

## “Art objects are made to travel – Interview with Jean Roudillon

*by Maureen Murphy, Paris 2004. Updated in 2019.*

MM: Could you talk about the beginning of your career as a dealer and expert in 1950s Paris, and about your collaboration with Olivier Le Corneur?

JR Olivier Le Corneur was a jewellery designer. He worked for jewellers who needed documents that they could present to their clients. As the son of a railway employee, working with antiques was hardly the obvious career choice for him but in 1928 he saw the Peruvian fabrics on show in the exhibition *Les arts anciens de l'Amérique* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (in a wing of the Louvre), and developed a passion for pre-Hispanic American objects. He knew my father, who sold him various pieces. One day my father said to me, “Listen, I’m getting old. I have a client who’s becoming very difficult. I can’t supply him any more. I’m going to give you his address, why don’t you deal with him and find out what he wants?” At this point I was already in the business. I had a shop in the rue des Saint Pères. I met Olivier Le Corneur and we made a number of transactions but then, one fine day in the 1950s, he said to me: “I don’t want to go on designing jewellery, it’s gone out of fashion. If you like we could open a shop together and be partners.” We found the shop at 51 rue Bonaparte and set up a gallery there that at the time was considered the most modern of its kind because we didn’t display objects the way old antiques dealers did, but standing on simple bases instead.

MM: Could you say more about the way objects were presented in galleries back then? What was different about your space?

JR In the first third of the twentieth century, most of the dealers located on the rue des Saints Pères showed their objects in shops lit only by an electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Sometimes they had wood-fired heating. As for the bases, up until the twentieth century they came into being with the objects themselves – they were an integral part of them. Then there was a point when objects became what I call “dogs without collars” –

taken out of their context. A carved Gothic wooden panel is part of a chest, it's not made to be a panel. An African mask is made to be placed on a dancer's face or head. Once you start selling it, you are going to have to make it stand alone. Hence the appearance of the pedestal makers. The pedestal must disappear behind the object. Some pedestal makers tried to make bases that were too complicated. In that case, you stop seeing the object, you see the base. The base is like a frame, which must serve to present the painting, which is why some painters started creating their own frames. Speaking about Inagaki, the leading pedestal maker, Charles Ratton defined this process as follows: "He made it possible to sell objects by making them stand upright."

**MM: About Charles Ratton, how did you differ from someone like him?**

JR: Charles Ratton started out well before we did in shops where he presented a great variety of objects, then later he specialised in "primitive" arts and moved into an apartment in the rue de Marignan. In the early days we had a small stock of objects that Olivier Le Corneur owned and that he had decided to put into the common reserve. It was the same for me. To furnish our walls we hung up works by the painter Jean Deyrolle. Le Corneur ran the gallery and I travelled round France and abroad to find supplies. We specialised in what in those days people called "art nègre", plus pre-Hispanic American antiques and sculptures from Oceania, but also classical antiquities, archaeology, the Middle Ages.

**MM The last time you told me that in the 1950s you were one of the first to receive a big shipment of objects from Africa.**

JR My father was already receiving objects from Africa before the 1940 war. These were objects sent by Europeans, colonials. The quantities were relatively small and there had already been a selection. Before African independence it was sometimes difficult for an African to go from one land to another. After the independence things changed. The Africans took in hand the primitive art market. It was no longer the Europeans living over there who sent objects. After the 1940 war, those who were recognised as antiques dealers – Charles Ratton, Le Corneur and others – said, "There's nothing left in Africa." But this wasn't true, because it was only then that we started seeing the arrival of sculptures in unfamiliar styles, like the Dogon ones, Baga snakes and, later, pieces from Nigeria and other countries that were not so close to us.

