

# TRIBAL ART

30 years  
TRIBAL  
ART  
Magazine  
1994 - 2024



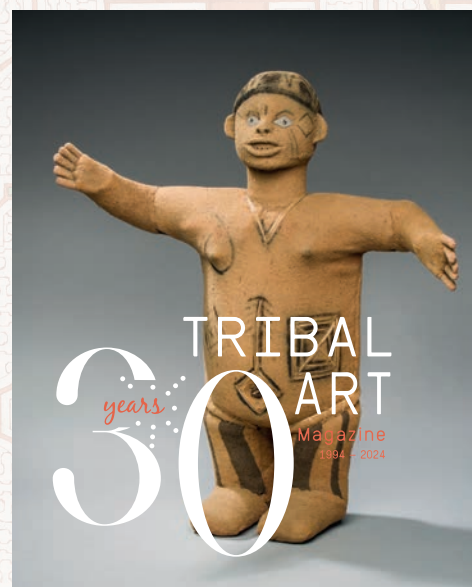
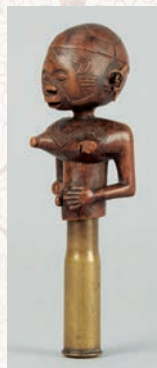
Special Report: *Parcours des Mondes 2024* • Solomon Islands Crocodiles  
André Breton and His *Uli* • Surrealism: Contact Zones • Peter Weis  
People, Auctions, News ...



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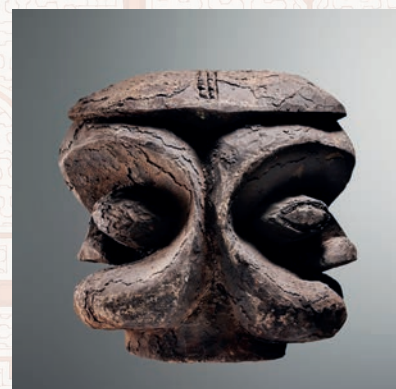
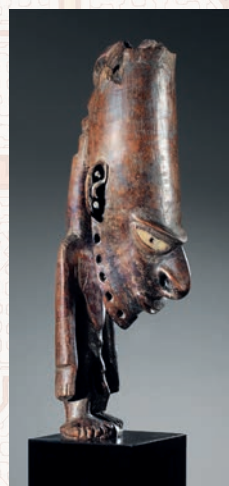
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Peter Weis on Collecting and the Art of the Cameroon Grasslands  
Interview by Jonathan Fogel



**Peter Weis** is a long-established collector of African art who lives near Munich. For many years, his primary focus has been the art of the Cameroon Grasslands and neighboring peoples, and his collection is extensive. While artistic masterpieces and works of historical importance are not in short supply, Peter's curiosity is also piqued by unusual artworks, and these too are well represented.

We had the pleasure of chatting with Peter on the eve of the release of a major book about his collection, *Art of the Cameroon Grasslands*, and his perspectives were illuminating.

**Tribal Art magazine:** *You have formed one of the largest collections of art from the Cameroon Grasslands in private hands. This is a considerable contrast to your professional and academic career in finance in Saarbrücken, Berlin, Munich, and London. What draws you to this art?*

**Peter Weis:** In my professional development, I've looked more for satisfaction rather than a career, which is perhaps why many of my goals were fulfilled. However, the paths always offered opportunities to pause, discover new challenges, or pursue my preferences. The will to change, to try something new, has been my inner driving force. This is similar to my passion for collecting, which began as a child. Stamps and pictures from faraway countries appealed to me. Missionaries in New Guinea and Africa, who reported on their work in our Rhenish village of Brücken (Pfalz) while on home leave, awakened my curiosity even further.

My interest in *les arts lointains* began many years ago when I first came across African masks. I began to recognize that expressive power and stories are encapsulated in these works of art—indeed these are an integral part of their mystery and symbolism. Tribal art fueled my imagination and, over time, demanded a more intense engagement. Perhaps this also relates to the fact that later, in an academic context, I frequently dealt with the connections between artifacts, behavior, culture, and society.



**FIG. 1 (left):**

Ritual *lefem* post with a human figure holding a head. Attributed to the workshop of Ateu Atsa. Bangwa; Cameroon. 19th century.

