

Review Essay: Collecting the ‘Other’: From Cultural Expressions to World-Class Art*

***New Guinea Art: Masterpieces from the Jolika Collection of John and Marcia Friede.* Ruth A. Peltason, ed. San Francisco: Publications Department of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2005. 852 pp. (Co-published with 5 Continents Editions.)**

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This lavish two-volume edition of photographs and essays on the Jolika Collection of Melanesian art, held by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF), has arrived in the midst of a lively interdisciplinary conversation in which anthropologists and art historians reprise earlier discussions and critiques concerning both the relationship of art and culture and the concept of primitive art with ever greater insistence on the political and economic dimensions of the production, display, and exchange of art objects.¹ The exhibition and associated publication of the Jolika Collection of New Guinea art join the ranks of major events in the art world through which the boundaries of art in Western paradigms of knowledge are being expanded. Debates and contests of ownership, authenticity, ethics, and value swirl amongst artists, local communities, scholars, collectors, and the now global marketplace of art and artifact. These discussions urge us to re-think the bases of interpretation by raising questions that jar older categories and privileges.

Born into this fertile ground, the publication itself presents multiple approaches to understanding art and culture. Each of the authors examines the collection differently, in terms of the history of collecting (Robert Welsch) and the themes of New Guinea art (Dirk Smidt), in relation to surrealism, the moment at which such art entered into Western philosophies of art (Philippe Peltier), and from a scientific perspective, using radiocarbon dating to discover the age of the wood from which the objects were made (Gregory Hodgins). John Bigelow Taylor and Dianne Dubler have produced stunning sharp photographs that reveal minute detail, while John Friede, collector and art patron, presents his personal perspective on the long-term project of collecting, a widespread but seldom studied practice.

For us as anthropologists, certain questions press forward: how is the activity of collecting viewed by the collector(s)? What impact does it have on the peoples whose art it is? What cross-cultural communications—or elisions—are involved? Do they—or do they not—contribute to mutual understanding and to the cumulative knowledge base of the societies involved? This publication makes an extensive array of New Guinea art available to a predominately Western public for the first time; and the essays provide, in the words of Harry S. Parker III, Director of Museums, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, multiple entry points and ways of appreciating this unfamiliar art world. Yet they stop short of making their criteria of artistic value explicit, the terms and processes of acquisition transparent, or the meanings fully localized. Objects in the collection, and the collection itself, are described in superlatives (by contrast to “inferior

* Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* September 25, 2007/ See:

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examples,” Vol. 1, p. 23). They are not only “spectacular,” “dazzling,” and “superb” (e.g., Vol. 2, pp. 9, 22), but discriminations are made as to the “the finest,” the “best,” and “most important” specimens (e.g., Vol. 2, pp. 12, 19, 20, 21, 23). What renders a piece inferior or important—and to whom? How do the “experts” evaluate pieces? More troubling in this monumental work is the near total absence of New Guinea voices.

The presentation of the Jolika Collection to the public, at the new de Young Museum and in print, epitomizes the tension between global economics and the legacies of colonialism on the one hand, and local politics and indigenous systems of value, on the other. Friede’s essay describes his goals and experiences acquiring the objects in terms of collector prestige values and capitalist economics. Social scientists long ago observed the extent to which money dissolves the boundaries of different systems of value and thus allows transactions that otherwise would be incommensurate, such as the purchase of objects prized for their religious, aesthetic, historical and sentimental value. Friede recognizes the invasive power of capital as he describes acquiring objects from other collectors who “had dreams of their own, who had hoped to keep their objects together, but for one reason or another could not” (Vol. 1, p. 15), then he thanks both the NOMOS Corporation for its profitability and his agent at Citibank for the “access to liquidity” that have made the enterprise possible (Vol. 1, p. 23). Using the metaphor of the hunt to describe his collecting adventure, Friede set out to fulfill a dream “that a definitive and comprehensive collection of the art of New Guinea could still be built and presented to the world” (Vol. 1, p. 15). He “learned to track down my scarce game with the same zeal as the New Guinea hunters pursue their quarry in their protein-poor forests” (Vol. 1, p. 15). The rarity of his results extolled, the Jolika selection is also treasured for how “much of it was made before the effects of contact with foreigners” (Vol. 1, p. 17). Representing a common Western contradiction, the collection is thus a celebration of that which has not been polluted by foreign influence, while it, itself, epitomizes that very history of foreign impact.

