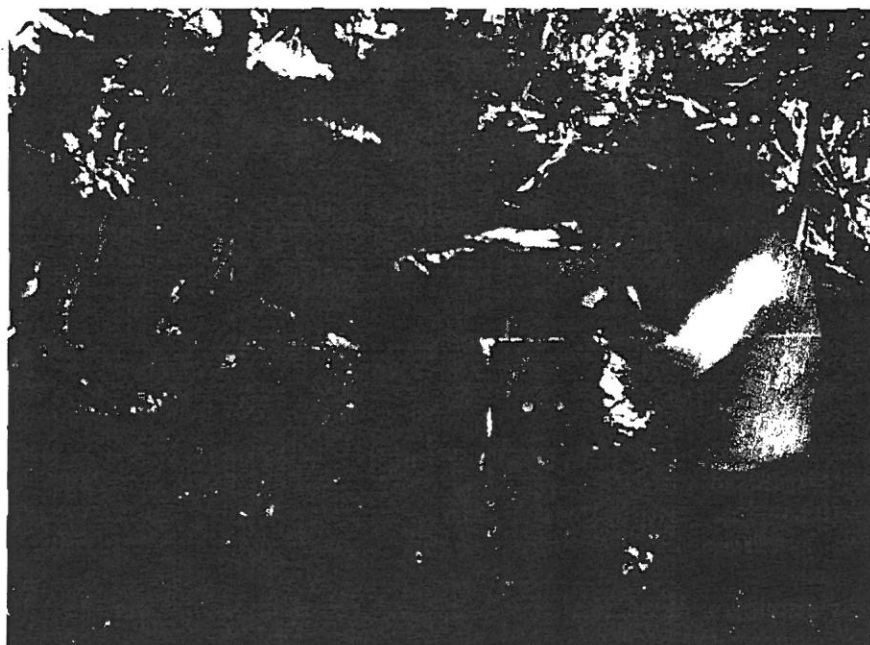


R. Corbey, Tribal Art Traffic
2000: Royal Tropical Institute,
the Netherlands



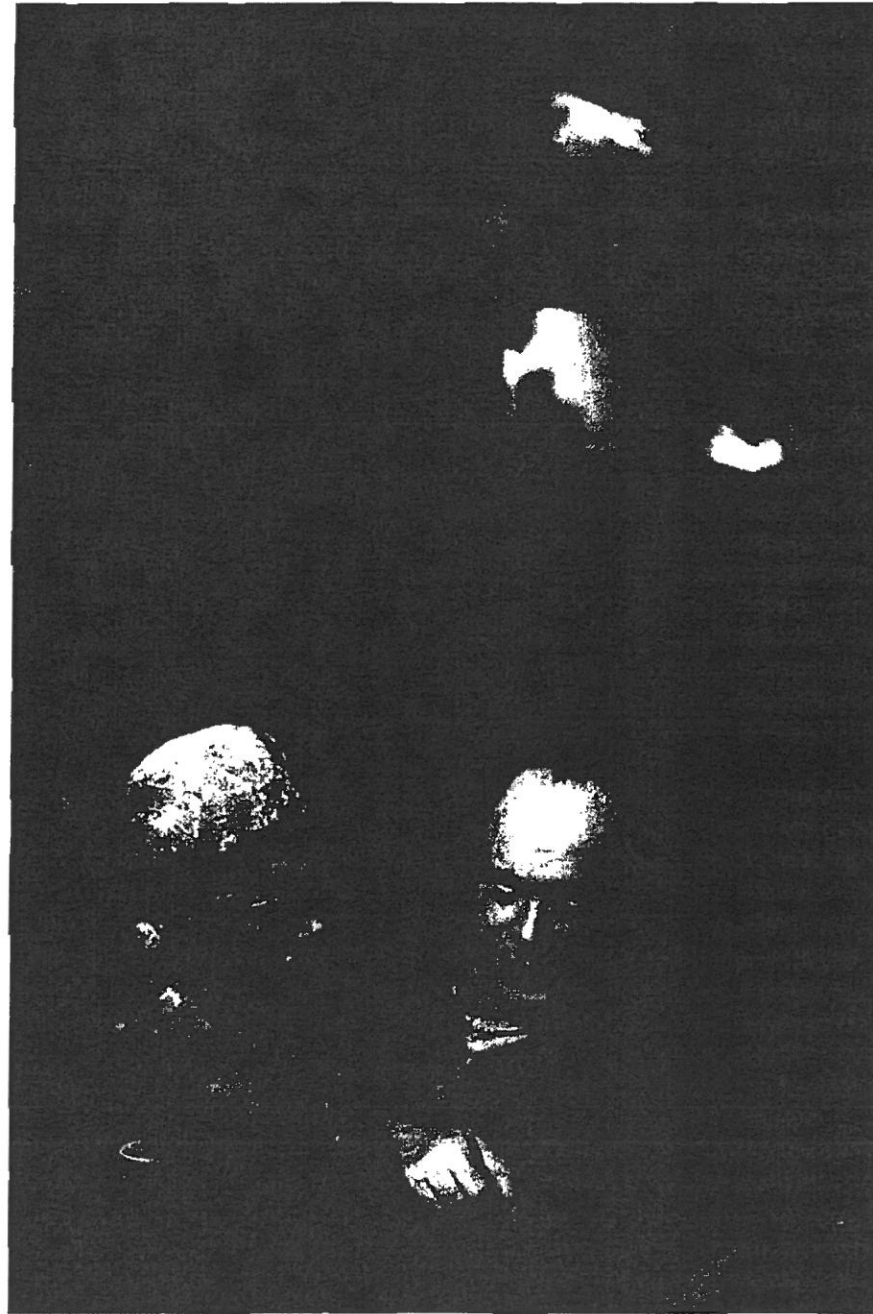
37. The Belgian tribal art dealer Marc Felix during his wild years, removing a stone ancestor figure he had just bought in Eastern Timor in 1974.

