

**African Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario:  
The Aesthetic Legacy of Justin and Elisabeth Lang**

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, in partial  
fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Carleton University

Ottawa, Canada

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*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-26930-5*  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-26930-5*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper offers a discussion of the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art in Kingston, Ontario, in terms of the complex history of individuals and events that influenced its formation and its position within broader themes of African art collecting in the West. Its donation to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre and the implications and challenges of the gift for this particular museum are also explored. I argue that the Lang Collection of African Art is a product of the Modernist Primitive 'taste culture' that formed during the mid-twentieth century in Canada; its specific character can be linked to the social and familial education of the Langs and fits within broader trends of African art collecting in the West. The collection's presence at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre is attributable to the aesthetic preferences members of the Art Centre staff shared with Justin and Elisabeth Lang.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to thank a number of individuals whose help and support contributed to the completion of this thesis. I am especially indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Ruth Phillips, for her thought-provoking discussions and careful readings of numerous drafts. Robert Lang, Dorothy Farr, Philip Fry, Robert Swain and Victoria Henry played crucial roles in helping me reconstruct and document the history of this important collection. I would also like to extend my thanks to Kristen Steele, Carla Taunton, Anne de Stecher, Heather Igloliorte, Michelle McGeough and Christopher and Lou Ellen Hale. Research for this thesis was carried out with assistance from the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program.

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## PREFACE

As many as 25,000 objects of African origin exist in Canadian museum collections.<sup>1</sup> Despite this significant body of African material, very little attention has been devoted to researching and exhibiting African Arts and Cultures in these institutions. One reason for this lack of attention is that many museums have focussed on working with the material culture of Canada's First Peoples. Africa has simply not been a priority. Another related phenomenon is that Canada does not have many experts working in the field of African arts. At the graduate level of Art History, only one university has a professor who specializes in the arts of Africa, and no Canadian museum currently has a permanent curator of African Arts and Cultures.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the history of researching and exhibiting African material culture in major Canadian institutions has been sparse.

Aspects of this discussion were raised by Marie-Louise Labelle in her catalogue for the recent exhibition *Beads of Life: Eastern and Southern African Beadwork from Canadian Collections* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (14 April 2005 – 26 February 2006). In an article about the exhibition written for *African Arts* Labelle points out that *Beads of Life* was the first major exhibition of African art presented by a Canadian museum since the Glenbow Museum in Calgary's *Where Symbols Meet* (1994) – more than a decade earlier.<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging the absence of African art scholarship in Canadian museological history, Labelle offers an optimistic assessment of recent developments in the field:

In 2004, the National Gallery of Canada presented an exhibition of African art. In 2005, it is believed for the first time in the history of Canadian museums, the Royal Ontario Museum advertised for the position of Cultural Anthropologist specializing in Africa. Finally, in 2006, some months after the opening of *Beads of Life* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Royal Ontario Museum will open a permanent gallery devoted to African art. These new exhibitions should help reveal Africa's cultural riches to the Canadian public and trigger new projects for the future.<sup>4</sup>

The 2004 exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada that Labelle refers to was *Material Differences: Art and Identity in Africa* (17 September 2004 – 2 January 2005). The exhibition, curated by Frank Herreman, originated from the Museum for African Art in New York. While it was certainly a major step to have an exhibition of African art at Canada's National Gallery, it is disconcerting that the exhibition did not include any objects from Canadian collections. To my knowledge, the last time the National Gallery of Canada exhibited African objects from Canadian collections was in 1978 when Jacqueline Fry curated *Twenty-Five African Sculptures*. It was in writing a review of the *Material Differences* exhibition for a graduate level course in Art History that I became interested in the question of why Canadian collections of African art have received so little attention.

Although it is disappointing that the National Gallery of Canada brought in an exhibition from the United States rather than exhibiting objects from its own country's collections, it is not surprising. Where Western European and American institutions have devoted significant resources and time to researching and displaying their African collections in recent years, Canada has lagged behind. Lack of scholarship and expertise has meant that much information about Canadian collections of African art remains unknown. During my undergraduate degree at Queen's University, I had the opportunity to work with the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in my capacity as a student docent. When I delivered the education programs to elementary and secondary students from the local community I became aware of how interested they were in learning more about the African sculptures and their collectors, and at the same time, how little information was available. I share Marie-Louise Labelle's hope that recent exhibitions of African art will "reveal Africa's cultural riches to the

Canadian public and trigger new projects for the future.”<sup>5</sup> It is in this spirit that I am undertaking an investigation into the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art in Kingston, Ontario.

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Louise Labelle, *Beads of Life: Eastern and Southern African beadwork from Canadian collections* (Gatineau, Québec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2005), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Elizabeth Harney is an Assistant Professor in the department of the History of Art at the University of Toronto who specializes in African and Diaspora arts.

<sup>3</sup> Marie-Louise Labelle, “Beads of Life: Eastern and Southern African Adornments,” *African Arts* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 12.

<sup>4</sup> Labelle, *Beads of Life*, 6. Note: Contrary to Labelle’s statement, the ROM’s African materials will not be housed in a separate gallery. They will be exhibited in three galleries: Galleries of Africa: Egypt; Galleries of Africa: Sudan; and Galleries of Africa: Themes and Collections. All of these galleries, whose titles were developed on the advice of community consultation, will be incorporated in the new *Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific Gallery*.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## INTRODUCTION

In general terms, the presence of African objects in Canadian museums in 2006 is attributable to two significant phases of collecting. The first phase, brought about by Canada's involvement in colonial activities in Africa during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, accounts for the majority of objects in Canadian institutions. These colonial collections of African material culture, now housed primarily in ethnographic museums, are characterized by their wide range of object types, narrow range of geographic and cultural representation, and general lack of aesthetic quality (although some exceptions do exist).<sup>1</sup> For the most part, missionaries and military personnel collected these objects as souvenirs, trophies or *curios*.

In 1989, curator Jeanne Cannizzo explored this first phase of collecting through her exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. In the words of Cannizzo, *Into the Heart of Africa* “offered the history of the museum's African collection through a critical examination of the role played by Canadians in the European colonization of Africa while displaying the rich diversity of African cultural practices and artistic traditions.”<sup>2</sup> In the exhibition catalogue, Cannizzo highlighted Canada's close ties to Britain and the Canadian desire to participate in the Imperial enterprise. She explained that Canadians viewed the peoples of Africa as “savages” who needed to abandon their “barbarous” customs and convert to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> As such, the objects brought back by missionaries and military men were not necessarily admired by their collectors, but more likely, were viewed as symbols of a successful conquest.

