Herbert WEISS

Collecting African Art

Edited extract of an interview by Yves Abrioux and Kenneth J. Knoespel in the Weiss apartment, Washington D. C., Saturday, November 15, 2014, with additional text by Herbert Weiss

Very few people know as much about Africa, and the Congo in particular, as the distinguished Africanist and political scientist Herbert Weiss (b. 1930), an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at City University of New York and a Senior Fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute of International Studies, New York City. Weiss' first field trip to the Congo occurred in 1959, just as the independence struggle was about to reach its peak. He got to know several of the leaders of the independence movement, some of whom came to respect and trust him. His extended period of study on the ground resulted in the publication of his groundbreaking Political Protest in the Congo. The *Parti Solidaire Africain* During the Independence Struggle (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967). *This was the first book to challenge the standard view that urban elites, influenced by European leftist ideologies, first mobilized urban populations and then spread their parties into the rural, tradition-bound, areas. Weiss' research concluded that the rural populations were often more radical than their urban based leaders and that this rural thrust was an indispensable component in the seizure of political power by anti-colonial, independence seeking, nationalists.*

In the Congo at least, Weiss showed, urbanized leaders often struggled to keep up with or reign in the rebellious rural followers. This observation is at the heart of Political Protest in the Congo*. In the years immediately following the independence of the Congo, Weiss used the same lens to analyze the sudden success and rapid demise of the Kwilu Rebellion led by Pierre Mulele which was the earliest manifestation of the much larger Congo Rebellions (1963-65).*

Weiss's research involved long treks through the Congo at the wheel of his car. He kept the maps he used and annotated on these journeys. Weiss responded with great generosity when he was contacted in the lead-up to the exhibition Mapping Place, Africa Beyond Paper *curated by Teri Williams, Kenneth J. Knoespel and Yves Abrioux at the Robert C. Williams Museum of Papermaking, Georgia Institute of Technology, February-June, 2014, in the context of* Africa Atlanta*, an initiative of the Georgia Institute of Technology Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts and the Consulate General of the Kingdom of Belgium in Atlanta. The exhibition catalogue was published by the Georgia Institute of Technology. Preparations for the exhibition involved extensive discussions with Weiss, both on his collection of African art and on his collection of maps, expanded beyond his initial fieldtrip to the Congo in 1959 and 1960. A number of these maps were included in the exhibition.*

Herbert Weiss also gave a talk at the Museum of Papermaking in conjunction with the exhibition on April 24, 2014. His visit was sponsored by Africa Atlanta 2014. The exhibition was followed by an international conference, Africa beyond Africa: The

Future of Cultural, Social and Scientific Research*, Georgia Institute of Technology, May 16-17, 2014, that was also part of* Africa Atlanta*. You can see the proceedings here.*

The long conversation with Weiss from which an extract is published here took place in the wake of the exhibition. The interview took in numerous aspects of a rich and varied life. Early childhood in Vienna was followed by adolescence in the Sudan, to which the Weiss family fled in order to escape from Austria after the Nazi invasion. The family then moved to the USA in time for Weiss to begin his university studies at the University of Oregon before quickly moving on to New York University. Military service took him to occupied Germany, after which he picked up his studies again in France. Weiss then served briefly as an intelligence analyst at the Department of State before joining the Center for International Studies at MIT which sent him on his first field trip to the Congo in 1959. In the mid-1960s, he became an academic, first at NYU, subsequently at Brooklyn College. Trips to Africa, an active role in the development of Africanist research and consultation work on Congo continued throughout and beyond his academic career.

In the interview recorded in November 2014, Weiss speaks at length about his personal and family history that in part explain his extraordinary lifelong itinerary. An astonishing gallery of portraits of people describes personal and intellectual influences. The cast of characters includes private contacts and public figures. Some of the latter are well known. Others are no less significant in his life for being less

familiar. A number of little-known facts about recent American and international history emerge along the way. There is an extended discussion of the independence struggle in the Congo and the Kwilu Rebellion in the early years of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Weiss also speaks of his passionate interest in African art. He explains what these mean to him and meditates on the culture of collecting in which he continues to participate, critiquing both certain excesses and attacks that he considers misguided.

