

# SHARED PASSION

**ANNE AND MICHEL VANDENKERCKHOVE,  
A COLLECTION OF THE 21ST CENTURY**

Edited by  
Didier Claes

**MERCATORFONDS**

# A PASSION TO SHARE...

**Anne-Marie Bouttiaux (A.-M. B.)** You chose a special title for your book, one that guides us to the very heart of its theme. Could you tell us what inspired this title?

**Michel Vandekerckhove (M. V.)** This book seeks to illustrate a collection of African art that first took form around 20 years ago and is still being created today. It began in 2001 and really gained momentum after my meeting with Didier Claes, in November 2005. Our artistic relationship has been exciting and passionate, marked by incredible discoveries, magical moments and a never-ending search for rare items. Our relationship has evolved from one of art dealer to mentor, then from mentor to business partner and finally from business partner to friend. This collection has been built up by two people, piece by piece and year after year. It's based on sharing, friendship and passions, as referred to in the title. This collection is also Didier's collection.

**Didier Claes (D. C.)** Professionally speaking, a dealer is above all someone with a passion. If there's no passion, you can't ply this trade properly. It's a passion that was born in my childhood, and I've also passed it on to Michel. Our initial meeting, with Anne and Michel, took place during the Grands Antiquaires artfair on the Grand Sablon square in Brussels. Before long, we found ourselves getting to know each other around a table. I had been an art dealer for around a decade and I was starting to make a name for

myself in the trade. Every good gallery owner needs to link up with a major collector, someone who will follow and encourage them in their career. It was a meeting that kicked off our adventure together. Michel, who had just commenced his African art collection, was enthusiastically embraced by the greatest collectors, while I was keen to support him on this journey.

**A.-M. B.** You opted for black and white photos. Why did you make that decision? Can you tell us more about the scenography in terms of the images?

**M. V.** The choice of black and white is easy on the eye, ensuring uniformity and consistency throughout the book. Simpler yet more refined, it is better at conveying emotions. A subtle play of light and shade, brilliantly orchestrated by Hughes Dubois, leaves room for the imagination and dreaming, as the partially revealed works retain their mystique. Throughout the book, the images are arranged in such a way as to establish a dialogue between them, although the order in which they appear may differ slightly from their sequencing in the text.

**A.-M. B.** Didier, when did that passion become your profession? Do you think a passion and profession are actually two distinct things? When working as a dealer, does the passion remain as strong?