The second phase of Canadian collecting of African objects, which I will discuss in this thesis, began around the time of World War II and extended into the late twentieth century. This phase was characterized by a catholic appreciation of the

so-called Primitive arts<sup>4</sup> in association with an interest in modern arts like Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism. In many cases, the collectors who shared this interest did not obtain objects directly from their original contexts in Africa. Instead, dealers, auction houses, and African-runners were the main sources for purchase. The primary difference between this phase and earlier colonial collecting is that objects were no longer being obtained as souvenirs, trophies, or *curios*, but rather, were admired and upheld for their aesthetic qualities. In other words, African objects had been placed by these collectors into the category of “Art”. The fact that many collectors who obtained objects during this phase donated their private collections to art museums like the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and the Art Gallery of Ontario (as opposed to ethnographic museums like the Royal Ontario Museum or the Glenbow Museum in Calgary) reflects this ideology.

One of the major trends toward viewing non-Western objects from an aesthetic perspective developed out of the activities of several European artists working during the early twentieth century – particularly those of the Montparnasse group in Paris.<sup>5</sup> Artists who encountered African sculptures in museums, flea markets or elsewhere, expressed their admiration for the formal innovation and emotional expression they felt these objects embodied. Motifs and formal elements inspired by African sculpture soon found their way into the work of artists like Pablo Picasso, as was most famously exemplified in his 1907 work *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*. In some cases, it was not the specific formal qualities that inspired Western artists, but rather, the belief that African objects were a direct product of the African artist's subconscious, which was thought to be unfettered by modern concerns. Anti-modern sentiments played an important role in the Western artists' emulation of African material culture. Those who were dissatisfied with the circumstances of their lives in

modern Europe often idealized African people as pure and uncontaminated beings who were deeply in touch with spirituality and nature.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, there was a prevailing belief in the universality of modern European aesthetics. Many people thought that African objects that appealed to Western artists did so because they were aesthetic masterpieces whose power could transcend cultural and temporal boundaries.

This Western artistic phenomenon, labelled “Modernist Primitivism” retrospectively, has since been normalized within the canon of Art History. In recent years, scholars have researched the impact of this movement on Western collection and exhibition of non-Western arts in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere. However, the Canadian involvement with Modernist Primitivism, especially in terms of African art collecting, has yet to be explored. The context for Modernist Primitivism in Canada is a particularly interesting one because of a number of social and historical circumstances. World War II brought an increase in immigration from Western European countries; most notably, a number of Jewish refugees who had been forced to flee the Nazi regime and who brought with them a Western Fine Arts tradition that privileged aesthetic contemplation, and exposure to the Modernist penchant for Primitive arts. At the same time, there seems to have been an extensive commitment among new immigrants to support and foster the growth of specifically Canadian art and artists. In this way, collectors and scholars who expressed an early interest in the arts of Africa often made an “easy” transition into collecting or studying the arts of the First Nations and Inuit Peoples of Canada. Similarly, the work of Quebecois artists like *Les Automatistes*, which was based on Surrealist principles, found an eager audience among collectors who favoured a Modernist Primitive aesthetic.

### **The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art**

In 1984, Montrealers Justin and Elisabeth Lang donated their important collection of African art to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC) at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. The collection includes over 570 objects that the Langs amassed during a period of forty years (approximately 1940-1980). The objects originate primarily from West African peoples and are all sculptural forms. At the time of the donation, it was considered the "largest Canadian Collection of African art in private hands."<sup>7</sup>

Christopher Steiner has argued that "perhaps more so than in any other field in the world of art, collectors have dominated the formation of taste and construction of aesthetic value in the study and exhibition of African art."<sup>8</sup> He suggests that where scholarship has directed the development of other art genres, and in turn sparked public desire, collectors have led institutions dealing with African art to their subject.<sup>9</sup> This is especially true in Canada, where museums do not generally have acquisition budgets for African objects and therefore rely almost entirely on donations. The result of this system is that the aesthetic discriminations of a particular collector or set of collectors determine the scope of objects available to represent "African art" at a given institution. As Susan Vogel has explained, what has come to be understood as "African art" in the West is only a small segment of the range of artistic objects created by the different peoples of the African continent.<sup>10</sup>

Acknowledging that the tastes of a select group of individuals largely determined the content of Western collections of African art reinforces the importance of understanding collectors themselves. Curators and scholars have begun to realize that studying the history of collectors is an essential step toward identifying the nature of collections and the assumptions and values that they embody.<sup>11</sup> No such study of

Justin and Elisabeth Lang or their collection has yet been undertaken although its seemingly anomalous position within Canadian collecting history suggests the importance of investigating this collection. The Lang Collection, like any collection, does not represent African art comprehensively. Rather, it reflects the tastes of a particular pair of collectors who developed out of a specific set of social and historical circumstances. In this paper, I will attempt to provide a more detailed picture of the Lang Collection and the complex history of individuals and events that influenced its formation. In addition, I will position these ideas within broader themes of African art collecting in the West that have been the subject of recent research in both the United States and Britain. I will conclude my discussion of the Lang Collection by examining the circumstances of its donation to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre and exploring the implications and challenges of the gift for this particular museum. In my analysis, I argue that the Lang Collection of African Art is a product of the Modernist Primitive 'taste culture' that formed during the mid-twentieth century in Canada; its specific character can be linked to the social and familial education of Justin and Elisabeth Lang and fits within broader trends of African art collecting in the West. I further argue that the presence of the Lang Collection at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre is attributable to the aesthetic preferences members of the Art Centre staff shared with Justin and Elisabeth Lang.

### **Literature Review**

Since its donation to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in the mid-eighties, only three catalogues have been published in association with the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection. The first catalogue, *Visions and Models: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 2 February-31 March 1985, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada*, accompanied the inaugural

exhibition of the Lang collection.<sup>12</sup> The catalogue includes a foreword by Robert Swain, the director of the Art Centre at the time of the donation; and Preliminary notes on the possibilities of the collection, catalogue essay “Visions and Models”; and a brief discussion of the Langs and their collection, titled “The Spirit of a Collection,” all written by scholar Jacqueline Fry.

