

THE NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER VISION
ARTS OF AFRICA, OCEANIA, AND THE AMERICAS



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Summer 2014



THE NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER VISION
ARTS OF AFRICA, OCEANIA, AND THE AMERICAS

Alisa LaGamma, Joanne Pillsbury, Eric Kjellgren, and Yaëlle Biro



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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Front cover: *Queen Mother pendant mask (Iyoba)*, Edo peoples, Court of Benin, Nigeria, 16th century (fig. 7)

Inside front and back covers: detail of *Paintings from a ceremonial-house ceiling*, artists of Mariwai village, Kwoma people, Washkuk Hills, Upper Sepik River, Papua New Guinea, 1970 and 1973 (fig. 45)

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This *Bulletin* and the exhibition it accompanies, “The Nelson A. Rockefeller Vision: In Pursuit of the Best in the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas,” reflect on an extraordinary act of philanthropy that was also a catalyst for momentous change in the art world. In establishing the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA) in 1956—the precursor to what is today the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (AAOA) at the Metropolitan Museum—Nelson Rockefeller was a true pioneer, assembling what remains the greatest collection of fine art from these disparate fields. Perhaps even more important than this singular achievement, however, was Rockefeller’s long campaign to place his collection at the Metropolitan Museum as a gift to the city and to the world, which he finally achieved in 1969 after nearly forty years of effort.

Rockefeller’s gift carried the unequivocal message that artists from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas are equal in every respect to those of their peers across the globe and throughout history. Yet until that time there was, famously, skepticism in the Western art world on this point as well as resistance from earlier generations of Metropolitan directors in viewing non-Western art as part of the institution’s mission. Relying on his formidable powers of persuasion, Rockefeller eventually brokered an agreement to transfer the collections, staff, and library of the MPA to the Metropolitan, an astounding triumph that fundamentally changed the character of the Museum. Vast reaches of the globe were suddenly represented under this roof for the first time, and the Metropolitan’s collections became truly encyclopedic. Rockefeller’s prescience and tenacity led not only to the founding of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas but also to

the construction of the galleries in The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, opened to the public in 1982.

We take seriously our responsibility to build on the collection that Rockefeller helped create so that it will continue to reflect the ever-expanding canon of art in these diverse fields, which so appealed to Rockefeller’s imagination and intellect. The authors of this *Bulletin*, all current or former curators in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas—Alisa LaGamma, Ceil and Michael E. Pulitzer Curator in Charge; Joanne Pillsbury, Andrall E. Pearson Curator; Eric Kjellgren, former Evelyn A. J. Hall and John A. Friede Associate Curator; and Yaëlle Biro, assistant curator—examine the impetus behind Rockefeller’s collecting and underscore his passion for great art, no matter the source. Rockefeller also appreciated creative expression as a vehicle for connecting to and understanding the world at large. Ultimately, he wanted peoples across the planet to feel enfranchised through pride in being represented in one of the world’s most influential and remarkable cultural institutions. As we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Rockefeller’s founding of the Museum of Primitive Art, we pay tribute to his sense of adventure, his wonder, and his drive to learn about our fellow humans through their finest achievements. It has been a privilege for the Metropolitan to partner in that vision with Rockefeller and with his daughter, Mary Rockefeller Morgan, who continues to inspire as a steward of that legacy.

Thomas P. Campbell

Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Nelson A. Rockefeller Vision: In Pursuit of the Best in the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

Alisa LaGamma

Scion of one of the nation's most significant philanthropic families, Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller (1908–1979) is perhaps best remembered for his decades spent in the political spotlight. Elected to four consecutive terms as governor of the state of New York (1959–73), he was then appointed vice president under Gerald R. Ford and served from 1974 to 1977. Rockefeller was equally at home in the art world, however, and ultimately his greatest legacy may be his deeply felt advocacy for the arts of sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas (fig. 1). The Metropolitan Museum's rich and varied collections of these artistic traditions are regarded as canonical. They constitute such an integral part of the Metropolitan's mission as an encyclopedic museum, in fact, that few realize how their presence here is largely the legacy of Rockefeller's taste, tenacity, and vision.

Among the most formative influences that sparked Rockefeller's interests as a young man were his early travels

abroad and his mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1929. Abby Rockefeller's gallery within their home instilled in Nelson an appreciation not only for contemporary art but also for the African art forms that had influenced its development. In 1930, on graduating from Dartmouth College, Nelson joined the board of the Metropolitan Museum. Ironically, the catalyst for his mother and her close associates to establish MoMA had been the Metropolitan's evident lack of interest in avant-garde art. Her son, in turn, advocated at the Metropolitan for institutional engagement with another notable lacuna in the collection, Precolumbian art. Although Nelson's lobbying efforts on this front were thwarted by then-director Herbert E. Winlock, he was not deterred. Following in his mother's footsteps, and with the encouragement of his close friend and associate René d'Harnoncourt, Nelson went on to conceive the founding of a cultural organization devoted to the artistic traditions absent from the Metropolitan's collections.

Educated in Graz and Vienna, the urbane d'Harnoncourt (fig. 2) had moved to Mexico after World War I and developed a keen interest in Mexican folk art, a tradition he featured in a groundbreaking exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in 1930. In 1936 he was appointed general manager of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, and five years later he joined the Museum of Modern Art, eventually serving as its director (1949–67). D'Harnoncourt, who shared Rockefeller's enthusiasm for Precolumbian art, provided him with a methodology for assembling a collection of African and Oceanic art, and he served as cofounder and vice president of the pioneering institution they launched in 1954. The scope of this museological *Salon des Refusés* was vast, encompassing a diverse array of culturally distinct, non-Western art traditions. Initially baptized "The Museum of Indigenous Art" in its original charter, it was located in a town house adjoining Rockefeller's boyhood home, directly across from MoMA at 15 West 54th Street (fig. 3). Renamed the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA), from the outset the institution strove to study, collect, and exhibit the artistic traditions of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas as works of fine art rather than



1. "Rocky as a Collector," cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, May 18, 1969

approach them through an ethnographic or anthropological lens, the prevailing institutional tendencies that had long isolated those traditions from the larger history of art. This fundamental shift is underscored in the MPA's first press release, dated February 21, 1957. Acknowledging that museums of ethnology and "natural history have, of course, long shown these arts," Rockefeller continued:



They have done so primarily to document their studies of indigenous cultures. It is our purpose to supplement their achievement. However, we do not wish to establish primitive art as a separate kind of category, but rather to integrate it with all its amazing variety, into what is already known of the arts of man. Our aim will always be to select objects of outstanding beauty whose rare quality is the equal of works shown in other museums of art throughout the world, and to exhibit them so that everyone may enjoy them to the fullest measure.

Until that moment, interest in these traditions in the art world had focused entirely on their relationship to modernism. Art historian and critic Robert Goldwater's (fig. 4) path-breaking dissertation at Harvard University, "Primitivism and Modern Painting" (1938), charted the influence of African, Oceanic, and American precolonial traditions on twentieth-century art in the West. D'Harnoncourt recommended to Rockefeller that he recruit Goldwater, then a professor in the



2. René d'Harnoncourt, 1959

3. Museum of Primitive Art, ca. 1970



4. Robert Goldwater with Museum of Primitive Art staff member Barbara A. Brown and a Dogon male figure with raised arms, 1958

Department of Art History at Queens College, to be director of the Museum of Primitive Art. In this role, starting in 1956, Goldwater formulated a collection policy for the new museum and oversaw an extensive program of landmark exhibitions that introduced these traditions to the broader art world.

Rockefeller's desire to incorporate these distinct cultural traditions collectively into the mainstream of art history paralleled developments in the academy. During the same period, Paul S. Wingert, an art historian at Columbia University, was among the first generation of scholars to establish "primitive art" as a field of study. In his *Primitive Art, Its Traditions and Styles* (1962), Wingert analyzed and defined the scope of the artistic conventions developed by artists working in Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in language derived from the study of modern art. Yet this unwieldy

category was also being broken down into specific areas of specialization through George Kubler's fundamental scholarship on Precolumbian and Ibero-American art at Yale University, beginning in the 1940s, and Roy Sieber's 1957 dissertation at the University of Iowa, "African Tribal Sculpture," the first study in the United States focused on African art history.

Throughout his life Nelson Rockefeller was a passionate collector of art across many fields, but he was especially responsive to sculpture as a medium of expression, once noting, "My major interest was sculpture because plastic art to me has the greatest strength and vitality."¹ His collection of modern art, while extensive, was also highly personal. In contrast, his method for pursuing works from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas was systematic and professional. Early on



5. Page from René d'Harnoncourt's notebook "Catalogue and Desiderata—African Negro Art"



6. Deity figure (*Zemí*). Dominican Republic (?), Taíno, ca. 1000. Ironwood and shell; 27 x 8 5/8 x 9 1/8 in. (68.5 x 21.9 x 23.2 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.380)

d'Harnoncourt had devised for Rockefeller a method of assembling a comprehensive survey of regional artistic genres and advised him on which ones should be prioritized in notebooks titled "Catalogue and Desiderata." Each notebook was devoted to a different collecting area and included maps, bibliographies, and drawings of exemplary interpretations of artistic forms to be acquired for the collection (fig. 5). As articulated in the press release announcing the formation of the Museum of Primitive Art, Rockefeller approached this material first as fine art, emphasizing aesthetic quality above all else, a philosophy that would guide the MPA's collecting practices and define its mission as an institution. Put simply by Douglas Newton, an MPA curator and, later, first head of the Metropolitan's Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, "We look for quality within each element—the best of everything."

In 1954 a number of private individuals approached the Museum of Primitive Art about acquiring significant works from their collections. These offers came from as far afield as the United Kingdom, where the owner of an exceptionally important thousand-year-old Taíno deity figure proposed it "for the new primitive museum" (fig. 6). Beginning in 1957 Goldwater provided Rockefeller with a steady stream of carefully considered memoranda recommending purchases of African and Oceanic art, which he first reviewed with d'Harnoncourt. (The paucity of this kind of commentary on paper concerning acquisitions from the Americas may reflect the fact that decisions in this area occurred verbally between Rockefeller and d'Harnoncourt, or that Rockefeller was most personally engaged with this part of the collection.) Among the most expansive of these formal rationales was a proposal dated December 31, 1957, making the case for the acquisition of an ivory pendant mask from the Court of Benin, now among the Metropolitan Museum's most celebrated masterpieces (fig. 7). In his brief, Goldwater argued persuasively for the mask's superiority to the renowned and nearly identical example in the British Museum: "I believe this mask surpasses it in delicacy of workmanship and penetration of expression. It is thus the best object of its kind known, nor will any others ever turn up."² In speaking to its potential to transform the collection, Goldwater compared it to what was then one of the most recognizable works at the Museum of Modern Art, Henri Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy* (1897): "The purchase of this mask would give the Museum a permanent, primary attraction—a popular masterpiece. It is one of those objects that 'has to be seen' by scholars, art lovers, and the



7. *Queen Mother pendant mask (Iyoba)*. Edo peoples, Court of Benin, Nigeria, 16th century. Ivory, iron, and copper (?); 9⅞ x 5 x 3¼ in. (23.8 x 12.7 x 8.3 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972 (1978.412.323)

public alike. As René [d'Harnoncourt] has suggested, it is the kind of object that would . . . have to be put permanently on view; like the 'Sleeping Gypsy' of primitive art."

On September 17, 1958, the *New York Times* announced the Museum of Primitive Art's unveiling of the mask, which Rockefeller acquired for a record price. For Goldwater, this singular acquisition came to "crystallize a policy" that the MPA's mission be that of "a Museum organized around permanent exhibition galleries where outstanding masterpieces of each area will be continuously accessible to the public, and other galleries with changing exhibitions."

