



# ETHNIC ARTS COUNCIL

## EAC NEWS

Winter 2007

### FEATURE

## Which Way, Ethnic Art? A Journey Through Concepts

By Wolfgang Schlink

2006 has been a banner year for ethnic art. Paris provided the main venues. In June, after an eight years gestation period, the Musée du Quai Branly, an arranged marriage of the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie opened in its Jean Nouvel-designed quarters. The auction of the Collection Verité produced record-breaking sales. The mid-September "Parcours-des-Mondes", held in more than fifty galleries in St. Germain-des-Prés, has arguably evolved into the world's premier powwow of top quality dealers, collectors and, of course, stunning tribal art.

Closer to home, "Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives", a new gallery featuring selected highlights of the Fowler Museum's permanent ethnic art collection, made its long-awaited September debut.

While the events of 2006 are great news for ethnic art, the Fowler's theme "Intersections" describes, maybe inadvertently, today's dilemma of ethnic non-western art and its public presentation. A crossroads of choices challenges museum directors and ethnological curators: Emphasizing the aesthetic value of ethnic art's best in the same context as western and classical art? Or underscoring the mandate of ethnology and focusing on educating the public about the creators' historical, sociological, religious and political environments?

### Aesthetics Versus Ethnology

Jacques Chirac, the *éminence grise* of the Branly and a prominent collector of Asian and African art himself, had the vision of creating a monument that would show non-western art and cultures on a level equal to western high art. In an ambitious trial run in 2000, Chirac's collector friend, the late Jacques Kerchache, put an exquisite selection of tribal pieces, mainly from Paris' ethnological museums, into France's art hall of fame, the Musée du Louvre. The installation had to overcome resistance from all parties involved. Ethnological curators hated to see their best pieces extracted while at the receiving end the feeling of desecration of a national art temple prevailed. Today, one still faces that condescending stare, signaling "Ils sont fous,



Branly: Lega in Lego

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*les Américains*", when asking the *demoiselles du Louvre* at central information for directions to the tribal art exhibit at the remote Porte des Lions.

However, once the odyssey of staircases, hallways and elevators is successfully negotiated, the spacious display of about one hundred top-notch ethnic art objects is a rewarding, breath-taking experience. Even better, the exhibition's obscure location allows viewing in almost splendid privacy. The emphasis is purely on aesthetics, not on extensive background information. There is virtually none.

The well warranted "elevating" of non-western art, its move from traditional ethnological and often anthropological presentation into first-class art museums, actually began in America. In 1982, Rockefeller funding facilitated the entry of the former New York Museum of Primitive Art's collection into the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Ethnic art was displayed in easy company of

flanking galleries featuring classical antiquities as well as modern art by Picasso, Matisse, Brancusi, Klee, Pollock & Co. The profound influence of tribal art on these and other artists was brilliantly documented in the 1984 landmark exhibition "Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" at MOMA. Picasso stated: "Primitive sculpture has never been surpassed", and subsequently tribal aesthetics became a significant source of inspi-

ration for major works of western art.

### The Branly: The Art of Darkness

The Branly has come a long way from the gaudy exhibition practices of its predecessors. Only some thirty years ago did the de

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## CHAIR'S MESSAGE

By Kaija Keel

A "Happy New Year" to all EAC members! I am very proud to represent you for the next two years. I'd like to keep you informed on what the Board of Directors is planning to advance the EAC agenda.

At our meeting in early November, the Board reviewed the outcome of the Annual Dinner and Auction. Thanks to the hard work of Jean Concoff, Fred and Stella Krieger, along with many of you, we had a very successful fundraiser coming close to last year's outstanding event. Our bank account is replenished and we are starting to look forward to the next grant period. Reports from our Membership Committee were very inspiring with our membership nearly 200 strong!

