



"Pour témoigner des peuples oubliés"

"In Africa, when an old man dies, it's a library burning..."

Amadou Hampaté Bâ

A Foundation against oblivion

This verity should haunt us all. How can we as men and women with a tradition of written literature, equipped to preserve the heritage of humanity, how can we look on impassively as myths as rich as those of Ancient Greece die out and vanish?

We have to admit that the vast wave of ethnological research that swept through the twentieth century focused mainly on the most 'visible' peoples, those overflowing with cultural wealth: masks, sculptures, initiatory societies, myths of various origins, etc. And yet, tiny groups with strong individual identity have been discovered sometimes living very close to the towns so frequently visited by anthropologists but unbeknown to them.

In the course of its thirty-three years of existence, the Barbier-Mueller Museum has found the time and qualified scientists to carry out research among some of these forgotten peoples. However, we soon realized that this subsidiary activity could not, and should not be carried out on a larger scale by an institution whose main aim is to highlight the plastic qualities of works created by 'preliterate' societies in their magic-religious context. In fact, many of these small, isolated groups produce no cult objects, masks or 'fetishes'. All they have is a surprising socio-political structure, complex forms of worship staged around perishable, unfired clay statues, aniconic religious preoccupations - in short, nothing that can be displayed in a museum, or very little.

I hope this Foundation, set up with the support of the 200 year-old watchmaking company Vacheron Constantin whose directors share my concerns, will also be patronized by numerous benefactors and that its activities soon take shape so that no human being, religion or culture, however small, will ever disappear without leaving a clear trace.

Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller
Chairman of the Board of the Foundation

“Each man is our double, wearing a mask hiding this brotherhood. Knowing about humanity is learning to know ourselves better.”

The transmission of know-how: A sacred duty

Since 1755, Vacheron Constantin has remained unwaveringly loyal to its five fundamental values: the pursuit of excellence, creativity, passing on know-how, preserving cultural differences and openness towards the world.

While our Manufacture is itself a faithfully perpetuated heritage, it is also establishing itself as a cultural and social institution in its own right. It is committed to activities of general interest that are both legitimate and useful.

Legitimate, because our company passes on the skills and expertise of the watchmaking art through successive generations of watchmakers. This is the unshakeable foundation of our present and the guarantee of our future.

Useful, because our corporate approach is designed to demonstrate our deep-felt attachment to the vast treasures of humankind, however diverse and remote.

We are giving concrete expression to these values by supporting the Barbier-Mueller Museum Cultural Foundation.

For several years now, Vacheron Constantin has been cooperating with the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva, in a spirit that constantly draws us closer to the very origins of humanity. We have a sense of solidarity with all human beings who, throughout the ages, have succeeded in preserving and perpetuating their own traditions.

We hope our commitment will pave the way for other institutions and individuals who share the same ideal.

Juan-Carlos Torres
CEO of Vacheron Constantin
Vice-Chairman of the Board of the
Foundation

To bear witness for forgotten peoples

A worrying issue: the loss of little-known cultures

The major ethnic groups were systematically studied by anthropologists at an early date. On the other hand, smaller peoples comprising only a few villages were neglected. Mankind is thus bereft of information on the lifestyles, material culture, plant skills and the different ways that autochthonous peoples found to survive, while their religious beliefs are often fast disappearing.

Commitments

The Foundation's objectives are strictly scientific and non-profit-making. It aims to support, at the international level, anthropological observation missions, publications and conferences entirely funded by the Foundation.

Field Studies

The Foundation follows the advice of qualified specialists for the identification of 'forgotten peoples'. Surveys are entrusted to well-known ethnologists or students in search of an unusual subject for their doctoral thesis (upon recommendation by a university professor).

Initially, researchers will spend approximately a month in the field to familiarize themselves with the ethnic group studied. They will then have several months to prepare a second two- to three-month field stay. They will have a year to present their research with a purpose of a short publication.

Researchers will be free to include their work in a dissertation or a doctoral thesis.

Many peoples, scattered all over the world, have never been studied by ethnologists, anthropologists or qualified historians. The Foundation plans to take an interest in groups practicing shamanism in Siberia, for example, or non-Chinese populations living in the extreme south of China or small ethnic groups in the State of Orissa in India.