Wood. H: 121 cm.  
Collected by Gustav Conrau, Bangwa region, winter 1898–1899.  
Ex Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, 1899 (inv. III C 10544);  
Arthur Speyer II, Berlin (c. 1920);  
Charles Ratton, Paris, (late 1920s); Potter Museum, Bramber, Brighton, then Arundel (1930–2003);  
Bonham's, London, September 24, 2003, lot 489; Kevin Conru, Brussels;  
Private collection; Sotheby's, Paris, December 10, 2014, lot 68; Javier Peres, Berlin; Binoche et Giquello, Paris, June 29, 2021, lot 86.

## Peter Weis on Collecting and the Art of the Cameroon Grasslands

Interview by Jonathan Fogel

Object photos by Andreas Achmann

**FIG. 2 (right):**  
Peter and Adelheid Weis, Munich, 2024.  
Photo: Laura Weis.





**T.A.M.:** *As I understand it, you didn't start with Cameroon. Tell us a bit about your journey in collecting African art.*

**P.W.:** That's correct, and your language is apt. Collecting African art has always been a journey for me, and one that is characterized by curiosity and the spirit of discovery. Indeed, my goal has never been completion but rather treading a path that allows me to gather interesting experiences.

When I first began collecting in the early 1980s, I tried to explore the broad spectrum of African art. At first, I focused primarily on West Africa, but the more I found that each region offered its own unique styles and traditions, the more I began to appreciate African art more broadly. Although my interest was not initially Cameroon, some Grasslands objects such as tobacco pipes, simple but old stools, and masks found their way into my collection early on. Due to the demands of my job, collecting often was superseded by other priorities, but visits to auction houses, galleries, and museums, as well as conversations with other collectors, repeatedly helped to revitalize my passion for African art.

When I felt I needed more direction, I tried Yoruba art for a time, but I became more and more fascinated by the expressive art of the Grasslands and the rich traditions of the more than 200 kingdoms of that region. Their elaborate royal regalia and ceremonial objects got my full attention around the year 2000. The fact that Cameroon was a former colony of Germany likely increased its relevance to me. I was particularly impressed by the diversity of the royal art of the Grasslands, including statues, masks, thrones, and beaded sculptures. However, in contrast to Nigerian traditional art, I found there were fewer good pieces on offer.

Reading the 1994 book *Die bildende Kunst der Bangwa* further encouraged me. This was the dissertation of Bettina von Lintig, who is now coauthor of the book on my collection that will be released this autumn. However, I was surprised at how little other published information on Cameroon art was available, so when I started acquiring pieces from

**FIG. 3 (left):**  
Maternity figure with nursing child.

Bamileke/Bangwa;  
Cameroon.

Before 1920.

Wood. H: 102 cm.

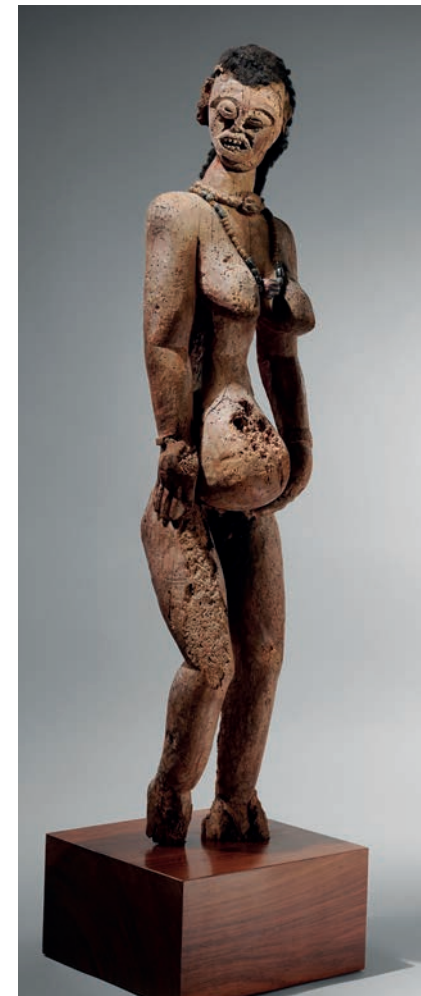
Ex Alain Dufour, Paris; Loudmer-Poulain, Paris, 14 June 1979, lot 113; Liliane and Michel Durand-Dessert, Paris; De Baecque & Associés, Paris, 14 November 2018, lot 147.

**FIGS. 4a and b (below):**  
Kun'i'gan Society fertility figure. Bamileke; Cameroon.

Before 1920.

Wood. H: 95 cm.

Ex Franco Monti, Italy; Arte y Ritual, Madrid; private collection, Antwerp; Native, Brussels, 30 January 2024, lot 80.