2.3 Marc Felix and the Congo (in reply to decent question last session...!)

The Belgian Marc Leo Felix is an outstanding specialist and a reputable dealer when it comes to the tribal art of the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, and before that a Belgian colony. He has published extensively on Central African art, and directs the Congo Basin Research Institute in Brussels, where he also has a gallery. As both an expert and a dealer, he numbers museums and universities among his clients, next to some of the wealthiest private collectors. His private Congo collection is one of the finest and most complete in the world.

Felix grew up the son of a chemist on the Grote Zavel, a well-known square in Brussels and a centre of the trade in tribal art. There, as a young boy, he derived great pleasure from browsing through the various antique shops, while his imagination thrived on reading Stanley, Livingstone, Karl May, James Fennimore Cooper, Tintin comics, and missionary periodicals. His parents' house was frequented by expressionist painters of the CoBrA movement²²⁹ such as Bram Van Velde, Jan Coboer, Corneille, Christian Dotremont, Roel D'Haese and Marcel Broodthaers, many of them collectors of *art nègre*. Another well-known artist and collector, Willy Mestach, lived around the corner and was to become one of his mentors.

Marc briefly attended the art academy and studied art history, but he soon grew weary of this and signed up on a merchant ship bound for the Belgian Congo. During his second journey on that vessel he jumped ship and stayed in the Congo for several months, until political developments forced him to return to Belgium. Home again, he fulfilled his military service obligations and once discharged he opened a small antiques shop on the Grote Zavel, which did well until the tax department reminded him of his obligations towards the community—a tax debt so high that he could scarcely scrape the money together. Subsequently, he went to work for an oil company in the Arab Emirates, where he learned to speak fluent Arabic. But Africa beckoned, and after a few years he went on to Nigeria, still in the oil business, where he divided his time between his work and collecting ethnographics among the Ibo, Ijo, Eket, Urhobo, and other tribal groups along the southern coast. From Nigeria, he went to Cameroon in



1967, and from there to Gabon, still in the oil business, and by now collecting ceaselessly.

In a well-to-do suburb of Brussels, seated in an exquisite sitting room packed with beautiful African art, I talked to this thoughtful, man, who sports cowboy boots and a pony tail.

Your work for oil companies in several African countries must have offered good opportunities to add to your collection.

Well, theoretically, yes, but actually, no. In those days, I hadn't yet developed a discriminating eye. I was too enthusiastic, bought whatever I saw, much of which I later regretted. Sometimes, I was in the *brousse* for weeks yearning to see something, and then when I finally found it I had the tendency to overestimate it. It's much easier to go to an art dealer, where you can take your time to study things, compare them with other pieces, and even have the opportunity to go home or to a library to look them up. To be honest, I bought a lot of junk in those days. Not so much fake as ugly—I mean really ugly. Anyway, for about two years, from 1966 till 1968, I worked and collected mainly in the southwest of Gabon, among the Lumbo, the Punu, the Shango, and the Mitsogo, and also the Galoa. At one point, however, a river boat in which I had invested met with an accident, and I lost everything. Then I went to Nigeria, at the time of the war in Biafra, and subsequently to Cameroon. I was about thirty then.

When and how did you start to deal in tribal art?