The following year Goldwater wrote to Rockefeller alerting him to the opportunity of acquiring works from the "legendary" collection of American-born British sculptor Sir Jacob Epstein before it was dispersed at auction. He



8. *Sculptural element from a reliquary ensemble: Head (The Great Bieri)*. Fang peoples, Betsi group, Gabon, 19th–early 20th century. Wood, metal, and palm oil; 18¼ x 9¾ x 6⅝ in. (46.5 x 24.8 x 16.8 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.229)

prioritized a single piece of inestimable importance: the sculptural element in the form of a head from a Fang reliquary ensemble, known as “The Great Bieri” (fig. 8), which in the preceding quarter century had become “a symbol of African art,” to use Goldwater’s phrase. A year later, a follow-up memo to Rockefeller, dated August 28, 1961, apprised him that Epstein’s collection was to be sold privately by Parisian dealer Charles Ratton and that the MPA and the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, Paris, would be given first pick. Goldwater urged Rockefeller to act on a list of five outstanding works, including the Great Bieri, and submitted the prices assigned to them by Ratton.

Goldwater celebrated the acquisition of the Great Bieri with a publication dedicated to this singular, renowned work of art, which opens with the following panegyric:

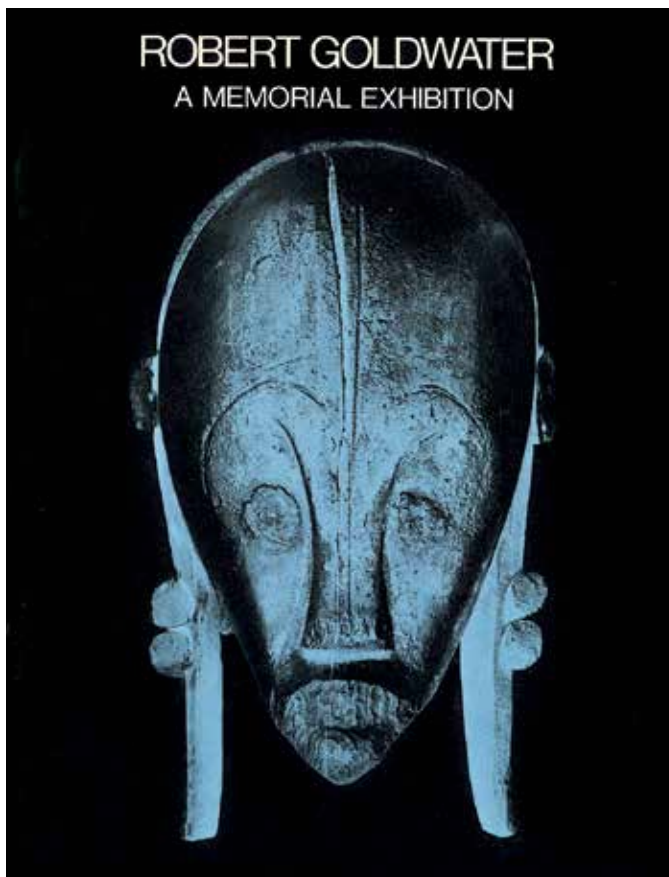
For every style, and every period, in the history of the arts of mankind, a few works stand out above the rest. Somehow they both contain and surpass all these qualities which we value in the art of the culture from which

they come. They seem to have captured the ideal of design and expression toward which many artists [have] tended. We refer to these works as classic examples of their kind, and they impress themselves upon our memory with a particular clarity. The GREAT BIERI is such a work: it is the embodiment of Fang sculpture, and one of the great classics of African art.³

So significant was this acquisition for Goldwater that, upon his death, the Great Bieri was featured on the front and back covers of the catalogue of a memorial exhibition organized in his honor, featuring twenty-seven works from the collection of African sculpture “in which Robert Goldwater personally took the greatest interest, as collector and scholar” (fig. 9).⁴

For Rockefeller, the works of art in his collection were inextricably linked to their places of origin, and he was always eager to learn more about them through travel to the source. Rockefeller’s first love was Precolumbian art, and beginning in the 1930s he traveled extensively in Mexico and Latin America, dedicating his energies to fostering economic development. Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt he was appointed to the newly created position of coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs (1940), and he later served as assistant secretary of state for the Office of American Republic Affairs (1944). Rockefeller took pride in the fact that by the end of his career, he had visited every nation in South and Central America save Paraguay.

Rockefeller believed that the Museum of Primitive Art had an important role to play in generating outreach and inspiring pride among the countries then emerging from colonialism and whose works were in its collection. He had first traveled to Africa on an ambitious multistop visit with his family in 1956, and on September 30, 1960, Rockefeller, by then governor of New York, led the U.S. delegation as President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s representative to the celebration of Nigerian independence. A highlight of that stay was time spent with archaeologist and curator Bernard Fagg at the National Museum in Lagos (see fig. 48). Directly upon Rockefeller’s return, the MPA considered organizing an exhibition “to contribute to Nigerian-American understanding and friendship.” Ultimately, it was decided to broaden the scope of the exhibition to include sixteen new African states represented in the collection, for a total of one hundred works of art. At the launch of the exhibition, “The Traditional Arts of Africa’s New Nations,” on May 16, 1961, the U.N. representatives from those states were invited to meet the press



9. Cover of *Robert Goldwater: A Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Museum of Primitive Art, 1973). Robert Goldwater Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



10. Opening reception for “The Traditional Arts of Africa’s New Nations,” May 16, 1961. Left to right: Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller; Adlai Stevenson, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; and Alhaji Muhammad Ngileruma, Nigerian ambassador to the United Nations

11. Michael C. Rockefeller, kneeling on ground with recording equipment, surrounded by a dance circle in the highlands of western New Guinea, 1961

along with Rockefeller and the American ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson (fig. 10). The ongoing transition from colonialism to independence was also marked by the loan of major African works to important exhibitions in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe), in 1962, and Dakar, Senegal, in 1966 (see Yaëlle Biro’s essay “The Museum of Primitive Art in Africa at the Time of Independence” on pp. 38–46). The exhibition in Dakar, “L’Art nègre: sources, évolution, expansion,” which later traveled to Paris, was held in conjunction with the First World Festival of Negro Arts, presided over by Senegalese president Léopold Sédar Senghor and featuring some twenty-three works from the MPA’s collection.

Nelson’s son Michael shared his father’s passion for non-Western art and served as a member of the MPA board. On his graduation from Harvard, in 1960, Michael participated in an expedition of the university’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology to record a documentary film in Papua New Guinea, where he stayed on to research and collect the art of the Asmat peoples (fig. 11). During a subsequent visit to the region, Michael had his life tragically cut short





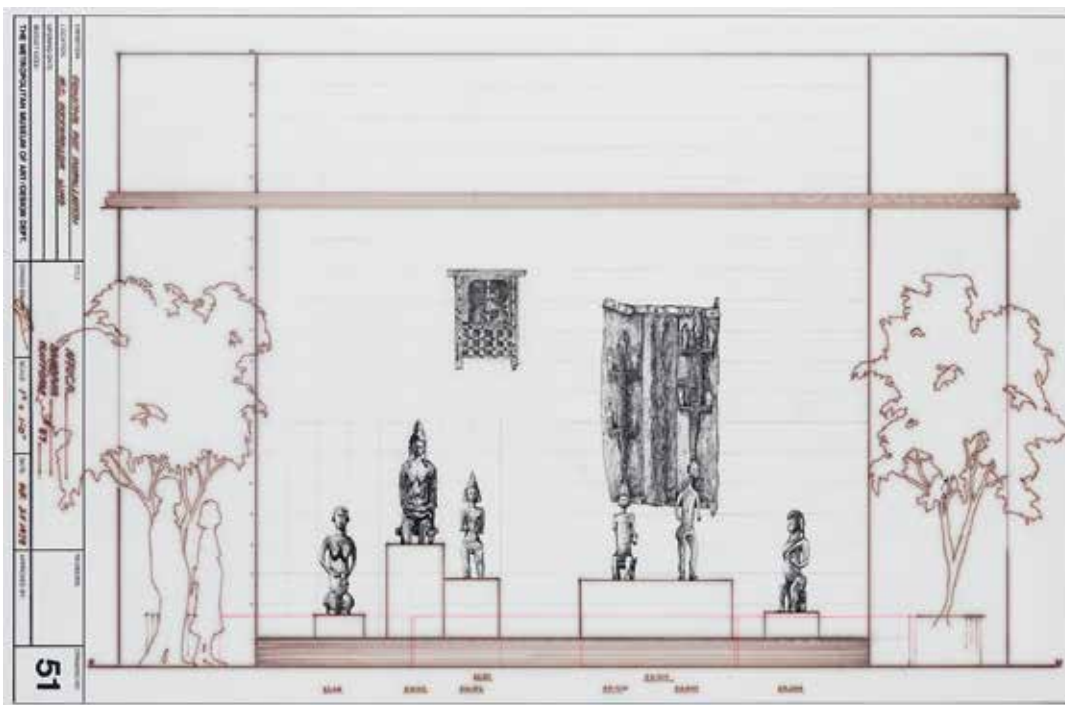
12. "The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea: Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller," at the Museum of Modern Art, 1962

when he disappeared during a boating accident. The more than six hundred works he gathered were first presented in the 1962 MPA exhibition "The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea: Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller," held at the Museum of Modern Art (fig. 12), and today are enshrined as his legacy in the Metropolitan Museum's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing.

For more than two decades, the MPA assembled the collection of record for art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Devoted to winning the hearts and minds of the public for these relatively obscure and unfamiliar artistic traditions, Nelson Rockefeller relied on his prominent public profile to draw attention to the art. He even underwrote the services of one of New York's early public-relations firms, Lobsenz and Company, Inc., to generate press coverage. In a 1960 report to Rockefeller summarizing her achievements that year, the firm's founder, Amelia Lobsenz, noted that she had secured two separate ten-minute spots on NBC's *Today Show* with David Garroway, illustrated stories in both *Newsweek* and *Time*, frequent coverage in the *New York Times*,

pieces in two issues of *Vogue*, and another feature in *Glamour*, along with various other initiatives to increase attendance. Throughout the MPA years, however, Rockefeller's ultimate goal—really the same goal he had nurtured since the beginning of his career—was to have the non-Western collection he was forming become part of the Metropolitan Museum. Accordingly, d'Harnoncourt, before his death, in 1968, assisted in brokering an agreement with Metropolitan director Thomas Hoving to create a new department within the Met that would encompass not only the holdings of the MPA but also Rockefeller's personal collections. In a letter to Rockefeller dated December 8, 1967, d'Harnoncourt broke the news:

Two days ago I had a long meeting with Tom Hoving and am surprised and delighted to report a marked improvement in the Met's attitude to our proposal. First of all, Tom definitely invited us to give a major exhibition of the Collection of the Museum of Primitive Art



13. Nelson A. Rockefeller at the press conference announcing the donation of the Museum of Primitive Art collections to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 10, 1969

14. Architectural rendering of the gallery of African art in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, 1979–80

15. Gallery of African art in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, July 1982

at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1970 when they expect to have a gala year celebrating their one hundredth anniversary. . . . Tom also implied to me that he had spoken to a number of Trustees and had found considerable interest in providing space for the Collection of the MPA.

On the original copy of this letter, among Rockefeller's papers at the Rockefeller Archive Center, are extensive annotations by its recipient, including the word "excellent" written next to this news.

On May 10, 1969, an exhibition of works from the Museum of Primitive Art opened at the Metropolitan, formally introducing the Met's audience to the Rockefeller "primitive" collections. Titled "Art of Oceania, Africa, and the Americas from the Museum of Primitive Art," it included eight hundred works, displayed in more than seventeen rooms, and was described at the time as "the most important exhibition of primitive art ever held." The audio tour featured an introduction narrated by Governor Rockefeller himself:

My own interest is purely aesthetic. The beauty and fascination of form, texture, color, and shape provide

never-ending delight and excitement. Whatever we can learn about the art displayed in these galleries, the objects themselves transcend all explanation. In that sense they are like all works of art, and it is appropriate that they be looked at among other supreme artistic achievements of the world.

During the press conference for the opening (fig. 13), Rockefeller announced that the entire collection of the Museum of Primitive Art would be integrated into that of the Metropolitan, finally bringing to fruition his ambition from nearly forty years before. When the Museum of Primitive Art closed, in December 1974, its 3,500 works of art as well as its library and much of its staff were transferred to the Metropolitan, a process of assimilation that culminated in the completion of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing eight years later. Sadly, Rockefeller died before the wing dedicated to the memory of his son was opened to the public, in January 1982 (figs. 14, 15).