I have appointed a Grants Review Committee, chaired by John Ross, to refine the grant-giving policy in order to be more flexible, nimble, and influential in advancing the area of ethnic arts. Are there areas that we may be overlooking? Can we find areas to target for special fundraising? More-

over, should we explore different fundraising activities that would attract our members as well as grow our grant-making capacity? The Board will review these two areas and invite your comments. If any of you have any ideas or wish to participate in this please call or email me.

Feelie Lee and Julie Du Brow continue their innovative programs. Please see more details in the Programs section of this newsletter.

Thank you for your steadfast and generous support that helps EAC moving forward. EAC could not continue without your knowledge, interest, and input as we grow and expand into the future!

I am looking forward to a collaborative year.



## WHICH WAY, ETHNIC ART? (CONT'D)



l'Homme remove from its showrooms the "Hottentot Venus", a wax model of a Khoi San woman who had been paraded around Europe's human ethnozoos of the early 1800s. Unfortunately, in the eyes of so many viewers, the execution of the Branly's commendable goal to bid farewell to ethnocentrism and to elevate ethnic art to equal opportunity with western art falls short. It is certainly not for the lack of marquee artifacts. The Branly underscores the art's aesthetics in its spectrum from beauty to brutality. It de-emphasizes, in fact almost hides descriptive labels and delegates the educational aspect mainly to the optional audio tour. Scattered small video screens, regrettably, come only alive at their own schedule, often without sound or narrative. But the gloomy lighting, dimmed further by the application of chintzy forest foliage on some window fronts, leaves the art objects stuck in their mysterious overseas environment of jungle and river.

To add insult to injury, in an unfortunate compromise between spectacular architectural design and sensitive art display, the curators have crammed most of the Africa collection into small, dark Lego-style cubes that protrude from the Branly's Seine-facing façade. One wonders: "What were they thinking?"

The Branly presents some 3,500 artifacts in an unpartitioned geographical walkabout, leading off with Oceania where its best pieces are concentrated. Thereafter, the unsuspecting visitor is left without much of a choice but to stay the course on the curator-enforced tour from Papua to Peru. Taking shortcuts to



Aboriginal Australia: Contemporary Ancient

other continents and cultures, driven by curiosity, the search for light or the wish to compare, is not part of the exhibition concept.

### Ethnic Contemporary: Aboriginal Australia Arrives

On the bright side, the Branly has performed a quantum leap by integrating contemporary ethnic art not only into the exhibition, but also into the building itself. *Et voilà*, the art of Aboriginal Aus-

tralia, largely misunderstood and under-appreciated outside its home continent, has arrived on the scene. The art of the first Australians, steeped in their eternal tradition of the Dreamtime, had, until recently, mainly been created in the ephemeral forms of sand paintings or ceremonial body decoration. Beginning in the early 1970s, the introduction of western art materials, like paint boards, canvas and acrylics started a revolution that made Aboriginal art permanent and facilitated its entry into the art market at large. Yet it took another twenty years and repeated rejection for being "unauthentic folk art" to be accepted at the major European contemporary art fairs of Venice, Cologne and Kassel.

At the Branly, eight Aboriginal Australian artists were commissioned to put their creative talents into column murals, ceiling frescoes and façade design, a laudable, bold move. And inside the exhibition, though somewhat hidden in a remote corner between Oceania and China, early Aboriginal works on bark, funerary poles and recent paintings, inspired by sacred totems and

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landscapes, have made a magnificent debut.

The advent of contemporary ethnic art in a major ethnological museum may help mute the stifling discussion if ethnic art has to be “old and ritually used”, be “bought in Paris” or have its provenance from the proverbial “Belgian missionary collection” to qualify for being authentic. Ethnic art just did not come to an end with the arrival of foreign belief systems and the abandonment of tribal tradition. In many parts of the world ethnic art accomplished transition and transformation. Aboriginal Australia is one good example. There are others.