Cameroon, it was important for me to also learn about the cultural and historical context of these works. Ultimately, collecting works from a past culture is a way of furthering the appreciation and understanding of these fascinating traditions.

**T.A.M.:** *Your collection is wide-ranging and encompasses everything from masks and figurative sculptures to beadwork, stools, and pipes. How does such a broad cross section of Grasslands material culture increase your appreciation of its traditions as a whole?*

**P.W.:** Over the years, I've come to appreciate the rich culture of the Grasslands more and more. The objects I live with, as well as the people who created them, have my respect. The antiquated expression "primitive art" is absurd when confronted with the complex state systems of the Grasslands and their art and culture. Of course, this is true of most other African regions as well.

Each object type—pipes, masks, etc.—opens insights into different cultural or social aspects from a holistic perspective. Art was linked to all areas of life, and the possession of certain works represented rank and had a signaling effect on others. Royal regalia, for example, provides information about the organization of kingdoms, the role of kings and nobles, and

the distribution of power. Everyday objects such as simple stools and pipes provide insight into the daily life and social situation of the classes below the nobility.

All in all, collecting such a wide range of material culture strengthens empathy and understanding of people and their society. Each piece tells some kind of story, and each fosters a deeper connection to and appreciation of the kingdoms' artistic and cultural heritage.

**T.A.M.:** *Authenticity is always a consideration in our field. Some of your pieces have deep provenance and are associated with important artists and field collectors—King Yu, the workshop of Ateu Atsa, and Gustave Conrau, for example—while others have less notable resumé. What is your experience with issues of authenticity?*

**P.W.:** Like most collectors, authenticity has been a primary requirement when I select and acquire objects, insofar as they should be original, genuine, and unadulterated testimonies to a past culture. Of course, I have sometimes been plagued by doubts as to whether a “good piece” really is “authentic.” Every serious collector will have had this experience. The goal, therefore, has been to learn from experience and avoid poor purchases as far as possible, which is easier said than done, since a work of art can be appealing without fulfilling such a claim to authenticity. And a more recent object can be “authentic” if it was used in cult, ritual, or everyday life.

Part of the process of collecting is a deep learning experience about production and use within a presumed ethnic group, traces of use and wear, and a patina that may be the result of ritual treatment. Provenance and collection details, such as the place of original acquisition, are also important, as are comparable objects in other collections. Outside expertise from academics can provide further details. It cannot always be assumed that the advertised properties of an object are true, and I've had to learn this the hard way from time to time.

Recently, the selection process for the upcoming book has been extremely informative. Karl-Ferdinand Schädler, who is highly regarded in German collecting circles, spent three days looking at all the Cameroonian objects in our collection, thereby creating an initial basis for the further selection process. We also spent some very interesting evenings together, and I learned a lot of new things about African art and its acquisition in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Costa Petridis of the Art Institute of Chicago kindly provided a critical review of our selection of objects, and Bettina



**FIG. 5** (facing page, left): Throne figure of a princess consort of the Afo-A-Kom ensemble. Attributed to King Yu (1830–1912). Kom; Cameroon. Before 1905.

Wood. H: 119 cm.  
Ex. Baron Freddy Rolin, New York / Brussels; Christie's, Amsterdam, 2 July 2002, lot 223; private collection, Germany; Nagel Auktionen, Stuttgart, 7 December 2023, lot 623.

**FIG. 6** (facing page, right): King Yu with throne figure. Photographed by Adolf Diehl, 1905.

Frontispiece from Julius Lipp, *The Savage Hits Back*, New Haven, 1937.

**FIG. 7** (above): Troh (Night) Society crest mask with two heads. Bangwa; Cameroon. Early 20th century or before.

Wood, pigment. L: 45.5 cm.  
Ex. The African Art Museum of the SMA Fathers, Tenafly, New Jersey; Wilma and Carl Zabel, New Jersey (acquired around 1980); Galerie Martin Doustar, Brussels (until 28 January 2018).

**FIG. 8** (left): Commemorative figure of a hunter fighting with a leopard. Bamileke; Cameroon. Before 1920.

Wood. H: 90 cm.  
Collected in the early 1970s in the Grasslands area by Dr. Günther Traut (owned until 31 July 2020).





art and visiting private treasure troves always fuels my passion.