The second catalogue, *Visual Variations: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 1 March-3 May 1987, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston Canada*, includes a foreword by Robert Swain and an essay on the exhibition by Jacqueline Fry.<sup>13</sup> *Heroic Figures: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 12 May-25 September 1988, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada* was the third catalogue produced in association with the Lang collection.<sup>14</sup> The exhibition occurred in conjunction with the Canadian Association of African Studies annual conference held at Queen’s University in May 1988. Jacqueline Fry, Nkiru Nzegwu and Jean-Claude Muller wrote essays for the catalogue. For the most part, these essays deal with larger issues concerning African art, rather than specific aspects of the Lang collection.

Sculptures from the Lang collection can also be found in the catalogues for three Canadian exhibitions of African art curated by Jacqueline Fry: *African Sculpture from Canadian Collections: The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Oct. 27, 1972-Jan. 31, 1973*,<sup>15</sup> *Vingt-Cinq Sculptures Africaines = Twenty-Five African Sculptures*,<sup>16</sup> and *Masks without Masquerades*.<sup>17</sup> While the Langs are credited as lenders to the Winnipeg and Halifax exhibitions, the works from their collection are identified as “Private Collection, Montreal” in the National Gallery publication. The Catalogue for *African Sculpture from Canadian Collections* includes an introductory essay by Jacqueline

Fry that addresses the difficulties of presenting African sculpture in a Western setting and offers some cultural context for selected works in the exhibition. The remainder of the catalogue includes images of the objects from the exhibition and brief discussions of form and context. *Vingt-Cinq Sculptures Africaines = Twenty-Five African Sculptures* also includes an introduction by Jacqueline Fry that considers the issue of displaying African sculpture in the Western context and follows with a discussion of the formal and cultural aspects of works in the exhibition. In this catalogue two sculptures from the Lang collection are discussed by Huguette Van Geluwe and one is discussed by Robert Farris Thompson. Each of these discussions is several paragraphs long and offers insight into the function and meaning of the object in African society. *Masks without Masquerades* includes an introduction written by Jacqueline Fry that addresses the removal of African masks from their original contexts and offers some insight into their original functions. The remainder of the catalogue includes illustrations of the objects in the exhibition with short paragraph-long descriptions of their formal and material composition and uses in African society.

In addition to these five catalogues, newspaper articles provide further information about the collectors, their collection, and its donation to the Art Centre. The art critic, Normand Biron, published an interview he conducted with Elisabeth Lang in the journal *Vie des Arts* in the summer of 1986.<sup>18</sup> The interview addressed Elisabeth Lang's personal history as well as her collecting practices and travels to Africa. Beyond these sources very little has been published that addresses the Lang collection with any depth or specificity. Unpublished correspondence between Jacqueline Fry, Philip Fry, the Langs, Dorothy Farr and Robert Swain, among others, can be found in the Jacqueline Fry Fonds at the National Gallery of Canada. These

documents provide insight into the donation process and exhibition plans for the collection.

I will draw upon the wealth of literature dealing with Modernist Primitivism to support my evaluation of the Lang collection. Frances Connelly's *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907*<sup>19</sup> and Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Art*<sup>20</sup> trace the history of Primitivism in the West. Connelly's text focuses on the roots of the discourse as it developed out of the early eighteenth century and Goldwater investigates the involvement of avant-garde artists like Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Klee in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The exhibition catalogue for William Rubin's "*Primitivism*" in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern*<sup>21</sup> is also a valuable resource because it offers an extensive number of essays dealing with Primitivism in Modern art, and illustrates the universalizing aesthetic doctrine of Modernism. While Rubin et al. accept the formalist premises of Primitivism, a number of essays produced in response to the "*Primitivism*" in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* exhibition deconstruct the discourse critically to reveal its negative impact on the West's "others". James Clifford's essay "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern" in *The Predicament of Culture* argues that although non-Western objects were redefined importantly in the exhibition, they were redefined in terms of a Western aesthetic system that was masquerading as a universal concept of art.<sup>22</sup> Susan Hiller's *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*,<sup>23</sup> Sally Price's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*,<sup>24</sup> and Shelley Errington's *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress*,<sup>25</sup> further deconstruct the euro-centrism and negative effects of Primitivism on non-Western artists. Hiller's text includes a variety of essays that critically address the construction of the "other", the concept of the "Primitive", and issues of identity. Price provides yet another

perspective by examining the manifestations of Modernist Primitivism in museums and popular culture. Errington examines the discourses of progress and Primitivism and argues that in the late-twentieth century, the concept of “Primitive art” died a “double death” – both through critical reactions to its assumptions and values and through the dwindling availability of objects that fit its prescribed categories.

Publications dealing specifically with Canadian collectors have not included any discussion of the Lang Collection. General sources on collecting include James Clifford’s chapter “On Collecting Art and Culture” in *The Predicament of Culture*, which establishes the importance of understanding the discriminations behind a particular collection and presents a system for understanding the classification of objects and their shifting statuses. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart illustrates how collections serve to construct interior illusions of adequate representation and examines their important role in identity formation.<sup>26</sup> Susan M. Pearce has published several sources on the subject of collecting that provide a very useful overview of the major theorizations of collecting behaviours. Her publications include *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*,<sup>27</sup> and *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*.<sup>28</sup>

Important sources that address the topic of collecting African art specifically include Susan Vogel’s *The Art of Collecting African Art*<sup>29</sup> and Christopher Steiner’s essay “The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness: Fashioning the Canon of African Art” which was published in Elisabeth Manfield’s *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*.<sup>30</sup> Vogel discusses the typical African art collector as well as trends in collecting African art. Steiner examines the important role that collectors of African art have played in developing the field of African art and defining its parameters in the West. Steiner’s book *African Art in Transit*<sup>31</sup> and his

chapter “Authenticity, Repetition, and Aesthetics” in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*<sup>32</sup> also provide useful insight into the African art trade and the ways that African traders cater to notions of authenticity held by Western collectors.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Approaches**

In addition to the literature on collecting, the social theorizations of taste outlined by Herbert Gans and Pierre Bourdieu will be particularly useful to my discussion.

However, my use of these theories will be limited to specific aspects of their arguments. In their respective analyses, Gans and Bourdieu each devote a significant portion of their discussion to outlining the common trends of ‘taste’ within particular classes. Both of these sociologists investigate the ways that socio-economic positions, education levels, and political preferences correspond to the tastes of specific groups of individuals. In this art historical project, I am not interested in analyzing how the tastes of the Langs and their associates fit within broader structures of class in Western societies. Instead, I will focus on developing a specific picture of their shared artistic preferences, and I will abstract key concepts from both Gans and Bourdieu to support my analysis.