Deontology

Researchers' contracts will contain a clause forbidding the acquisition of artifacts, or even the acceptance of gifts, in the villages where the Foundation funds their research.

Sharing Data Collected

Information collected will be made available to the cultural agencies of countries concerned.

Publications

The information, photographs and drawings collected will be published after each survey.

These small volumes will make up a series.

The series will be published jointly with Hazan (Hachette Group), a publishing house specialized in educational and scientific works.

Conferences

Researchers will each give about ten lectures over a period of approximately two years in the auditoriums of the world's major museums and universities. These talks will be followed by a debate and the projection of photos or films taken by the researcher in the course of her or his travels.

Decisions taken jointly with the scientific committee

- Annual research program
- Selection of candidates for field surveys (doctoral students or well-known scholars)
- Supervision of the publication of work completed.

"I am a man. I consider nothing that is human alien to me."

Terence

Organization

Board of the Foundation

Chairman: **Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller**, Chairman of the Barbier-Mueller Museums in Geneva, Barcelona, Cape Town.

Vice-Chairman: **Juan-Carlos Torres**, CEO of Vacheron Constantin.

Secretary and Director: **Laurence Mattet**, Director General of the Barbier-Mueller Museums in Geneva, Barcelona, Cape Town.

Yann Arthus-Bertrand, Photographer, Film-Director, Academician of the Beaux-Arts, Chairman of the GoodPlanet Foundation.

Caroline Barbier-Mueller, Media Consultant.

Arnaud d'Hauterives, Member of the Institut de France, Perpetual Secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts.

Ousmane Sow, Sculptor.

The Board is currently being established.

Scientific Committee

Chairman: **Stéphane Martin**, Chairman and Managing Director of Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (France).

Marla C. Berns, Director of the Fowler Museum (a position sponsored by Shirley and Ralph Shapiro) and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Art History, University of California, Los Angeles (USA).

Suzanne Preston Blier, Professor of African Art at Harvard University, Allen Whitehill Clowes, Professor of Fine Arts and Professor of African and African-American Studies, Cambridge, MA (USA).

Daniela Bognolo, Research Associate at the CEMAF – Centre d'Etudes des Mondes Africains – (CNRS/Université Paris 1/EPHE/Université de Provence), formerly Professor of Fine Arts in Milan (Italy).

Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, Head Curator of the ethnology section of the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren (Belgium).

Alain-Michel Boyer, Research Supervisor, member of the Conseil National des Universités in Paris and Professor of African Art at the University of Nantes (France).

Lorenz Homberger, Assistant Director and Curator in the African Art department at the Rietberg Museum, Zurich (Switzerland).

Steven Hooper, Professor of Visual Arts and Director of the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, University of East Anglia, Norwich (Great Britain).

Jonathan King, Keeper, in charge of the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, with the Centre for Anthropology, The British Museum, London (Great Britain).

Robyn Maxwell, Senior Curator of Asian Art, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (Australia).

Cäsar Menz, Honorary Director of the Art and History Museums of Geneva (Switzerland).

Philippe Peltier, Head Curator, in charge of the Unité Patrimoniale Océanie-Insulinde, at the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (France).

Klaus Schneider, Director, Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum – Kulturen der Welt, Cologne (Germany).

Boris Wastiau, Director of the MEG, Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève (Switzerland).

The Gan of Burkina Faso

It was not until recently, towards the late 1990s, that ancient, finely-worked ‘bronzes’ were more precisely attributed to the Gan people. Until then doubts as to their identity had been constantly fuelled by the lack of scientific data and the aura of silence and secrecy surrounding this small population of some six thousand souls, neighbors of the Lobi in south-west Burkina Faso. In fact, one of the distinctive characteristics of this monarchy, with a history marked by the itinerancy and rivalries of power, is the ritual inhumation of its ancient emblems and cult objects dedicated to the tutelary forces of the kingdom, directly linked with deceased members of the Farma princely family whose ancestors supposedly left Ghana for political and religious reasons at some point during the fifteenth century. The fact that their artifacts were buried was a further obstacle to the study of the spectacular ‘bronzes’ where the snake widely dominates motifs, sometimes associated with other symbolic representations, thus reinforcing royal ascendancy and its various sacred alliances.