At that point, in Cameroon, where Douala became the home base from which I operated, buying in both Cameroon and Nigeria through a network of African helpers. I joined forces with a well-known French tribal art dealer who lived there, Philippe Guimiot.* He was older than I was and knew a lot. That was the beginning of my activities as a dealer. When I met him, I suddenly realized how little I actually knew about African tribal art, in spite of my enthusiasm and my familiarity with a number of African societies. When Guimiot went through my collection in Brussels, which I kept in my parents' house, he turned his nose up to most of it, and quite rightly so. My frame of reference was still far too limited. I'd seen far too little really good material with which I could compare what I came across. You need to see lots of quality old pieces in collections, in museums, and at exhibitions in order to get a feel for it. You need to struggle through the literature. That's exactly what I started doing then. With the additional advantage of my African experiences, I learned quickly.

What form did your partnership with Guimiot take?

I was largely out in the field collecting, in Africa and in Indonesia, while he attended to selling the material in Paris, Brussels, and the United States. For a number of years, it went really well. In 1971 and 1972, I travelled to Indonesia, not just because I was sick of the misery that I had come across in Africa, but also because the art from the Indonesian Archipelago was virtually unknown outside Holland. On Sumatra, around the Toba Lake, I found good Batak material that sold very well in the Brussels gallery we had opened. Next, I paid short visits to Kalimantan and Nias, and longer ones to Timor (Fig. 37) and Atauro. Kalimantan, Nias and Timor are well-known for their art, but it was a surprise for everybody to learn that there was something worth finding on Atauro—a small island between Timor and Wetar. You could say that that was my first big discovery.²³¹

You enjoy a certain reputation for having participated in the "opening up" of a number of hitherto virtually unknown tribal art areas such as Atauro, Vietnam, East Africa, and the Ituri Forest.

In the case of Atauro, nobody even suspected that there was anything there, but my intuition told me that there must be something, because beautiful things were known from all the surrounding islands. And indeed, I went there and found art which was completely unknown to the western world: spectacular male and female ancestor figures, some of them enormous, up to three meters high, but mostly smaller, which functioned as the bow and the stern of boat-shaped monuments made of piled-up stones, which referred to the arrival of the ancestors on the island. With the permission of the local authorities, I did some collecting there. In the western world of collectors and specialists, these figures caused quite a stir.

And how did it go in Vietnam?

In 1974, after my collecting ventures in the Indonesian Archipelago I went, via the Philippines, to the hill tribes in central Vietnam: the Jörai, the Södang and others, known under the general name of Moï, though that's an incorrect and derogatory term. My attention was alerted to them by a book by the German ethnologist Hugo Bernatzik.²³² I found these groups interesting because of the great similarities concerning patterns and styles they had with the Malaysian peoples of insular Southeast Asia. In the hills of Vietnam, you find the same type of houses, with canoe-shaped ornaments on top of them, while the people there have never even seen a canoe. I also noticed linguistic similarities. Several tribal groups that I visited in India fit more or less the same cultural register. Among those hill tribes, I primarily collected Jörai grave poles,

which mark out their *pösat*, the burial grounds, and have powerful, coarsely carved figures on them in the typical crouching posture, the elbows on the knees, that can be seen in the art of a number of Austronesian groups.²³³ The death ritual, whereby the deceased passes on to the domain of the ancestors, often goes on for several years and when it draws to its conclusion the enclosures and the grave poles are renewed. I was able to lay hands on a considerable number of these poles when they were taken down for renewal.

If I remember correctly, you published an article on cultural affinities between the various Austronesian cultures.

More specifically, the relationship between Indonesia, on the one hand, and Madagascar and East Africa on the other fascinated me—naturally, considering my African background. I tackled this problem in an article in the periodical *Tribal Arts*,²³⁴ in which I compared objects from Madagascar and the African east coast with objects from the Batak of Sumatra: the same masks, the same magician's horns, priest's staffs and anthropomorphic figures. Art doesn't lie! Here again, as in Vietnam, stylistic and iconographic relationships are echoed in linguistic similarities, as well as in various crops which appear to have been brought from Southeast Asia to East Africa.

So from Southeast Asia your interests shifted back to Africa?

My interests and my activities. I went back to Africa, first to Congo, then to East Africa, again because everybody said there was no art there, which I thought was highly unlikely. I went there and found marvellous things. I was more or less the first; others soon followed. My ambition in those years was to discover something new regularly, and to a certain degree I succeeded in that.

Are there now still regions which with regard to art production are still relatively unknown, where discoveries can be expected to be made in the near future?

Well, completely unknown, no, but there are some regions that are so little known that it is almost scandalous, for instance, the Kasai in Congo, where there's still an awful lot to discover because it is a diamond region and for this reason was always closed to outsiders. It's very dangerous there, nowadays, because of smugglers and drunken soldiers. I feel too old now to go and play Indiana Jones, and the younger generation doesn't dare. The Kasai is a cross-roads of Central African styles—it is where the civilizations of Angola, Zambia and Congo meet.