In his text, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, Gans has suggested that classes of people who share common aesthetic values can be thought of as ‘taste cultures’ for the purposes of social analysis.<sup>33</sup> Within these ‘taste cultures,’ individuals make similar aesthetic judgements in a range of situations and through interaction reproduce their particular ideologies. I will use Gans’ concept of the ‘taste culture’ to frame my discussion of Justin and Elisabeth Lang and the circle of dealers, collectors, and social acquaintances who shared a Modernist Primitivist sensibility in the mid-twentieth century. Bourdieu’s argument that taste is

a product of social and academic education, which he outlines in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, will provide the basis for my evaluation of Elisabeth Lang's collecting habits.<sup>34</sup> His idea of the 'aesthetic disposition', which he describes as the capacity to approach any type of object with aesthetic interest, is particularly relevant to a discussion of Elisabeth Lang as a collector of African art. Furthermore, his proposal that the field of artistic production has grown to be self-referential offers deeper insight into the serial nature of the Lang Collection. I will undertake a more detailed discussion of the aspects that I will be abstracting from Gans' and Bourdieu's theories in subsequent chapters.

Because of the scarcity of sources available that directly address Justin and Elisabeth Lang and their art collection, oral interviews played an important role in my research process. I had the opportunity to speak with five individuals who knew the Langs and their collection in a number of different capacities: Robert Lang, the son of Justin and Elisabeth Lang; Philip Fry, a friend of the Langs and Jacqueline Fry's husband; Victoria Henry, former owner of the *Ufundi* gallery in Ottawa (which sold contemporary and historical African art), Director of the Canada Council Art Bank and friend of Elisabeth Lang; Robert Swain, the Director of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at the time of the Lang donation; and Dorothy Farr, the curator responsible for working with the Lang Collection since its donation.

The interviews were informal and unstructured. I provided some prepared questions to the interviewees at the outset of the discussion, but more often than not, our conversation evolved in a less structured way according to the information that they provided. It was from these discussions that I was able to develop a more comprehensive history of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, their collecting habits, and their social network. When processing the information I received from the different

interviews, I discovered that there were some contradictory statements. Where there were discrepancies between different accounts, I sought out other information to determine the accuracy of one account over another. I have noted cases where this information was not available and I was unable to reconcile contradictory information. In other cases, where it was not possible to confirm factual accuracy in the statements of these individuals, I have simply presented the information as it was given to me.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

The first chapter will provide an overview of the history Modernist Primitivism and its relationship to the activities of early twentieth century European artists. An introduction to the way that Modernist Primitivism developed in the Canadian context will follow this discussion. I will use Herbert Gans' theory of 'taste culture' to frame a description of Justin and Elisabeth Lang and their associates that will develop an outline of their artistic interests and reinforce the proposal that this group of individuals formed a Modernist Primitivist 'taste culture' in mid-twentieth century Canada. Within this discussion, I will develop a picture of the African art market in Canada and the role of the *Galerie des 5 Continents*, Elisabeth Lang's commercial gallery.

In the second chapter, I will investigate the unique character of the Lang Collection before situating it in terms of broader trends in African art collecting in the West. A description of the Lang's African Collection will be provided in addition to a discussion of their collecting methods. A consideration of the roles that Father Ernest Gagnon and Jacqueline Fry played in forming Justin and Elisabeth Lang's attitudes to African objects will follow. I will draw on Bourdieu's theory of the 'aesthetic disposition' and ideas about the self-referential character of the field of artistic

production to provide further insight into Elisabeth Lang's collecting habits. After establishing the specific nature of the Lang Collection, I will compare the Langs' collecting parameters to those of other Western collectors of African art and will look at the implications of their aesthetic preferences. Susan Vogel's description of the "typical African art collector" will be used to further establish the Lang's position within wider collecting circles.

The final chapter will look at the Lang's decision to donate their collection to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, and, in turn, the Art Centre's decision to accept the collection. I will describe the variety of community responses to the AEAC's decision to accept the collection and outline the challenges the Art Centre faces in caring for it. I will then discuss the challenges of exhibiting African art in terms of the distinction between aesthetically focussed and contextually informative approaches to display. Some of the major arguments in favour of, and in opposition to privileging the aesthetic dimensions of objects in museum exhibitions will be discussed. I will then consider the exhibition strategies employed by the curators of the Lang Collection in terms of this larger discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Louise Labelle, *Beads of Life: Eastern and Southern African beadwork from Canadian collections* (Gatineau, Québec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2005), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Jeanne Cannizzo, "Exhibiting Cultures: 'Into the Heart of Africa'," *Visual Anthropology Review* 7, no.1 (Spring 1991): 150.

<sup>3</sup> Jeanne Cannizzo, *Into the Heart of Africa* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1989), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Shelley Errington has argued that "the author of a work about the primitive and primitivism needs some devices to show ironic distance from terms that could be misinterpreted as being uttered in the author's own voice." I have chosen to capitalize the terms "Primitive" "Primitivism" and "Modernist Primitivism/ist" to indicate that these labels are constructs of Western culture, embedded in the specific ideologies that I am analyzing, and do not reflect my own perspectives on the cultures or art forms being discussed. In some cases, I have qualified the terms with words like "so-called" and "supposedly" to reinforce this position. Where I quote someone else's opinion, I have not capitalized or otherwise changed their terminology. For Shelley Errington's discussion of this topic see Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xxv-xxvii.