If we look back on this extraordinary act of generosity in terms of basic numbers, Nelson Rockefeller gave to the Metropolitan Museum 417 works from Africa, 1,068 from Oceania, and 1,054 from the Americas, an incomparable







foundation on which to build for the future. Indeed, today the collection has grown to 11,768 works of art, including 2,592 from Africa, 2,616 from Oceania, and 6,458 from the Americas, and it continues to be added to, often in fortuitous new directions. The final item on Goldwater's short list of standouts from the Epstein collection, for example, was a sculpture of a couple from Madagascar, the summit of a ritual post originally positioned at the center of a Malagasy village. "This is a supplementary recommendation," he wrote to Rockefeller. "Its price is high. However, it is unique, extremely well-known, and far and away the best example of its style. There will never be another similar object. It too would be a 'symbolic' addition to our collections." When Rockefeller elected to pass on the sculpture, which was offered at the same price as the Great Bieri, it was acquired by famed collector Carlo Monzino. Nearly half a century later, in 2001, the Metropolitan purchased the work from the Monzino heirs, filling a significant gap in the collection with an outstanding icon from that tradition (fig. 16).

Although across much of sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and the Americas the textile arts are a major form of expression, Rockefeller's personal affinity for the idiom of sculpture meant that those two-dimensional traditions were not always the highest priority for him. Expanding the Metropolitan's collection in this area has thus been a goal over the last decade in order to provide a more balanced appreciation of regional creativity. William Goldstein donated Central African textiles and championed enrichment of the Museum's collection of African textiles with exceptional examples (fig. 17). These contributions were complemented in the Oceanic area by early Indonesian textiles given by Anita Spertus and Robert Holmgren (fig. 18) as well as by Fred and Rita Richman.

By broadening its scope to embrace new artistic genres, the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan has revisited the MPA's original conceptual emphasis on "transformative" masterpieces: works, it was believed, that epitomize creative expression in a given tradition and distill it in a single, exemplary artistic interpretation. For example, in 1967 the MPA had deaccessioned at

16. *Couple*. Sakalava peoples, Menabe region, Madagascar, 17th–late 18th century. Wood and pigment; H. 39 in. (99.1 cm). Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Daniel and Marian Malcolm, and James J. Ross Gifts, 2001 (2001.408)

17. *Ceremonial skirt (Ntchak)*. Kuba peoples, Bushoong group, Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th century. Raffia palm fiber and natural dyes; 167 x 26 in. (424.2 x 66 cm). Rogers Fund, 2004 (2004.254)



18. *Ceremonial banner (Palepai Maju)*. Lampung, Indonesia, probably 18th century. Fiber, ceramic and glass beads, cloth, and nassa shells; 162 x 48½ in. (411.5 x 123.2 cm). Gift of Anita E. Spertus and Robert J. Holmgren, in honor of Douglas Newton, 1990 (1990.335.28)

Detail of fig. 18 showing beadwork



auction a critical mass of works, including, unfortunately, a monumental sculptural couple from Côte d'Ivoire that reflected the ideal of male-female duality underlying Senufo society and religious practice.⁵ This sculpture, so the argument went, was redundant alongside the exceptional single male figure from another Senufo pairing (fig. 19), also in the collection, and should be sold to generate funds for new acquisitions. The shortcomings of that strategy became all too evident once the MPA collection had been folded into the Metropolitan's deep bench of Western art. Today, rather than arbitrarily designate a single creation as a definitive landmark, we take for granted that an art-historical collection ideally should embrace the plurality of interpretative approaches that artists in a given tradition have developed in response to a particular movement.

Sixty years after the founding of the Museum of Primitive Art, Nelson Rockefeller's pioneering vision that art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas might occupy a key place at the Metropolitan has come full circle. Just as Rockefeller's generosity allowed what he considered a great institution to fulfill the promise of its mission, we aspire to the continued development of a truly encyclopedic collection that at once expands and deepens our understanding of this vast and highly diverse canon of artistic traditions.



19. *Male Poro figure (Pombia)*. Senufo peoples, Tyebara group, Lataha, Département de Korhogo, Région des Savanes, Côte d'Ivoire, 19th–mid-20th century. Wood; $42\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{7}{8} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$ in. (108 x 22.4 x 26.7 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.315)

The Pan-American: Nelson Rockefeller and the Arts of Ancient Latin America

Joanne Pillsbury

In the late 1930s, an energetic young trustee of the Metropolitan Museum argued passionately that ancient American art—sculptures, ceramic vessels, textiles, and ornaments of the Precolumbian cultures of Latin America—should be included in the Museum’s exhibitions. Despite the acquisition of Precolumbian works of art shortly after the founding of the Metropolitan, in 1870, by 1914 the Museum had decided that such works were more appropriate in the context of a natural history museum. As a result, the ancient American collection was sent across Central Park to the American Museum of Natural History, as a long-term loan, and later another set of objects went to the Brooklyn Museum. That young trustee, Nelson A. Rockefeller, would ultimately prevail in his quest to have Precolumbian works viewed as fine art at the Metropolitan Museum, but victory would come only some forty years later.

By his own account, Rockefeller’s interest in Precolumbian art began on a vacation in Mexico in 1933. Drawn there by his fascination with Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, he immersed himself in the study of the region’s ancient and contemporary art. Exposure to Maya ruins and other remains of the pre-Hispanic past in Mexico was the beginning of what would become a lifelong passion. On his return to New York, Rockefeller tried to interest the Metropolitan in cosponsoring, with the American Museum of Natural History, a series of archaeological expeditions. The Museum’s rejection of the plan only increased his keen desire, and Rockefeller set out to accomplish these goals on his own.⁶

The groundwork for Nelson’s engagement with Mexican art was laid in part by his mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and an avid collector with broad-ranging interests, including African, modern European, and folk art. She, too, was an admirer of Diego Rivera, and in 1931 she had organized an exhibition of his work at MoMA. Nelson, who also served on MoMA’s board, promoted the selection of Rivera to paint a mural at Rockefeller Center, a commission that came to a famously disastrous end when the artist added a portrait of Lenin to the composition. Rockefeller tried to



20. Nelson A. Rockefeller with Mary Todhunter Clark Rockefeller, Winthrop Rockefeller, and others in Curaçao, off the coast of Venezuela, 1937

dissuade Rivera from including it in the final version, but Rivera refused. Anxious to broker a compromise, Rockefeller suggested relocating the mural to MoMA, but this, too, was to no avail, and the mural was destroyed in 1934.⁷

Until the late 1930s Rockefeller’s relatively limited engagement with Precolumbian art was an outgrowth of his interest in the affinity of modern artists for what was often called “primitive” art. But after 1937 his involvement in Latin America grew, along with his fascination with the artistic traditions of the region. Drawn by family business to Venezuela that year (fig. 20), he visited other countries in Latin America during the two-month trip, including Peru, where the “tremendous archaeological richness fired [his] imagination and interest.”⁸ Rockefeller was entranced by Peru’s textile traditions, both ancient and modern. In Cuzco he purchased “vast armloads” of weavings, and in Lima, through his acquaintance with the noted Peruvian archaeologist Julio C. Tello, he viewed some of the world’s most spectacular ancient textiles.⁹ Tello and his colleagues had recently recovered some four hundred mummy bundles from a necropolis in the Paracas Peninsula, south of Lima. The mummy bundles, now known to date to the second half of the first millennium B.C., contained the remains of individuals enveloped in layers of

textiles. The finest examples were garments woven with richly saturated colors, often with intricate embroidery over the weaving. The bundles were stored in poor conditions in Lima, however, and Rockefeller threw his support behind Tello's efforts to conserve and properly house them. In return, Rockefeller was given four of the mummy bundles, which he brought back to New York with the intention of giving them to the Metropolitan. But having no curator with the expertise to look after them, the Metropolitan declined the gift, and they were delivered to the American Museum of Natural History.¹⁰

Knowing that the Metropolitan had supported archaeological research in Egypt, Rockefeller hoped to interest the Museum in developing fieldwork in Latin America as well. Instead, his support was channeled through the Institute of Andean Research, an advisory body founded in 1937 by archaeologists based at several institutions, including the American Museum of Natural History. In addition to providing financial support for projects in Peru, Rockefeller later supported Alberto Ruz Lhuillier's excavations at the Maya site of Palenque, in Chiapas, Mexico. His contributions, which supplemented funding from the Mexican government, led to spectacular new insights into Maya culture, including

the discovery in 1948 of the tomb of the Maya ruler K'inich Janaab' Pakal. In later years Rockefeller further supported archaeological research through exhibitions, including one in 1966 on recent findings at Tikal in Guatemala.

Among Rockefeller's first acquisitions of Precolumbian art were modest ceramic vessels from coastal Peru and a number of Peruvian textiles. He lent the latter to the Peruvian general consul for exhibition at Peru's pavilion at the 1939–40 New York World's Fair. While there is some evidence that Rockefeller acquired several effigy bottles from the Moche and Chimú cultures in 1938, according to his own recollections he purchased his first Precolumbian works of art in Buenos Aires in 1939, including a Nasca ceramic bowl with a band of lizards painted in ceramic slip around the exterior (fig. 21).¹¹ The Nasca culture, now known to have flourished on the coast of Peru south of Lima in the first six centuries A.D., had only recently been identified at the time of the acquisition, and aerial photography—pioneered in Peru by Robert Shippee and George Johnson—had just begun to reveal the extent of the monumental geoglyphs created on the coastal desert by the Nasca peoples. With their bright slip-painted designs of desert fauna, the small bowls were thus part of the rich, newly revealed history of the ancient Americas.



21. *Bowl*. Nasca culture, Peru, 1st–4th century. Ceramic; H. 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (6 cm), Diam. 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (16.5 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1105)

But Rockefeller saw such objects not just as testaments to history but as works of art in their own right. Along with the diplomat and collector Robert Woods Bliss, Rockefeller fought for the recognition of Precolumbian art as *art* with aesthetic merit rather than as specimens more suitable for a natural-history museum.¹² Bliss, a generation older than Rockefeller, was an ally in the belief in Pan-American unity—the strengthening of hemispheric ties in the face of the spread of European fascism at the outbreak of World War II—and later a rival in collecting Precolumbian art. Both had faith in art as a key component of diplomacy and worked together on initiatives of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, a wartime body devoted to public diplomacy across the Americas. Bliss was adamant that his own collection of ancient American art be seen as fine art, first at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, in 1942, and later at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where it was on rotating display from 1947 until 1962.

