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Dr. Werner Muensterberger's African Art Collection by Jeanne Schinto

Sotheby's, New York City

by Jeanne Schinto Photos courtesy Sotheby's

It's been almost 20 years since Werner Muensterberger published Collecting: An

Unruly Passion, a view of the collector impulse as seen by a psychiatrist. In the book the German-born doctor, who died in 2011 at age 97, presented the theory that collecting is "an almost magical means for undoing the strains and stresses of early life and achieving the promise of goodness." For collectors, "no matter what or how they collect, one issue is paramount," he wrote. It is that "the objects in their possession are all ultimate, even unconscious assurances against despair and loneliness." Many of those who believe they collect purely for love of, say,

form or color found his theory galling. On Amazon's Web site, Jeanette Hanisee Gabriel wrote that she "was offended from the first page of this book written by a psychiatrist, whose theory trivializes the emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual (not to mention fun) qualities of

collecting by reducing the pursuit to 'compulsive action molded by irrational impulses." As a "former curator at a top ten museum," she continued, "I think I am more familiar with collectors than the author. As a collector myself, I know that collecting is a happy, positive, and enriching experience." A.J. Peluso, Jr., reviewing the book for M.A.D. in 1994, was equally incensed. "Prepubescent, post-pubescent, even adult experience is never

factored into the collecting

wrote. "Education goes

mania" by Muensterberger, he

unmentioned. Aesthetic considerations don't come into play. No one collects things simply because they're historic, culturally important, or beautiful. Sad." Others, however, had a radically different reaction. Those readers were relieved to learn what they perceived to be the answer to the riddle of their endlessly collecting selves. "I could not put this book down from the

minute I started reading it and

recognized myself on almost

every page," Amazon

commenter Neil Goodman gushed. Art dealer Richard Feigen, likewise, wrote in an essay of praise for the doctor: "All my life, from the age of eleven, my serious relationships seemed always to have been more with objects than people. This concerned me. When I read Werner Muensterberger's book, things began to make sense." On the occasion of Muensterberger's death, art historian Lisa Zeitz wrote in Art in America that some collectors who read the book signed up for a turn on the doctor's couch. Feigen was one who began to meet weekly with Muensterberger, just to talk, without becoming a patient. "This began one of the

important relationships of my

better than anyone Werner

understood the collecting

anything, even people. He

the root causes—the

life," Feigen declared. "Of course

pathology-not just art collecting,

but the compulsion to collect

understood the differences in

insecurities, the motivations psychological, aesthetic, social, financial." No matter how one feels about his theories, it's no longer possible to argue that Muensterberger was writing only from a theoretical position. On May 11 in New York City, Sotheby's sold six pieces from his African art collection for a total of \$3,130,250 (including buyers' premiums). It wasn't revealed in Collecting, but the author had been buying African art since age 13, when he acquired his first piece in

Amsterdam at the so-called

Jewish market, where only Jews

were allowed to keep shop on

Sundays. He continued to collect for the rest of his life. The only child of well-to-do parents, Werner Muensterberger was brought up in a bilingual (German-Dutch) household. As severed head of a vanquished a boy, he spent extended periods enemy in the other. of time at the home of his grandmother, in Zandvoort, near Amsterdam. In 1922, when he was nine, it was in Zandvoort, at the home of distant relative Baron Eduard von der Heydt (1882-1964), that he was first exposed to a world-class collection of Asian, Oceanic, and African art (later donated by the baron to the Museum Rietberg in Zürich).

Through Von der Heydt,

also met Charles Ratton, a

Muensterberger was introduced

to an international community

of artists. Through the baron he

pioneering tribal arts dealer who

was instrumental in organizing

the seminal exhibition African

Negro Art at the Museum of

Modern Art in 1935.

Another part of the baron's network was Carel van Lier, who, beginning in 1927, became the first person in the Netherlands to sell "Negerplasteik" or Negro sculpture. In the 1930's, Muensterberger bought from Europe for \$20,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000). As a young man, Muensterberger studied ethnology in Berlin,

pursuing an education as a psychoanalyst.

until his retirement.

Rockefeller bought it. Currently it's in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to which Rockefeller donated it in 1978. Another important work once owned by Muensterberger is a Senufo female figure that Swiss dealer Emil Storrer "field-collected" in the 1950's.

it to William Rubin, director of the Museum of Modern Art's

art to sell for more than \$1 million at auction.

department of painting and sculpture. Rubin consigned it to Sotheby's

tribal arts sale on May 15, 1991, where it became the first piece of African

Today prices for African art in the millions are no longer as remarkable as

they once were, and one piece in this sale—a carved-wood Luluwa helmet

mask from the Democratic Republic of the Congo—sold to a phone

bidder for \$2,546,500 (est. \$1.5/2.5 million). Muensterberger acquired

the mask in 1959 from Merton D. Simpson, America's pioneer dealer in

When the Germans occupied the Netherlands, a girlfriend hid him.