<sup>5</sup> Other trends toward viewing non-Western arts from an aesthetic perspective included Chinoiserie and Japonisme. These trends began to develop as early as the seventeenth century but will not be addressed within the scope of this discussion.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of these perspectives see Robert John Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

- <sup>7</sup> Press Release, 30 April 1984. Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection File. Agnes Etherington Art Centre. Queen's University, Kingston, Canada.
- <sup>8</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, "The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness: Fashioning the Canon of African Art," in *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield, 132-145. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 133.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Susan Mullin Vogel, ed., *The Art of Collecting African Art* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1988), 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 194.
- <sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *Visions and Models: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 2 February-31 March 1985, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada* (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1984).
- <sup>13</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *Visual Variations: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 1 March-3 May 1987, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada* (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1987).
- <sup>14</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *Heroic Figures: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 12 May-25 September 1988, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada* (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1988).
- <sup>15</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *African Sculpture from Canadian Collections: The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Oct. 27, 1972-Jan. 31, 1973* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1972).
- <sup>16</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *Vingt-Cinq Sculptures Africaines = Twenty-Five African Sculptures* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1978).
- <sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *Masks without Masquerades*. (Halifax N.S.: Dalhousie University Art Gallery = Galerie d'art de l'Université Dalhousie, 1974).
- <sup>18</sup> Normand Biron, "Les Vertiges De l'Éternité: Rencontre Avec Elisabeth Lang," *Vie des Arts* 31, no. 123 (Été 1986): 90.
- <sup>19</sup> Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).
- <sup>20</sup> Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*.
- <sup>21</sup> William Stanley Rubin, ed. *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 vols (New York; Boston: Museum of Modern Art; Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1984).
- <sup>22</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- <sup>23</sup> Susan Hiller, ed., *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991).
- <sup>24</sup> Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- <sup>25</sup> Errington, *Death of Authentic Primitive Art*
- <sup>26</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993).
- <sup>27</sup> Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).
- <sup>28</sup> Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- <sup>29</sup> Vogel, *The Art of Collecting African Art*.
- <sup>30</sup> Steiner, "The Taste of Angels."
- <sup>31</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, *African art in Transit* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- <sup>32</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, "Authenticity, Repetition, and Aesthetics." In *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* by Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- <sup>33</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
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## CHAPTER ONE: The Collectors

### Modernist Primitivism

As William Rubin explained in his catalogue essay for the 1984 exhibition *“Primitivism” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, the term “Primitive” has been evoked historically to describe a wide range of artistic phenomena. When the term was originally coined in nineteenth-century France, it referred to a broad spectrum of arts that included, among other things, the work of Romanesque, Byzantine and non-Western artists, as well as the work of fifteenth-century Italian and Flemish artists. At the time, the arts of Africa and Oceania received little attention – the non-Western artists encompassed by the term were inhabitants of places like Peru and Japan. In the twentieth century, “Primitive” became narrower in scope and referred more specifically to African, Oceanic, Native American and Eskimo (now more properly referred to as Inuit) peoples.<sup>1</sup>

The term “Primitivism” does not refer to the art of the so-called Primitive peoples, but rather, it describes a Western artistic construct. William Rubin delineates this distinction by explaining that “the derived term primitivism is ethnocentric...it refers not to the tribal arts in themselves, but to the Western interest in and reaction to them. Primitivism is thus an aspect of the history of modern art, not of tribal art.”<sup>2</sup> The term “Modernist Primitivism”, then, refers even more specifically to the dominant twentieth-century manifestation of Primitivism. While Westerners thought of objects made by Primitive societies previously as *curios* or ethnographic specimens, in the twentieth century they were ushered into the realm of “Art” by modern artists who proclaimed their value on a number of different levels.

Robert Goldwater’s 1938 text, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, which was published in a revised version as *Primitivism in Modern Art* in 1967, still provides a

useful outline for understanding the various facets of Modernist Primitivism as they unfolded in the early twentieth century. Goldwater identifies four significant forms of Primitivism in modern art: *Romantic Primitivism*, which was exemplified in the work of Gauguin and the Fauves; *Emotional Primitivism*, which was characterized by German Expressionist groups like The Brücke and The Blaue Reiter; *Intellectual Primitivism*, which could be seen in the work of Picasso and the Cubists; and *The Primitivism of the Subconscious*, which was illustrated in the work of artists like Paul Klee, Joan Miró, and the Dada and Surrealists.<sup>3</sup>

The *Romantic Primitivism* of Gauguin was the antithetical alternative to life in modern Paris. In Gauguin's life and in his art, he rejected the "civilized" in favour of what he called the "barbarian". "Barbarian" for Gauguin, was a celebratory term that indicated simplicity and purity. In the late nineteenth-century, he left Paris to live in Martinique, Tahiti, and the Marquesas, among people that he believed embodied these traits. The artist's reverence for the "barbarian" is evident in his sculptures, woodcuts and paintings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He employed Marquesan decorative techniques in a number of his sculptures and woodcuts, and his paintings not only depicted "barbarian" subject matter, but Gauguin rendered them in a style that he believed was "barbarian" in nature – thick, flat outlines, simple shapes and broad washes of colour.<sup>4</sup> While for the most part Gauguin did not stray too far from indigenous European traditions (he showed some interest in Indian and Egyptian relief), the *Fauves* enthusiastically embraced African sculpture in their conception of the Primitive. According to Goldwater, their appreciation of Primitive art differed from previous artists because they considered the Primitive arts in isolation from their original contexts. For example, the artists did not travel to Africa to encounter Primitive objects (as Gauguin had travelled to Tahiti, etc) but instead, they came upon

them in places like museums and flea markets, where the objects did not obviously exist in relation to the circumstances of their creation. The isolating approach of the *Fauves*, though it went further than that of Gauguin, was not a purely formal interest on the part of the artists. The *Fauves*' also admired the African objects they encountered because of their romantic interest in the strange and exotic, and their interest did not lead to any direct borrowing in their own creations. Instead, they employed simplified forms, broad washes of pure colour, and lack of depth, which they felt echoed the simplicity of Primitive arts.<sup>5</sup>

The members of Die Brücke, Goldwater argues, exemplified an *Emotional Primitivism* because they admired Primitive art for its power and immediacy. The group showed an interest in the arts of both Africa and Oceania, which they encountered in the museum setting. While some curiosity for the exotic remained in their perceptions of Primitive objects, the Brücke instantly elevated them to the level of "Art". In their own work, the artists strove to capture the passion, emotion and directness they felt Primitive arts embodied. Like Gauguin, they found many aspects of modern life superficial and wanted to return to a form of expression that they believed was more "basic and important".<sup>6</sup>

In their *Emotional Primitivism*, the Blaue Reiter of Southern Germany celebrated a wider array of aboriginal styles, including, among other things, work from Brazil, Mexico, Japan, New Caledonia, Easter Island, the Cameroons, and archaic Greece as well as folk arts from Russia and Germany.<sup>7</sup> They believed that like themselves, the Primitive artists "sought to express in their work only internal truths, renouncing all consideration of external forms."<sup>8</sup> Many members of the group equated Primitive arts with the arts of children, which they believed were pure and unmediated. Like many other artists who admired the Primitive arts, the work of the

Blaue Reiter did not copy Primitive forms. Instead, they tried to evoke the fundamental aspects of human nature that they believed Primitive arts expressed.