Elected president of the board of trustees of the Museum of Modern Art in 1940, Rockefeller became closely involved that year with the exhibition “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art,” a sweeping survey of thousands of years of Precolumbian, colonial, modern, and folk art organized with the Mexican government. As with MoMA’s earlier exhibition “American Sources of Modern Art” (1933), the Precolumbian world was viewed through a modernist lens. The exhibition downplayed aspects of Precolumbian culture that may have been distasteful to U.S. audiences, such as human sacrifice, and instead promoted the Precolumbian world as part of a common legacy for all Americans across the hemisphere. In the wake of the exhibition, Rockefeller tried to persuade MoMA to acquire the folk and indigenous arts of the New World, a desire fulfilled only through a series of temporary exhibitions organized into the early 1950s. “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” was crucial in other ways, however. Intended in part to foster deeper ties with Mexico at a time of tension over Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas’s expropriation of foreign oil companies operating in his country, the exhibition was a harbinger of Rockefeller’s remarkable efforts in public diplomacy in Latin America during the war years.¹³

By 1940 Rockefeller had spent a considerable amount of time in Latin America in pursuit of his family’s interests in the oil industry and related businesses, and he was increasingly comfortable in the Spanish language as well as with Latin American culture in general. He had grown concerned, however, about the possible destabilization of the region

upon the outbreak of war in Europe, which he feared would disrupt the usual flow of trade and make Latin America increasingly vulnerable to incursions of European fascism. In 1940 President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Rockefeller, just thirty-two at the time, coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs: a new government body, independent of the Department of State, that was intended to foster economic development in the region and strengthen a sense of common heritage and purpose across the hemisphere. Cultural exchange was a key aspect of the office, and Rockefeller was resourceful in developing public-private initiatives and exchanges of cultural figures, from university professors to Hollywood producers.¹⁴ His efforts were greeted initially with dismay by the Department of State, but ultimately his approach became influential in future U.S. forays in public diplomacy.¹⁵

Strategic interests, such as the development of transportation infrastructures—rail systems and airstrips, essential in case of an expansion of the war’s hostilities—were clearly an important component of his new post, but Rockefeller also demonstrated a genuine concern regarding what he saw as a lack of cultural understanding between the United States and Latin America. From his first experiences in Venezuela,



22. Nelson A. Rockefeller and Frida Kahlo at Tizapán, home of the artists Miguel and Rosa Covarrubias, outside Mexico City, 1943

where he had discovered that most foreign oil company employees neither learned Spanish nor made attempts to integrate within the broader communities in which they worked, Rockefeller fought against a prevailing ignorance and mistrust between the United States and Latin America.¹⁶ The cultural initiatives were not all critically acclaimed,¹⁷ but overall the program was successful in increasing awareness of cultural traditions between regions, if not true understanding. As part of his job, Rockefeller traveled widely in Latin America between 1941 and 1945, working intimately with political and business leaders but also forging close ties with artists and intellectuals, establishing friendships that endured for years (fig. 22).¹⁸

One of the fortuitous benefits of Rockefeller's work on "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art" was that he met René d'Harnoncourt, a Viennese chemist turned curator who had assembled a notable collection of folk art while living in Mexico in the late 1920s. The two became close friends after 1944 through their work at the Museum of Modern Art, where d'Harnoncourt eventually became director. Prior to Rockefeller's friendship with d'Harnoncourt, his collecting interests in the Precolumbian field were enthusiastic but relatively modest; acquisitions were made as opportunities arose, often in the course of his travels. With the war winding down Rockefeller had more time to devote to his collection, and in d'Harnoncourt he now had a deeply knowledgeable adviser. In later years Rockefeller described his interest in art as "an [a]esthetic experience . . . not an intellectual one."¹⁹ D'Harnoncourt not only gave Rockefeller's growing collection direction and shape, he developed lists of desiderata, including detailed drawings and photographs of particularly good examples of certain types of sculptures. But the final decisions always lay with Rockefeller, whose visceral response to works of art was palpable. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, remarked that "Nelson needs art more than any man I know. Works of art give him a deep, almost therapeutic delight and refreshment."²⁰

Well aware of modern artists' affinity for other-than-Western art, Rockefeller made selections of Precolumbian objects that often dovetailed with the collecting habits of artists such as Henry Moore and Diego Rivera. Among his earliest acquisitions of Mexican sculpture, for example, were stone figures from Guerrero, characterized by clean, strong lines and minimal detail.²¹ In 1951 Rockefeller acquired a group of forty ceramic figurines from Esther Scheinman, who had once worked with the New York antiquarian Joseph



23. *Female figurine*. Chupicuaro, Central Mexico, 3rd century B.C.–A.D. 4th century. Ceramic and pigment; H. 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (11 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.966)

Brummer. Said to be from sites in the Valley of Mexico, these figurines (fig. 23) are now known to be more than two thousand years old and of great importance for understanding the development of complex society in ancient Mexico. Such modest works had been of little interest until the 1930s, when artists such as Rivera and Miguel Covarrubias began to rescue them from sites rapidly being built over as Mexico City expanded outward.

By the late 1940s Rockefeller was making major acquisitions in Precolumbian art. He purchased works largely from New York-based dealers, including Julius Carlebach and John Wise, but he also patronized the Los Angeles gallery of Earl Stendahl, a rising West Coast dealer of both Precolumbian

and modern art. In addition, Rockefeller acquired pieces from individuals, such as the archaeologist and art historian Herbert Spinden and the artist-dealer William Spratling. Beyond his long-standing relationship with d'Harnoncourt, Rockefeller was advised in these purchases by two archaeologists from the American Museum of Natural History—Junius Bird on South America and Gordon Ekholm on Mexico and Central America—who served as “consulting fellows” and were on call for advice as the need arose.

Exhibitions are often catalysts in the formation of collections, and by 1953, when Rockefeller's collection was shown at the venerable Century Association in New York, his had finally come of age (fig. 24). The exhibition, titled “Primitive Sculpture from the Collection of Nelson A. Rockefeller,” was in many ways the foundation for the development of the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA), which would be chartered the following year. While d'Harnoncourt, by then director of the Museum of Modern Art, had continued to organize exhibitions of Precolumbian art there—including the 1954 “Ancient Arts of the Andes,” with loans from Rockefeller—both Rockefeller and d'Harnoncourt felt that it was time for a new institution dedicated to the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Initially called the Museum of Indigenous Art, the new institution was later renamed the Museum of Primitive Art because Rockefeller and the trustees felt too many people would associate the word “indigenous” with “indigent.”²² Still smarting from the Metropolitan's decision decades earlier to exclude Precolumbian art from its holdings, Rockefeller was deliberate in defining the purview of the MPA as “the important art forms not included in the Met's cognizance of the past.”²³

The Museum of Primitive Art was housed in a Beaux-Arts town house adjacent to Rockefeller's boyhood home, directly across the street from the Museum of Modern Art. The gray stone facade, with its bow window, was left unchanged, but the interiors were converted into simple, minimalist spaces (fig. 25). Rockefeller's growing collection, by then totaling some five hundred objects, was its core, but the new institution soon attracted major gifts, including a sumptuous feathered tabard from the south coast of Peru, given by John Wise in 1956 (fig. 26). The tabard, a garment probably once worn by a local lord in the centuries just before the rise of the Inca Empire, displays hallmarks of what would later become imperial iconography, such as the chevron pattern and llamas, intricately rendered by stitching thousands of bird feathers to a cotton backing.

The first exhibitions at the Museum of Primitive Art encompassed works from all three of its major collecting areas: Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (fig. 27). As the collection grew, and expertise in these fields developed, more specialized exhibitions were planned. Wide-ranging exhibitions of Precolumbian gold (1958–59), stone sculpture of Mexico (1959), and textiles of ancient Peru (1963) gave way to increasingly scholarly investigations reflecting developments in archaeology. The 1963–64 exhibition “Art of Empire: The Inca of Peru,” organized by Julie Jones, was the first in the Western Hemisphere to feature the art of one of



24. “Primitive Sculpture from the Collection of Nelson A. Rockefeller” at the Century Association, New York, 1953

25. “Selected Works from the Collection” at the Museum of Primitive Art, 1957



26. *Feathered tabard*. Far south coast, Peru, 13th–14th century. Cotton and feathers; 44½ x 49 in. (113 x 124.5 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of John Wise, 1956 (1978.412.20)

27. Nelson A. Rockefeller and Robert Goldwater standing by a display case with Precolumbian textiles at the Museum of Primitive Art, spring 1958

the world's great ancient states. One highlight of the show, which drew from public and private collections in New York as well as museums in the United States, Europe, and Latin America, was a small silver female figurine, complete with her original woolen garments, that had been found a decade earlier atop Chile's Cerro el Plomo, deposited by the Inca at nearly 18,000 feet above sea level.

Rockefeller's collecting may have begun modestly, but by the 1960s it occasionally took a spectacular turn, including the acquisition of two exceptional Maya sculptures in 1962.





28. *Mirror-bearer*. Maya culture, Guatemala or Mexico, 6th century. Wood and red hematite; $14\frac{1}{8} \times 9 \times 9$ in. (35.9 x 22.9 x 22.9 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1063)



29. *Relief with enthroned ruler*. Maya culture, Guatemala or Mexico, 8th century. Limestone and paint; 35 x 34½ x 2¾ in. (88.9 x 87.6 x 7 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1047)

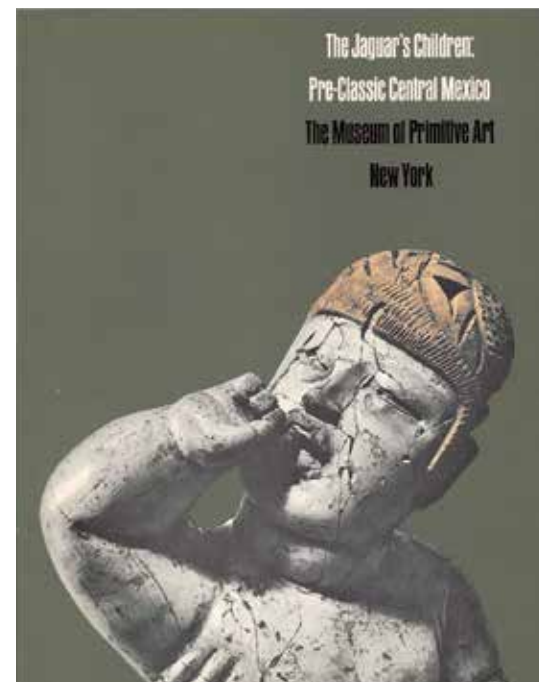
The first, a wood seated figure that possibly represents a Maya lord's dwarf, who once held a mirror, is a unique testament to a sculptural tradition that rarely survives in the tropical climate of the Maya region of Mexico and Guatemala (fig. 28). The second, a relief panel with vestiges of its polychrome painting, gives viewers a sense of the original appearance of Maya stone sculpture (fig. 29). Three years later, Rockefeller's acquisitions of Olmec ceramics prompted the

groundbreaking exhibition "The Jaguar's Children: Pre-Classic Central Mexico." The Olmec, the earliest of Mexico's great civilizations, flourishing in the first millennium B.C., was paradoxically the last to be recognized by archaeologists. The exhibition thus captured the tangible excitement of archaeological discovery just as it was beginning to unfold the complex history of Olmec culture. One of Rockefeller's prized acquisitions, a striking seated figure in ceramic with its



30. *Seated figure*. Olmec culture (Las Bocas), Mexico, 12th–9th century B.C. Ceramic and pigment; 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (34 x 31.8 x 14.6 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1134)

31. Cover of *The Jaguar's Children: Pre-Classic Central Mexico* (New York: Museum of Primitive Art, 1965)



hand raised to its mouth (fig. 30), was featured on the cover of the accompanying exhibition catalogue (fig. 31).

Despite the Museum of Primitive Art's many successes, in the late 1960s Rockefeller returned to his quest to find a permanent home for the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the years since the Metropolitan's indefinite loan of Precolumbian material to the American Museum of Natural History, in 1914, the Museum had made a number of desultory attempts to include Precolumbian art in a sustained way in its programs, but such efforts were generally characterized as reflecting a

"lack of interest."²⁴ Most of the Precolumbian collections, nominally under the care of the American Wing, continued in their indefinite residencies at the American Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Museum, although Precolumbian Peruvian textiles, many donated by George Pratt and housed in the Textile Department, remained at the Metropolitan through the century.²⁵ D'Harnoncourt's 1967 agreement with director Thomas Hoving created a department at the Metropolitan dedicated to these fields, one whose core holdings would consist of Rockefeller's personal collection as well as those of the Museum of Primitive Art.

D'Harnoncourt immediately began planning an exhibition of the MPA's collection at the Metropolitan, but he did not live to see either its opening, in 1969, or the announcement of the transfer of the MPA's staff and its collection of some 3,500 works (fig. 32). D'Harnoncourt's unexpected death was a blow to Rockefeller, who described his collecting activities with d'Harnoncourt as among the happiest and most rewarding endeavors of his life.²⁶ Yet even as the pace of Rockefeller's acquisitions slowed measurably, he was still able to pull off one last coup before the transfer occurred: a group of ancient Peruvian objects made of gold, silver, and copper (as well as complex combinations of those metals) known as the Loma Negra find, ornaments that most likely belonged to a high-level lord buried on Peru's north coast around A.D. 400 (fig. 33).

In what must have been a particularly gratifying moment for Rockefeller, one of the last exhibitions at the Museum of Primitive Art before it closed was a show of Precolumbian works from the Metropolitan Museum's collections, largely unseen since 1914. Some forty years after his first campaign to include Precolumbian art at the Museum, Rockefeller's wish had finally come true. More than that, with the opening of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing in 1982, the Metropolitan



32. Nelson A. Rockefeller viewing Maya objects at the press conference announcing transfer of the Museum of Primitive Art collections to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 1969

Museum's collection of ancient American art, remarkable for its depth and quality, became a touchstone for our understanding of these great traditions.