These collecting ventures to various corners of the world that you just described—were they lucrative?

Yes and no! Yes, in the sense that I was able to get my hands on good pieces regularly and in that I discovered all types of things, and no, because travelling is very expensive, and for every journey that produced results there were several more that didn't produce anything. The money we—Guimiot and I—earned was gone before we knew it, on expenses and on advertising costs. Personally, I lived very simply, and would make do with anything, no matter how spartan, but not Guimiot. And that was what eventually led to the break between us, in 1975. He and I lived more or less in different worlds. He played the gentleman-dealer, living luxuriously, staying in the best hotels, flying first class, giving expensive dinners for customers and relations. He certainly knew how to present our objects, but he himself was too fond of luxury, was lazy, and spent far too much, out of joint means. Despite these critical remarks, however, Guimiot's expertise cannot be denied; I would like to stress again that I learned a great deal from him. He's still in business, based here in Brussels.

What happened after you broke up with your partner?

After breaking up with Guimiot I had no choice: I had to go and sell things by myself. Initially, I felt more as though I should be out in the field, but it turned out well and I even started enjoying it. From that point on, I devoted my time to tracing tribal art from the former colony of Congo in Belgium. Many people here had things from the Belgian Congo, rubbish as well as good stuff. I bought a lot from ex-colonials, from monasteries and missionaries, and from other dealers who picked up their stuff from the same sources. Some of the ex-colonials are agreeable and colourful people, but others are simply frightful. Last week, for instance, I had dinner with a couple who spent thirty years in the Congo. It was disgusting! Absolutely no feel for or interest in the people and their culture, whatsoever. The only contact they had with the native population was their "boy." But when it comes down to it, it was in these circles that I did—and still do—my buying. In addition, I went to Congo regularly, where I made numerous interesting finds with the aid of my staff there. I sold in Europe and the United States, to private collectors, dealers, museums, and universities. It was big business! Belgium turned out to be a gold mine—I've managed to trace some real treasures, often through the grapevine. Now I am known as a specialist in Congo art, a limited area, but this specialisation is my strength, and universities and museums throughout the whole world know that and consult me.

How does the trade in ethnographics here in Belgium work and where do you fit into it?

In Belgium, there are dozens of private individuals, maybe a hundred or so, who systematically track down colonial families and see if they have any ethnographics left. They go from one family to the next, tracking their relations, ex-colleagues, and friends, working very thoroughly, also covering garage sales, local auctions, fleamarkets, and antiques shops. They sift through everything systematically. This group, most of whom are not officially registered as dealers, form the base of the dealing pyramid, so to speak. They mostly sell to the middle layer, which is formed by fifty or so official dealers in tribal art, both large and small, mostly conducting their business here in Brussels around the Grote Zavel. The apex of the pyramid consists of only a handful of dealers, who trade in the best and most expensive pieces.

Why don't the runners sell the best pieces directly to museums or serious collectors themselves?

Well, it just doesn't work that way, for a number of reasons: they don't have enough expertise, they don't have the right connections, they don't have the reputation, and they don't have enough capital. A serious dealer backs whatever he sells, he guarantees it, and takes it back if necessary, completely refunding the purchase price in cash. The tribal art scene is one with very strict rules. I would never infringe upon the territory of my runners. If I hear that something has popped up in their territory, I don't go myself but I give one of them a tip. He'll pick it up and bring it to me. It's a very precarious set-up. The dividing lines are fine and sharp

Can you give an example of the route of a particular object?

I'll give you one from my own experience. A while ago, somebody bought a small human figure, cut from elephant ivory, at an auction in a little town here in Belgium for 13,000 Belgian francs, which is about \$ 300. It was a so-called *bwame* statue from the Lega in East Congo, probably centuries old. That individual sold it to a small-time antique dealer in the same region for three times as much. The antique dealer suspected that it was something good, and took it to a tribal art dealer in Brussels, who paid him about \$ 3,000, three times what the antiques dealer had paid for it. The tribal art dealer in turn came to me, specialized as I am in Central African art, and received \$ 12,000, four times what he had paid for it—still for the same little African statue. I, in turn received an offer of \$ 25,000, the very next day, which I refused. The figure, which is beautiful, one of the finest I have ever seen, is now in my private collection. It is quite common for a good piece to pop up in this way and travel through these channels before ending up somewhere up-market.