Although he is aware that for their creators the objects express spiritual and human values and motivations, Friede implies (but never makes explicit) aesthetic values drawn from a Western universalist art tradition—form, balance, creativity—and positions the makers of New Guinea art as definitely “other,” and most times as “primitive.” For him, the objects have “the freshness of the paintings and carvings of the Cro-Magnon people of the last European Ice Age” (Vol. 1, p.16). The objects “engaged my love of *natural* objects, my fascination with *ancient religious* artifacts, and my preference for *surrealist* images” (Vol. 1, p.16, emphases added). The activities of collecting included field trips to New Guinea, but have taken place primarily amongst other collectors and dealers in Europe, America, and Australia.

Anthropologist Welsch traces the history of collecting in New Guinea in detail. The discussion of who the explorers, traders, and missionaries were and their motives and goals is fascinating, and presents material that has not been pulled together like this elsewhere. As political climates changed in Europe, the degree of contact and acquisition in New Guinea varied. Contradictory statements both recognize and deny the one-sidedness, opportunism, and often outright brutality that characterize collecting both in colonial times and now as Western and local values collide. While assuring us that “Western collectors were largely dependent on what villagers were willing to part with, and typically they only sold, bartered or exchanged objects that were no longer important to them” (Vol. 2, p. 10), in the next paragraphs Welsch describes how

missionaries were often coercive in their efforts to acquire objects that they could then sell back home to support their work (Vol. 2, p. 10f.); and most extreme, how one collector “the flamboyant d’Albertis. . . exploded sticks of dynamite to chase away the villagers. Then he entered their homes and took whatever he wished” (Vol. 2, p. 11).

This ability of capitalism to invade other domains of value reaches far back into the history of cultural contact. Although more humane dynamics may prevail today, there is little doubt that the desire and need to participate in enterprises that require capital (e.g., to gain access to education, health care, taxes, and transportation) continue to pressure New Guineans to part with objects of value. Such transactions may exact their own costs or consequences locally. During field research in the Sepik in 1988, Barlow encountered a situation in which a young mother’s untimely death was attributed to the inappropriate sale of a powerful object to an art dealer. Other objects of historical and sentimental importance to their owners had been sold to pay for school fees or hospital stays.

Welsh concludes his essay by urging that “[i]t is now up to the museum visitor to listen and to hear what these pieces can tell us about the diverse symbolic and ritual lives of New Guineans” (Vol. 2, p. 24). But following his disturbing account of relentless collecting, what presses most at this point is a need to hear the more specific stories of the objects in this collection. Objects in the Jolika collection represent a broad sampling of the major collecting expeditions—and as such cannot be divorced from the history of exploitation and “lack of regard for the rights of New Guineans” (Vol. 2, p. 11).

Although dealers and collectors largely deny responsibility for knowing where their objects came from and how they were obtained, this is a practice and a form of privilege that is being rapidly eroded as indigenous peoples and descendants of original producers and owners become more knowledgeable and vocal about their rights. Welsh does not raise this point about the history of collecting; but when the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Getty Museum of Los Angeles, the Austrian National Museum, and other giants of the museum world are being called upon to openly examine their collections, these issues cannot be avoided. Already, the existence of several items of national cultural property of Papua New Guinea in the Jolika collection have been noted in an article in *Nature* (Dalton 2006). Asked about this, Friede reportedly expressed that “[r]epatriating the artifacts is ‘crazy’” and that “They are a lot better off in San Francisco (Dalton 2006:723).” Some of the very objects of the Jolika collection originally were extracted from New Guinea by people who generally saw them as “evidence of the villagers’ extreme backwardness” (Vol. 2, p. 10), and it is hard to not read here an implication that the reason they should not now be repatriated is still somehow New Guinea’s backwardness. By contrast, Friede, who sees himself as the objects’ loving collector-parent, characterizes San Francisco as an expressly progressive and appropriate place for the New Guinea objects, “a place unburdened by the narrow attitudes of the past” (Vol. 1, p. 23)—referring to Westerners who did not appreciate “primitive art.” In fact, much as objects from New Guinea once helped construct German or Hungarian or Surrealist authority, pride, and identity (Vol. 2, p. 12), here the objects of the Jolika Collection are linked to San Francisco, which “now at any given time, . . . can be relied upon to present a breathtaking array of New Guinea art” (Vol. 1, p.10). Yet New Guinea and New Guineans do not feature as relevant to this collection.