Publicly available information about sales events, results, trends, and auctions (e.g. *Tribal Art* magazine, Artkhade, and online auction platforms) also significantly contributed to the collection. My “hunting grounds” have extended to almost all Western countries, including the U.S. Large auction houses in Paris and Brussels contributed to the collection, as have many of the smaller ones, which sometimes have interesting objects on offer, thanks to their local presence. I also have acquired good objects in galleries, many of them in Paris and Brussels during the major fairs, such as *Parcours du Mondes*. Most of these have specialized in tribal art for many years, usually offer good or very good quality, and know the cultural and historical context of their objects. However, their overhead for rent, trade-fair expenses, and manpower costs generally are reflected in higher prices, which in some cases has dampened my transactions with them.

von Lintig and I intensively discussed all the objects yet again when editing the text. Some objects that were close to my heart fell through the examination grid. Fortunately, the reason for this was not so much due to doubts about authenticity as to the fact that these particular objects did not fulfil the usual Cameroon canon or the aesthetic expectations of the viewer.

**T.A.M.:** *A collection of this scale clearly has many threads. Are there certain dealers or other sources that you particularly rely upon?*

**P.W.:** Building up a collection of this size does indeed require a large “net.” About a third of the objects were acquired from private sources—primarily tribal art collectors with many years of experience. Some of these had spent time in Cameroon on business in the early 1960s or 1970s and were able to build up collections there when good material was still available. Usually, these acquisitions hinge on a relationship of trust, and sometimes friendships developed, which is a pleasant bonus. Talking shop about tribal



I should mention here my wife, Adelheid, who, while not a source of acquisitions, has been a source of encouragement on this journey.

**T.A.M.:** *All serious collectors have had the experience of “the one that got away.” Is there one of these that sticks in your mind? Similarly, is there one that you’ve long pursued that you were finally able to acquire?*

**P.W.:** There are so many that got away. I have experienced this kind of loss all too frequently! Sometimes my insecurity about authenticity was stronger than my “hunting instinct.” Sometimes I lacked the time for the research necessary in order to make a decision quickly, and faster competitors carried off the trophy. Still other times, I followed well-intentioned expert advice (“that’s a fake”) only to later find a field photo of the object from the 1920s. Occasionally I’ve simply been outbid when I should have gone to the next level. An Mfunte figure was offered at a ridiculously low estimate in an auction in the U.S. As one of two bidders, I held out for a long time, but ultimately my competitor was ready to go higher than I was. My “rational” arguments to soothe the pain do little to quell the remorse.

On the other hand, I have many great objects that had haunted me for years. One of these is a great Night Society mask once owned by Jacques Kerchache [FIG. 9]. It took a long time, but I finally was able to convince a German private collector to let me acquire it.

**D.G.:** *You’ve been collecting for forty years. What are some of the major changes you’ve observed in the art market as it relates to African material?*

**P.W.:** In the early 1980s, collecting African art was largely a localized affair. Without today’s digital tools, ordinary collectors had to rely primarily on their local dealers and auction houses. At that time, a lot of the works—real and fake—still came directly from African countries. Clever gallery owners often secured the best pieces, and many collectors had low quality standards compared to today. Provenance was not always specified, even by the major auction houses, and literature



on these art forms was still in its infancy. Accordingly, it was difficult for collectors to assess the authenticity and market value of their works. Qualified expertise was practically nonexistent or rarely requested, and it was difficult to find comparable pieces. Sometimes there might be interaction with the staff of an ethnological museum, but it was not their job to advise collectors. In Germany, experts such as Karl-Ferdinand Schädler, who curated the sales at auction houses such as Ketterer and Neumeister in Munich, were valuable resources for collectors.

The situation in Belgium and France, especially in the capital cities, was better. Dealers and many auction houses were in greater competition with each other, which facilitated the development of a sustainable tribal art market. In general, the large auction houses in Paris and New York fueled the entire market. These triggered several huge price surges from the 1960s onward. Auctions such as those of Paul Guillaume in the 1960s, Helena Rubinstein (1966), René Rasmussen (1979, 1980), Tristan Tzara (1988) and

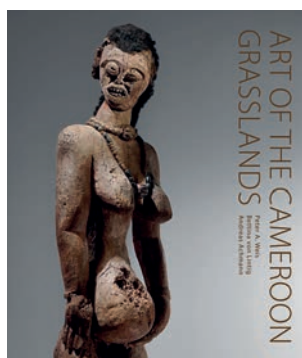
**FIG. 9 (far left):**  
Troh (Night) Society  
janiform mask.  
Bangwa; Cameroon.  
First quarter of the 20th  
century or earlier.  
Wood. H: 40.5 cm.  
Ex Anne and Jacques Kerchache;  
Christie’s, Paris, 29 October 2008,  
lot 112; Alain Dufour/Galerie  
Afrique, Saint-Maur (until April  
2011); J. Schmitt-Sulzberger,  
Steinheim (until 18 August 2021).