Are the countless fakes in the field of African art a problem for you?
I still make mistakes, fewer as the years go by, but I still make them. A few months ago I bought a six piece lot from one of the small-time dealers that regularly come by, in order to obtain the only piece in that lot that really interested me: a BaKongo *maternité*—a mother with a child. In order to get it, I had to buy the whole lot. That's how it works; in order to keep the relationship going I am almost obliged to buy. We all have our own game to play. He wants to sell as high as possible, I want to buy as low as possible. You don't show too much emotion, but a little bit emerges nonetheless. That happened on a Friday evening. The next morning, when I came downstairs and looked at it in daylight I immediately noticed that the *maternité* was a shrewd forgery. So it still happens. When buying, you try to react to your intuition, to really use your eyes and think; but at the same time you cannot show too much interest, you have to act fast, make snap decisions, negotiate a fair price, make the deal. In fact, it is only then, once you've got the piece, that you have time to examine it at your leisure.



How do you go about examining an object?
The better objects are subjected to a standard inspection which normally takes up to a few hours. Everything is looked at thoroughly: the type of wood, any other materials used, manufacturing techniques, dyes, pollen, patina, wear and tear, the nature and extent of any restoratory work. Those are the basic things. Next, you study the style and the iconography, what it represents, by comparison with other pieces. This is where the literature and my large data base on Central African art come into play. That is the first part of the judgment process, the analytical phase. The second part is more intuitive. I put the object in a cupboard, the one which I call my "observatory," under spotlights, on a very slowly revolving plate. Then I sit back and let it sink in. Now, contrary to the negotiation situation, I have time to observe it properly. Through such a standard examination a buy that at first sight I had thought was authentic can still be proven to be false. Every now and then that happens, not often, but with a certain regularity. This procedure also helps to prevent me from making mistakes with respect to my clients.

How does the world of collectors of ethnographics in Belgium compare to that in the Netherlands?
First of all, it must be said that in the Netherlands there is a much wider-spread interest in ethnographics than in Belgium. Next we have to establish that people in the Netherlands are much more easily satisfied—or should we say too easily satisfied? In the Netherlands, people buy a great deal of mediocre or even fake African pieces, which

Dutch dealers generally buy here in Brussels, or from African runners. Dutch dealers also buy some rather third-rate stuff from me, for very little. Belgian collectors tend to have better taste. In Belgium, there are perhaps twenty really serious collectors, almost all of whom wish to remain anonymous and are pretty well-to-do: lawyers, medical specialists, industrialists, noblemen, and so on. What's curious, incidentally, is that they sometimes prefer to buy abroad, for example Paris. Ironically, you can buy plenty of pieces there which in fact are the property of Belgian dealers who are aware of this phenomenon and sell them through colleagues there—which, of course, makes the pieces more expensive.

What, as a dealer, are your experiences with tribal art auctions?
I have very mixed feelings about them. Like most dealers, I buy and sell a lot at auctions, where, unfortunately, a lot of games are played. The only auction house that I really trusted in was Christie's of London. As for the auction world in general, and Paris in particular, I don't trust anybody. It is all quite dodgy, while at the same time they handle a lot of good stuff every year. 1996, for instance, was an especially good year: in June, three fine collections came under the hammer at Drouot: the Pierre Guerre collection from Marseille, that of the Van Bussels from Amsterdam and the Jernander collection from Brussels.²³⁵ Jernander, like myself, bought a great deal from Belgian ex-colonials. The auction yielded a lot, but the yield was not optimal in my opinion because so much was put on the market at the same time. Had it been more spread out, it could have fetched twice as much. I bought several pieces on those occasions.

Both in the Guerre collection and in that of the Van Bussels, there was a wonderful Fang byeri reliquary figure. To me, the two pieces seemed equally beautiful, old, and well-documented. Nonetheless, to my surprise the Guerre Fang fetched three times as much as the one from the Van Bussel collection. How is that possible, and why is it that Fang figures are so expensive in the first place, often several times as expensive as equally fine figures from other categories?
As far as I am concerned both pieces were indeed equally fine. The difference is that Guerre's Fang has become an icon, while the other is simply a good Fang and nothing more. The Guerre Fang has been exhibited and published on many times since the thirties, much more so than the Van Bussel Fang; therefore, it has a better pedigree, and consequently more prestige and a greater value. Furthermore, you may have noticed that the Guerre Fang has been rendered in a drawing by the renowned artist Arman, a collector himself; the drawing was on the

cover of the auction catalogue. That also adds to the pedigree. And why are Fang reliquary figures so expensive in the first place? Well, I can tell you: they are easy—of course, they are old and beautiful, at least a certain number of them, but above all they are easy. Many of the very rich collect art in general and spend tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars on one purchase without much further thought. Some of them, at some point, become interested in primitive art. For those people, a Fang is one of the more obvious choices: it is recognizable, well-known and prestigious. Most of the really good Fang *byeri* are in the possession of people who don't collect African art as such. There you won't find any Baule from Ivory Coast or Sukuma from Tanzania, for Baule is too delicate, too refined for them, while Sukuma is too coarse, too wild. They want something in-between. It has to have something mysterious, a quality a good Fang figure usually possesses, but on the other hand, it must not be as frightening and extreme as BaKongo *nkisi*, "nail fetishes." All in all, Fang fits the bill perfectly.

