

INTERVIEW

DAVID UTZON FRANK





HI DAVID, HOW IS THE COLLECTION DOING AT THE MOMENT?

My collection is in the growing phase, I enjoy and look at it every day. I am adding all the time (around an object every month) but I must say that I am going for better items these days and selling from the bottom.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND.

I was born into a family of collectors ; we have been dealing and collecting art and antiques for four generations. I really started focusing on tribal art about 12 years ago. I began in the auction business at Bruun Rasmussen (part of the Bonhams network) 18 years ago. Before that I had my own gallery dealing in design and tribal art. The first tribal items I handled professionally were Himalayan masks and Naga pieces that I collected on a trip to India just after high school in 2001.

TELL US ABOUT THE DANISH SCENE.

There is a great art and design scene in Denmark. The tribal scene is small but very serious. There are a handful of active collectors

in Copenhagen, but historically there has been many. So you often see high quality items on the market.

We are very fortunate to have a very nice ethnographical collection at the National Museum in Copenhagen. Here we have a very large and important collection of Inuit material from mainly Greenland but also many pieces from Alaska and Canada. We also have the collection of Carl and Amalie Kjersmeier on permanent display. He was the author of the famous four volumes work "Centre de style de la sculpture nègre africaine" in 1935.

Before his collection was donated to the museum a lot of items that he collected in western Africa in 1932 came on the market and are still to be found in Danish private collections.

Another major player on the scenes was Lau Sunde (Gallerie Etnografica) active from 1948 to 1979. A lot of great items came through his hands and is still to be found in the collections in Denmark and every year a handful of objects with this provenance appears on the Danish market.

Unfortunately there is no serious dealers active today in Denmark.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR APPROACH TO THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ARTS WORLD.

I have a very global approach to my tribal art collection, that is also one of the things that gives me so much joy, the international network of likeminded collectors and dealers, we all speak the same language of tribal art! I love it! I attend the Parcours des mondes every year and find great inspiration there. I buy every year! This is the greatest opportunity to see and buy quality items, and touch base with the art world. I visit TEFAF every second year, which is of course amazing, but it do not have the cozy and intimate feeling that Bruneaf or Parcours has.

When going to Paris I always visit the Louvre and start in the tribal art Pavillon des sessions and work my way to the ancient art. Then to the Quai Branly Museum. This is a must.



Regarding social media, I find this a good way to network and discuss objects with fellow collectors around the world. Also as a source for new items to the collection.

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE YOUR KIND OF ART? GIVE US EXAMPLES PLEASE.

My African collection is the main. I am a general collector of classical African art, from west, central and southern Africa. I love my Yoruba collection (Ibejis, shrine figures, bronzes and ivories), my south African collection of clubs, prestige staffs, neck rests and knives. My collection from the Congo includes a Mangbetu shield (which I call my "Soulages"), a harp and jug from the same Danish colonial collection dating from before 1915 with a lot of history and photo documentation. I love also my Hemba stool and Bakongo mirror fetich (ex Laurent Granier), my great Mali masks, Dogon and Bambara.

My collection is a variety of figures and forms (abstract) and I find just as much joy in a great form as in a powerful figure or a mask.

I always go for an item that is untouched with original patina and as ancient as possible. Sometimes I know straight away that I want it!! My heart pumps and I can decide quickly for a purchase. Other times I will need some time and go back and forth to see if it sticks to me. It also depends if it's a large sum or not.

I have a small but very nice collection of PNG items: Korwar, Sepik and Papuan gulf pieces.

My collection of ancient Egyptian art contains a coffin lid, New Kingdom shabtis and late period shabtis.

The paintings collection is mainly Danish abstract paintings from c 1940 – 1970 COBRA and others. I find that these paintings go so well with the primitive art. But I don't buy a painting or a piece of tribal art to match! Every item that I purchase is bought for its unique quality and age.

Tribal art for me, is interesting because there are so many layers. There is the immediate esthetic impression, then religious aspect of

the item, background and purpose and then the collection history, and there is a lot that we don't know, so much room for interpretation.