*Intellectual Primitivism* was the term Goldwater used to refer to artists who were concerned with the formal aspects of Primitive art. He explains that

...their intention, indeed, was to...consider only the formal aspects of primitive work, disregarding not only its particular iconographical significance, of which they were entirely ignorant, but also the more general emotional expression and the effect induced by the form and composition of the objects that they knew.<sup>9</sup>

According to Goldwater, the work of Picasso exemplifies this tendency. While admittedly, Picasso was not completely disconnected from romantic ideas about the Primitive, his work revealed a profound interest in the formal solutions employed by African artists. Picasso was looking for a style of art that would offer an alternative to previous academic painting. After coming into contact with African and Oceanic art, elements of their designs began to appear in his work. In some cases, he painted or sketched masks that recalled African works; in other cases, he employed shapes or textures that were derivative of Primitive arts.<sup>10</sup> While he certainly maintained his own style, Picasso's aesthetic appreciation of African and Oceanic sculpture was evident in his own work.

The final type of Primitivism that Goldwater identified in the work of modern artists was *The Primitivism of the Subconscious*. According to Goldwater, a major aspect of this form of Primitivism was the Child Cult. Artists like Paul Klee drew on children's art because they felt it exemplified a "freshness and innocence" that could not be captured in later years of modern European life.<sup>11</sup> Klee believed that the products of the unconscious, unmediated by logic and conscious thought, were forces of the universe that could speak through the artist. He categorized children's art with the art of the Primitive peoples, saying that "I want to be as though new-born,

knowing absolutely nothing about Europe, ignoring poets and fashions, to be almost primitive.”<sup>12</sup> Klee’s work revealed borrowings from children’s as well as tribal arts. Joan Miró was another artist working in what Goldwater called the Child Cult. His work, like Klee’s, was inspired by both the art of children and the Primitive arts. Miró admired the African and Oceanic sculptures that he encountered in Picasso’s studio for the atmosphere he felt that they evoked. In 1936, he wrote, “each grain of dust possesses a marvellous soul. But to understand this it is necessary to rediscover the religious and magic sense of things – that of Primitive peoples.”<sup>13</sup>

Goldwater considered the work of the Surrealists Primitivist because they were preoccupied with continuing a tradition of anti-rationality that emphasized the importance of exteriorizing the contents of the subconscious.<sup>14</sup> The Surrealists believed they were accessing the fundamental aspects of human nature through the psyche. There is a correlation here between how they viewed the art of Primitive societies and their own – they thought that both forms were a direct way of communicating basic human emotions. The Dada artists shared a similar belief in internal sources of inspiration. They promoted the idea that artists needed no technical training to be capable of producing art objects. Both the Dada and Surrealist artists emphasized the internal factors that they believed were responsible for creating great art and equated these factors with the greatness of Primitive art.<sup>15</sup> Primitive peoples, they felt, were in direct contact with their subconscious desires because they had not been “civilized” to repress them.

The Modernist Primitivism of the twentieth century extended well beyond the artists discussed here. What the outline of Goldwater’s analysis reveals is the different ways that European modern artists began to value the so-called Primitive arts and how this extended into their own work, and subsequently, into the general realm

of Western consciousness. In the decades that followed the proclamations of these early twentieth-century artists, many collectors, connoisseurs and other artists came to appreciate Primitive arts as objects of immense aesthetic value. While each collector of Primitive art likely had complex and personal reasons for his or her interest, the significant and common thread of these new perspectives was that Primitive objects were being collected and appreciated as “Art”. By drawing these objects under the umbrella of “Art”, the Modernist Primitivists promoted a belief in the universalism of aesthetic standards and asserted the ability of non-Western objects to affect their viewers through space and time.

### **Modernist Primitivism in Canada**

In Canada, the Modernist Primitivism of the early twentieth century focussed primarily on the material culture of Canada’s aboriginal peoples. Unlike the situation in Europe and the United States, it was not until much later that the arts of Africa and Oceania began to receive attention. The 1927 exhibition, *Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern*, presented at the National Gallery of Canada, exemplified the early manifestation of Modernist Primitivism in Canada. It was the first time in the gallery’s history that it exhibited Native objects as “Art”. The exhibition, which focussed exclusively on British Columbia, brought a range of West Coast ceremonial objects together with paintings by members of the Group of Seven, Paul Kane, Anne Savage, Florence Wyle, Walter J. Phillips, Charles Scott, F.M. Bell Smith, Langdon Kihn, Peggy Nichol and Emily Carr, as well as works by the Haida Carver, Charles Edenshaw, and the Coast Tsimshian painter Frederick Alexie.<sup>16</sup> Viewers were encouraged to evaluate the Northwest Coast objects for their aesthetic beauty while recognizing their formal “affinities” with the modern paintings. For much of the

twentieth century, Native Canadian arts remained the focus of the Modernist Primitive impulse.

During and after the Second World War, the taste for Primitive arts in Canada began to expand to include African and Oceanic objects. Galleries that sold African objects appeared in cities like Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto, and there was an intimate circle of African art collectors, scholars, and gallery owners who associated with one another. These individuals were connected to a larger circle of people who had an interest in Primitive arts and modern Canadian painting, and many of them collected these arts in addition to African objects. One of the most significant products of this phase in Canadian Modernist Primitive collecting was the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African art. Using Justin and Elisabeth Lang as my nucleus, I will map the 'taste culture' of Modernist Primitivism and its specific relationship to African art enthusiasts in Canada during the mid-twentieth century. The Sociologist Herbert Gans has used the term 'taste culture' to refer to classes of society that share "common aesthetic values and standards of taste."<sup>17</sup> He explains that the concept of 'taste culture' is an abstraction that allows a researcher to analyze the tastes of a particular class, but he maintains that culture is inseparable from the people who practice it. He stresses the point that 'taste cultures' are constructed by the social researcher and are not necessarily, but can be, recognized by the people categorized as such. I have borrowed Gans' concept of the 'taste culture' to describe the group of people who celebrated the aesthetic value of African, Native, Inuit and modern arts in Canada during the mid-twentieth century. The social network that is outlined by mapping the contacts of Justin and Elisabeth Lang will show the important role European immigrants played in fostering the taste for Primitive and modern arts in Canada and will provide insight into a significant culture of individuals

that participated in the broader manifestation of Modernist Primitivism in mid-twentieth century Canada. By detailing the existence of this particular ‘taste culture’ and the histories of its members, I am establishing the artistic climate out of which the Lang Collection of African art developed.