**MM: Tell me more, if you would, about the role of African dealers in all this.**

JR One day an African came into our shop in the rue Bonaparte – this must have been in about 1955 – and said to us: "Are you interested in African objects? I am a student in Paris and I have a friend in Mali who has some." "Yes," we said, rather surprised. I remember Le Corneur saying to me: "Don't kid yourselves, there's nothing left in Africa." Three months went by and he came back to the gallery with a jute bag over his shoulder. He slung his bag down over his shoulder and we heard a cracking sound (it was a

stone floor). He opened the bag and took out some masks. They were Senufu masks from the Korhogo region. They weren't old but at the time we had dealings with decorators, particularly American ones, who were looking mainly for decorative objects. There were small masks, big masks, small statues, medium-size statues – about a dozen, maybe. We gave him an estimate for the small, the medium and the big ones. This was around 25 francs, 50 francs, 75 francs at the time. "I'll let my friend know," he said. Two months later he came back: "My friend agrees to your estimate." And he added. "How many do you want?" This question surprised us, and we asked him what kind of quantity he had in mind. "A hundred or a thousand?" he replied. We were so surprised by this answer that we didn't take him seriously. A little later I got a call from my wife. "Come to the apartment, quickly! There's a furore in the building. They have delivered crates, three of the things, and they are four cubic metres each." The marking on the crates simply said, "Sent by Mr Gouro Sow in Bamako." Three days later, I received a visit from a young man, Mr Gouro Sow, who had sent the crates. We got some tools and opened the crates. There weren't a thousand objects, there were only seven hundred and fifty. A lot of the masks were devoid of interest; there were three hundred decorative Senufu masks, two hundred decorative Senufu statuettes, but there was also a Kono mask that was later included in exhibitions, and a very fine pestle statue. There were one or two important pieces among this ensemble. We immediately sold all the decorative objects to clients from New York who came to see us, and we sold the others: the Kono mask to René Rasmussen, the statue to a Belgian collector, etc. These were the first deliveries. More shipments came after that, both for us and for our colleagues. Overwhelmed by these massive quantities, the sellers of African antiquities rented cellars in the buildings on the boulevard Saint Michel and other places where they used to stay and took delivery of the objects themselves. We went to call on them.

### MM Whom did they supply?

JR René Rasmussen, who had decided to "take up the torch," managed to keep going for three months but after that he had to give up because he was constantly being solicited by some African dealer. It was too much, there was more than he could sell. The dealers stopped coming to our galleries; we went directly to their delivery points.

### MM: Could you say where the objects came from in the 1960s?

JR: The objects came mainly from the Ivory Coast, Mali and Burkina Faso, countries with which France had particularly close ties.

### MM Did you have contacts with dealers and collectors in New York in the 1950s and 1960s?

JR In the 1950s and 60s the dealers who were in New York were mainly Europeans. America has always been irrigated by people coming from elsewhere. The dealers living in New York were Belgian, French, Indian, Syrian, Polish, Hungarian – Mathias Comore, Stanislas Séguéy, Klejman, Carlebach, Merton Simpson, and others.

## MM What kind of relations did you have with these dealers?

JR American antiques dealers had a different outlook than ours. Either they were looking for objects for the big museums or foundations, which was the case for Merton Simpson, and the case for Klejman, or they had merchandise that was more for university campuses and decorators, as was the case for Julius Carlebach and Stanislas Sechsi. Sechsi, who came from Hungary, was writing a book about African arts. When he published his book I gently remarked to him, "My dear friend, in your book you have put objects that in my opinion are fairly mediocre." He answered, "If I put in only masterpieces, then what am I going to sell?" All three were from Central Europe. However, Merton Simpson was an American black. French people, too, had settled there. There was a real American market, it was different, but we had very good relations with these dealers who came from elsewhere to replenish their stocks in France. I had a gallery at the time. I must have had about thirty African objects on show. Carlebach came to see me: "How much is that? How much is that?" I told him straight out and he asked, "How much for the whole lot?" As if he was buying out my stock. He came back the next day and I had sold an object. He said, "But I had reserved everything! In that case I don't want anything." It was all rather dodgy. He had never reserved anything and in fact I had never decided to sell him the whole lot. The bargaining would have been infernal. However, when we received the dealers who were sent by decorators we could sell them a hundred and fifty decorative objects. There were exchanges between Paris and Brussels. Especially Paris. For our part we went to Brussels to buy from the antiques dealers.

## MM What period was this?

JR The 1960s and 70s.

## MM Where did Brussels dealers get their supplies?

JR Mainly in the Belgian Congo. All the old colonials who had lived in Africa brought objects back. It was a market that was continuously supplied. There were leading merchants who had incredible stocks in Brussels. In the 1940s the objects were still authentic.