In 1947 he immigrated to the United States, invited by prominent

cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict to teach in her department at

After war's end, he worked briefly as a curator at the Stedelijk Museum.

Columbia University. In 1951 he accepted a professorship in psychiatry

at the State University of New York Medical Center, where he remained

As the story goes, Muensterberger arrived in the United States with only

\$100, the family fortune having been lost in the war. He also had pieces

(ruler or king) that he had bought from London's Sidney Burney Gallery.

In New York he sold it to tribal arts dealer Julius Carlebach (1909-1964),

from his collection, one of which was a Benin ivory figure of an oba

submission. In classic Luba sculptures of the first half of the 19th century, it symbolized female power. No other piece in the collection achieved nearly as much as the mask. In fact, it was the second to top lot of all the day's tribal arts offerings at Sotheby's, which included 217 lots of African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian art from other consignors offered before and after the Muensterberger lots, which had their own catalog.

The second to top lot in the Muensterberger group, a 7½" tall stone Sapi

passed. Before Collecting, Muensterberger had published many other books, including the 1955 landmark Sculpture of Primitive Man, in which he explored the arts of Africa, Oceania, Indonesia, and Native America and their impact on the European Modernists. But it and the other volumes were meant for academics and scholars. Collecting is the one that introduced him to a general audience.

As we all know, collectors can be found on any point on a continuum

that runs from mildly committed to obsessed. To represent the whole

community, he might well have included a few of the milder cases in his

book. Instead, he went for the opposite end of the spectrum, the better

to make his points. Frankly, it also makes for more fascinating reading.

Perhaps the most extreme example he chose is that of British bibliophile

He must not have read *Moby-Dick* even if he owned it. It would have told him all he needed to know about the perils of monomania. The man collected not only tens of thousands of books, but literally wagonloads of pictures, drawings, manuscripts, and papers of all sorts. "He seemed unable to consign to the garbage anything with writing on

it," wrote Muensterberger, who traced Sir Phillipps's mania to his out-of-

wedlock birth and the fact that he was an unloved, unwanted child who

"could never allow himself the full expression of his resentment" toward

impregnated his servant girl and then sent her away after Thomas's birth.

his father.

over his origins never once let him rest, even as he became internationally famous among scholars for what he possessed. Another extreme case that Muensterberger explored in Collecting was that of the French writer Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), a bric-a-brac addict ("a nearly irrepressible accumulator"), whose novel Cousin Pons is

a single moment of true closeness and affection between him and the vain, distant, and narcissistic woman who was his mother." Maternal neglect, the doctor wrote, "remained a festering wound with [Balzac] throughout his entire life." That, in Muensterberger's opinion, is what led Balzac to his preoccupation with spending debt-inducing amounts on objects of questionable value. "[He] can broadly be described as suffering from

his compulsions, he once wrote, "In the end I believe that I am but an instrument played on by circumstance." While researching the book, Muensterberger interviewed many contemporary collectors, although he included in detail an account of only one, an Orientalia connoisseur to whom he gave the pseudonym

wheelchair. Not everyone who suffers multiple tragedies becomes a collector; Martin G. did. But where and when did Muensterberger suffer the loss or trauma that propelled him into the collector class? Was it solely the terrors of the Nazi genocide? Or were there other factors? One imagines we will learn the answer to those questions when Zeitz, author of the Art in America piece mentioned above, publishes her biography of him in 2013, on the

centennial of his birth. Tentatively titled Die Masken des Doktor Muensterberger (The Masks of Dr. Muensterberger), it was written in German, but the author anticipates an English translation. The book will include a section on a monograph that the doctor was working on at the time of his death. A psychoanalytic perspective on forgers, it is called "Fälscher auf der Couch" ("Forgers on the Couch").

"Most forgers," Muensterberger maintained, "don't just cheat the original artists they are forging, but also the expert, the ideal father figure." So apparently they, like collectors, have their own issues.

For more information about the book, contact the publisher, Berlin Verlag (www.berlinverlage.com). For more information about the

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES BY WERNER MUENSTERBE Werner Muensterberger's Collecting: An Unruly Passion

was first published in 1994 by

Copies are available on Amazon

(www.amazon.com) and other

used-book Web sites. One must

Princeton University Press.