### **Early Histories of Justin and Elisabeth Lang**

Justin and Elisabeth Lang came from very different backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> Justin Lang was born in 1906 and grew up in a small agricultural community called Treuchtlingen in Bavaria, Germany. His father, a small farmer and trader of agricultural goods, died when Justin was 13. Justin had dreamed of being a chemist but could not pursue his studies because he had to leave school to find work so he could provide for his mother and sister. He followed his passion for chemistry and got a job working for a company in Nuremburg where he became active with the Social Democratic movement. When the Nazis came to power in 1933 Lang was immediately blacklisted, both because of his Social Democratic activities and because he was a Jew. He managed to get his company to transfer him to Amsterdam and took his mother along with him. It was in Amsterdam that Justin and Elisabeth met.

Elisabeth Lang (née von Taussig) grew up in a wealthy and privileged Jewish family in Vienna, Austria. Her Grandfather had been a personal financier to the Emperor Franz Joseph and had started his own small bank. When the Nazis invaded Vienna, the von Taussig family fled to England while Elisabeth, who was in her twenties at that point and quite independent, fled to Amsterdam. In a second-hand shop in Holland in 1938 Elisabeth von Taussig had her first encounter with African art. She found a sculpture nestled in a large copper bowl that “captivated [her].”<sup>19</sup> This sculpture, a termite-eaten *Baule* statuette that now remains in the collection of her son, Robert Lang, marked the beginning of Elisabeth’s lifetime affair with African

art.<sup>20</sup> Robert has stated that his mother's family home was extremely ornate, boasting Rococo furniture and "gilt-edged everything."<sup>21</sup> She did not embrace the décor, he notes, but, rather, rebelled against it because she felt that these styles of art were "superficial" and "phoney." From an early age, Elisabeth gravitated to more simple forms of cultural expression.<sup>22</sup> Although she did not have a formal art education, she had acquired knowledge of art in a number of different ways over the years. While growing up, Elisabeth received private tutoring. She wrote her high school equivalency test but was not encouraged to pursue post-secondary education. Elisabeth studied art history informally in Europe and later at the University of Montreal; in addition, she learned a great deal from her uncle who had been in the art business. Elisabeth educated herself further by spending time in galleries and in doing so became familiar with the art market. Her first step toward a collection had been the acquisition of an eighteenth-century engraving when she was still living in Vienna.<sup>23</sup>

When the Nazis threatened to invade Holland, Justin Lang was able to get a visa out of the country for himself and his mother. Elisabeth and Justin had fallen in love but were not yet married. Elisabeth followed a few months later, escaping Amsterdam only two or three days before the Nazi invasion. She had managed to get a visa to leave the country, but had been unable to gain one for entry into Canada. Because she had no legal destination, Elisabeth ended up in an internment camp in Cuba where she was imprisoned for several months before an Austrian official recognized her last name on a list of prisoners. After confirming that she was in fact the granddaughter of the famous Austrian banker, Theodor von Taussig, her release was organized. Although she had been able to bring very little with her, Elisabeth managed to fit a small typewriter into her baggage. This, combined with her fluency

in six languages enabled her to get work as an interpreter and stenographer in Cuba. In the meantime, Justin arranged for her legal entry into Canada as a refugee. Once the papers were in order, Elisabeth left Cuba on a sugar cane boat bound for Montreal.<sup>24</sup>

Elisabeth von Taussig arrived in Montreal in 1941, and she and Justin were married soon after. They had two sons, John, born in 1946 and Robert; born in 1949. For the early part of their marriage, the Langs survived on almost nothing. Although Justin Lang was a refugee, he was also a German citizen and was therefore considered an enemy alien and not allowed to take any official position or have a job. He brought in what little money he could by selling mothballs door to door. After the war, Justin found a silent partner with whom he started a small business that traded and brokered chemicals and minerals used for industry. The partnership turned sour a few years later but at that point Justin had developed a good reputation for importing and exporting minerals and chemicals to and from Europe. By the fifties, the Langs were beginning to join the middle-class. With their modest amount of disposable income, they purchased a small home in Montreal and Elisabeth began to develop their art collection more actively. As Justin's business became increasingly more profitable over the years, the Langs were able to expand their collection significantly.

In addition to her interest in African art, Elisabeth Lang had a strong commitment to supporting Canadian, and specifically Quebecois, artists. At the same time that she was purchasing African sculptures, Mrs. Lang was also collecting contemporary Canadian works. According to Philip Fry, Elisabeth Lang was buying Emily Carr as early as 1947 – long before Carr developed the reputation of a great Canadian art icon.<sup>25</sup> Robert Lang remembers Mrs. Lang having a particular interest in the work of *Les Automatistes*, especially Paul Emile Borduas and Jean-Paul Riopelle.

She was very enamoured of the art scene in Montreal and became close to a number of Quebecois artists.<sup>26</sup> When it was auctioned after the Lang's deaths, their collection of Canadian Art included works by Paul Emile Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Emily Carr, Lionel Lemoine Fitzgerald, David Brown Milne, Jean Albert McEwen, Jeanne Rheume, Marc-Aurele Fortin, Jack Weldon Humphrey, William Goodridge Roberts, Philip Henry Howard Surrey, Jean Philippe Dallaire, Albert Dumouchel, Henri Leopold-Masson, Stanley Morel Cosgrove, Paul Archibald Octave Caron, Marc-Aurele de Foy Suze-Cote, Simone Mary Bouchard and Marie-Cecile Bouchard.<sup>27</sup>

While African art comprised the main body of the Lang's art collection, and Canadian modern artists were well represented, the Langs also collected First Nations and Inuit Art in comparatively smaller amounts. According to Philip Fry, the Lang's collection of Inuit art was "exceptional in regard to the period and the geographic range represented."<sup>28</sup> The collection included early contemporary Inuit material as well as art from Alaska, Greenland, and Lapland. The smallest part of the Lang's collection was their Native North American art, which included good examples of Plains and Northwest Coast objects.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to being a collector, Elisabeth Lang also took on the role of art dealer. In 1978, she opened the *Galerie des 5 Continents* on Greene Avenue in Montreal. The gallery, which specialized in African, Native, Inuit and Canadian folk arts, quickly became a social gathering place for people who were interested in talking about, collecting, or learning more about these lesser-known art forms. Coffee and tea were always available and Elisabeth Lang did not expect anyone to buy.<sup>30</sup> Robert Swain compared the gallery to a "European coffee house" because of the constant stream of people strolling in and out and chatting.<sup>31</sup> Mrs. Lang held court at the

centre of the scene, acting as a catalyst and igniting people's interest in the arts on display.

