



TRIBAL ART

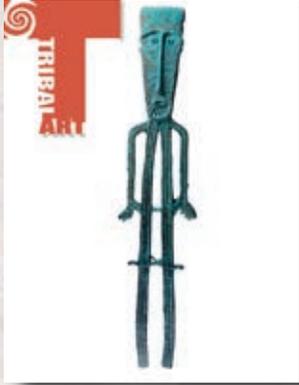
Kulai

Bronzes
from Siberia



- Pathways of Art at the Rietberg Museum
- The New Stanley Museum of Art

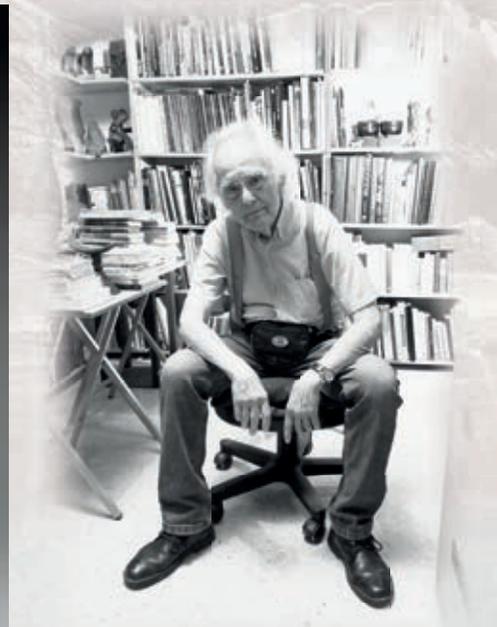
- Duke Paul's Bladed Gunstock Clubs
- Kathleen Haddon's Photography
- Albert Costa on Collecting
- **People, Auctions, News...**



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TRIBAL ART (ISSN 1379-1940)
is published quarterly for \$25 per issue
by Primedia srl
BP 18
Arquennes, Belgium

POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to:
TRIBAL ART Magazine
BP 18 - 7181 Arquennes (Belgium)

ADVERTISING

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I must have been at most seven years old when I ventured into my father’s office alone for the first time, while he was the director of a fine arts school in Brussels. I was asked to wait for him quietly while he made his daily inspection of the studios, when my child’s gaze, impressed and, to be frank, almost terrified, fell upon an anatomical skull propped up against some art books on the purple and gold morocco leather of his desktop. “Memento mori,” he exclaimed as soon as he entered the room, amused, though perhaps a bit concerned to see that his son appeared troubled. Passionate about art and history, he explained to me that, since time immemorial, man has been fascinated by death in

ples that are holy relics enshrined in gold and silver completed the portrait gallery and forever marked the little boy that I was.

A few decades later, the fear this lad experienced, which a classical education and a few wrinkles on his forehead have mitigated, seems to have spread across an entire society, which can no longer bear what it refers to as “human remains” to be displayed in its museums or, even worse, to be offered for sale as collector’s items. And this revulsion for the relics of death becomes the denunciation of a crime when those relics come from another continent.

On December 13 and 14, 2022, the Brussels auction house Vanderkindere offered twenty-four