**FIG. 10 (left):**  
Kwifon Society *mabwo*  
“runner” mask.  
Wum/Bafum; Cameroon.  
First third of the 20th  
century.  
Wood. L: 32 cm.  
Ex Klaus Paysan, Stuttgart;  
Dorn Gallery, Hamburg (until 25  
January 2018).

**FIG. 11 (above):**  
Kwifon Society *mabwo*  
“runner” mask.  
Wum/Bafum; Cameroon.  
First half of the 20th  
century.  
Wood, pigment. L: 39 cm.  
Ex Merton D. Simpson, New York;  
Thierry de Maigret, Paris, June 2017,  
lot 10; private collection, Spain;  
private collection, Belgium.



**FIG. 12 (above):**  
Slit drum.  
Bamum. First third of the  
20th century.  
Wood. L: 120 cm.  
Ex de Baecque-d'Ouince-Sarrau,  
Lyon, 5 May 2022, lot 67.



**FIG. 13 (above):**  
Cover of *Art of the  
Cameroon Grasslands* by  
Peter Weis and Bettina  
von Lintig.  
24 x 28.5 cm, 350 pp., fully  
illustrated in color.  
ISBB: 979-12-5460-062-7.  
Published in English by 5  
Continents Editions, autumn 2024.

Hubert Goldet (2001)—the latter of which can probably best be described as a “spectacle”—all boosted the popularity of African art.

With the increasing internationalization starting twenty or thirty years ago paired with greater ease of travel, many new possibilities have opened up. Trips to far-flung museums and auctions have enabled collectors like me to make more reliable and accurate comparisons. Above all, the Internet and digitization have significantly increased transparency in the market. Today, collectors worldwide can obtain information on works of art, check provenance, and compare prices. Online databases and auctions have simplified access to art and improved market transparency. Many museums offer digital access to their collections, which provides instant access to top-tier objects that were acquired long ago. In addition, collectors can now rely on a wider range of expert opinions and scientific methods.

However, I’ve also experienced downsides in this development. For example, there is now only one auction house in Germany, Zemanek, that specializes in ethnological objects. Though based in Cologne, Lempertz has moved its tribal art sales to Brussels. Even in Munich, which was something of a Mecca for tribal art in the 1990s, treats tribal art more as an additional service than a specialty. Globalization has resulted in consolidation to fewer outlets.

From my own perspective, the market for good Cameroon objects has improved considerably since I started, though prices for top objects have risen significantly, to the point where only a few private collectors can afford them. In contrast, prices for the majority of tribal art, Cameroon art included, of lower and medium quality have fallen significantly since the 1980s. And even in this lower segment, the discussion about the origin of African artworks and the repatriation debate has deterred new collectors, particularly younger ones, at least in Germany.

**T.A.M.:** *Are there future plans for this collection?*

**P.W.:** As far as they exist, my plans involve both gradual improvement and the long-term preservation of the collection. While my collecting interests will continue, I plan to add only works that complement the diversity of the collection and improve its quality. At the same time, I may part with some pieces that I have less of an emotional attachment to, as well as non-Cameroon objects that will be better appreciated by other collectors. For daily life in our home, this means making space to focus on high-quality pieces: “Less is more!” Ultimately, I want to enjoy the objects in my surroundings for as long as possible, but with that said, I am confident that one day I will find a good answer to this question.

FIG. 14 (right):  
Pipe with elephant head.  
Grasslands. Before 1913.  
Copper alloy, fiber. L: 37 cm.  
Collected between 1911 and  
1913 by a senior canon fireman  
of the German Protection Force in  
Cameroon, then by descent.  
Ex Hans-Georg Hauch (acquired late  
1990s); Kunstauktionshaus Günther,  
Dresden, 6 November 2020, lot 914.



FIG. 15 (below):  
Royal pipe with  
crowned-head bowl.  
Possibly Bamum. 19th or  
early 20th century.  
Bronze alloy. L: 61 cm.  
Ex Marianne and Helmut Zimmer,  
Zurich (acquired in Cameroon in the  
1960s).



FIG. 16 (right): Pipe with a bat figure  
and human face on the bowl and ground  
spider motif on the stem. Grasslands.  
Early 20th century.  
Terracotta, wood, iron. L: 48 cm.  
Ex Marianne and Helmut Zimmer, Zurich (acquired in  
Cameroon in the 1960s).