CAN YOU GIVE US A FEW EXAMPLES OF ASPECTS YOU SPECIFICALLY LIKE IN SOME OF THEM?

To me the Tsonga neck rest is a masterpiece. The patina is amazing, the abstract form is so well balanced and gives me a calm and peaceful feeling when studying it. The pattern is so intriguing. I can find nothing bad to say about this piece. For me this is important there should be nothing to excuse for!

Regarding my male Ibeji, Master of the Owo Shango Shrine, I love the pose of this figure, strong and self-confident and the way the coiffure explodes upward. Nice and untouched patina.

On the Sundi/Vili power figure I love the sturdy and the calm look in the face. The fact that the item is intact with all its strings of textile, seeds and beads. Love that the edge around the mirror is not restored. For me it is an untouched piece with a lot of power!





PRACTICALLY HOW DO YOU OPERATE TO ACQUIRE NEW WORKS? DO YOU HAVE A ROUTINE OR BEST PRACTICES TO SHARE?

As I would think it is for a lot of collectors, the hunt is a great motivation. The hunt for the next piece!!!

I look at a lot of places: The auction platforms (Liveauctioneers, Invaluable, etc.), the big auctions (Sotheby's, Christie's, Bonhams, Drouot), I visit the Fairs in Paris and Brussels, I also buy a lot of items from other collectors and I go to our local antique fairs and antique galleries that sometime have pieces of tribal art and ancient art.

When I get a new object I do my study a bit the other way around. I would think the best way to buy is to study first and then buy. I find it more motivating to study an object that I own! I love my books and use them all the time, not just to study a new object but also just to kill time, while looking at great art, I find it very relaxing. For my online study I like to use the museum databases. I use the ahdr archive, a great tool to study one special type of object to get an idea of what's good quality and what's not, especially if it's a type you are not that familiar with. Artkhade gives me an idea of auction value and again of quality in a specific type of object.

I have a very good friend that has been a mentor for me for many years. He has been collecting for 50 years and has a great collection and an even greater knowledge. If I don't have the book or catalogue, he does! I always consult him before making a new purchase.

WHAT ARE YOUR KIND OF BOOKS?

My library is not as great as I would like it to be, I buy books every month so it's getting in the right direction. At the moment I am deep into Raymond Corbey's book on Korwars. Northwest New Guinea Ritual art according to missionary sources. This book gives a great knowledge on the types and diversity in style from the different regions and furthermore an insight into the time and place and the people

involved. A highly important work on this area. I try to keep up to date with the new catalogues and publications from the major galleries and auction houses.

And follow the various exhibitions. Was very amazed by the exhibition "Power and Prestige, The art of clubs in Oceania" and read the catalogue twice.

HOW DO YOU LIVE WITH YOUR COLLECTION ON A DAILY BASIS?

As we just moved into a new house, my collection has not found its right place yet. It's important to me that I can see my entire collection every day, so nothing is stored away, to my wife's big regret! I enjoy looking and handling the collection every day. It's important that its displayed right and mounted right. Unfortunately, we don't have any base makers in Denmark so I ship the items to France to have it done there. I work with the light and put a lot of energy into getting it just right, so the objects are shown at their best.

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FROM A GALLERY THESE DAYS?

The amount of material offered online today is so huge, and it's very easy for the collectors to make a collection without even going out the door.

I think the galleries role today is to offer knowledge, to educate the clients and especially the younger clients. Do thematic exhibitions, tell a story. Don't just be a merchant! That's for the auctions.

WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL BE CONSIDERED A GREAT COLLECTION IN 10 YEARS?

This is a difficult question. For me a collection is very personal, and a great collection to some, might not be to others. There is of course objects of great importance and masterpieces that cannot be discussed. When a collection is sold at a gallery or an auction every single object will find a new home and form another

collection. When I am not here anymore my daughters are to keep one object each, if they want it, the rest is to be sold so it can bring joy again to other collectors and be part of a new context.

So you can say, I don't find collections interesting, I find the single object interesting.

THANKS DAVID

(interview realized by Laurent Granier)

