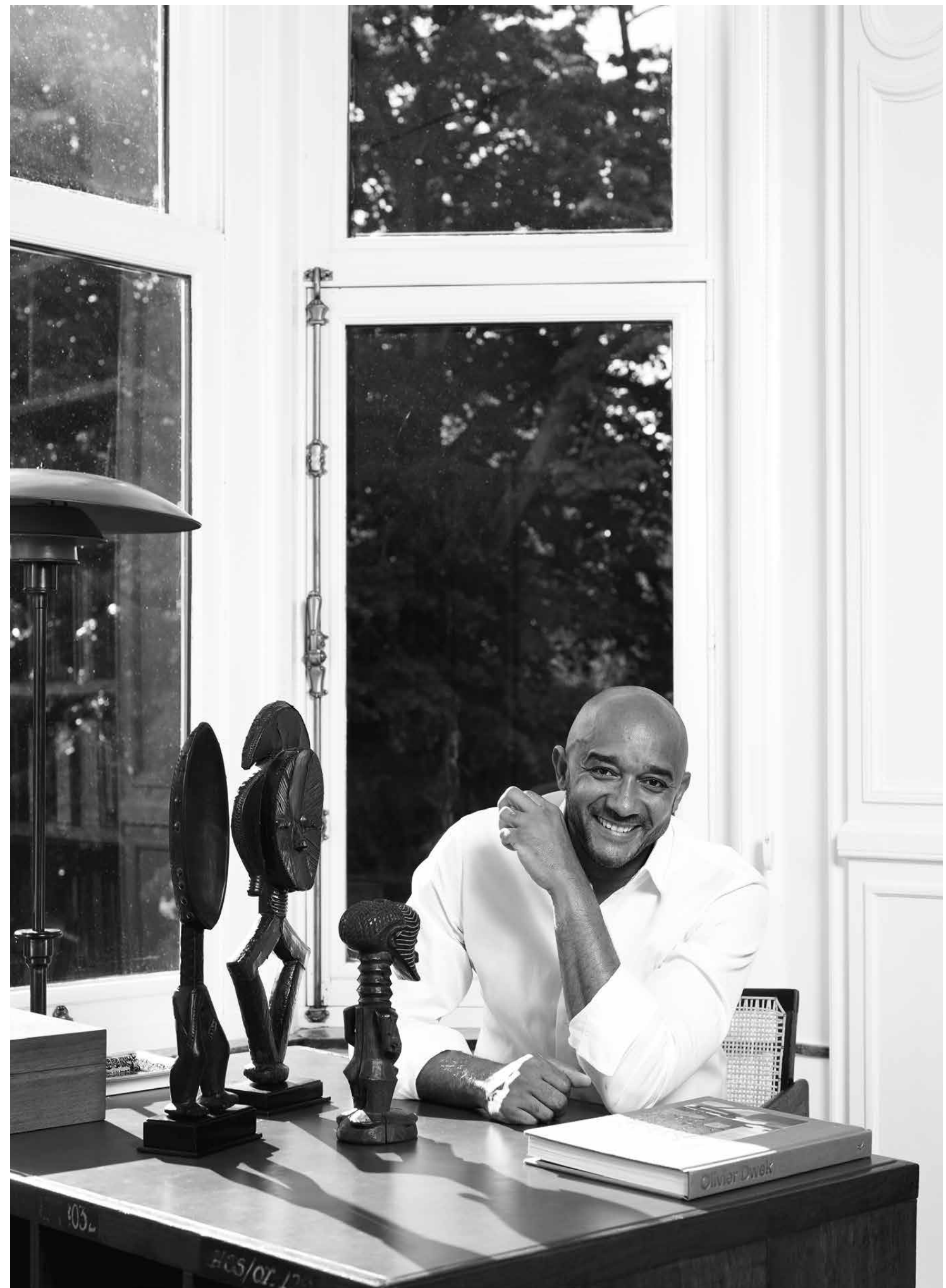
An encounter with DIDIER CLAES
Words SILVIA MOTTA