- D. C. I grew up in this world. So it made perfect sense that I would become a collector. Because my collection included all these pieces that had passed through my hands, been cherished for a few weeks and then handed over to enthusiasts. To some extent, I consider myself a go-between: someone who transfers objects, who is a dream-maker. My collection is constantly in flux, it doesn't belong to me, and these objects are merely in transit before embarking on a new stage of their journey. A collector is the guardian of works, and their dealer is the go-between, the discoverer. What really thrills me is unearthing works that will be discovered for the first time by the general public, as happens with certain items in this collection.
- A.-M. B. Why publish a book on the collection? What do you hope to convey to readers?
- M. V. I see this book as an invitation to travel. Apart from the aesthetic side and the form of the pieces, I also want people to grasp their presence, their power, and their history. I would like to get readers to look at and appreciate certain details, like the cutting edge of an adze, a patina's polish, the line of a curve or the depth of a face. I obviously want to pay homage to the artistic and creative genius of African artists. Moreover, and quite logically, I would like perhaps to encourage some readers to become professional collectors. To share my emotions... and share the magic of this art. That's how I envisage the goal of this book.
- D. C. Just a short time ago, I would never have imagined that Michel would agree to unveil his collection. He typically prefers to stay discreet and only shows his objects on rare occasions when I manage to persuade him with the right words. In my opinion, he sees this book as a way to celebrate our friendship and ultimately to present his collection to connoisseurs. It's a wonderful sign of confidence, a way to give me priority over others. Michel knows my business and knows that an art dealer chooses their collectors. I consider this book as the culmination of our association—a relationship that has taken up three-quarters of my life as an art dealer, and one that rewards the energy I invested in finding pieces and my efforts to acquire them. For me, it's also a way to show potential art-lovers that it's possible today, in the 21st century, to assemble their own very important and magnificent collection if they devote the time and energy, as well as the friendship and sincerity.
- A.-M. B. Do you remember your first transaction?
- D. C. I recall the object perfectly, even though I wasn't happy with the price paid! (*laughs*) It was a Yauré mask from Côte d'Ivoire (fig. 122) and it is still part of the existing collection. I should add that I'm especially delighted that it has been kept. It's a very traditional mask, purchased in London as part of an inheritance. In November 2005, Michel and Anne had come to visit me on my stand, intrigued by a publication about a Songye statue, which had already been sold. Since they showed a great deal of interest in old African art and they were eager to talk about it, we lunched next door, at Lola's, to continue our conversation. As it turned out, we spent the whole afternoon together. By the end of the day, they had decided to buy this mask to launch our relationship.
- M. V. What's amusing about this story is that we were interested in a Songye statue that was extremely powerful and full of blades and nails. Yet we left with a Yauré mask from Côte d'Ivoire, the complete opposite of Songye aesthetics. Whereas the Songye pièce is violent and somewhat aggressive, the Côte d'Ivoire mask is beautiful, refined and relaxing.
- A.-M. B. Let's focus on what you have described as a key moment for you and your relationship: the purchase of this nkisi nkondi, this large nail-studded "statue-force" from the Kongo cultural area (fig. 68), during the BRAFA (*Brussels Art Fair*) en 2011.
- D. C. Yes, it was certainly an important moment in my career as an art dealer. It's worth noting that the tribal nail fetish, which is very large (fig. 68), is an object that all collectors or all public institutions dream of acquiring. Any major art dealer should have acquired a nail fetish of their own. That was also my dream. One day, I received an envelope with a business card and the note: "I have an object for valuation. Could you please contact me?" I immediately had the feeling that this was an important object. This intuition gave me several sleepless nights. On my arrival, the object which had never had a plinth, was standing next to the wall in the main room. It looked powerful and magnificent. When I got home, I contacted Michel and told him about my incredible discovery. We talked and came to an agreement: whatever happened, we would acquire this object and we would do that jointly. After this decision was made, I returned to see the family, and I told them: "I have some good news and bad news. The good news is that you have an extraordinary piece. The bad news is that you will have to sell it to me!" Ultimately, everything went as we had hoped. The negotiations took a whole year. After acquiring the piece, I exhibited it at the BRAFA, alone on my stand. That was an amazing event, which resulted in around 50 articles in the press. It was a moment that was very important for me, among the best examples of recognition from people operating in this marketplace. Today I view this nail fetish as the object that best symbolises our relationship.
- M. V. It's true that this object is symbolic. That day, at the antique dealers fair, I felt great pride in being the owner of this work, which was the centre of attention for the artistic community. This key moment certainly helped to reassure me about the pertinence of my choices. It also contributed to my desire to assemble a genuine collection and to expand it.