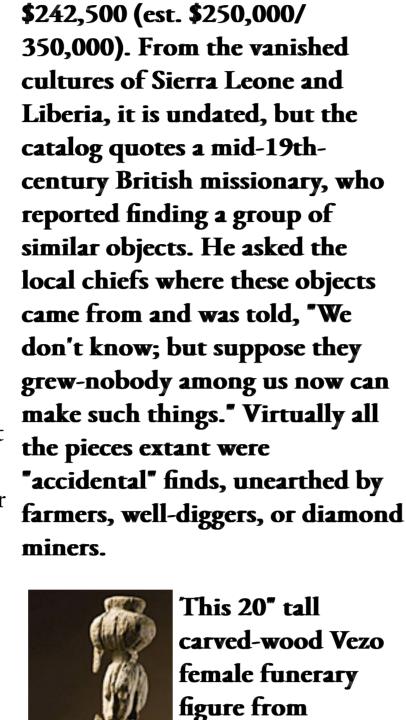
get to the end of the book to discover the doctor believed that collecting, if kept within bounds, could be a healthy response to the vicissitudes of life. Rather than being "an unhealthy ego defense," he saw it as a "device" for coping with frustration and "a way of converting a sense of passive irritation, if not anger, into challenge and accomplishment."



A 7½" tall carved stone Sapi

(Proto-Temne) head sold to a

private collection in the U.S. for



female figures like this one were customarily placed inside rectangular box-like wood structures, one corner of which would be made to point northeast, where the sun rises, dawn being considered by the figure-maker's culture an auspicious time for birth and for the removal of a corpse.

Madagascar sold for

A Mbembe male

region of Nigeria

sold for \$170,500

(est. \$150,000/

250,000). The

45½" tall.

catalog, it

probably

represents a

warrior chief

who once held a

weapon in one

hand and the

wood carving is

According to the

torso from the

Cross River

\$12,000/18,000).

\$20,000 (est.

Both male and



auction record for the artist, whose works are in many major museums today. Van Lier a 20" tall wooden Vezo female funerary figure from Madagascar. It was one of the eight pieces at this sale and sold to a phone bidder in undertaking field trips to Africa. At firsthand, then, he saw the place where the objects of his affection came from. After the Nazis gained power in Germany, he went to Switzerland, continuing his studies there. In 1939, after more field research in Indonesia, he accepted a position at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam. Meanwhile, he was also

Muensterberger also collected

Anthony Ralph Gallery in New

York City, this ceramic sculpture

by Nairobi-born artist Magdelene

Odundo sold to a bidder in the

\$40,000/60,000). The price for

the 16 7/8" tall piece is a new

room for \$134,500 (est.

contemporary African art.

Acquired in 1991 from the

and the sale reportedly carried Muensterberger and the first of his three wives through the early part of their marriage. In 1951 Nelson It entered Muensterberger's collection in 1958. Thirty years later, he sold

African artworks, who is also an artist and jazz musician. The scarification patterns on the mask's cheeks and forehead, along with its two (heavily eroded) curved braids, are characteristic of the form. Bishimba (cavities) in such sculptures were meant for the insertion of magic substances. There are remnants of palm oil in this one. Worn in dance rituals and used as an object of devotion, the mask has downcast eyes, showing the influence of the neighboring Luba culture upon its Luluwa maker. Westerners associate that type of gaze with sadness or

hands, head, and feet, it was acquired by Muensterberger from Parisian dealer Helene Kamer in 1989. A Kotoko brass equestrian figure, just 1 7/8" tall, sold for \$16,250 (est. \$6000/9000). Two other, minor lots were

Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872), whose stated goal in life was to collect one copy of every book in the world. Certainly nobody would want to be identified with Sir Phillipps, a most disagreeable person. As described by Muensterberger, he was "a willful, despotic man, plagued by ill-temper, and with an astonishing disregard for other people's needs and emotions," including those of his family.

Apparently pleased to have an heir, he left his fortune to his son. That money funded the early phases of Phillipps's collecting habit, but anxiety

The senior Phillipps, a wealthy landowner, merchant, and bachelor,

manic-depressive manifestations correlated with obsessional defenses," a

Martin G. The man's father was killed in World War II; his mother thereafter grew despondent and distant; his older brother was a bully; his young wife was injured in a car accident and spent the rest of her life in a

Muensterberger bought it from Simpson in 1973. A Mbembe male torso from the Cross River region of Nigeria went to another phone bidder at \$170,500 (est. \$150,000/ 250,000). Missing its

(Proto-Temne) head, sold on the phone for \$242,500. Below estimate, it was nonetheless a new auction record for a Sapi stone sculpture.

focused deeply and empathetically on that affliction. "If we are to understand what was involved in the development of [Balzac's] highly complex character," Muensterberger proposed, "we must delve into the disturbing emotional life that marked his formative years," which were marked by "rejections, disappointments, and loneliness." Like Sir Phillipps, Balzac was a neglected child. In all of his 51 years, in Muensterberger's words, "there is no indication that...there had ever been

primary one being his obsessive collecting, another his literary creativity. One wonders what Balzac would have thought of Muensterberger's assessment. He may not have disagreed. Aware of his powerlessness over

site (www.sothebys.com).

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