As for what the Jolika Collection, as Welsch suggests, “can tell us about the diverse symbolic and ritual lives of New Guineans,” Smidt provides the only few pages in these volumes to focus on the cultural context for the objects and what they might have meant to those who made and used them—a task undertaken in broad strokes given the islands’ “hundreds of cultures” (Vol. 2, p. 31). Smidt certainly conveys rich appreciation for the general cultural roles of objects such as those now held in the Jolika collection, making it very clear that they “are much more than just art works or instruments for making music or issuing signals. They are imbued with the soul and the power of the spirits” (Vol. 2, p. 38). Even an object such as “a shield may be seen as a human being” (Vol. 2, p. 42). In fact, Smidt describes in some detail the current process of carving and painting such shields—constructing them like humans and achieving their transformation into supernatural beings (Vol. 2, p. 43)—indicating that they obviously still have relevance, and rendering even more glaring the absence of New Guinean voices in presenting this collection. It is also emphasized that such objects “cannot be isolated” (Vol. 2, p. 48), but are “inextricably linked to other forms of art” and to their broader contexts. At this point, the volumes’ only New Guinea voice appears, as Smidt refers to scholar and poet Dr. Jacob Simet of the Papua New Guinea National Cultural Commission, “who stresses an unbreakable unity between the work of art, the society in which it plays a role, the rules of that society, the songs, the magic, and the setting”—with particular emphasis on the setting (Vol. 2, p. 48). Smidt continues logically that though objects in “Western museum showcases and depositories may please us” etc., “there is still a gap to be bridged to do justice to its real significance as dynamic repositories of supernatural spirits influencing all major aspects of life,” and hopes that “the objects shown in these volumes open our eyes, our minds, and our souls” (Vol. 2, p. 48).

The photographs by Taylor and Dubler have an extraordinary vitality of light, shadow, and texture—a vitality that depends not only on photographic technique (which is excellent), but also on the traces left by the rich lives of these objects outside of a collection vault that both Welsch and Smidt entreat readers to appreciate. But the gorgeous, seductive photos also objectify these spirit representations, in a way that cannot help but be at odds with what we learn about them in their once cultural contexts. Individual objects are presented with minimal specific information, while the articles speak mainly of categories of objects. Thus the identity and particular story of each object is effaced and it comes instead to represent the genre. Though we learn, for example, of the “great symbolic and emotional significance” of slit-gongs, which generally have their own personal stories (e.g., Vol. 2, p. 38), we hear no personal stories of the objects in the Jolika. Rather than toward cultural analysis, the process of discovery has been furthered in the direction of scientific analysis. Dating of the wood, for example, revealed samples of extraordinary age, and some of the objects have been photographed with magnification, with similar “revelatory effects” (Vol. 1, p. 21). Friede points out: “Viewing our objects at one hundred times magnification made possible by [the photographers’] camera, exposed structure, color, and materials that had always been there but had gone unrecognized for decades until this time” (Vol. 1, p. 21).

What we hear, then, as we tune into the pieces for their particular histories and the details of their making, use, and significance, is a telling silence created by their abstraction from cultural context. This break and re-orientation are represented well by the black space surrounding them in the photographs. From that void the objects stand out starkly—the “best” and very “important” examples of the collector aesthetics according to which they were assembled. This

makes even more poignant the stories of what brought them into this space—the stories that they cannot or perhaps are not supposed to relate. The details of the thumbnail sketches in volume two tell other stories. They present pedigrees of the objects in the Western art world—the collectors from whom they were acquired, comparable pieces in other museum collections, exhibits, and publications (see objects 150-153, Vol. 2, p. 105f)—and the personal impressions of the collector—his favorite pieces (object #62, Vol. 2, p. 92) and associations to them (ex: #148 “always reminded me of Groucho Marx” Vol. 2, p. 105f). Given this re-contextualization outlining the collecting process, it would be interesting to know in more detail about the development of the collector’s values, strategies, and skills.

The gift of the collection to the de Young and the exhibition transform the objects from private collection to public museum accession. This transition makes the objects available to a new and potentially very broad public audience, and is a threshold for this audience to begin to learn about a vast and complex range of cultural productions. It will be useful to art historians and to teachers, and perhaps ultimately to New Guineans studying their own art traditions. Also exhibited is the transition of these objects from their roles in the “diverse symbolic and ritual lives of New Guineans” (Vol. 2, p. 24) to collector display. The publication documents the power relations implicated in such exchanges. It also shows that there is yet work to be done to turn from a Western cultural monologue on art and aesthetics toward dialogue that encompasses a broader range of cultural worldviews and experiences.

Note

1. The two volume work under consideration here—*New Guinea Art: Masterpieces from the Jolika Collection of John and Marcia Friede*—was “published on the occasion of the inaugural exhibition of selected works from the Jolika Collection in the Marcia and John Friede Gallery at the re-opening of the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California, USA in October 2005” (p. 2). Together with the Legion of Honor, The de Young Museum is part of the larger Fine Art Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF).

Reference Cited

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