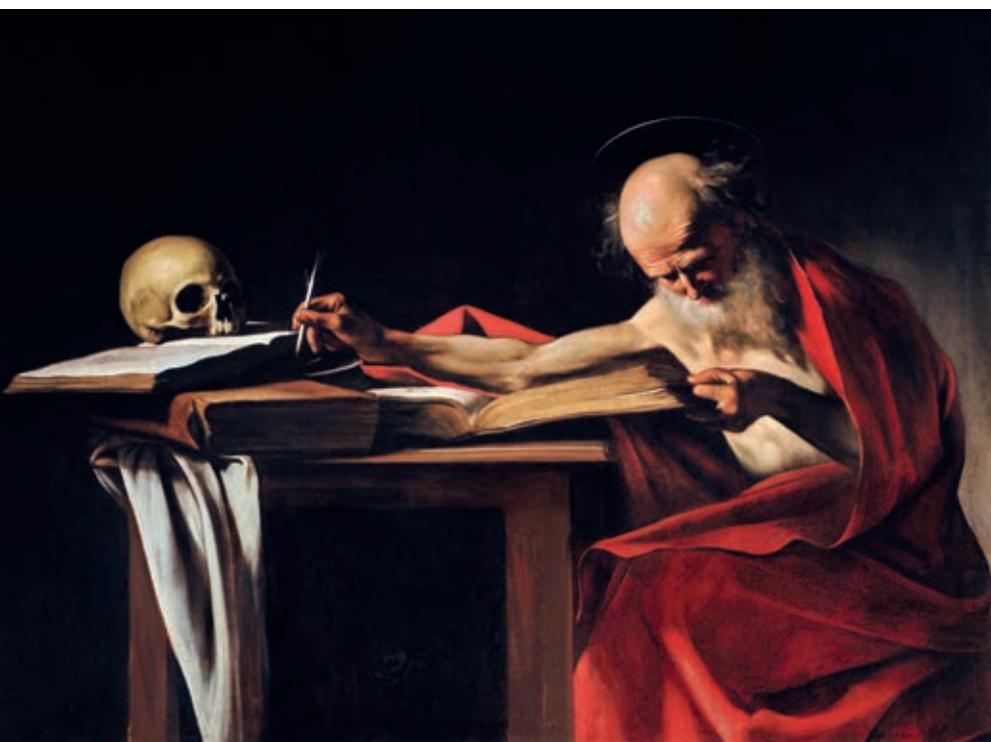


FIG. 1 (above):
Caravaggio, *Saint Jerome Writing*, 1605–1606.
Oil on canvas. 116 x 153 cm.
Galleria Borghese, Rome.
Public domain image.

all its various representations, and that this skull had two functions—firstly, an academic one, insofar as it had served as a model for generations of aspiring artists anxious to learn anatomy, but also a philosophical one, since its existence reminds us of what our own end will be. When we got home, our library allowed him to further illustrate his point, which he did with enthusiasm: Frans Hals! Cézanne! A famous mosaic of Pompeii (FIG. 3)! Caravaggio’s Saint Jerome (FIG. 1)! Dürer’s Saint Jerome! Van Gogh! Ensor! Picasso! A few overmodeled skulls from neolithic Jordan to historical Vanuatu, not to mention those from Papua New Guinea. Medieval European exam-

lots of African art for sale, mostly from the Dr. Louis Laurent collection. Also from the good doctor’s collection was lot 405, two skulls and a fragment of a third (FIG. 6).

The cry of scandal rose up, and a collective of 147 self-righteous individuals published an article titled “Auctioning Human Skulls in Belgium: How Far Can Dehumanization Go?” in the “Carte Blanche” column of the Belgian sensational magazine *Le Vif*. The article is replete with historical and legal inconsistencies set against a backdrop of decolonization claims, and it calls for legal action against the auction house and its owner on the charge of “receiving a corpse.”

MEMENTO MORI

By Yves-Bernard Debie

It emphasizes murder, large-scale torture, “people decapitated during conflicts with colonials,” people who “died of hunger” and “of disease after having been forced to come to Belgium to be displayed like animals,” and “millions of victims of the barbarity of colonization” constituting, in the words of the signers, many “crimes against humanity.” This path had already been blazed by an article in *Paris Match* that called out “extreme colonialist violence.”

In truth, a bona fide historian will readily dismiss these accusations as totally unrelated to the history of these skulls (Volper 2021), while a lawyer will note that this sale was legal and that the offense of “concealment of a corpse”

Sleep well, sleep well
Death will not tell
Pray to the mournful devotees
We dance on the graves
Death will not know
Sleep well, sleep well

from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Funérailles,”
Le Guetteur mélancolique, 1952.

I must just have turned thirty years old when I discovered the last stanza of Guillaume Apollinaire’s poem “Les Funérailles” from his collection *Le Guetteur Mélancolique*, which also contributed the title *La mort n’en saura rien* (*Death Will not Know*) to the 1999 exhibition at the Musée

FIG. 2 (below):

View showing a skull fallen from a coffin and hung in a tree fork. Photo: G. Fr. de Witte, Sakania, DR Congo, 1930.

Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, inv. HP.2011.62.8-143.
 © MRAC, Tervuren.



FIG. 3 (above right): Roman *memento mori* decorative mosaic depicting the wheel of fortune.

Pompeii, 1st century BC.
 Mosaic. 47 x 41 cm.
 Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, inv. 109982.
 Public domain image.

relates to preventing evidence of a murder from being discovered by the authorities in an effort to ensure the murderer’s impunity by removing the main proof of the crime (J. C. 2004; Article 340; Nypels 1870). None of this, of course, has any bearing on the removal of skulls from their original environment and their subsequent preservation in a doctor’s collection in the late nineteenth century, all of which is rooted in the European tradition of the curiosity cabinet and, even more so, in the timeless and universal tradition of the confrontation with death (above all, our own) that my father had tried to explain to me.

National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie in Paris curated by Yves Le Fur. Seventy-six works relating to death, mainly skulls, commanded the attention, respect, and response of visitors to this memorable exhibition. Each of these “skull relics” from Europe and Oceania displayed the power of the sacred, even though they derived from widely varied cultures. The universality of the human race, transcending all borders, may never have been made more clear to me. My father, on the other hand, saw the genius of artists, their sculptural solutions, and the creation of a macabre and powerful aesthetic—constant reminders that the greatest testimony to humanity is art.