Berlin: “Father Superior”, Nigeria, 19th C.  
Photo: Claudia Obrocki

the historic stage. Early Portuguese-commissioned ivory salt-cellars from Sierra Leone, a Saint Anthony statue carved in 19th century Congo, and a 1912 Africa-inspired standing nude by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner testify to the significant artistic bonds between Africa and Europe. The exhibition itself is a tour de force of figures, masks, musical instruments and “decorative art” objects like combs, spoons and headrests. The exquisite selection pays homage to the creative talents of the individual, yet unknown artists, while the explanation of the functional and sociological environment is provided by audio and video. The Berlin curators launched their art-driven concept first in Brazil where “Art of Africa” had a remarkably successful test run during 2004. An astounding attendance of more than one million people came to visit, many drawn to the exhibition to learn about their very own cultural heritage. “Africa” at the Dahlem Museum is stunning and worth a detour.

**The Fowler: Successful “Intersections”**

Until recently, more than a handful of museum stops and miles of freeways had to be negotiated to experience a good look into the varied cultural and artistic roots of multi-ethnic Los Angeles. Well, no more, since the recent opening of “Intersections” at the Fowler Museum. A cross-section of some 250 magnificent highlights from the permanent collection is now on view in the thematic context of “Action”, “Power”, “Knowledge” and “Trans-

formation”. It is a fresh touch to see how different peoples from different continents at different times transformed similar ideas into the universal concept of shape and meaning. Moche and Mossi in the same showcase – the language of art unites. Accompanying videos are instructive, easy to use and benefit from a multitude of voices. So does the audio tour. The Fowler also includes a few contemporary pieces. The thought-provoking, multi-figural wood carving “Apartheid’s Funeral” by South African artist Johannes Segogela condenses the four themes of the exhibition into one. Some twenty figures, portraying people who created, supported, lived with, benefited, suffered or died from the brutal segregation of non-whites and whites, surround the coffin of apartheid.

In the public presentation of ethnic art, the conflict-laden history between western and non-western cultures must not be left out. To this end a major conceptual, multi-year renovation, geared to remove the colonial must of King Leopold’s ghost, has started at the important “Royal Museum for Central Africa” in Tervuren, Belgium. It would be next to impossible - although the Fowler does it well in its compact setting - to include the many aspects of aesthetics, interpretation and display in a single concept. Concurrent special exhibitions could be helpful, illustrating



Fowler: Tsimshian, B.C., Canada, 19th C.  
Photo: Don Cole

in a “dual track” gallery how ethnic art has influenced western art and vice versa or illustrating how our view of ethnic art has changed over time. Also, documenting the path of individual artifacts from creator to collector could open revealing windows into the history of art and politics.

In today’s environment, abundant with instant information and entertainment, museum directors and curators alike are struggling with goals such as keeping attendance up, correcting misguided historic treatment and fulfilling the mandate of education without being overly scholarly. The successful ethnic art exhibition concept may well require breaking down curatorial silos that separate ethnology and art. Yet the focus on the dramatic aesthetics of ethnic art - in a world driven by images - is a good platform.

*The author: Wolfgang Schlink, EAC News editor, collector and gallerist, lead a trip for ten art enthusiasts to Paris and Berlin in September 2006 visiting museums, curators, galleries and private collectors. The article reflects a few of his impressions.*



Once again EAC has launched its 2006 grants program aimed at funding museums for programs and projects that advance ethnic arts. The Board adopted a working definition of ethnic arts as “the material art of indigenous people whose art employs traditional methods, aesthetics, and purposes which are functional, ritual, or sacred in nature”. By supporting difficult-to-fund research projects, important publications, unusual exhibitions, and/or travel and related activities, EAC provides our local museums with much-needed support in a timely manner, often within a month of their submission.