33. *Pair of ear flares*. Moche culture (Loma Negra), 390–450. Silver, gold, gilded copper, and shell; Diam. 4 in. (10 cm), 4 1/4 in. (10.8 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1245, .1246)

Returning to the Source: Michael C. Rockefeller, Douglas Newton, and the Arts of Oceania

Eric Kjellgren

One of the most distinctive facets of the history of the Museum of Primitive Art's collection of Oceanic art is the extent to which many of its most prominent works were acquired not on the art market but directly from their original source, the island of New Guinea. This was undertaken by two individuals who, apart from Nelson Rockefeller himself, were the most pivotal figures in the formation of the museum's Oceanic collection: Nelson's son Michael C. Rockefeller, who collected and documented the arts of the Asmat region in 1961, and Douglas Newton, the first curator and later director of the MPA, who made a series of collecting trips to the Sepik River region beginning in 1964.

New Guinea, situated directly north of Australia, is home to more than eight hundred different peoples and a greater profusion of art traditions than any other Pacific island. With the notable exception of the Asmat region, many coastal areas of the island had been in contact with the West since the late nineteenth century. Much of the interior, however, remained sparsely contacted and explored by outsiders until after World War II, and it was not until the 1950s that the Dutch, who controlled the western half of the island, including the Asmat region, and the Australians, who governed the eastern half, including the Sepik River region, began to exert colonial control over many of the interior's peoples. In the process, they outlawed the customary warfare that formed the impetus for many of the island's sculptural traditions. These government pacification programs, combined with the increasing success of missionaries in converting many groups to Christianity, resulted in large numbers of works, no longer in use in their original contexts, becoming available for collection and entering the art market. Some of these art forms, including the spectacular hook figures of the Korewori River region (fig. 34), which the Museum of Primitive Art was among the earliest institutions to acquire, were previously unknown in the West and today are considered among the most iconic masterworks of Oceanic sculpture.

Thus, by the beginning of the 1960s, opportunities remained to acquire important works representing many of New Guinea's outstanding sculptural traditions either directly



34. *Figure (Yipwon)*. Yimam people, Korewori River, Middle Sepik region, Papua New Guinea, 19th century. Wood and paint; 96 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 5 x 9 in. (245.7 x 12.7 x 22.9 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972 (1978.412.732)

from their source communities or from the increasing number of Western traders, missionaries, and colonial officials who began to visit even the remotest areas of the island in search of pieces for the art market. It was to this recently opened and comparatively brief window of opportunity to collect highly significant works of art—as well as information on their imagery, contexts, and uses in situ—that first Michael Rockefeller and then Douglas Newton turned their attention.

Born in 1938, Michael Rockefeller (fig. 35) grew up, by his father's account, "surrounded by not only Modern Art but by Primitive Art," and, as a teenager in the 1950s, he regularly accompanied his father on visits to dealers and galleries in New York. In 1959, while still an undergraduate at Harvard (where he majored in history), Michael became a trustee of the Museum of Primitive Art. He graduated the following year, and in 1961 he joined the Harvard-Peabody New Guinea Expedition as a photographer and sound technician. Led by filmmaker Robert Gardner, the expedition sought to record the life and, in particular, warfare of the Dani people of the Baliem Valley, in the highlands of western New Guinea. Arriving in April, Michael recorded the sound that accompanied Gardner's footage of the Dani for what became the 1963 documentary film *Dead Birds*, still considered a classic of anthropological filmmaking, and shot more than four thousand black-and-white and numerous color photographs.²⁷ But the Dani, like nearly all highland New Guinea peoples, had no significant tradition of wood sculpture, and Michael was intent on collecting such works for the Museum of Primitive Art. Accordingly, he temporarily left the expedition for three weeks in June and July, accompanied by his college friend Samuel Putnam, and journeyed to the island's southwest coast with the purpose of acquiring objects from the Asmat people, among New Guinea's most prolific and accomplished wood sculptors.

At the time of Rockefeller's visit to the Asmat region, the Dutch, who briefly opened an administrative post in the area in 1938 (it closed three years later following the outbreak of World War II in the Pacific), had only just begun to reestablish control of the area, reopening the post in 1953. In that same year the first Catholic missionaries arrived and founded a mission station.²⁸ Venturing there only eight years later, Rockefeller encountered the Asmat at a time when many of their art traditions either were ongoing or had only recently ceased, and many master carvers were still active. Indeed, Western influences on Asmat culture were so limited that the Asmat had not yet adopted the use of money; virtually all



35. Michael C. Rockefeller, 1961

the works Rockefeller collected were thus purchased not with cash but with trade goods such as tobacco, metal axes, knives, and other imported items. In a typescript of his journal from his first trip, now in the Archive of the Museum of Primitive Art, Rockefeller frequently noted the types of goods he exchanged for specific objects and the names of the artists who had made them, as in this entry from June 29, 1961, from the village of Omadesep:

(27) Prow ornament by Terepos . . . (1½ Lempang [an Indonesian unit of trade] tobacco)

(28) Tortoise—(4 arm lengths of nylon line and one large fish hook) by Pechur

During his initial visit Rockefeller was based in the village of Amanamkai, where he and Putnam stayed with Dutch anthropologist Adrian Gerbrands, of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, who was conducting research with the

resident master carvers. From there the two traveled by canoe, together with Gerbrands and Dutch government anthropologist René Wassing, to collect works in the surrounding villages, bringing with them the necessary supplies of trade goods (fig. 36).²⁹ Having been cautioned before his departure by MPA director Robert Goldwater that a “long line of collectors” had already passed through the area and that there might be little left to acquire—an opinion likely based on information from American medical researcher Carleton Gajdusek, who had briefly visited the Asmat region—Rockefeller discovered otherwise. His determination not only to collect but also to document the works he acquired was almost certainly strengthened by his interaction with Gerbrands, whose groundbreaking research on individual styles of Asmat master carvers sought to dispel the prevailing Western misconception that Oceanic artists were anonymous craftspeople reproducing a predetermined series of collective art forms. In a letter to Goldwater dated July 9, 1961, Rockefeller described his



36. Adrian Gerbrands and Michael C. Rockefeller with tobacco in an Asmat longhouse, 1961

approach: “I shall continue my policy of finding the names of the artists of all the objects which I collect, photographing the objects and artists where they are important, and making as complete as possible a documentation of the various art-producing villages I visit.”³⁰ The rigorousness of Rockefeller’s documentation is evident in the detailed information and photographic record he made of a *jifoi*, a canoe-shaped wood bowl used for mixing red paint (fig. 37), which he purchased directly from the artist Ndanim of Omadesep village:

(19) Paint dish in the form of Prow [canoe] with large human figure at one end by Ndanim. His portrait taken on exposures 29–31 of Roll #1012. From Village of Omadesep. A group of about 8 men came from the village [of Omadesep to Amanamkai]. . . . They brought with them about 12 objects, for they knew of Dr. Gerbrands “who bought art.”

Although the journal entry notes that the Asmat regarded Gerbrands as the one “who bought art,” it was Rockefeller who eventually acquired Ndanim’s remarkable bowl and also made several striking photographic portraits of the artist with his work (fig. 38).

Rockefeller spent only three weeks in the Asmat region on his first trip, but the expedition nonetheless proved phenomenally fruitful. His most remarkable acquisitions were the towering *bis* poles that today are among the most prominent works in the Metropolitan’s Oceanic galleries (fig. 39). These monumental wood carvings are created for one time use, predominantly for the *bis* feast, from which the poles derive their name—commemorating individuals who have recently died and assisting their spirits onward to *safan*, the land of the ancestors—but they are made occasionally for other rites as well. In his letter to Goldwater, Rockefeller enthusiastically described his success in obtaining two separate groups of *bis* poles, which he considered his most significant purchases from the first trip:

I think that the *bise* [*sic*] poles alone made this trip thoroughly worthwhile. The first is a set of 4 from . . . Omadesep. . . . They were carved not for a Bise ceremony, but for a men’s house inauguration ceremony. . . . We asked this particular men’s house to reenact the ceremony for us, and thus I have good photographic documentation of the circumstances in which they



37. *Bowl (Jifoi)*. Carved by Ndanim, Asmat people, Omadesep village, Faretsj River region, New Guinea, Papua Province, Indonesia, mid-20th century. Wood with traces of paint; L. 34 1/4 in. (87 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller and Mrs. Mary C. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.1199)

were used. Furthermore, I have photographed each of the artists with the pole that he carved and found out as much as I could about the ancestor represented by the several figures on each pole. . . . Dr. Gerbrands felt that these poles were up to the standards of any in Europe. He said that as yet no museum had collected a complete set of poles used in one ceremony. . . . Secondly, I am in the process of getting 3 bise poles from [Otsjanep village] of an entirely different style. These ones have resulted from the well known bise ceremony. . . . 7 poles, I know, is quite a few bise poles, However, I never once hesitated in getting them, for I feel that my opportunity is unique. . . . Indeed, if there are more opportunities to get other bise poles of different styles . . . I should be inclined to take advantage of them also.

After Rockefeller and Putnam left the Asmat region, they rejoined the Harvard expedition and remained with it



38. Michael C. Rockefeller's photograph of the artist Ndanim with his *jifoi* (fig. 37), 1961



39. Asmat *bis* poles on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

until early September, when it ended. Following a brief trip home to New York, Rockefeller returned to the Asmat region in late September for a more extensive collecting trip for the Museum of Primitive Art. Accompanied by Wassing, he spent two months traveling to villages along the Casuarina coast and up many of the rivers that drain into it, all the while collecting and documenting works in numerous villages.³¹ Curious about the full range of Asmat art, he purchased works of every type and scale, from personal ornaments to a massive dugout canoe that he commissioned from the master carver Chinasaptich, today the largest single work in the Metropolitan's Oceanic collection.

In their travels, Rockefeller and Wassing often relied on a catamaran-like craft made from two canoes attached to a broad wood platform. On November 18, 1961, while attempting to cross the rough waters and heavy currents at the mouth of the Betsj River, their vessel overturned and was rapidly swept out to sea. After drifting for nearly a day, and with no sign of any rescue attempt, Rockefeller, now roughly twelve miles from shore, tied two gas cans together for flotation, decided to swim for help, and lost his life.

Today the remarkable collection of nearly six hundred Asmat works assembled by Rockefeller on his two trips to the

region still forms the largest and best-documented corpus of art from any single Oceanic tradition in the Metropolitan's collection and includes many outstanding examples of Asmat sculpture. But because many of the works had recently been created when Rockefeller acquired them, misconceptions sometimes arise regarding the collection's aesthetic quality, often reflecting a lack of understanding of the nature of Asmat art. With the exception of utilitarian objects such as weapons and food bowls, virtually all Asmat wood carving was ephemeral in nature. After being used in the ceremony for which they were designed, such sculptures were either discarded or destroyed. Indeed, virtually all works of Asmat sculpture—even those in the vast colonial-era collections of Dutch museums—were newly made when they were obtained. Rockefeller's exemplary collection of Asmat sculpture remains a cornerstone of the Metropolitan Museum's Oceanic galleries, and the wing named after him endures as a fitting tribute to his accomplishments in collecting and documenting one of New Guinea's foremost art traditions.