The extract from the interview published here is intended to accompany the texts of presentations made in the context of the international conference Africa beyond Africa*, whose chief focus was on museum culture. It therefore centers on Weiss's passion for African art. The full text of the interview can be read here. Both its numerous academic, political and historical developments and the portrait it draws of an individual whose entire life has been swept up in the maelstrom of the twentieth-century history contextualize Weiss's collection in many fascinating ways. Further testimony of Weiss's generous engagement in* Africa Atlanta *was provided by the interview he gave to Georgia Tech Radio. The conversation with student presenter Cornelius Ejimofor was recorded on Monday, April 28, 2014 and broadcast June 23. It can be heard here.*

The present interview owes everything to the enthusiastic participation of Herbert Weiss. Unfortunately, no transcription can give a proper sense of the way he periodically leapt up from the table to lovingly handle pieces from his collection and

pointed to features which helped him make a specific point. The interview could not have been conducted without the hospitality afforded by Sevana and Herbert Weiss at their apartment in Washington, D.C.

A taste for African art

My intellectual input on the subject of African traditional or tribal art has to be viewed as quite limited. Although I have collected almost from the time I arrived in the Congo – I acquired my first piece in Luluabourg in November 1960 – my purpose in collecting has always been essentially to fulfill my own aesthetic interests and values.

Somebody like Zoe Strother at Columbia University is interested in breaking down the barrier between received definitions of traditional African art that emphasize purity, in other words, art that is unaffected by colonial impact, and traditional/tribal art that evolved during the colonial period and was affected by the colonial condition. Why, she argues, consider this as any less valid? On the contrary, it may be more valid because it shows, as with every other art form, evolution under the pressures of current conditions. I have to say that my input is far more limited and essentially restricted to fulfilling my joy in the aesthetic qualities of this art and the process of collecting it.

I don't know what most of these pieces in my collection were used for. That's not my purpose in collecting. My purpose is to collect African tribal art for the same reason I would collect Western modern art – because it speaks to me aesthetically. But, I do believe it is undervalued if one puts it into a comparative context. For instance, I believe that a lot of Warega art has the same aesthetic, stylistic values as a Brancusi sculpture but sells for a small fraction of what a piece by Brancusi sells for

and it is only known by people focused on African tribal art. In fact, I believe the Warega sculptures are much more imaginative than Brancusi's work which I find immensely appealing but somewhat repetitive. That contradiction interests me. I look at it from the point of view of a universal aesthetic that is then somewhat artificially subdivided. For instance, within a universal aesthetic, I am interested in the interface between Expressionism and Cubism. That's my taste. Before I went to Africa I was particularly drawn to the sculpture of Marini.[1] You know, the sculptor who always had these riders on horses. That is the aesthetic that made me so excited about the first piece of African art I bought. That monkey over there. I don't know if you see the linkage. To me, there is a daring in the treatment of volumes which, to my sense, recalls the way Marini treats volumes. And yet there's a strong psychological element in the piece as well. You can impute a personality and even an attitude to this little monkey. That's where I come from, where art is concerned

You may be interested in the attempt to link African and African-American Art. You know there's an exhibit of the Cosby's collection at the National Museum of African Art in Washington.[2] Why did they put it in the National Museum of African Art, when it's African-American art? Well, I think the reason is that African-Americans are enormously eager to develop those links. There is an African-American anthropologist living in my building. She's very interested in making these

[1] Marino Marini (1901-1980), Italian sculptor.

[2] *African and African American Artworks in Dialogue*, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Nov. 2014-Jan. 2016, bringing together works from the National Museum of African Art and the Camille O. and William H. Cosby Collection.

connections. She's deep into West African influences in the Western hemisphere. Then, of course, there is the exhibit last spring at the Carter Center in Atlanta that emphasizes the link between Kongo and African American art.[3]

As you know, I was sorry that the loans from the Tervuren Museum[4] were all concentrated on Kongo art because it denied the American pubic the incredible richness of the Tervuren collection on *C*ongo art – Congo with a C. But if your emphasis is on crossing the seas, then the Bakongo people are probably the closest link because they are located at the mouth of the Congo River and were massively subjected to the Atlantic slave trade.