Thus begins our conversation with Didier Claes, one of the world's leading experts in antique art, and since 2012, the vice president of BRAFA, the event that attracts a large audience of discerning and passionate collectors to Brussels every January. With his atypical career and early discoveries of exceptional pieces, Didier is now one of the most renowned specialists in the field of ancient African art. In 2002, Didier Claes opened his first gallery in the famous Sablon district of the Belgian capital. Since then, he has dedicated himself to presenting high-quality artworks from significant Western collections and contributing to major Belgian and international events. Among the clients of his gallery, currently located in a prestigious space on Avenue Louise, are numerous American and European collectors, as well as museums and international institutions. Who better than him can tell the story of discovering and enhancing a cultural heritage, not only artistic but deeply rooted in the history of all humanity? "For a long time, at least three-quarters of the last century, ethnic art was considered ethnographic-technological art, and indeed, it was because it was a research art," continues Didier Claes. "The first objects brought by Westerners to Europe were for study, and there was a different perspective from today. I believe that the influence it had in the '20s and '30s on the great modern artists

changed the way we confront this certainty, and the attention of the great contemporary artists was the first trigger to stimulate interest from institutions and collectors. Consequently, the second triggering factor was, of course, the valorization given by collectors, especially from the '70s, and even later in Europe, with the spotlight on African art in major museums. In Belgium, this art did not leave the natural science museums, while in Paris, museums were born like the Musée de L'Homme, created by Paul Rivet on the occasion of the 1937 international exhibition, the heir to the ethnographic museum of Trocadéro (Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro), which had been founded in 1878. In 1995, the Pavillon des sessions du Louvre was born, at the behest of then-President Jacques Chirac, and it is the eighth section of the Louvre Museum. Masterpieces of "other art," chosen by the scholar Kerchache, are exhibited there, and he personally fought for the opening of this section. Many consider the Pavillon des sessions as the "antenna" of the large Musée du quai Branly, entirely dedicated to extra-European art, which emerged a few years later. In these places, all objects are truly displayed outside their ritual context, genuinely shown for what they are, the masterpieces we are talking about. I believe that contemporary art has a lot to recognize, as inspiration, as a search for origins, in African art."

So, did the interest of artists and collectors, exploding in the 20th century, come from this? Can it be related to the gigantic and historical World Exhibitions held in Paris from the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th? They were a blend of didactic, spectacular, and exotic elements... In both the Exhibitions of 1878 and 1889, an African village (village nègre) was displayed. In the latter, visited by 28 million people, 400 "natives" represented the main attraction. While the 1900 Exhibition featured a fantastic living Malagasy "Panorama-Diorama," soon to become famous, the reconstruction of Khmer temples, Javanese cafes... Simultaneously with the promotion of elite tourism in overseas colonies, a powerful vector for the circulation of thought structures, as a hope for repair, reciprocity, and sharing?

The French Expositions universelles of the early last century were a showcase of "colonial" art offered to the general public, which was, I believe, mainly a scam. A bit like Egyptian art, which exploded in the 18th century; there was Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, and for the general public, that was indeed a glorious era. "True" art was instead in the Wunderkammer



DIDIER CLAES. Photo, Gilles Geekk



VITSHOIS MWILAMBWE BONDO, *Untitled II*, 2022.
Collage and acrylic on canvas - Ebony black wooden frame - 180 x 145 cm

of very, very rich people who had extraordinary objects in their homes. Contextualization is important, and if today I speak of African history with a critical eye, but also with a current perspective, it's because we cannot do without it. If we talk about "African art" today, it's because the valorization of African art has already happened, giving it priority in exhibitions, without any preconceived judgment. Back then, we didn't have the same vision we have today, so we showed African art as an example of what was created by distant peoples but without placing these classical objects on the same level as great Western artists. African objects can be seen in different ways: very often, they were considered ritual objects, and for this reason, many people look at them as the ancients did, as personal items, sacred objects. There are people like me, art dealers, collectors, who consider them as works of great artists. So, everyone can find a bit of themselves in each of these objects... I lived in Africa; Africans value very few objects, and only as sacred objects because not everyone is interested in their intrinsic value. And what makes me reflect today is that, as I said, there has been a lot of work over a century to get these objects accepted as artworks because they are works of ingenious artists who deserve to have their place in the art world and in the greatest collections: if these artists, who are no longer with us, could speak their minds, I would like to know what they think.

All well and good, but how do you recognize a masterpiece? How do you assign value to an African artwork? What do you use as a parameter to define that it is?