We were not alone in experiencing this feeling of awe. Dr. Julien Volper, in a remarkable essay titled “La Mort et son numéro d’inventaire. Quelques réflexions autour des crânes humains en collections muséales” (“Death and Its Inventory Number: Some Reflections on Human Skulls in Museum Collections”), wrote:

As a young student of art history, I vividly remember the impression that the reliquary of St. Pancras from the parish church of Wil [Switzerland], which was exhibited on this occasion, made on me. It is truly quite difficult to forget this skeleton in its suit of armor and with its dignified gestures when one has seen it even just once. The same is true of the *rambaramp*, the Vanuatu funerary figures that are surmounted by an overmodeled human skull, of which two, or perhaps three (?), examples were also presented. For me, as for many visitors, I imagine, it was the first time that such works were available for us to see; they served the audacious theme of the exhibition, which can be summarized as a confrontation and comparison between the “bone rituals” that existed in Europe and those that were practiced in Oceania. The skulls of ancestors and the skulls of saints, the skulls of enemies and the skulls from ossuaries evoked the complex relationship that peoples of different cultures in these two parts of the world have with death. The chapters of the catalogue, which is difficult to find today, deal with such disparate subjects as headhunting in New Guinea and the function and history of Catholic reliquaries. Other texts, such as those by Yves le Fur and Marine Degli, focus more on the way in which the body of the “other” was perceived, including the collection of skulls and the role that these trophies from across the oceans played in the popular Western imagination (Volper 2021)

*You walk toward Auteuil, you want to go home on foot
To sleep amid your fetishes from Guinea and Oceania
They are Christs of another form and of other faiths
They are the lesser Christs of obscure yearnings*

Apollinaire, from “Zone,” in *Alcools*, 1912.

I’m more than fifty-two years old now, and my father, who was neither a medieval saint nor an ancestor nor a vanquished enemy on a distant Oceanic island, has passed away, as have many other friends, without his mortal remains being the object of any rites other than those sanitized ones sanctioned by our society, which restricts and obscures death, striving to reduce it to a “virtual reality.”



FIGS. 4a and b (left and bottom left): Recto and verso views of a basket holding a fetish enclosed in a human skull. Kongo; Yanga village, Inkisi region, Republic of the Congo. Photographer unknown.

Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, inv. AP.0.2.2305. © MRAC, Tervuren.

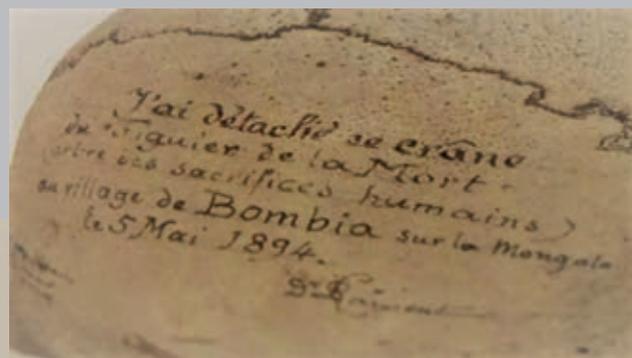


FIG. 5 (above): Enlargement of the inscription on the skull shown at right in fig. 6. It reads “I detached this skull from the ‘Fig Tree of Death’ (tree of human sacrifices) in the village of Bombia on the Mongala, 5 May 1894. Dr. Laurent.”

© Hôtel de ventes Vanderkindere.



FIG. 6 (right): View of lot 405 included and subsequently withdrawn from the December 13 and 14, 2022, sale by the Vanderkindere auction house in Brussels.

© Hôtel de ventes Vanderkindere.

We flee from death, refusing to look it directly in the face, and it disgusts us as much as it worries us. This is probably why we are so eager to accept and even be complicit in supporting all claims, even the most inappropriate and inept ones, which could help to distance its physical relics from our sight.

In any event, the infuriated activists who surf upon the waves of colonial repentance are particularly aroused by this. For them, any African skull is necessarily proof of colonial brutality. It does not matter that it was collected in the nineteenth century at the “Fig Tree of Death,” as was the fragment presented in this Brussels sale, or from the tomb of a noble whose last journey required that he be accompanied by one or more sacrificed slaves. It does not matter that this is the skull of an individual who was a ferocious slaver and himself a stranger to a country later colonized by others, as was Munie Mohara, who was killed

revisionist discourse born of naïve self-righteousness that strives to judge history without first studying or understanding it. Will these skulls, deprived of their history, ever find rest?

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on January 9, 1893, by a Sergeant Cassart. And it does not matter that Lusinga, defeated on December 4, 1884, by Emile Storms’ men, whom we have discussed in the past (Debie 2021a), was a brutal slave trader as well. Finally, it does not matter that the skulls of other enemies are conspicuously preserved in Africa. Two examples, among many, are the throne and the flywhisk in the Abomey treasure, which will soon be reunited with the twenty-six objects France has returned to the Republic of Benin (Debie 2021b).

In the past, these objects were sometimes tools used in the service of racist and supremacist propaganda, and today they have become the instruments of a

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