While Michael Rockefeller focused on the Asmat, the Museum of Primitive Art's other great field collector, Douglas Newton (fig. 40), cast a broader net in a very different region of New Guinea. Newton was born in 1920 to English parents



40. Douglas Newton, 1961

on a rubber plantation in what is today Malaysia. Returning to England as a youth, he received some formal schooling but was largely self-educated and never earned a university degree. An insatiable reader and a keen observer with wide-ranging interests, Newton discussed his early passions and eclectic tastes in the arts, including those of Africa and Oceania, in an interview conducted the year before his death, in 2001:

After a number of phases that involved a passion for ancient Egyptian art and, later . . . Aubrey Beardsley, I discovered contemporary English art around the age of sixteen. . . . I found that [English sculptor Sir] Jacob Epstein . . . had an interest in African sculpture, so I was impelled to find out why. For years before World War II began, I haunted the British Museum. . . . When the ethnography galleries began to reopen after the war, I went to them constantly with the sculptors Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull. I read a great deal in the British Museum Library and began to visit regularly dealers . . . and became familiar with anthropologists . . . and began to learn about the arts.³²

Following jobs in England as an editor, journalist, and BBC scriptwriter, Newton moved to New York in 1956, in part because a friend had told him that Nelson Rockefeller was in the process of forming what would become the Museum of Primitive Art and had encouraged him to apply for a job. Newton managed to obtain a meeting with René d'Harnoncourt, the museum's cofounder, and in 1957 was hired as an assistant curator. Promoted to full curator in 1960, he became director of the museum in 1974, following the death of Robert Goldwater, and was eventually made consultative chairman of the nascent Department of Primitive Art at

the Metropolitan Museum. As chairman, Newton oversaw the transfer of the Museum of Primitive Art's collections to the Metropolitan and the incorporation of its library, archives, photographic collections, and much of its staff into what is now the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, which he chaired until his retirement, in 1990.³³

In his years at the Museum of Primitive Art, Newton organized more than sixty exhibitions and, with Goldwater and d'Harnoncourt, was instrumental in the acquisition of many of its outstanding Oceanic masterworks. These include



41. *Shield (Grere'o [?])*. Solomon Islands, probably New Georgia or Guadalcanal Island (shield), possibly Santa Isabel Island (inlay), early to mid-19th century. Fiber, parinarium-nut paste, chambered-nautilus shell, and pigment; H. 33 1/4 in. (84.5 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972 (1978.412.730)



42. *Skull hook (Agiba)*. Kerewa people, Pai'ia'a village, western Papuan Gulf, Papua New Guinea, 19th–early 20th century. Wood and paint; 55 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 5 in. (141.9 x 74.9 x 12.7 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1969 (1978.412.796)

a spectacular shell-inlaid shield from the Solomon Islands (fig. 41), one of only about two dozen known examples, as well as an imposing skull hook from the Papuan Gulf in New Guinea, which, with its impressive scale and the raw,

expressive energy of its carving, is almost universally regarded as the finest of its type (fig. 42).

In the mid-1960s, after a number of years acquiring art exclusively on the Western market, Newton began traveling

periodically to New Guinea to purchase works for the museum's Oceanic collection. Between 1964 and 1973 he made five trips to the Sepik River region, in northeast New Guinea, where he obtained works in their source communities and from missionaries, colonial officials, and other Western expatriates. Unlike the Asmat region, the Sepik River territory had been a destination for museum expeditions, missionaries, and others for most of the twentieth century. By the early 1960s much of its early art had been collected, and large quantities of wood carvings were being produced expressly for sale. Nonetheless, for those with a discerning eye, many important objects remained.

Unlike Rockefeller, Newton appears to have kept few written records of his trips, although when he obtained objects directly in local villages he was careful to document their origins and, occasionally, the artists' names. Among Newton's most significant acquisitions were four early wood sculptures from the Inyai-Ewa people of the upper Korewori River, including an outstanding male figure representing a primordial ancestor (fig. 43). This sculptural tradition, whose earliest works may date to the sixteenth century, had only recently been discovered by Westerners when, in 1964, Newton purchased the group from one Father Heinemans of the Catholic mission in the town of Wewak. Newton's foresight in acquiring these essentially unknown works was amply borne out with time, as Inyai-Ewa sculpture today is considered among the best produced by any Sepik peoples.

Newton sought out not only rare forms of sculpture but also exceptional examples of common objects. His connoisseurship is evident in the unsurpassed quality of a yam mask from the Abelam people, which he also purchased from Heinemans (fig. 44). Thousands of such masks, used by virtually all Abelam men to decorate large yams for ceremonial exchanges, exist in museums and private collections around the world, but the exquisitely rendered features of this one, particularly the ideal visual balance between the concentric bands constituting the eyes and headdress, elevate it far above other examples of the genre.

In collecting objects directly from Sepik peoples, Newton concentrated largely on the populations of the Upper Sepik region, such as the Iwam, Wogumas, Kwoma, and Nukuma, who at the time were visited infrequently compared with groups farther downriver. Perhaps Newton's most spectacular acquisition, obtained in 1970 and 1973, after the Museum of Primitive Art's collection had been promised to the Metropolitan, was a group of more than 270 paintings



43. *Male figure*. Inyai-Ewa people, Korewori River, Middle Sepik region, Papua New Guinea, 16th–19th century. Wood; 47½ x 5 x 7 in. (120.7 x 12.7 x 17.8 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1965 (1978.412.856)



44. *Yam mask*. Abelam people, Prince Alexander Mountains, Sepik region, Papua New Guinea, early to mid-20th century. Fiber and paint; H. 25 in. (63.5 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1965 (1978.412.858)



45. *Paintings from a ceremonial-house ceiling*. Artists of Mariwai village, Kwoma people, Washkuk Hills. Upper Sepik River, Papua New Guinea, 1970 and 1973. Sago palm spathe and paint. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon Gift, and Mr. and Mrs. Alan Brandt Gift, in memory of Jacob J. Brandt, 1974 (1978.412.1621)

that he commissioned from Kwoma artists in the village of Mariwai with the intention of re-creating the spectacular polychrome ceiling of a Kwoma ceremonial house in New York. A selection of more than one hundred paintings from the group was used to construct a reduced version of such a ceiling in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing when it opened to the public in 1982. Not until the reinstallation of the Metropolitan's Oceanic galleries in 2007, however, was Newton's original vision realized and the entire ceiling presented for the first time, installed on a specially constructed armature whose design was inspired by actual ceilings from Kwoma ceremonial houses (fig. 45).

The determination of Michael Rockefeller and Douglas Newton to seize the unique but fleeting opportunity in the early 1960s to acquire important works of art in New Guinea profoundly broadened the Oceanic collection at the Museum of Primitive Art and, by succession, the Metropolitan, providing a richness that is abundantly reflected in the Oceanic galleries today. Although it now seems inconceivable to imagine the Metropolitan without the Asmat *bis* poles, canoe, and Kwoma ceiling, or its superb display of Korewori River and Upper Sepik sculpture, none of these transformative works of art would be here without the vision and resolve of these two remarkable figures.

The Museum of Primitive Art in Africa at the Time of Independence

Yaëlle Biro

For the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA), in early 1957, the museum's director, Robert Goldwater, struck a decidedly humanist tone, emphasizing, "We are aware of our kinship with all mankind."³⁴ This approach to the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas informed not only the seventy or so subsequent exhibitions organized by the MPA and its nearly sixty publications, but also the institution's active loan policy. With limited space in its own galleries and a constantly growing collection, the MPA proved a particularly generous lender to both domestic and international institutions. Moreover, the museum's strong educational mission led it to initiate touring exhibitions that traveled to university museums across the United States. Whereas the museum's physical space was pocket-size, the influence of its exhibition program on the appreciation of non-Western arts and their museography was tremendous.

On two occasions during the 1960s the Museum of Primitive Art loaned select works from its collections—such as a Bamana female figure (fig. 46)—to groundbreaking exhibitions in Africa. The first was at the Rhodes National Gallery, in Salisbury, Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe), in 1962, and the second at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966. Although the exhibitions took place in drastically different political and cultural contexts, both were intended to support Africa's pride in its artistic patrimony and cultural history. The involvement of the MPA embodied the vision of its founder, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, who saw art as a valuable tool of diplomacy and sought to link cultural exchange with international politics. It also underscored the institution's desire to celebrate the moment of transition in Africa from colonialism to independence. This desire expressed itself in different ways. In September 1960 Governor Rockefeller led the U.S. delegation to Nigeria's independence ceremony as President Dwight D. Eisenhower's representative. Rockefeller allied his political responsibilities



46. *Female figure (Nyeleni)*. Bamana peoples, Mali, 19th–20th century. Wood and metal; 22 3/4 x 6 1/4 x 5 5/8 in. (57.8 x 15.9 x 14.4 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1969 (1978.412.347)

with his interests in African art, meeting Nigeria's new officials (fig. 47) while also visiting local markets and touring the National Museum in Lagos with the director of the Nigerian Department of Antiquities, British archaeologist and curator Bernard Fagg (fig. 48). The visit no doubt led to the 1961 MPA exhibition "The Traditional Arts of Africa's New Nations," which featured one hundred works from sixteen newly independent African countries.

The events in Salisbury and Dakar followed a similar format. Inaugurated by a colloquium of African, European, and American speakers, they included art exhibitions, concerts, and dance and theater performances. Firmly international in scope, they were designed to showcase the wide-ranging contributions of African culture to the world. Although the 1962 gathering in Salisbury prefigured the 1966 Dakar festival, the latter has received extensive scholarly attention while the events in then-Rhodesia have remained comparatively understudied, possibly owing to their political and social context.

Formally known as the International Congress of African Culture (ICAC), the Rhodesian event (fig. 49) was organized by Frank McEwen, who had been director of the Rhodes National Gallery since 1956, the year before it opened. That the ICAC took place in a country still under firm colonial rule and in a museum directed by a British official has often made it difficult to separate the endeavor from its colonial context. But the content of the exhibition, the roster of international guests invited to the eleven-day colloquium, and the correspondence now available in the MPA archives allow us to redefine this event as more subversive, almost anticolonial in tone.

McEwen, an artist by training who had spent most of his career in France and had worked at the British Arts Council in Paris, had grown disenchanted during the 1950s with the European art scene and, especially, with the School of Paris, with which he was closely associated. In African art, McEwen found a source of artistic renewal, and when the opportunity arose to become director of the Rhodes National Gallery, he jumped at the chance. McEwen firmly believed that the gallery would be successful only if it capitalized on its African location and if its programming took ample advantage of this connection. Accordingly, shortly after his arrival he initiated and promoted the Rhodesian Workshop School, a manufactory for soapstone sculpture, a local idiom.³⁵ In publications and exhibitions he persistently emphasized Zimbabwe's ancient and important cultural history. McEwen showcased European paintings in



47. Nelson A. Rockefeller shaking hands with Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, prime minister of Nigeria, September 1960

48. Nelson A. Rockefeller with Bernard Fagg, director of the National Museum, Lagos, September 1960

49. Delegates to the International Congress of African Culture (ICAC), Salisbury, Rhodesia, 1962

the gallery's inaugural exhibition, in 1957—which was attended by Queen Elizabeth—including loans from prestigious European institutions such as the Musée du Louvre, Paris, the National Gallery, London, and the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, thus satisfying the museum's board of directors, whose intent was to focus primarily on Old Masters and European art. Keeping true to his ideals, McEwen also exhibited historical African sculpture as well as a small selection of works demonstrating the influence of Africa on twentieth-century Western schools.³⁶

Although McEwen had developed the idea of hosting a festival devoted to African arts and their impact on Western culture shortly after he settled in Rhodesia, the country's constantly shifting political terrain postponed it for several years. Through McEwen's perseverance, the eleven-day congress finally launched on August 1, 1962, while the associated exhibitions lasted through the end of September. The congress, by all accounts a success, was attended by thirty-eight delegates from three continents. Among them were a number of high-profile museum professionals, collectors, and university professors, such as Saburi Biobaku and the artist Vincent Kofi from Nigeria and Ghana, respectively; Alfred H. Barr, Jr., James Porter, and William Bascom from the United States; and Tristan Tzara, William Fagg (Bernard's brother), Roland Penrose, and the collector Pierre Guerre from Europe.³⁷

The congress's extensive exhibition component aimed to demonstrate the broad accomplishments of African artists past and present. While the preliminary program announced six distinct exhibitions, it is unclear whether they all actually took place (only three are confirmed in the exhibition catalogue).³⁸ "Ancient African Art" incorporated loans from an impressive roster of African, European, and American lenders; "African Influence upon Western Schools" featured several works borrowed from Penrose, a Picasso specialist; and "Non-Traditional African Art" focused on artists from McEwen's Rhodesian Workshop School, such as Kingsley Sambo and Thomas Mukorombogwo. The congress also showcased works by Kofi, Mozambique's Alberto Mati, and Nigeria's Ben Enwonwu. As *Sunday Times* (London) critic John Russell testified at the end of the congress, "[It] was many things in one, an exhibition of African art which was by far the finest ever assembled in Africa; a small scale African