A politically significant sculpture

Of course I was immensely interested and pleased when I happened upon a substantive link between a sculpture in my collection and my professional interests – the history of protest, especially rural protest in the Congo and more generally all over Africa. That was the focus of the talk I gave at the GTU Paper Museum that was part of the Atlanta/Africa program. In 1972 I was on a field trip in the Kwilu region of the Congo, specifically in Gungu, a large village in what is today Bandundu Province, I was offered and later purchased a Pende figure that was identified as representing M. Maximillien Balot, a Belgian colonial administrator who was killed

[3] The travelling exhibition *Kongo Across the Waters* was on display at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, Atlanta, May-September 2014, as part of *Africa-Atlanta*, a citywide year-long series of art exhibits, lectures, performances and conferences highlighting Atlanta as a nexus for reinventing the cultural and economic bonds among Africa, Europe and the Americas, organized by the Ivan Allen Collège of Liberal Arts, Georgia Institute of Technology.

[4] *Kongo Across the Waters* was organized by the Royal Museum for Africa, Tervuren (near Brussels). It consisted of works from its collections relating to the historic kingdom of Kongo that covered areas in what is now the southern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo but also in Angola.

by some villagers in 1931. This tragic event was the spark that started the Pende Revolt which was one of the last major, ethnically limited, uprisings against Belgian rule. Research, and the revelations of a courageous Belgian magistrate who was sent to investigate what had caused both the killing of Balot and the revolt, allowed me to reconstruct this history. It turned out that for years prior to this event a collusive relationship between local administrators and representatives of the Belgian subsidiary of Lever Bros resulted in an abusive system of forced labor that was used to extract palm nuts used in the production of oil and soap. When village men refused to be recruited for this arduous work, far away from their homes, their wives were taken hostage and sexually abused. When caught, they themselves were flogged. On the specific occasion that resulted in the Pende Revolt, a man whose wife had been "taken" while he was hiding was so incensed that he confronted the white recruiter in question. Instead of somehow compensating the man he was charged with attacking the recruiter. An administrator, M. Balot, was sent to the village to investigate the situation. He made it to the village but not out of it. He was attacked, killed and cut into pieces – and with that the revolt began. The repression soon followed. It was both inefficient and – even for then – surprisingly cruel. Orders were given that no capitulations would be accepted before all the pieces of Balot's body were returned. Since they were distributed among many clans few of the would-be capitulators were in a position to fulfil this demand. Nonetheless, some prisoners were taken and then tortured – some to death.

The Pende have a long history of protest against colonial rule. They were among the most determined groups involved in the independence struggle (1959-60) and their leaders were allied to (Patrice) Lumumba, the Congo's first Prime Minister. Shortly after Lumumba was expelled from power and assassinated, the Pende joined Pierre Mulele in starting the huge "Congo Rebellions" of 1963-8 – the largest post-independence revolutionary movement in Africa for many years. Many years later, a Pende leader became the king-maker of the 2006 election in the Congo by backing Joseph Kabila, the current President.

Zoe Strother, Richard Woodward (the Curator of African Art the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) and I have written an article[5] about the Balot figure and the context surrounding his death. So, you see, when the opportunity presents itself, I immerse myself in the link between art and politics and especially protest.

A universal aesthetic

There may be a link for you to discover between my professional commitments and my art collecting with the art that is surrounding us here. But in my mind I must say that with the exception of the Pende piece, all this is completely separate from my intellectual journey. I suppose there's a contrarian element there too. That's where the link possibly can be found, if I think about it. I'm a Westerner and I'm supposed to appreciate ballet, opera, good books, art. Right? OK. I feel a bit guilty because I

[5] Herbert F. Weiss, Richard B. Woodward, Z.S. Strother, "Art with a Fight in it: Discovering that a statue of a Colonial Officer is a Power Object from the 1931 Pende Rebellion" (provisional title), with a contribution from Gudijiga Christophe and Kiangu Sindani. To be published in *African Arts.*

don’t like opera. I can’t read music and although I like a lot of music – especially classical – I have the feeling that, in the last analysis, this music isn’t really touching me closely enough. I don’t read a lot of good books because it’s too boring, given the slow speed with which I read. I’m drawn to some modern sculpture spontaneously. And then there’s the opportunity that slowly emerged in Africa. I have a good eye. Dealers will tell me I have a good eye. You’re just born with it. This art is something I can afford. Western art, I can’t afford. I like sculpture more than paintings or etchings, drawings, lithographs. You have to go real close to look at these. I couldn’t be a collector of prints although some of them are very nice. I like sculpture, the 3-dimensional. This came from somewhere but I don’t know where. Hell, it’s like a gift from the heavens. So I went for it.