You just mentioned your private collection. So you do have one?
Of course I do. There are three people inside of me: the dealer, the collector, and the scholar. Each of them looks at things with a different eye. Up to this point in our talk, I have mostly been speaking as a dealer. I am busy with African art twenty-four hours a day. I don't have any hobbies. In fact, I have two large collections, which are both still growing. Each fulfills a personal passion. One of them is a typological Congo collection, which has to be as complete as possible. We are talking about some three hundred tribal groups here. I collect as systematically as possible, with a particular interest in the gradual transitions between style areas. As a scholar, I buy research pieces for this typological collection for which neither the dealer nor the art collector in me has any interest. The other collection consists of classical pieces from Congo, which aesthetically belong to the international apex. In this collection there is Luba, Songe, Tabwa, Chokwe, Yombe, Lengola—you name it: everything. Every time I find a better piece one of the others has to slide down the scale. While my typological collection has to do with culture and cultures, this one is about Art—with a capital A. In both cases, my aim is not commercial but purely idealistic. Eventually, I want to present the typological collection, which to me is the most important, to a university, where it is to be used for study and reference in the training of a new generation of specialists in the field. The art collection, on the other hand, will go to an art museum.

Now we touch upon a second period of your life, if I may call it that, which began around 1985.

You can certainly call it that, for the last twelve years or so, I have indeed been on a new track. Up until around 1985 I was mainly dealing, and even today I still deal, though less intensively than before. About twelve years ago, however, dealing was pushed into second place, for since then my real mission in life has been to document as completely and scientifically as possible the art production of Congo. My typological collection is part of that project. Up until then I sold everything on. It's strange, isn't it? I began as a collector, then I became a dealer, and now I am collecting again, albeit in a different way. Actually, it all began because I was embarrassed that I had so little documentation to pass on with the pieces I sold. It just wasn't available. Time and again, I couldn't answer the questions of my buyers well enough, so I started to search for literature and documentation everywhere: in the Africa museum in Tervuren, in the library of the former Ministry of the Colonies, and in various Belgian university libraries. But there appeared to be no good reference works. You could find a little bit here and there, but that was all.

About ten years ago, I bought your first book, 100 Peoples of Zaire and Their Sculpture.²³⁶ So that book was in fact a solution to this problem?
The book was an initial solution to the problem, as I made clear in the foreword. In it, I laid out the main facts as they were then known pertaining to a hundred tribal groups, together with drawings and short descriptions of the most important types of objects. Each tribal area had a page of text and a page of drawings. The basis for this was the folders with clippings, copies, and notes that I had made for each tribe, and added to pieces I sold. But as I already said: it was just an initial solution. More important was my initiative, in the eighties, to set up a documentation centre for Congo art, the Congo Basin Art History Research Center. Now that I am over fifty, I don't go off into the bush so lightly. The pleasure that I used to get from physical challenge I now get from my mental efforts. Finding that out was one of the greater surprises of my life. When I was forty-five, I thought that the best years of my life were over, but now I know that if I am lucky enough to have one I shall greatly enjoy my old age.

What should I envision when you say documentation centre?

I have gathered together a group of paid and volunteer staff, six or seven people. Everything, and I mean quite literally everything, known on the arts of Congo is made accessible through an enormous data base, which is divided into style areas: all the literature, from the earliest to the most recent, up to and including the most obscure articles in missionary periodicals; all known photographs and drawings of objects and their

ritual or daily ethnographical context; information retrieved from auction catalogues on pedigrees and prices, and so on and so forth. We pay attention to the materials used, technology, iconography, style, typology, ethnography and the life history of objects. In addition, every Central African work that comes in is photographed digitally and extensively documented. We have our own technical draughtsman and use the most advanced digital technology.

What do you intend to do with the data base?

First of all, I want to know as much as possible about the things I myself am trading. Secondly, when consulted by a museum, for instance, I get along all right with the expertise I have built up, but the judgments I render as an expert, however reliable they are, are still pretty much intuitive. What I want is to be able to explain and argue to others more explicitly what I am intuitively pretty sure about. Thirdly, and most importantly, all others who are interested must have free and complete access to this information. Everyone should be able to consult the data base. We are also busy creating a course in Central African tribal art, which will offer the hands-on experience that is missing everywhere, especially for young people: the pieces, not just the pictures.