The criteria are very simple. An object must first be authentic, but what does authentic mean? Authenticity is, of course, a very complex term, but a work can be considered authentic if it is carved by a traditional artist to create a traditional harmony with a Western influence... which is a bit complex because you can see that over the centuries, the encounter with Westerners has influenced tribal art, but the objects have remained sacred. In any case, an object carved by a traditional sculptor for the ritual use of his tribe, not for sale, is considered authentic. It must be known that since the 16th century, there have been intense exchanges between Europe and non-European countries, and thus, art objects were already being commer-

cialized 500 years ago. These sculptures are not rare in themselves but they are for their quality. There is no need to search for the exceptional. Here, we find everything: magic, tenderness, emotion. Most African objects are means of communication, intermediaries between the world of the living and that of the dead. It was the Westerners who transformed them into works of art. Now, as beliefs no longer exist in the vast majority of continents, those that have reached us are works and objects spared from the plunder of anti-belief, because, it is often forgotten to mention, many works have been destroyed or burned due to religious fanaticism. For those that remain, we now have the opportunity to see all the assembled objects, whether in museums or collections, published in books and magazines: it is a job that has been ongoing for more than a century, and now we have it at our fingertips, fairly accessible.

Even though artists are anonymous because they do not sign their works, we have managed to establish the "hand" of the master for some pieces, especially if they are very important, and this was thanks to the mass of artifacts. It's somewhat akin to Hellenistic artworks, which we attribute to Phidias rather than other sculptors.

Did you immediately develop a passion for tribal and African art, or did you start from "normal" Western art?

I was born into this world and was truly immersed in it because my family worked in historical-artistic institutions (my father was employed by the Kinshasa museum), and my childhood in Congo sparked my passion for African art objects, which I used to hunt with my father in the savannah. Very young, I had already sold my first objects. Being a dealer of African artifacts, or "bikeko" as they say in those parts, is not prestigious at all. However, the fierce determination to prove the naysayers wrong led me to become a recognized gallerist, an expert on numerous commissions, and the vice president of BRAFA since 2012. With a lot of passion, hard work, and a bit of luck, I was able to turn these disadvantages - my origins and young age - into advantages.

I immediately dreamed of specializing in Congolese art; it was truly the thing I was most interested in and had the most knowledge about. Initially, I approached it with the old logic

of a colonialist country like Belgium, which dominated it for 80 years. But not only that, it was also with the entourage, the people, the friends, the history, such privileged access that I started my business in wholesale trade, later expanding to the rest of Africa.

Are there connections between African tribal art and tribal arts from Oceania or South America?

There are indeed common features in ethnic and ancient art, partly because certain regions lacked the development of art in the modern era, as seen in Europe from the Renaissance to the Baroque to the Neoclassical periods. Art with a continuous tradition can be observed in Chinese or Japanese art, where masters replicated similar styles and manners. In the mystical regions of Mali and Niger, significant civilizations existed well before Jesus Christ, with archaeological finds, including wooden pieces coming from ancient times. This despite the challenges of wood preservation over time, and the absence of extensive written records, sculptures have been discovered dating as far back as the 12th, 11th, or even 6th century AD. These artifacts are found throughout in the rocky areas of Mali, and mark the presence of a great realm extending to the kingdom of Congo. Archaeology allows us to delve much further into the past, than with historical records. The enduring testimony of these early civilizations lies in the gaze of sculptures, providing a vivid account of a significant people from a distant era and leaving traces of majestic empires that flourished as the West entered the Middle Ages.

From the Far East and Central Asia, indeed, we have received magnificent works of art in stone and marble that have managed to survive thefts and vandalism...

It's true, and it's very interesting. Perhaps there were connections with classical Greece; perhaps they had abundant materials. But I also think that the use of art in Africa was ritualistic. If sculptures were meant to be worn as masks on the faces and bodies of people who played a certain role in the village, they couldn't be made of stone. They were used to temporarily abandon one's identity and transform into someone else so that people could experience the part they were in. A spirit ◀

or ancestor, for example, or an animal with a particular symbolic meaning. They were themselves, but with signs, tattoos, writings; the body itself could become a work of art. Different cultures associate different specific meanings to these objects, but constant elements include attributing spiritual meanings to masks, their use in dances and other religious rituals, and recognizing a special social status for the artists who create them and for those who wear them during ceremonies.