In any aspect of art that I’m interested in – I don’t know if this is too broad a statement but even if it is, let it stand – I yearn to understand a psychological content. I think that I’m a post-Freudian man in the sense that, whether you’ve had analysis or not or whether you read books about Freud or not (which I haven’t), my subculture is permeated by personality analysis. You probably share that? I transpose that. I make a bridge between that and art. So I want to look at art and see an expression. A human or animal expression. Basically, a human expression. I want to say this is really a depressed person, or whatever. At the same time, for reasons that I can’t explain other than by stating what appeals to me, I do like

Cubistic forms. There is daring in it. And then, I am also very much attracted by certain minimalist forms like this Warega mask.

Take this Lwalwa mask for example *[taking a sculpture off the shelf]*. You can read a person into it. A personality. At the same time, you can take these pieces out and they become beautiful shapes in and of themselves. There is a balance which makes the thing. Here is a good example of that *[another sculpture]*. It's daringly Cubistic and yet, in the last analysis, you can read power and earnestness into the face. You read whatever you want into it. That mask over there, which is heavily damaged and incomplete, again very well balanced, in my opinion. The sharp Cubistic values. And yet you can read something into it. So that's what I mean by being attracted to these things.

Of course, you collect more broadly. You can't restrict yourself that strongly. Here's another example. I like faces because you can read a being into them. This is kind of an interesting piece, if the interpretation of what it represents is correct. It is a Kuba piece. You can see a very glum woman whose breasts have been sheared off on purpose. Supposedly the King of the Kuba has about 100 wives and consequently some might feel unappreciated. The idea is, if you dare to go elsewhere, this is what could happen to you.

This morning I talked about the universal aesthetic. This comes in precisely if I take, for instance, a Warega Mask. Let's take this *[picking up a sculpture]* and compare it to a Brancusi. Now, they come from very different cultures. That satisfies

me. The way they treat form strikes me as very similar. So, this balance between personality, shape, minimalism, is something that they share forms the focus of a subset of a universal aesthetic. Next to them could be a No mask from Japan. It could fit into this triad that I just created. I don't need to appreciate French art, Congo Art, or Japanese Art. I may do that but I don't need to in order to appreciate these items. I appreciate them because they share a form, an aesthetic. I can appreciate all three of them on an egalitarian basis. With very rare exceptions, I completely abstract the art that I possess. In other words, you come and tell me, "Well what was this art used for?" I may know, I may not know but in any case I don't care. That's not why I possess it, you see. The one exception[6] is for obvious reasons. But other than that…

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This is a newly acquired mask. I didn't know that the Walengola in the Congo had masks. OK? It looks like a very good, old, used mask. The guy I exchanged it with I had never met before. I hope he didn't cheat me. My only real question about this mask is: "Do they have masks like this?" In other words, is it genuine? That's important to me for reasons, I suppose, of economy more than anything else. What is important is that I like it. I don't give a damn about what ritual it was involved in. Whether it was part of a circumcision ritual or something else. You know some people are immensely interested in that. I'm not.

[6] The piece from the Pende revolt described above.

Suppose, as an atheist Jew, I find a particular crucifix very attractive. I objectivize it and divorce it completely from its function. What's wrong with that? But you must separate theft from some sort of legitimate exchange. I mean, we're talking about theories of possession here. How it is presented is irrelevant. I don't know the history. But there is a reality. And one of the interesting things about various African objects – and I'm more familiar with that – is that, of course, some are stolen but some are desacralized so that they may be sold. In other words their sacred or ritual quality has been drawn out of them and then they are just objects. What we need to do is talk about that type of example, instead of conflagrating every acquisition into "cultural theft". Obviously, we're against theft. So I think you need to concentrate on why it is different for me to take a mask that was sacred to an African clan, as against a crucifix from a family who has had it in their possession for 300 years and has decided to sell. I don't see a difference. There is a form of universalization. We have the same rules. I'm against stealing African objects but I'm fine with a purchase from a legitimate owner.