How highly do you value Belgian academic scholarship with regard to tribal art from Central Africa?

I greatly appreciate the work of a number of Belgian scholars, for instance, Daniel Biebuyck, author of the two-volume standard work *The Arts of Zaïre*,²⁹ and Jan Vansina, another Belgian anthropologist, who teaches in the United States. They are both very sensible scholars who have carried out extensive fieldwork, have had intensive contact with the people, and are thus capable of compiling, generalizing, explaining, and extrapolating data in a manner that shows their feel for the local relationships. On the other hand, I do not have a very high opinion of certain structuralist ethnologists. They are intelligent people, much more intelligent than I am, but they do not really look at the material with regard to form and style, and understand nothing of stylistic variations and developments. The preconceived theories in their heads select only those facts that fit their theories, facts which, to make matters worse, they obtain mostly from secondary sources, and in translation, not the original languages.

What's the present situation in Belgium, at universities and in museums, as far as scientific research on tribal art is concerned?

Sadly, the politicization of scientific circles has advanced to an extreme. What is more important than the skill and knowledge of the candidate is

the language one speaks, and the individual's religion, political orientation, gender, skin colour, and connections. If the job is intended for a French-speaking socialist it will go to someone with that background, regardless of whether there are better candidates. As far as that is concerned Belgium is corrupt. One example is the Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika in Tervuren, where the head of the ethnography department is a very capable, internationally-known specialist, but in the field of South-American Indians. In this museum, which boasts the finest collection of Central African art in the world, there is now, ironically enough, a dearth of expertise with regard to this region. Take a few good Central African figures to this museum for Central Africa and you will find out immediately that they are not capable of interpreting them. In Belgium there are also unfortunately quite a few scientists who are rather narrow-minded, and hide their lack of expertise and their fear of real experts behind an ivory tower mentality—as though there is no expertise outside their academic circles! That, I really can't stand.

What's your own ideal as to how to proceed when studying the tribal art of a region?

My ideal, apart from a solid base in research and fieldwork, is a round table with all the pieces on it, and completely open discussions between those sitting around that table: members of the tribal group in question, preferably initiates, dealers and curators, ethnographers and linguists, historians, missionaries, and materials experts. That would be the ideal situation, but unfortunately the reality is quite different. An awful lot of rubbish is being written by people who haven't been out in the field, or perhaps only for a few months, who don't speak the language, who are familiar with just one of the angles of approach I just mentioned and who don't care to consult with specialists from other disciplines.

How do you see the relationship between dealers and museum curators? Generally speaking, it is strained and ambivalent. In museum circles, nowadays, you hear a lot of criticism aimed at dealers, but let's not forget how much museums depend on dealers, both as far as expertise goes and in putting together their collections. In the last thirty years or so, a great deal more has been found out about African forms of expression and their contexts, much if not most of that thanks to dealers who have explored Africa thoroughly and uncovered a lot of new stuff. An example is what was made known about East Nigeria at the end of the 1960s. Or take the amazing art of the Hema, the Kusu, and the Bango-Bango in Congo: that was completely unknown, while they are by no means small tribes. Take the Moba in Togo, the Lobi in Burkina Faso: completely unknown. However, there are two sides to this. On the one



hand, dealers literally save pieces which are then preserved and studied in western countries, which is positive. The tragic part of it is that the dealers take away the good traditional pieces which are the examples the younger generation needs.

*At the same time Christian, Islamic and new syncretistic beliefs are pushing aside the old, mythical, "animistic" convictions and rituals. Yes, and because of this the people there know less and less about the traditional art—which, after all, is not *l'art pour l'art*, but ritual art. I have often enough saved rejected objects from rotting away in areas that had recently come under the influence of Islam; these were things for which the people no longer had any interest. I am not a saint, and I do not want to be one, but this just happens to be the case. Let's be honest, on other occasions I have also messed up whole villages and even given the cause for bloodletting when an old village head sold me an item to which others in the village still attached great significance.²³⁸ I am aware of the good and the bad aspects of my trade.*

Let's get back to your scholarly efforts. 100 Peoples of Zaïre was the first of a series of thorough monographs, on Maniema masks, the art of Tanzania, and that of the Ituri forest, the KiKongo speaking tribes, the stylistic variations of Congo masks, and so on. Your most recent book deals with the masks of Zambia.²³⁹ Relatively unknown territory?