The Barbier-Mueller Museum’s interest and unfailing support for this project enabled me to extend my research on this ancient art of casting, which has practically disappeared today. Therefore, by interpreting the meaning of these cult objects’ ornamental elements, essentially based on animals, I was able to discover an entire royal bestiary. The Gan drew on this for the ‘language’ of myths and legends they shaped and kept up-to-date around each ancestor honored in this way, the dignitaries of a once flourishing kingdom that grew wealthy thanks to trade and the extraction of its gold. Long buried, kept secret and sometimes forgotten about, a priceless cultural heritage is unveiled - cast for eternity.

Daniela Bognolo

Captions

Representation of Kpnuo’ Iya, head of nature spirits and king of the court, showing off his attributes. Photograph by the author.

The late Louis Marie Anyima, twenty-eighth Kaa’iya (king) with the representations of the regalia brought back from Ghana. Photograph by the author.

Nature spirits’ house-shrine belonging to a soothsayer/healer. Photograph by the author.

Detail of the symbol of a spiritual entity of the so-called sindi sima custom. Photograph by the author.

The Wan, Mona and Koyaga of Côte d'Ivoire

The Sacred, The Secret

Africa always has surprises in store. Who would have thought that at the dawn of the twenty-first century three small 'forgotten' peoples about whom the West knows next to nothing could be living in the very center of a country like Côte d'Ivoire: the Wan, the Mona and the Koyaga? Who indeed would be capable today of attributing a plastic creation to them, whereas their art is rich and still very much alive, but never represented in museums (with the exception of a single statuette in the Barbier-Mueller Museum)? Why is this? Perhaps it can be explained by their isolation, albeit relative, or complicated tracks, oversight, a certain 'routine'-fatigue among collectors in a hurry to gather works produced by their neighbors the Guro, Yohure, Baule – precisely those Baule to whom the Wan passed on most of the famous *goli* masks, a bequest they are proud of since they often claim to have "colonized the Baule" with their art. This may be justified revenge taken by a tiny group, limited to some twenty villages, on another conquering people. Is our ignorance due to the fact that these peoples resisted Islam and were thus left on the sidelines of the great civilizing movements sweeping through the region? This is true for the Wan and the Mona, both fiercely animistic, who don helmet-masks to leap around at spectacular night-time ceremonies forbidden to women. But it is not at all so for the Koyaga (a Malinke people gathered in the Mankono region) who, although Muslim, braved the precepts of Islam and managed the rare feat of preserving the effigies of their distant ancestors: elephant-, monkey- and buffalo- masks which were never photographed because the mere sight of a camera or even a sketch-pad sparked wrath among dancers, and rightly so. The West's ignorance of these peoples' culture can more probably be accounted for by the groups' own uncompromising taste for secrecy. The women's cult Klin attests to this: a formidable supernatural force linked with the excision ceremony and which, preceded and followed by ceremonial parades and masquerades, takes place in a sacred clearing while men, who consider the vulva as the most powerful divinity, are strictly banished from the area. And yet, these three peoples whose stylistic inventions have spread to the east and south of the country are the keystone of a vast artistic laboratory essential to understanding the other creations of central Côte d'Ivoire.

Alain-Michel Boyer

Captions

Celebration in the Wan village of Golipla. Appearance of the boli gle kplekle mask. Photograph by the author.

Preparations for the appearance of the kwang masks. Sacred grove. Wan village of Golipla. Photograph by the author.

Chicken sacrifice ceremony carried out by a soothsayer/healer. Mona village of Soukouroughban. Photograph by the author.

Two surveys are about to be published:

- The first was carried out by the Italian anthropologist Daniela Bognolo, a specialist of Burkina Faso, among the little-known Gan people. Publication is planned for September 2010.
- The second, undertaken among the Wan people in central Côte d'Ivoire by Alain-Michel Boyer (who has already written a guide on African art published by Hachette), will be printed at the end of 2010.

You will find more information on both these studies in the previous pages.

Development of activities

For the time being, the Foundation is restricted to two surveys a year. With the assistance of enlightened patrons joining forces with the original associates, it will be able to expand the scope of its activities very rapidly.

“Let us act while there are still men alive who have preserved the collective memory of their people.”