Certainly, today, there is a lot of interest from collectors in young African artists. What is the classical art they refer to, beyond their ancestors? What is the transition between tribal or ritual art and contemporary African art now?

There are African artists who are highly valued in terms of contemporary values, but what is it about? If it's the connection that binds young contemporary African artists to their past, their cultural heritage, then it's an excellent question because, naturally, I have also been interested in contemporary art since I started dealing with classical art twenty years ago. The fact is that in the last 10 years we have heard much more about the contemporary African art scene because new movements have given us a way of looking at Africa that is much more in line with the present. I would say there is indeed a continuity of African genius. This is what I try to showcase in the gallery – that I've been selling African art from yesterday to today, emphasizing a certain continuity. However, I must admit that when I started, I followed artists like Modigliani who draw inspiration from ancient African classics, but there is, perhaps even more so, a significant group of artists who do not want to be part of this continuity and, instead, seek a sort of rupture.

Many artists today do not allow themselves to be compared to old traditions. Firstly, these traditions are generally passed down within villages, and contemporary artists today live in large cities where they were born and have never confronted the old scene. In fact, it's

often when they reach maturity in their art that they begin to show interest in it.

This year, which contemporary artist will you bring to BRAFA?

Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo is an artist who brings a certain heritage into his style and way of working. He is around 50 years old, and the heritage is evident in his creativity and inspiration, drawn from the use of small pieces of paper that echo traditional fabrics in color. I, too, grew up in the city of Kinshasa, in Congo, not in the bush, but I have a heritage from there. It's more a matter of legacy, I would say, rather than real influence. However, when I was appointed as the vice president of BRAFA, it was to give strong emphasis not only to Western art but to world art as a whole. BRAFA was already open to proposals beyond classical Western art, but when we truly started considering African art as a major art form, collector interest was definitively sparked. It's a paradox, but in fairs like this, we can place African objects next to antique paintings, alongside modern art, beside archaeology – it's like a journey we enjoy witnessing, being able to showcase works for what they are: the creations of great artists. Of course, it's a dream place because art lovers come without critically examining what they see.

Let's talk about current events linked to artistic production...

Even though the collector is not deaf to current events, he will still be aware that the works they acquire are not intended to be hostages of the present. However, that's exactly what I defend and what we defend when organizing fairs like this, because the present, as we know, has been known for inspiring many creations. What are the historical characteristics? We need to be objective and admit that the objects are displayed for what they are – works of art by great artists – and that these objects bear witness to a social moment. We also have the right to their history.

Are there academies in Africa for art and photography? The world of fashion

has recently given a lot of attention and space to African photographers and artistic directors of glossy magazines.

Yes, like the Academy of Fine Arts in Kinshasa, a beautiful campus where artists have been trained for over 50 years. The renewed momentum of contemporary African art doesn't only concern artists. Nigerian Okwui Enwezo was the director of the 2015 edition of the Venice Biennale. Azu Nwagbogu is the founder and director of the Africa Artists' Foundation (AAF), a non-profit organization based in Lagos, Nigeria. The Biennales of Dakar and Marrakech are meeting places for African artists and collectors, while numerous galleries from Johannesburg to Nairobi allow art enthusiasts to access works by artists from the continent. This way, art is becoming more and more a driving force for economic, social, and cultural development.

Great African photography is already in important collections. Then there's the whole series of what I call not-yet-glorified popular artists who, becoming reporters, have risen to prominence. The most frightening period right after independence was a time of great freedom, documented by photographers who reported from the streets. It's a great testimony to that period, and these photos are incredibly intense. I have several, and I know what they mean.

One last question. What would you advise a young amateur collector on how to start an African art collection from scratch?

First and foremost, you need to educate yourself because accessing this art is not easy for various reasons. You must know what you are looking for, what you want, and what appeals to you. I think books are really a good reference. See the works, broaden your perspective in museums, at exhibitions, and on the streets. In these phases, you can take all the time you need to familiarize yourself with the market. With this foundational work, the last thing is to trust the gallery owner or dealer, as they will be the people to rely on for this journey. ♦



KOTA RELIQUARY, Gabon end XIXth Century - Courtesy Claes Gallery