On September 1, 2006 the EAC Board enthusiastically announced grant awards ranging from \$6,000 to \$10,000 to the following museums:



Tuareg: “Crosses” from Tahoua, Timia, Agadez;  
Bracelet elkiss; Earrings tizabaten  
Photo: Wolfgang Schlink

**Fowler Museum** – for “**Art of Being Tuareg**”, the first major U.S. exhibition on Tuareg art and culture which considers the history and evolution of these people through their silver jewelry, clothing, leather works, and other highly decorated items crafted by skilled artisans. A joint effort by the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford and the Fowler Museum, it will travel to Stanford and to the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. Opened September 1, 2006 and ends May 30, 2007.

**LACMA** – for the first phase of a long-term research project on **Mezcala sculpture** with archaeologists from Museo Templo Mayor in Mexico City. An interdisciplinary approach using archaeology, materials science, and art history will be used. The museum’s 410 Mezcala examples will be the focus of this project. LACMA plans to organize an exhibition on the topic once the research is completed. Begins now.

**CAFAM** – for “**Healing: A Cultural Exploration**”, an exhibition that examines the human desire to heal physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Over 120 ritual objects from over twenty cultures will be on display, many of the objects on loan from EAC members. Opens January 21, 2007 and ends April 15, 2007.



No Smallpox!  
Songye nkishi Figure, D.R.C.  
Photo: Wolfgang Schlink

**Southwest Museum** – for commissioning **twenty new katsina dolls** to be created by a master Hopi carver as part of four inaugural exhibitions slated to open at the new Austry National Center building in 2009. These katsinas will be featured in a newly commissioned diorama of a plaza scene and will play a key role in the “Developing Katsina Imagery in Hopi Life” exhibition.

The success of the EAC grants program rests largely on the generosity of our members whose dues as well as fundraising activities at the silent auction and Annual Dinner help underwrite these valued awards. The Board appreciates your loyal support and urges you to continue your contributions!

## MEMBERSHIP

EAC warmly welcomes our new and returning members. The Board appreciates your expertise, enthusiasm and support.

Bah Abdoullaye  
Fredric Backlar  
Ellen Castleman  
Grace Choi  
Richard Crane and Judie Sampson  
Sharon and Herb Glaser

Tamara Hoffman  
Dr. Albert and Bonnie Josselson  
Barry Josselson  
Eric Kline  
Sarah Lee  
Lorran and Charlotte Meares

Thomas Murray  
Lois Rose Rose  
David and Cindy Ruderman  
Dr. Armin and Barbara Sadoff  
Sandra Sardjono  
Ryann Willis



## Elegance in Simplicity : A Favorite pre-Columbian Vessel

By Alan Grinnell

Pre-Columbian ceramics from central Panama are justly renowned for the beauty of their painted designs. The elegance and intricacy of these polychrome designs, and the obvious mythic/shamanistic symbolism in many, suggest that they were used ceremonially, probably mainly by and for elites in the chiefdom. As a collector of Panamanian ceramics, I have great admiration for these polychrome pots. Yet some of my favorite pieces are unpainted "plainware", hardly mentioned in reports of documented excavations. Some of these have appliquéd human or animal figures. Most, however, were probably simply functional. Yet even these are often aesthetic gems, illustrating eloquently the mastery of the artist who made them.

One of my favorite Panamanian pieces is an example of this:



Panama, ca. 1200 AD  
Photo: Alan Grinnell

a simple but elegant plainware pouring vessel. It is in the form of a symmetrical, sharp-edged disk, 16.5 cm in diameter, with a loop handle and a small hole just above the margin at one point.

It pours beautifully. Carbon deposits on the rounded bottom of the disk show that it has been heated, presumably to warm the contents of the vessel. The volume is not great - only a few ounces - suggesting that it was used to distribute a potent fluid. The specific origin and use of the pot are unknown, and I am not aware of any similar piece in museums or private collections. Given the frequent use of loop legs and handles in plainware ceramics from Veraguas, I would guess that this piece came from that province. It would not be out of place in a museum of contemporary design or modern art.