I have a piece that I presented at a conference. A group of Africans in a village had come to sell it because they wanted to send some of their children to school and schooling was no longer free. It was a sacred object that had been in their clan for many years but that they were willing – apparently legitimately, let's assume legitimately – to sell. At the conference an African-American woman came up to me and said, "So why couldn't you leave the object there and just given them the

money?" I said, "I happen to have their address. If you want to send them some money, why don't you do it? Why are you guilt-tripping me?" I refused to be guilty for doing in Africa what I would do everywhere else in the world. This object belonged to them and they were willing to exchange it for something that to them at that moment of time was of greater value. There were times in Vienna in 1938 when we were selling things desperately and the Nazis didn't even pay for them, although they pretended to buy them. That was theft under oppressive conditions. But, whereas I believe purchases of African traditional art, under legitimate conditions, are OK, there is a problem of the price paid. As with African raw materials such as copper, timber etc. the price paid in Africa for traditional art, especially in the past, has been ridiculously low. Of course, that is grossly unfair. But now things have changed and there is art for sale in Kinshasa at prices that are far higher than what one can buy at auctions here in the US.

Sometimes you put two pieces together. Take these. There is an aesthetic. The fact that they are a pair adds to their value. Over there, there's another pair. I don't mind adopting them in my western world in the name of universalism. And I think this is more honorable than giving superficial little bits of information about their original use. You're not going to really get into something like, "This is a mask that they danced with when they cut off a bit of this or that." It either fits into our Western world or it doesn't.

Leaving art aside, I am interested in getting deeper into my personal relationships with Africans in various ways. I have African friends and I'm delighted when they open up and tell me about their mother or father and how they feel about this, that or the other thing. I'm glad to be adopted. When there's an obstacle to intimacy, overcoming it is very meaningful, obviously. Yes, there are these cultural antagonisms. But when you overcome them, when you are adopted by other people, it is very moving. So when I say I'm not interested in the past of these objects, it is that I don't need objects to go and learn about a people and a culture. I'm interested in the role of circumcision. If someone wants to talk about circumcision I will listen. I don't need an object to do this.

What does this say to you? *[He displays an oil painting]*. It's a virtual copy of Picasso's *Guernica* - a multi-colored, rather garish, interpretation of the very grey original. It was painted by a Congolese artist who belonged to a group in Brazzaville that had years before been organized by a Frenchman. They signed themselves PPP – Peintre Poto Poto. Well it became much commercialized. There was a big cement platform and a very thick thatched roof. The platform was twice the size of this room. There were artists on both sides who exhibited their paintings. It was quite an innovation and a lot of foreign visitors bought "local art" there. I was there looking at one, to me, awful painting after another. And then I hit upon this one. I couldn't resist buying it because it represents a 360° circle of cultural influence. It is interesting in that they went to the trouble to copy Picasso. Why? Unfortunately, I

don't think it was because they wanted to integrate Picasso's aesthetic values or images – rather I suspect it was because they thought that some Westerner would be drawn to it – and as you see, one was. When the show *Primitivism and Modern Art* was on at MOMA in 1984 I telephoned and wondered if it would fit in. They didn't call back.

Collecting tribal art can be a profitable thing both because the value of good pieces has gone up so much but also because of the whole tax implications of charitable donations in the US. I give objects to American museums every year. In effect, the US Government "spends" more on objects of art – although they hardly ever buy any – than do the European governments that do purchase art. Here, the cost is in the lost tax revenues because the appraisals tend to be exaggerated. I got a call once from someone in the Congressional Reference Service. This guy was doing background research on Nelson Rockefeller, who had been nominated for the Vice-Presidency. He explained, "I'm charged with examining his income tax returns. I see here an appraisal of $5.5 million for objects of African art donated to the New York Museum of Primitive Art." This was the early 70's. In my opinion, he had perhaps spent $500,000, so it was immensely profitable for him to get a $5.5 million deduction from his gross income. Let's say he spent $1 million, although this is probably very high. Through tax not paid on this gift he cleaned up in raw cash between $3 million and $4 million! When I heard that, I said to myself, "Never feel guilty about donating African art to different museums!"

I have, as you know also collected maps of the Congo. Apart from the exhibit at GTU I have simply kept them – the inveterate collector. But, they are looking for a home!