

Collecting as Infatuation

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What is it that drives the collector of primitive art? According to a new study carried out by two ethnologists it is neither a taste for speculation nor acquisitiveness but rather an intuitive infatuation with the artworks themselves and a sense of obligation to them.

Reviewed: Brigitte Derlon and Monique Jeudy-Ballini, *La passion de l'art primitif. Enquête sur les collectionneurs*, Gallimard, 322pp., €20.

Recently, Brigitte Derlon and Monique Jeudy-Ballini have ignored the tribes of Papua New Guinea on which they are experts in order to carry out research on the world of Parisian primitive art collectors. Their book, it should be said, fills a gap in the anthropology of the art world and the study of the relationship between collectors and their collections. Although collectors have played a major role in the development of public collections and more generally in the development of a taste for primitive art, very little attention has been paid to them by ethnologists. How can such a lack of interest be explained? More than anything else, perhaps, it is the result of the fact that research, influenced by postmodernism and postcolonialism, has so often concentrated on the often violent methods collectors have resorted to, on the commodification of cultural goods, and on the stereotypes connected with primitivism, all of which have somehow made of the collector a representative of Western supremacy and its discourse on "otherness." Whether or not this point of view is legitimate, it has imposed a vision of collectors as predatory and mercantile. The main virtue of Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini's work is to have concentrated, without preconceived ideas, on the practices and representations that underlie the imaginative worlds of collectors of primitive art. Philosophical, historical and anthropological references to collecting enrich the book and the

authors, with peculiar ethnographic flair, allow collectors to express themselves freely and talk about their infatuation with their artworks.

Initial Enthusiasm

And infatuation *is* the word — a constantly stoked infatuation that causes collectors to see their activity as incompatible with any form of speculation and more particularly with any form of financial speculation. There is no economic incentive behind their purchases, nor is there a desire for social distinction. Quite the opposite is true in fact, and collectors of primitive art flaunt their contempt for money. Of course, money does allow them to buy and conserve valuable artworks, but it also corrupts and damages their rapport with the works. For a “real” collector, money is “the language of other people” (231): the language of art dealers and of all those who are not inspired by love for these works. To be disinterested is seen as a prerequisite without which enthusiasm and aesthetic entrancement cannot take place.

For the collectors of primitive art, aesthetic enthusiasm is essential. Many of them mention the singular capacity of artworks to arouse feelings, the intensity and tone of which vary considerably (from ardor to captivation, and from fear to jubilation or solace, etc.). The quality of a work does not only depend on its intrinsic properties (what it is made of, its lines) or its social characteristics (its financial value, scarcity, or prestige) but rather on its emotional power. This emotional element, which can be discerned in all collections, is without a doubt all the more noticeable in collections of primitive art since collectors sometimes think of their artworks as quasi-living things, endowed with feelings and intentions. Primitive works of art, it seems, sometimes choose the collector and strike up a conversation with him — rather than the other way round. Thus, the asymmetrical relationship between human and artefact is twisted round and the artworks become autonomous and remain at a distance, their alien character all the more obvious as they carry their spatial and temporal otherness (which is largely impermeable to cognitive appropriation) within them. Like Georg Simmel, the anthropologist Alfred Gell rightly remarked that the desire for an artwork (and its value) is directly proportional to its resistance. This unfathomable element allows the collector of primitive art to appropriate a work of art imaginatively, projecting onto it fantasies of his own, fantasies of a society closer to human origins, a society preserved from the corrosive effects of cultural hybridity, a society whose authenticity has been preserved and contained in its artefacts.

Collecting as a Way of Knowing

It nevertheless comes as a surprise to find that collectors so devoted to their artworks should often know so little about the societies that the objects come from, or the uses to which they were put, or even the conditions in which they were produced. Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini's analyses show that this ignorance is by no means a pose. It is the result of an aesthetic experience that challenges analytical and discursive approaches to art. "Freed of knowledge, and of the kind of understanding of indigenous societies that knowledge imposes, aesthetic experience can bridge the gap between the emotions and cognition and thus become a way for collectors to learn" (100-101). It is intuitively, in other words, and thanks to the immediacy of feeling, that the collector understands his artwork. Yet this experience cannot be reduced to mere contemplation during which the artwork reveals its truth in a moment of static perception. It is, rather, the result of a *habitual* cognitive method fueled by constant interaction between artworks and their owners. To be sure, the privilege of a collector is the daily frequentation of his collection: he alone lives with it and is inhabited by it, developing a familiarity that he often wishes to share with others.

A number of relationships between collectors and their artworks are presented in the book. Some collectors think of themselves as the creators — sometimes even the procreators — of their artworks. They see themselves as providing their artworks with life and significance, as if, by becoming part of their collections, they had been born again. Other collectors identify, almost literally, with their collections and see each piece as a projection of their persons — so much so, in fact, that they often think of the loss of one of them as crippling. This sort of narcissistic relationship is clearly heuristic. According to the authors, "in the final analysis, collecting is an instrument of self-discovery and self-esteem" (183). And it goes hand-in-hand with a real sense of responsibility, the origin of which is a sense of obligation towards the collected artefacts. Collecting is a form of stewardship and the collector must take care of the artworks, which will be passed on to others. Moreover, creating a collection is in itself meaningful: the aim is always to endow the combination with significance. Adding or withdrawing an element alters the perception and meaning of the whole. It also involves the risk of making the collection either inconsistent or incomprehensible. In the case of primitive art, this sense of responsibility is all the greater since collectors often see their artworks as endowed with intentions, sometimes even evil intentions, capable of damaging their environment. The collector's principle aim, then, as the desire for cohesiveness and legibility shows, is not to own but to transmit. His collection is a

part of a complex, discontinuous, non-genealogical legacy, in which the artworks are a sort of testament, even when the collection is scattered.

Although their study is only concerned with primitive art collections, which involve specific representations (such as the element of magic, an obsession with the ancestral world, a refusal of hybridity, etc.), Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini's book is of more general interest. Because it shows how collectors appropriate their artworks intellectually, how they take hold of them through the imagination and develop a special bond with them, the study demonstrates that collecting is less a question of acquisition than an attempt, by removing artworks that one wishes to enter into contact with from the world of usefulness and market value, to reassemble what is scattered in order, in the end, to be possessed by them.

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