Reference: Armand J. Labbé, *Guardians of the Life Stream: Shamans, Art and Power in Prehispanic Central Panama*, 1995

## PROGRAMS 2007

By Feelie Lee

### Meeting Michael Govan

Three programs have already taken place as of this newsletter: The eye-catching ethnic fashion show produced by new member Lois Rose for the Annual Meeting and the curator-guided opening of the first U.S. exhibition on "Art of Being Tuareg" at the Fowler in October. In late November a jam-packed audience spent an evening with the charismatic Michael Govan, the new CEO of LACMA. It was a worthy and spirited conversation between Govan and EAC, an organization that already has contributed immeasurably to LACMA's pre-Columbian wing and served in leadership roles in its many councils. As a vote of confidence the EAC Board offered Govan that night an incentive grant of \$5,000 once he has completed the search and hiring of an African art curator. Govan aptly noted that an encyclopedic museum such as LACMA - he called it a "House of Cultures" - must advance African art, on its own as well as in collaboration with other local museums. Govan supports a comparative approach to displays and acknowledges the global context of the art rather than stay with narrow speciality presentations. He sees future exhibits on ethnic art using a multi-dimensional approach, e.g. highlighting the relationship between African art and LACMA's important German expressionist works.

### The "Intrepid Collector" Series

A series of three key programs will open the 2007 year. These

events - under the working title **"A Guide For Today's Intrepid Collector"** - will take place at Sotheby's on Wilshire. The series will kick-off on **January 20, 2007** with **"Collecting"**, a panel moderated by Jonathan Fogel, Editor in Chief of Tribal Art magazine. Experts representing Africa, Asia and the Americas will discuss various sources available to today's collector, i.e. the field, dealers, auction houses, the internet and assorted informal networks like runners, flea markets, affinity networks and de-acquisition sales. The second program **"Preserving"** deals with best practices for maintaining one's collection and is guided by three local conservators experienced in objects and textiles. Scheduled for late February, this will be a hands-on and critically important session on caring for your collection. Attendees will be encouraged to bring an artifact/textile in need of care for professional advice. Lastly, the third program **"Disposing Or What Am I Going To Do With All This Stuff"** deals with the perennial challenge of dispensing, bequeathing or disposing of one's collection. Museum and auction house reps, legal and tax officials along with a financial planner will have appropriate advice on this third panel.

This series is open to non-EAC members for a fee (\$25 per session or \$60 for the three-part series). Admission for EAC members is free, but early RSVPs are encouraged as seating is limited.

Museum curatorial tours as well as our popular and intimate **"Conversations"** series with visits to collectors' homes will continue. We welcome input from you, the membership, as always!



## The Cat and the Lotus: Mystery of Egyptian Silver Hallmarks

By Wolfgang Schlink

“Is it silver? How old is it?” Lingering questions face every collector of ethnic silver jewelry. A sophisticated hallmarking system, guaranteeing fineness and date, is non-existent in most African and Asian countries.

Egypt is a good case in point. In bygone days, when silver jewelry was mainly created as dowry, a stamped guarantee was unnecessary. Client and silversmith were part of the same community. Often the customer provided the raw material in form of silver coins or older pieces of jewelry. The craftsman could not afford to betray the communal trust by adulterating the material for personal gain.

In the early 1900s jewelry became mass-manufactured in urban environments and the silversmith became anonymous to his ultimate client. State oversight and guarantees became desirable.

The British introduced compulsory hallmarking in Egypt in 1916, somewhat modeled after their home system. Six assay offices were established of which Cairo and Alexandria were the most prominent. The standard government mark consisted of three square fields. The first indicated in Arabic writing and numbers the location of the assay office and the fineness. The most common grade was 80%. The Arabian “8” looks like a wishbone, the “0” like a diamond-shaped speck. The center field showed the government mark. The cat was used between 1916 and 1945 and thereafter replaced by the lotus flower. The third field represented the date by an annually changing letter. Initially, capital letters of the Roman alphabet in serif font were used followed later by letters of the Egyptian Arabic alphabet.