- D.C. I remember this phrase by Anne and René Vanderstraete, who told me one day: "Putting together a collection is like erecting a cathedral. You first have to lay the foundations and then build on top." The purchase of this nail fetish in 2011 was one of these pillars that enabled the rest of the collection to be built up.
- A.-M. B. Michel, your collection, built up with Anne, now includes several hundred objects gathered over 22 years. Where did your motivation come from? What was it that led to you following this path... and continuing down it today?
- M. V. My parents were collectors, so I was immersed in a world of art enthusiasts. I grew up around modern architecture, surrounded by contemporary furniture, Tibetan bronzes, precious stones, agates, modern paintings, porcelain and even several Oceanian pieces of art. Quite naturally then, I have recreated this type of eclectic environment for us, by collecting Murano glass, tin-plate robots (a crazy idea, I know!), modern and contemporary paintings and sculptures and, now, tribal art. If I look back at my career as a collector of tribal art, I can distinguish three periods. The first one, the early days, was marked by my acquisition of two objects: 28 years ago, a Sakalava statue, followed five years later by an Ogoni mask on sale at Christie's, from Josef Herman in Amsterdam. So not much happened over the next six years. Then there was a key driver: my friendship with Xavier Hufkens, a leading contemporary art dealer in Brussels, who was a collector and connoisseur of African art. From Xavier, I got my passion and the bug for this art. In 2001, he took me to see the exhibition *Mains de maîtres*, in the Espace BBL in Brussels, where African art came to me as an artistic revelation. I immediately fell in love with this art's diversity, force, refinement and beauty. At that point, I still hadn't come up with the idea of launching a new collection. But I had already begun to buy a few pieces and to create a small library, and to visit museums, galleries and exhibitions in Belgium and abroad. I was impulsive, feverishly checking out galleries with Anne, my wife, without really seeking advice and most likely having no knowledge of the prices or the expertise required to gauge the authenticity of the pieces. This unfortunately led to me making mistakes. Sometimes I acquired rather mediocre pieces, and they were purchased too late, or were too expensive or simply dubious. This second period lasted for two or three years, until my decisive encounter with Didier in 2005. That was when my collection really got underway. I started to buy more carefully, after more analysis and with more focus on quality, at a fairly high rate—around 15 objects a year, including one or two large pieces. We also made up for our past mistakes. This was the start of a period of gaining in maturity. Didier helped me to improve my taste and knowledge, led me to discover new horizons and above all gave me the opportunity to acquire many important pieces, and a few less important ones, from which I still benefit today. I think that, from an artistic viewpoint, I have always been looking for a mentor. It was Xavier Hufkens for modern and contemporary art, and Didier for African art. I need people's encouragement, to spend whole evenings discussing the notion of 'Beautiful', to compare the respective merits of pieces within a corpus, and to share my emotions, in accord with an *alter ego*.
- A.-M. B. What's your wife's role in this passion, in this collection?
- M. V. Anne has always been a great support. She is very involved in the collection and genuinely admires African art. Her views on the pieces are thoughtful and pertinent, and her opinion is very important to me. In general, we are on the same wavelength and, after visiting an exhibition or collection, we agree on which pieces were best—without even conferring. She urges me to buy the pieces that she likes or she talks me out of doing that when they are not to her taste, though that doesn't often happen...
- D.C. Let's just say that if Anne also likes the work on offer, that's always better for the art dealer... (*laughs*). Her advice is very valuable and she has a good eye.
- A.-M. B. In the interior views at the end of the book, we also see modern and contemporary art from multiple perspectives. Can you make a link with these African arts? I'm thinking here of the major exhibition *Le primitivisme dans l'art du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle* at the MoMA in 1984, where these links between the West's discovery of the African (and Oceanian) arts and the key moments of modern art were revealed
- M. V. I really like arranging works so they relate to each other, and blending different types of art and design. At home, the pieces are in a dialogue. So I make connections between a sculpture by Donald Judd and a mask from the Torres Strait, or I arrange a group of ivory figurines on furniture by Charlotte Perriand. I've also placed a small sculpture by Thomas Houseago among a group of Kota reliquaries. I enjoy grouping shapes and patinas, and the way the works complement each other without clashing. Modern artists' discovery of African art inspired new artistic solutions, and these solutions are evident in all the major movements of modern and contemporary art—including cubism, expressionism, surrealism, abstract art, and figurative art and so on. Clearly, this facilitates the dialogue.
- A.-M. B. Has this relationship between African art and modern art guided your tastes?
- M. V. No, not really. I won't buy a painting or sculpture that reminds me too directly of African art. I like it when these two categories are associated, in a dialogue, but not when they are in competition or

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INVENTORY



# SOURCES

The history of the past millennia of the African continent, considered the cradle of mankind, has long been shrouded in mystery. Without having produced written records, many civilisations rose and disappeared, only leaving majestic works of art as witnesses of their greatness. Most of these forgotten cultures were rediscovered only throughout the twentieth century, often by accident, and scholars have been struggling to puzzle together the pieces of the African continent's recent history.