50. Mask: Female figure (*Karan-wemba*). Mossi peoples, Burkina Faso, 19th–20th century. Wood and metal; 29½ x 6 x 5¼ in. (74.9 x 15.2 x 13.3 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.84)





51. *Figure: Buffalo head.* Ewe peoples, Togo, 19th–20th century. Terracotta; 9 x 9 1/8 x 4 5/8 in. (22.9 x 23.2 x 11.7 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1)

Salzburg with an orchestra from Mozambique; a theatre group from the Côte d'Ivoire, instrumental soloists from many parts of Africa, and a steel band from Trinidad—a university open to all in which every hour, on the hour, authorities from all over the world could be heard on their African subjects.”³⁹

Through the congress McEwen had hoped to “inspire more understanding,” but in Rhodesia at that time exhibiting African and Western artists together as equals and highlighting the influence of Africa on Western culture were perceived as subversive. Correspondence in the MPA archives sheds light on McEwen’s struggles to organize the event and on Robert Goldwater’s own skepticism regarding its potential to succeed. McEwen had first approached Goldwater about the project in 1959, hoping not only to borrow works from the MPA but also to persuade him to participate.⁴⁰ Following two postponements, McEwen contacted Goldwater again in 1962 with a new official opening date and a candid assessment:

We are now in a position to say that our projected Congress is on for certain on 1st August. It is gathering momentum and good support from the countries we have contact with. . . . Rhodesia, as I have constantly maintained, may be considered by people “outside” as

an unsympathetic place to hold such a Congress. In point of fact it is more necessary here than anywhere else and it is something of a miracle that we can hold it at all. For this reason it needs support and is likely to be a triumph for African consciousness and confidence . . .⁴¹

Beginning to doubt the project’s feasibility because of the repeated false starts, Goldwater wrote to his colleagues William Fagg at the British Museum and Michel Leiris at the Musée de l’Homme, Paris, for reassurance. Fagg’s response, in particular, is revealing:

In the past, though Government approval had apparently been given in principle, there was no outward sign of effective government support, and this did not altogether surprise me, since, from the somewhat diffuse character projected for it, the congress seemed not unlikely to develop into an anti-colonialist rally. . . . On the whole, I am reasonably optimistic of the Congress being held this time.⁴²

In the end Goldwater agreed to lend a group of ten works (e.g., figs. 46, 50, 51), which were chosen by MPA curator



52. *Headdress: Serpent (A-Mantsho-ña-Tshol)*. Baga peoples, Guinea, 19th–20th century. Wood and pigment; H. 54 ½ in. (138.4 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1964 (1978.412.339)

Douglas Newton in collaboration with Hosea Mapondera, a public-relations officer at the Rhodes National Gallery.⁴³ The selection, which included several of Rockefeller's noteworthy recent acquisitions, shows an emphasis on works from countries in West and Central Africa: Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Burkina Faso, Mali, Gabon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Among the most striking was an over-lifesize Baga serpent headdress from Guinea (fig. 52), whose sinuous curves and elegant representation evoke the power, elusive grace, and flexibility of a Baga spiritual entity known as A-Mantsho-ña-Tshol. Several examples of this genre of sculpture, which had been unknown in the West less than a decade before, were collected in Guinea during the second half of the 1950s and brought to the attention of the art market. With its strikingly colored patterned surface and towering height, the headdress undoubtedly made a powerful visual impact in McEwen's exhibition (fig. 53), as did a Kwele elephant mask from Gabon whose heart-shaped face, projecting trunk, and sculptural planes are defined by black, white, and ochre pigments (fig. 54).

In contrast to the Salisbury congress, which struggled to find official support in its home country, the festival in Dakar was a cultural and political statement initiated and fully

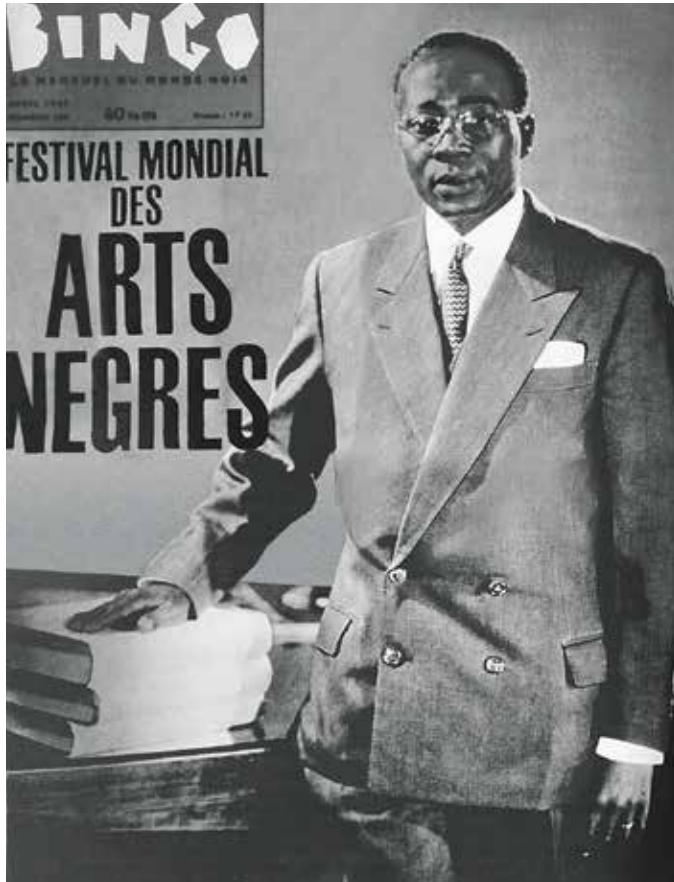


53. ICAC exhibition, Rhodes National Gallery, 1962



54. *Beete mask: Elephant (Zok)*. Kwele peoples, Gabon, 19th–20th century. Wood, pigment, and kaolin; 30 x 5⁷/₈ x 10⁵/₈ in. (76.2 x 14.9 x 27 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1964 (1978.412.292)

endorsed by Senegal's first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor (fig. 55). As the head of state of a newly independent African nation, Senghor was determined to root his policies in the specifics of black identity and to use that connection as a point of departure for forging an African modernity.⁴⁴ Echoing



55. President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal on the cover of *Bingo*: *Le mensuel du monde noir*, April 1966

56. "L'Art nègre: sources, évolution, expansion" at the Musée Dynamique de Dakar, on view during the First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar, Senegal, 1966

Senghor's political ambitions and rhetoric, the festival was to be "a solemn and unprecedented assertion of [the] values of Négritude," the pan-African ideological movement Senghor had developed in his capacity as both a literary figure and a public intellectual. The festival's highlight, the exhibition "L'Art nègre: sources, évolution, expansion," was focused equally on classical African arts and contemporary arts from Africa and the diaspora; there was also a symposium as well as theater, music, and dance performances.⁴⁵

Like the 1962 Rhodesian congress, the 1966 Dakar exhibition—organized under the auspices of UNESCO and the French government, and opened on April 1 by Senghor and André Malraux, the French minister of culture—included works lent by museums and royal collections from across the African continent as well as by European and American private and institutional holdings.⁴⁶ It was held in the Musée Dynamique, a state-of-the-art, custom-built facility (fig. 56). Goldwater, who was on the advisory committee overseeing the American contributions, was also asked to chair the exhibition committee, arrange all the U.S. loans, and participate in the symposium.⁴⁷ The U.S. committee eventually sent forty-two of the five hundred works on view in Dakar, twenty-three of them from the MPA (figs. 46, 57, 58). Although rumors circulated among the Americans of the risk of possible repatriation claims by African countries—a concern Goldwater raised in a letter to President Senghor—the Senegalese ambassador to France, Médoune Fall, assured him that Senghor would tolerate no such claims, clearing the way for the loans.⁴⁸

Documents in the MPA archives reveal that the Dakar festival's message of cultural recognition extended far beyond the African continent and, in fact, resonated powerfully in the United States, which was in the midst of its own civil rights struggle. The American committee's handbook to the festival opened with a statement by President Lyndon B. Johnson reaffirming the festival's goal of demonstrating the contributions of the "Negro . . . to the enrichment of world culture." "Nowhere outside of Africa itself," the statement continues, "have the values and the influence of Negro arts achieved greater vitality than here in the United States. These values, so familiar to Americans, have yet to be fully appreciated beyond our borders. The Festival should do much to win for the genius of Negro artists the recognition it desires."⁴⁹ Written only two years after Johnson signed the watershed Civil Rights Act, and at a time of civil unrest and race riots in the United States, his words echoed the historic significance of



57. Dorothy Lytle, registrar of the Museum of Primitive Art, preparing a Kifwebe mask and Bamana figure (fig. 58) for the First World Festival of Negro Arts, 1966

the moment. To reiterate Johnson's personal investment in the festival, the First Lady was made honorary chairman of the U.S. committee; in addition, the United States contributed \$150,000 to the festival through the State Department and planned to send a delegation of about one hundred African American visual artists, writers, musicians, and dance performers, including Duke Ellington and Langston Hughes. The U.S. committee also determined that the American presentations would later be shown in the United States, "thus displaying for the first time as a cultural entity the vivid and powerful contribution of the Negro to our life and times."⁵⁰

Central among the wide range of works loaned by the MPA to the Dakar exhibition—masks and figures from Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—was a female element of a reliquary created by a Fang master from present-day Equatorial Guinea (fig. 59).⁵¹ Originally placed at the summit of a portable family altar, the figure was the public face of the ancestral presence contained within. Oils ritually applied to the figure's surface over many years give it a distinctive, lustrous shine and sticky texture. A muse of the French artist André Derain, who had owned it during the first decades of the twentieth century, this impressive female representation was acquired in 1960 from the estate of sculptor Sir Jacob Epstein and instantly became a cornerstone of the MPA collection. That it was lent to the festival in Dakar is



58. *Seated female figure*. Bamana peoples, Mali, 15th–19th century. Wood; 40 1/4 x 8 1/2 x 10 7/8 in. (102.2 x 21.6 x 27.6 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.338)



59. *Figure from a reliquary ensemble: Seated female*. Fang peoples, Okak group, Equatorial Guinea, 19th–early 20th century. Wood and metal; 25¼ x 7⅞ x 6½ in. (64 x 20 x 16.5 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.441)

all the more remarkable given the work's status as an icon of African art and concerns for the effects of shipping on its delicate surface.

Archival sources indicate that the Museum of Primitive Art also lent twenty works to yet another major exhibition in Africa, the 1969 First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers.⁵² Although a selection was made and works were sent to Algeria, logistical mishaps and miscommunication prevented them from being exhibited. This aborted participation nonetheless confirms the MPA's dedication to lending to exhibitions in Africa as late as 1969, when the transfer of its collection to the Metropolitan Museum was already formalized. Today, when loans of major works of art from Western collections to the African continent are scarce at best, the broad scope of these exhibitions and the number of important pieces secured from prominent international lenders seem astonishingly impressive. Yet it bears remembering that the spirit of hope inherent in the independence movements then sweeping across Africa was shared by a wide constituency within the art establishment. The participation of the Museum of Primitive Art in these African celebrations was the direct result of the historical circumstances of the 1960s aligning both with the MPA's mission and with Rockefeller's political ideals concerning the role of art in furthering international dialogue. Looking back, we can see how the context and reception of these exhibitions, which pioneered how artists from Africa and the African diaspora are presented to a diverse audience, should inspire cultural institutions in the West seeking to reach an increasingly global audience as well as museums across Africa discovering new ways to interact with their audiences at home.

CHRONOLOGY

1930

Nelson Rockefeller visits Hawaii on an around-the-world honeymoon trip and acquires his first work of “primitive” art, a Hawaiian bowl.

1932

Rockefeller becomes a trustee of both The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

1933

He visits Mexico for the first time.