Sure. Only little was known on that subject. The masks from Zambia show salient cultural and stylistic relationships to masks from neighbouring Congo. I did fieldwork for it, scrutinized as many masks in collection as possible, and scraped together as much information as possible from all kinds of sources. I look at geographical distribution and numerous types of affinities, primarily with neighbouring groups, but also with groups at a range of about a thousand miles. In a number of cases this provided surprising clues regarding the area of origin and the diffusion pattern of a certain tribe or style. My next project, by the way, is a completely revised and updated version with colour drawings of *100 Peoples of Zaïre*, which has fulfilled an obvious need—some five thousand copies have been sold.

39. A so-called caryatide stool of the Luba, Eastern Congo (see text). About twenty stools in this particular style are known, which are all attributed to one hand—that of the Master of Buli—or at least to one workshop. Collection M. Felix.

My last question, Mr. Felix: until now, what has been your greatest surprise or discovery concerning one single piece?

My most exciting episode was discovering a Caryatide stool by the so-called Master of Buli, in 1980. At that time, about twenty such stools were known, all of which were attributed to one craftsman—Frans Olbrechts coined the phrase “the master of Buli”—or at least to one workshop.³⁶ They are about half-a-meter high and were used in the swearing-in ceremonies of tribal chiefs by the Luba and the Hemba of East Congo. When I came across this one, a similar one had just been auctioned at Sotheby’s in London for US \$ 540,000, at that time a record price that made the papers worldwide, and was paid by the Metropolitan Museum. Six months later, to everybody’s surprise, a stool of the same type, which is very rare, was brought to the same auction house (Fig. 39). This time, however, there were doubts about the patina, which differed from that on the first stool, so it was sent to the museum in Tervuren to be examined. The style and the materials turned out to be exactly right, as did the stool’s age, which was established through ring dating of the wood. The somewhat strange patina appeared to have to do with a very thin layer of plaster that had been applied by way of restoration and covered with dye. On an X-ray, this plaster layer was clearly visible, covering large parts of the surface, and this lowered the value considerably, for repairs are not supposed to be too extensive. The evaluation in Tervuren came to the conclusion that the stool was authentic, but had been heavily restored. Now at that time, I was an advisor to Sotheby’s, and when I was there judging other pieces, not this one, I was told the whole story. It would not be put up for auction, it was said, because it was too incomplete. I took the piece and weighed it. Plaster is heavier than wood, so the piece, in view of the extensive restorations, should have been relatively heavy—heavier than had it consisted of pure wood. In my judgment, however, that was not the case. So I became interested, and was able to buy the stool for a fraction of the price I would have paid had it been intact. I had the restoration reversed, during which process, every step of which was photographed in detail, it appeared that only a few small areas had been restored and that the restorer had smeared a thin layer of plaster over a large area so as to make the whole seem as even as possible, after which he had applied the paint. That explained the misleading impression that the x-ray had made. I was on cloud nine! That piece is currently worth about a million dollars.

2.4 Tijs Goldschmidt, Art Collector

I’m talking with Tijs Goldschmidt, in his apartment which looks out over a beautiful stretch of Amsterdam canal. We are surrounded by Asmat and Sukuma carvings and *gope* ancestral cult boards from the Gulf of Papua, but also by contemporary art from Dutch artists such as Reinier Lucassen, Jan Roeland, Arjanne van der Spek, and others. Goldschmidt grew up in Amsterdam. He is a biologist and writer who regularly publishes on evolution, animal behaviour, and art and literature. He has written a doctoral thesis on the ecosystem of Lake Victoria in East Africa, as well as scientific articles and a book for the general public, *Darwin’s hofvijver*, published in English as *Darwin’s Dreampond*, which was well received in the Netherlands, the United States, Germany, and Japan.¹⁰³ Goldschmidt says he doesn’t feel like a collector.

You don’t want to be seen as a collector?

I don’t really care how I’m seen. What I care about is that I don’t feel like a collector, even if others call me one. I’m surrounded by objects fraught with meaning: drawings, paintings, carvings, photographs. I want to be near them. I think a collector is more systematic, someone who strives for completeness, who still wants this or that in his collection because he sees a gap. I’ve never gone about it in that way. But perhaps my view of the collector is too narrow. In any case, I’m an art-lover and it doesn’t really matter where that art comes from. But I do have a predilection for contemporary western art, and for non-western art which, I believe, is related to it. If I’m on holiday somewhere where there’s no art around, I doesn’t take long before I start feeling miserable. During a long period when I was ill and couldn’t work, what kept me going were the art objects in my room.

How did it start, your fascination with ethnographics?

“Ethnographics”? Again, it’s art that interests me. I associate ethnographic objects with clubs and axes of remote peoples, with stories of cannibals. I’m not interested in people because they’re remote or