One of the earliest identified civilisations is the so-called Nok culture, named after a village in central Nigeria, where its archaeological artefacts were first discovered in the 1920s. We know so little of this civilisation that even its name will forever stay buried. With its apogee dated around the first few centuries AD, the Nok produced terracotta works of art that have continued to amaze with the rich vocabulary of their iconographic language. The creative abundance of this culture is expressed in the enormous variety of known statues, many adorned with elaborate clothing and prestigious jewellery. The sculptural qualities of coiffures, mirroring complex existing hairstyles, are often beautifully expressed on Nok heads. One figure displays a cap-like hairdo, perforated throughout, on a compact terracotta statue (fig. 1). Our attention is drawn to the stylised treatment of the face—where the hands support the chin—featuring the classical triangular-shaped eyes, with deep

pierced pupils, placed under a large forehead. The age-old adagio 'less is more' in mind, the artist omitted the legs. Scarification patterns under the prominent navel decorate the torso. The exact meaning and function of this small yet monumental statue are unknown; we are left to enjoy the pensive feelings of introspection it radiates.

The aesthetic accomplishments of ancient African civilisations can also be witnessed in the art of Mali's Middle Niger River region. While the ancient city of Jenne-Jeno, settled by AD 250 and suddenly abandoned by 1400, was at the heart of a thriving civilisation with a well-known and celebrated type of art, not all known statuary can be attributed to this major urban centre. A standing bronze figure is a fitting example of the enigmatic origins of the many artefacts from this region (fig. 2). While previously attributed to the Djenne culture, this figure exhibits features that deviate from its classical trademark style. Indeed, this work of art is a telling example of the wide variety of casting centres with often highly individual substyles that must have been active in the Middle and Lower Niger River region over the course of several centuries.

The inland Niger River Delta region was the site of violent rises and falls of empires, and the taking of, and trade in, slaves. One sculpture shows a woman prisoner with her ankles shackled (fig. 3). Unlike other similar prisoner figures, her

hands are not bound behind her back. Here we find both hands on top of the head in a gesture that centuries later still feels relatable. The elegant, realistically rendered body with its slight vertical elongation, together with the soft greenish-bronze patina, makes this figure a timeless masterpiece.

Scientific testing of the wooden statues that have been discovered in this region attests to a continuous artistic evolution spanning almost a millennium—an unparalleled feat within African art history. The enigmatic Tellem inhabited the Bandiagara Escarpment between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. The Dogon came to live under these cliffs starting from the fifteenth century and named the culture before them Tellem, meaning as much as 'We have found them' in the Dogon language. The wooden statues they discovered in the cliffs' numerous funerary caves would come to inspire their own statuary. A figure relating to a corpus of Tellem works has the arms raised towards the sky (fig. 4). Such raised arms, which are often interpreted as a gesture of prayer for rain, are a motif that originated with the Tellem and that the Dogon later appropriated. Rain, indeed, was an essential component of a good harvest and the subject of important yearly Dogon rituals at the beginning of the planting season. This statue accrued a thick layered surface over the course of successive applications of offerings composed of millet and the blood of sacrificial animals—a feature defining ancient Dogon devotional sculptures.

In another grand gesture, with its elbows resting on the knees, and the hands to the face, a small wooden statue (fig. 5) exemplifies the extraordinary bold sculptural solutions Dogon artists applied in their religious statuary. The human body is rearranged in a tightly organized geometrical composition. Alternating vertical and diagonal lines, that enclose triangular negative spaces, the woodcarver created a most modernist sculpture, before modernism was invented. Such a figure would be placed on an altar dedicated to the ancestors, which each lineage possessed. In such a ritual context it might have expressed the idea of mourning for a deceased relative through the gesture of covering the face.

The sculptural sophistication of the ancient terra-cotta anthropomorphic statues coming from the centre of Mali is stunning. A majestic seated male figure belongs to a small selection of works attributed to a single artist and his workshop (fig. 6). The stylistic homogeneity of this group (with 18 known examples) suggests they were created together for the ornamentation of an altar dedicated to a specific mythical ancestor. The exact function of these terra-cotta sculptures, 600 years after their creation, remains in question. These figures stand out from others by their naturalistic modelling, the delicacy of their features and the softness of the curves of their posture. Typical is the remarkable fluidity witnessed in the beautiful position of the legs. The works from this anonymous master artist are characterised by their proportionally small bald heads featuring prominent projecting ears. Bead necklaces and metal bracelets accent the torso. Although almost naked, the figure wears an apron-like garment, adding to its universal appeal.