1935

The exhibition “African Negro Art” at MoMA has a profound influence on several of the future leaders of the Museum of Primitive Art, including Rockefeller and Robert Goldwater.

1937

During travels in South America, Rockefeller has his first encounter with Peruvian antiquities, which he particularly admires.

1939

Rockefeller acquires a group of Peruvian ceramic bowls in Buenos Aires.

1940

“Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” opens at MoMA in cooperation with the Mexican government. Rockefeller becomes president of MoMA’s board of trustees. About this time he meets René d’Harnoncourt in New York.

1941

“Indian Art of the United States” opens at MoMA. The exhibition is organized by d’Harnoncourt, then general manager of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, and Frederic H. Douglas, a pioneering curator in the field.

1941–45

As coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, Rockefeller travels widely in Latin America.

1942

Rockefeller proposes to MoMA’s trustees the formation of a collection of folk and indigenous art of the New World that would encompass painting, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, and other works of applied arts.

1944

MoMA hires d’Harnoncourt as vice president in charge of foreign affairs and director of the Department of Manual Industries.

1946

“Arts of the South Seas,” organized by d’Harnoncourt in collaboration with the anthropologist Ralph Linton and noted scholar Paul Wingert, opens at MoMA.

1949

D’Harnoncourt becomes director of MoMA.

1949

Rockefeller acquires his first works of African, American Indian, Oceanic, and Precolumbian art from dealers in New York and Los Angeles.

1953

“Primitive Sculpture from the Collection of Nelson A. Rockefeller,” the first exhibition drawn from the Rockefeller collection, opens at the Century Association, New York.

1954

“Ancient Arts of the Andes” opens at MoMA. A major international loan exhibition organized by d’Harnoncourt and the archaeologist Wendell Bennett, the show includes works from the Rockefeller collection. The Museum of Indigenous Art is chartered as an educational corporation, “the first of its kind in the world,” according to the charter. Rockefeller and d’Harnoncourt are its principal officers.

1956

In September, Goldwater is appointed director of the new museum, which three months later is formally renamed the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA).

1957

The MPA opens to the public in February with the exhibition “Selected Works One,” which features an array of art from diverse regions of the world. Douglas Newton joins the staff of the MPA as assistant curator.

1958

Rockefeller acquires an ivory pendant mask from Benin (fig. 7), paying a record price for a work of “primitive” art. “Selected Works Four,” an exhibition of ancient Peruvian textiles and featherwork, opens at the MPA.

1960

Rockefeller leads the U.S. delegation to Nigeria and attends ceremonies commemorating the country’s independence from the United Kingdom. His son Michael becomes a trustee of the MPA. “The Art of Lake Sentani” opens at the MPA. Rockefeller is elected fourteenth governor of the state of New York.

1961

“Art Styles of the Papuan Gulf” opens at the MPA. Michael Rockefeller joins the Harvard-Peabody New Guinea Expedition to the Baliem Valley, in western New Guinea, and makes his first collecting trip to the Asmat region. He is lost while on a second collecting trip to the Asmat later in the year.

1962

The MPA exhibition “The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea: Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller,” designed by d’Harnoncourt with Douglas Newton’s assistance, opens in a specially built pavilion inside MoMA’s courtyard (see fig. 12).

1963

Under Goldwater’s direction, the MPA presents “Senufo Sculpture from West Africa.” Mary Rockefeller Morgan, Nelson’s daughter, is elected to the MPA board of trustees.

1964

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits racial, ethnic, national, religious, and gender discrimination.

1965

The MPA loan exhibition “The Jaguar’s Children: Pre-Classic Central Mexico” focuses on the complex history of the early peoples of that region in the mid-first millennium B.C.

1966

The First World Festival of Negro Arts (1er Festival mondial des arts nègres) is held in Dakar, Senegal.

1967

The MPA publishes *The Asmat of New Guinea: The Journal of Michael Clark Rockefeller*, which contains Michael’s notes and photographs as well as a catalogue of the Asmat works he collected.

1969

“Art of Oceania, Africa, and the Americas from the Museum of Primitive Art” opens at the Metropolitan and introduces the Museum’s audience to the Rockefeller collections. Rockefeller signs an agreement to transfer the MPA’s collection, staff, and library to the Met.

1974

Newton succeeds Goldwater as director of the MPA and is later appointed chairman of the Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Primitive Art. Construction begins on the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, designed by architects at Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates. Mary Rockefeller Morgan is elected to the Metropolitan Museum’s board of trustees. In December, the MPA closes its doors.

1978–79

The collection and library of the MPA are physically transferred to The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

1982

Opening of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing.

1991

The Metropolitan’s board of trustees votes to rename the Department of Primitive Art the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

NOTES

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3. Robert Goldwater, *The Great Bieri*, Studies, 1 (New York: Museum of Primitive Art, 1962).
4. Hilton Kramer, "In Honor of Robert Goldwater," *New York Times*, October 14, 1973, p. D25.
5. *Primitive Art: African, Oceanic, American Indian, Pacific Northwest Coast and Pre-Columbian Art, Duplicates from the Collection of Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller and the Museum of Primitive Art*, New York, Public Auction, May 14, sale cat. (New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, 1967).
6. Sanka Knox, "New Art Museum Shows Primitives: Nelson Rockefeller Display Opens to the Public Today at 15 West 54th Street," *New York Times*, February 21, 1957, p. 23; Cary Reich, *The Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller: Worlds to Conquer, 1908–1958* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 166; Nelson Rockefeller, "Introduction," in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art*, by Douglas Newton et al., The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), pp. 19–25.
7. Anna Indych-López, "Mexican Muralism in the United States: The Controversies and Paradoxes of Patronage and Reception," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adèle Greeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 208–26; see especially pp. 210–11.
8. Nelson A. Rockefeller to Julio C. Tello, May 21, 1937. Division of Anthropology Archives, American Museum of Natural History, New York (hereafter DAA, AMNH).
9. Reich, *Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, p. 167; Rockefeller, "Introduction," in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art*, p. 21.
10. H. E. Winlock, director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, to Clark Wissler of the American Museum of Natural History, June 21, 1937. DAA, AMNH. Nelson A. Rockefeller to Wendell C. Bennett of the American Museum of Natural History, August 3, 1937. DAA, AMNH.
11. Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Collecting Peruvian Art: The Charm of Pre-Columbian Crafts," *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 2 (November 1968), pp. 42–44.
12. Rockefeller, "Introduction," in *Masterpieces of Primitive Art*, pp. 19–25.
13. Anna Indych-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927–1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), pp. 158–63.
14. Gisela Cramer and Ursula Prutsch, eds., *¡Américas unidas!: Nelson A. Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs (1940–46)* (Madrid and Orlando: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2012); Reich, *Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, pp. 214–15; Nelson A. Rockefeller, "The Spirit of Hemisphere Cooperation: Cultural Understanding as a Basis for Lasting Peace," *The Saturday Review of Literature* 26, no. 15 (April 10, 1943), pp. 4–7.
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18. Adriana Williams, *Covarrubias* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 111–17, 170–71.
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21. MMA 1979.206.1362, 1979.206.438.
22. "Rocky Road to Art," *Newsweek*, July 18, 1966, p. 90.
23. Ibid.
24. Interdepartmental memo from Alexander Leiber to James Rorimer, April 30, 1963. Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Departmental files, Americas section, "MMA Precolumbian coll. 1914–65" file.
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32. Laurence Mattet, "Interview with Douglas Newton," *Arts and Cultures* 1 (2000), p. 20.
33. Holland Cotter, "Douglas Newton, 80, Curator Emeritus at the Metropolitan [obituary]," *New York Times*, September 22, 2001, p. A13; Virginia-Lee Webb, "I Just Like Looking at Objects': Douglas Newton, Collector," in *Collecting New Guinea Art: Douglas Newton, Harry Beran and Thomas Schultze-Westrum*, ed. Michael Hamson (Palos Verdes Estates, Calif.: Michael Hamson Oceanic Art, 2013), pp. 10–12.
34. Robert Goldwater, "Introduction," in *The Museum of Primitive Art: Selected Works from the Collection, Spring 1957*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Primitive Art, 1957), n.p.
35. Elizabeth Morton, "Frank McEwen and Joram Mariga: Patron and Artist in the Rhodesian Workshop School Setting, Zimbabwe," in *African Art and Agency in the Workshop*, ed. Sidney Littlefield Kasfir and Till Förster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 274–97.
36. Frank McEwen, "New Art from Rhodesia," in *AdeleArt.com*; <http://adeleart.com/family/frank-mcwen/new-art-from-rhodesia> (accessed January 31, 2014).
37. Lectures included Jean Laude's "Aesthetics and Ethnology," S. Okeke's "The Artist in an Ibo Community," Bernard Fagg's "Four Yoruba Masters," James Porter's "The Influence of African Art and Culture in the New World," Roland Penrose's "African Influences on Picasso and Contemporary Art," and McEwen's "Art in Contemporary Africa," in *Proceedings of the First International Congress of African Culture, 1–11 August, 1962 Held at the National Gallery, Salisbury, Rhodesia* ([Salisbury, 1962]).
38. Among them were "One Hundred Masterpieces of Ancient African Sculpture," "African Influences on the School of Paris," "African Influences in Brazil," "African Influence on North American Negro Art," and "Contemporary African Art from Most Parts of Africa." *Exhibitions on the Occasion of the First International Congress of African Culture, National Gallery, Salisbury, August 1–September 30, 1962*, exh. cat. ([Salisbury, 1962]).
39. In *Sunday Times* (London), August 12, 1962. According to artist Pat Pearce, the congress was "a great cultural experience but for me it was [also] a new experience in complete integration and national equality, inside the walls of the National Gallery. It was an oasis." *Gallery* (Harare), no. 15 (March 1998), p. 22.
40. Frank McEwen to Robert Goldwater, June 8, 1962. The Visual Resource Archive, Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (hereafter VRA, MMA), AR.1999.6.62, box 15, folder 2.
41. McEwen to Goldwater, undated letter, probably March 1962. VRA, MMA, AR.1999.6.62, box 15, folder 2.
42. William Fagg to Goldwater, May 7, 1962. VRA, MMA, AR.1999.6.62, box 15, folder 2.
43. McEwen to Goldwater, June 8, 1962. VRA, MMA, AR.1999.6.62, box 15, folder 2.
44. Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).
45. 1er Festival mondial des arts nègres, and Société africaine de culture, *Colloque: Fonction et signification de l'art nègre dans la vie du peuple et pour le peuple, 30 mars–8 avril [Rapports]* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1967). The festival closed in Dakar on April 24 but found continuation in Paris, where the exhibition was on view at the Grand Palais from June to September.
46. Private individuals included Jean de Menil, Eliot Elisofon, and Lester Wunderman; institutions included the Baltimore Museum of Art; the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia; and the newly founded Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
47. Jean Gabus, director of the Musée d'Ethnographie Neuchâtel, articulated the goals of the exhibition to Goldwater: "[It] is to allow [us], at least once and for a short period of time, to gather a part of the treasures of Sub-Saharan Africa. It is a gesture of solidarity, of understanding, which certainly will infinitely move Africans." Jean Gabus to Goldwater, December 22, 1964. VRA, MMA, AR.1999.6.23, box 6, folder 2. See the full Gabus-Goldwater correspondence, winter 1964–spring 1965, *ibid.*
48. Ambassadeur du Sénégal to the U.S. Committee, August 4, 1965. VRA, MMA, AR.1999.6.23, box 6, folder 2.
49. The United States Committee for the First World Festival of Negro Arts, Inc., Dakar, Senegal. Presentation brochure, September 1965, introductory statement. VRA, MMA, AR.1999.6.19, box 5.
50. Ibid., p. A-3. For an example of a planned touring exhibition, see the catalogue *Dix artistes nègres des États-Unis: Premier festival mondial des arts nègres, Dakar, Sénégal, 1966 / Ten Negro Artists from the United States: First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar, Senegal, 1966* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1966). Produced and sponsored by the United States Committee and the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
51. Three works were featured in both exhibitions (figs. 46, 51, 52).
52. Outgoing Loans, Archive of the Museum of Primitive Art, Robert Goldwater Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. VRA, MMA, AR.1999.6.3, box 1, folder 3.