## MM What was the effect of the independence of the African countries on the circulation of objects?

JR Independence meant that Africans began travelling from one country to another whereas before they often lived under the rules of the "passport mask." An African from the Ivory Coast could not get into Togo or Mali as easily as one might imagine. The independence of African countries allowed the Dyula to travel around African countries, and they were the ones who brought the largest number of objects out of Africa, whereas before them it was a matter of chance, depending on the colonials living down there and gathering objects. With the independences, the Africans really took to trading.

## MM And where did they go to sell?

JR They went wherever they thought they'd find buyers. Depending on the market, sales prospects, the facilitation of imports, all kinds of factors. It's always the same thing. It depends on the climate. A museum can swell the number of clients, but objects become scarce, and pieces of art nègre are not so abundant. That's why this market will seize up. The market was extremely lively and important in the 1930s and the 1960s-70s because there were objects coming in from Africa and we were supplied directly.

## MM And what about now?

JR Now we have copies. When an object of interest is discovered in Africa it's sure to fetch a comfortable price from the start. There's one thing I'd like to say, and to insist on, which is that contrary to what certain Africans have said, we did not pillage Africa; we worked as curators of the ancient African heritage. Before the Europeans came, the Africans had their fetishes made by the blacksmith-sculptor. An object that was used could be burned if it was the rite, or was abandoned when it had served its purpose. There was no idea of conservation. Consequently what I shall call "animist-negro-African" production was constantly being renewed, and constantly being destroyed. We came to these countries and we saw these objects. We said, "These objects have an artistic interest" even before the museums were created. We collected them, exchanged and bought them, and sometimes took them, yes, it's true, but we saved them and out of all the things you will find around the world in museums of African civilisation nowadays, 80 per cent of these objects would have been destroyed. We acted as curators and not at all as pillagers. There is one exception, which is the English in Benin City; they took everything and left nothing, they went a bit far. But in the other cases it was travellers, people living locally, officials, the curious who acquired these objects in one way or another. "They got them for nothing," people will say. Yes, but at the time they acquired them, they were worth nothing. Before 1900–1910 a Pahuin fetish was worth 25 euros, not even. When the English sold the Benin bronzes in 1900 they were asking 50 cents and one pound sterling in the catalogues. It was later, precisely, that with the creation of museums publications caused these objects to be worth something. It's not always greed. We preserved Africa's heritage. When Africa tried to do it in our place and to create museums, sadly they were emptied in the month that followed. All the best objects in the IFAN museum in Dakar no longer exist. They were gradually sold off, and it's the same for the museum in Bamako, and the one in Libreville too. The museums that we Europeans created on-site grew gradually dilapidated, were pillaged if not abandoned and destroyed. So, for the artistic heritage to be preserved, it had to be brought out of the country.

## MM You can't put the Biafra and Katanga wars in that perspective, can you?

JR Yes, of course, there are exceptions to confirm the rule. During the war in Biafra we discovered stylistic centres we knew nothing about.

MM ... some of which came to Europe.

JR To Europa or America. They exist, they can be found. If you like, we could also say that all the Flemish objects that are in France were pillaged in Flanders, that all the Chinese objects were pillaged in China ... Art objects are made to travel. Today countries protect their art objects because they have realised that they are an economic and tourist asset. They have understood that tourists come to their countries to visit the museums. There is an epidemic of museums, even in France, in the provinces, museums are opening.

MM: What do you think about the current debate about returning cultural possessions to Africa, as announced by Emmanuel Macron?

J. R. You must see the objects for what they are. For objects taken during wartime, it should be considered. But to say that they were all acquired by foul means is untrue. To say that they were bought for nothing is untrue. The issue is distorted because it has been placed on a political and not an artistic level.

*Jean Roudillon (1923-2020) was an expert in the arts from Africa, Oceania and the Americas. He opened a gallery with Olivier Le Corneur in 1954 and has served as an expert for many sales of African art such as the Helena Rubinstein collection in 1966, Paul Guillaume's collection in 1965 or André Lhote's in 1979.*

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