Cairo 80; Cat; 1917 (?)



Egyptian Beauties 1900 – 1950s

Is it then safe to assume that, for instance, the Roman letter “B” indicates the year 1917 or “E” stands for 1920? Logical, but too easy! For reasons of national interest the Egypt Assay Office has never published the exact sequence of its date markings.

Is then a completely unmarked pair of bracelets a pre-1916 creation? Possible, but unlikely! Hallmarking, particularly in rural communities and oases, was “phased in” after 1916. Many silversmiths, far away from the assay offices, continued to handle their business as in the “unmarked days”.

Today, there is an unfortunate trend in North Africa of melting down traditional silver jewelry, exchange it for gold and have it made into filigree earrings or other tasteful modern accoutrements. So, buy your traditional cat (1916 to 1945) and lotus (post 1945) marked pieces while they are still available.

Photos: Wolfgang Schlink

Reference: R. Bachinger and P.W. Schienerl, *Silberschmuck aus Aegypten*, 1984



Lotus



**The San Francisco Tribal & Textile Arts Show** will be held from **February 9 thru 11, 2007** at Fort Mason Center. Exceptional artifacts are for sale by about 100 galleries from the U.S. and abroad. Several fellow EAC members are among the exhibitors. A special exhibit features Cambodian silk ikat textiles. For more information see [www.caskeylees.com](http://www.caskeylees.com).

**Friends of Ethnic Art**, San Francisco, sponsor two slide-illustrated lectures at the Tribal & Textile Arts Show on Sunday, February 11. At 10 am, EAC's own **Wolfgang Schlink** will speak about **"Barter, Blood, Beauty – Beads in the Age of Discovery"**. And at 2 pm, **Sandra Sardjono**, assistant textile curator at LACMA and newest EAC member, will talk about **"Toraja Heirloom Textiles: Sarita and Mawa"**. Location: The Firehouse, to the right of the show entrance.

**Bowers Museum**, Santa Ana, celebrates its new building extension with two spectacular exhibitions. **"Treasures from Shanghai: 5000 Years of Chinese Art and Culture"** features stunning art objects from the Neolithic period to the Qing Dynasty. And **"Ansel Adams: Classic Images"** showcases a selection of the artist's brilliant black-and-white photographs from landscapes to portraits. Opens February 18.

**Jim Pieper**, an expert on ceremonial Guatemalan culture and a long-time EAC member, has a new book out on **"Guatemala's Masks & Drama"** which documents hundreds of masks, folk deities, village rental agencies and celebrations in full color display, 284 pages. The self-published book is recommended for beginning collectors and experts alike. It also contains helpful advice how to evaluate the age of a mask through examination of patina and repair.

**In Memoriam Peter Silton** - EAC Board member and co-editor of the Newsletter, Peter Silton passed away after a brief but courageous battle with cancer on February 19, 2006. He was a passionate person in every way – as a premier collector of ethnic and contemporary art, a world-traveler (84 countries in nineteen years), a prolific writer of four books, a skilled photographer and video-maker. An art patron as well as a philanthropist with broad reach, his contributions are evident in schools, social justice organizations and museums. He will be sorely missed.



## EDITOR'S NOTE

**EAC News** welcomes your comments and critique. We also welcome suggestions and contributions, particularly for future "Feature" articles and the "Focus" section. Share your expertise, curiosity and enthusiasm for ethnic art with the EAC membership! Please email your input to Wolfgang Schlink at [wolf@tribalearthgallery.com](mailto:wolf@tribalearthgallery.com).

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Authors' opinions are uniquely theirs and do not necessarily reflect EAC's point of view.

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## **ETHNIC ARTS COUNCIL**

**Dedicated to Advancing the Knowledge,  
Interest, and Appreciation of Ethnic Art.**