More to the west, towards Bamako, appears a terra-cotta tradition of sculptures in a more restrained, elongated style described as Bankoni, after the village where archaeologists have unearthed such works from the 1950s onwards. Dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the elegant sculptures from this lost civilisation have been found at several sites in the region near Bougouni and Diola, today inhabited by the Bamana. While the precise ritual purpose these figures played remains unknown, the lavish jewellery and the abundant scarification patterns on the torso suggest status and wealth (fig. 7). The hands on the thighs, with the palms open in a supplicant gesture, this figure has an upward gaze suggesting a request for divine intervention. The voluminous upper legs and the elongated upper body strengthen the sculptural presence of the figure, making it one of the most accomplished works of art to survive from this vanished culture.

Elsewhere in West Africa, in south-western Nigeria, we find another tradition of anthropomorphic terra-cotta sculpture in the city-state of Ife, whose power peaked between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its art has long been celebrated, as it fits easily into the classical western notions of what canonical art should look like. It is clear that western cultural superiority is no longer tenable if one considers that these exceptional works of art predate their counterparts from the European High Renaissance. Archaeological evidence reveals that Ife terra-cotta sculptures were originally conceived in groups, with multiple figures presented together in complex commemorative shrines celebrating the royal ruling family. Few complete anthropomorphic figures in terra-cotta remain, and almost all heads have been separated from their bodies, fragmented after having been buried for centuries. Reconstructions suggest these statues originally were about life-size. Each shrine figure would have had recognisable features identifying its function and position within society. An Ife head featuring a crown-like coiffure suggests we are looking at a queen (fig. 8). The complex hairstyle displays an exceptional careful modelling. The hair is drawn up into a disc-like form atop the head and adorned with multiple strands of beads. The face is finely striated, referencing the traditional facial scarifications of Ife's population and a classical and unique feature of their anthropomorphic art. The eyes, nose and mouth are naturalistically modelled with much refinement, giving this head a striking, timeless and sophisticated beauty. The varying known hairstyles in Ife art suggest the importance of individualisation. These ancient heads thus likely personified a multitude of historical figures; besides royals, court officials and other servants can be identified. The spiked coiffure of a smaller-sized head would have been easily recognisable at the time of its creation, yet its identity remains unknown to us (fig. 9). Together with their beauty, the serenity emitting from these heads is in line with their presumed function as memorials, objects intended to bring the past into the present—a mission in which they continue to succeed.

An abstract monolith originates from the middle of the Cross River area in southern Nigeria, where peoples from the Bakor linguistic group have been worshipping them as long



as can be remembered (fig. 10). These monoliths were found in abandoned villages, arranged in circles, and have been dated to the sixteenth century; they are possibly even older. In 1968, British researcher Philip Allison documented five examples of this distinctive type at the site of Oyengi. This figure's large protruding navel renders the torso of this massive stone monolith anthropomorphic. Its human character is thus reduced to a single, highly symbolic element. Throughout African statuary, prominent navels explicitly reference ancestors: they are a body marker highlighting the

physical connection with one's mother and her predecessors. While most known Bakor monoliths are thought to be representations of chiefs, legendary hunters and warriors, the abstraction of this magnificent example possibly refers to the ancestors as a group, not to an individual member. A deep, broad groove departs upwards from the navel separating the torso from the head, suggesting a phallic shape. Besides honouring the past, the sculpture clearly emphasises male fertility and its importance for the survival of the clan. Past and future hence come together in this timeless work of art.

NOK STATUE (fig.1)  
Terracotta 15 cm Nigeria







DJENNE STATUE (fig. 3)  
Metal 23 cm Mali

DJENNE STATUE (fig. 2)  
Metal 24 cm Mali



DOGON STATUE (fig. 4)  
Wood 46 cm Mali