The warm environment fostered by Elisabeth Lang reflected the fact that her primary concern was to share her passion for African and other arts. Unlike other gallery owners who relied on their sales as the main source of their income, Mrs. Lang was not financially motivated. The *Galerie des 5 Continents* had a limited number of clients who purchased regularly and Mrs. Lang had little need to pursue more buyers aggressively as Mr. Lang's company was quite successful by this time.<sup>32</sup> In the years after its opening, the gallery became well known to traders from Africa who would drop-in whenever they were through Montreal. Other gallery owners, dealers, and collectors working in the Primitive art market in Canada also knew and highly respected Mrs. Lang.

#### **The 'Taste Culture' of Modernist Primitivism**

The Lang's social circle included a number of collectors, dealers and friends who shared an interest in African, Inuit, Native, and modern Canadian arts. Together, these individuals formed a Modernist Primitivist 'taste culture' that was unique to the Canadian context.

In Montreal, the Lang's close friends, Leon and Louise Lippel, ran the Lippel Gallery that dealt with a range of non-Western arts but specialized primarily in African, Leon Lippel's first love. Lippel first encountered African art during his days as an art student in London. He later recalled that when he saw the African works at the British Museum, their "power, originality and honesty" filled him with awe.<sup>33</sup> Lippel felt that African sculpture presented a stark contrast to Western arts, stating that "the freedom with which Africans regarded sculpture was a denial...the very opposite of Western concepts."<sup>34</sup>

Lippel began his own collection of African art, and when his home began to fill with the objects he and his wife rented a small gallery space on Crescent Street in Montreal. They had so much success exhibiting their African works that in 1961 they decided to open a permanent gallery in a basement on Mackay Street. Lippel later abandoned his day job as an importer and exporter so he could devote himself to the gallery full-time. At that point, the Lippels moved to an even larger gallery space on Sherbrooke Street.<sup>35</sup> Like the gallery Mrs. Lang would open a few years later, the *Lippel Gallery* was a social gathering point. Lippel did not pressure visitors to buy and spent a great deal of his time sipping tea in a large armchair in the gallery. He also had a solid client base of people from Canada and the U.S. who bought from him on a regular basis. He claimed to have sold Toronto collector Murray Frum his first piece of African sculpture.<sup>36</sup> According to Victoria Henry, past owner of the *Ufundi* gallery in Ottawa (which sold African art from 1975 – 1992), and current director of the Canada Council Art Bank, Leon Lippel's role as a gallery owner differed from Elisabeth Lang's in that he had a more educated eye, bought more often from auction catalogues and had larger price tags.<sup>37</sup> This may be in part because the Lippels, while they had a passion for African arts, also relied on the gallery as their main source of income. In addition to collecting, exhibiting, and selling African works, Lippel was also interested in Native, Inuit, and Pre-Columbian works. He had a fine personal collection of Inuit and Northwest Coast objects that received admiration from many.<sup>38</sup>

The Lippels and the Langs met in the sixties, after the Lippels opened their gallery on Mackay Street.<sup>39</sup> Leon Lippel regularly brought new pieces that he found particularly exciting or interesting to show and discuss with Elisabeth Lang.<sup>40</sup> Even after Mrs. Lang opened her own gallery, they continued to maintain a relationship of camaraderie. Philip Fry remembers that he and his wife, Jacqueline Fry, had dinner

regularly with the Langs and the Lippels in Montreal.<sup>41</sup> In the seventies, the Lippels and Langs travelled to Africa together. Irene Kon, who had worked as Elisabeth's assistant at the *Galerie des 5 Continents*, went to work for the Lippel Gallery after Elisabeth Lang's death in 1990.<sup>42</sup>

Another gallery dealing with non-Western arts in Montreal at this time was the *Petit Musée* on Sherbrooke Street, run by Max Klein. Originally housed in a basement, the gallery displayed and sold works from all over the world. Elisabeth visited the *Petit Musée* on a regular basis and came home with African objects almost weekly.<sup>43</sup>

Esther Dagan also ran a gallery specializing in the arts of Africa in Montreal, which opened about a year after Elisabeth Lang's *Galerie des 5 Continents*. Dagan ran the *Galerie Amrad African Art* on Sherbrooke Street West beginning in 1979/80 after teaching at Concordia for a year. Dagan was born in Israel and trained as a dancer there before pursuing a Master's degree in theatre and drama in Paris. She taught at the Tel Aviv University until she came to Canada in 1978 with her husband.<sup>44</sup> When Dagan arrived in Canada, she already had several African sculptures and wanted to publish illustrated books on the subject. Canadian publishers refused to take any of Dagan's books, so she started her own publishing house. The books she published received little attention from Canadian buyers, but have been critically acclaimed and sold widely in the United States.<sup>45</sup> The *Galerie Amrad African Art* closed in 1991.

Max Stern, the Montreal dealer and collector, was another important member of the Langs' social circle.<sup>46</sup> Stern, who the Langs had known in Europe, owned and ran the Dominion gallery on Sherbrooke Street with his wife, Iris. The gallery, which included 17 exhibition rooms on four floors and an open-air terrace on the roof, was

one of the largest in North America.<sup>47</sup> Max Stern exhibited and sold a wide range of paintings and sculptures that dated from 200 AD to contemporary times and came from a myriad of countries.<sup>48</sup>

Stern was born into a German-Jewish family in 1904. He studied art history in Berlin, Cologne and Vienna before receiving his doctorate from the University of Bonn. After completing his studies, he returned to Düsseldorf to manage his family's gallery, *Galerie Julius Stern*.<sup>49</sup> The rise of the Nazis forced Stern to close the gallery, and in 1937, he fled to London, England. He was interned as an enemy alien after the war began, first in England, then in New Brunswick and Quebec.<sup>50</sup> Unlike Justin Lang, Stern was able to get an exemption from the limitations imposed by his refugee status in Montreal by having William Birks, the head of the Canadian Refugee Organization, vouch for him based on a letter of recommendation from Tancred Borneius, dean of art history at the University of London and editor of *Burlington Magazine*.<sup>51</sup> By 1944, Stern was a partner in the *Dominion Gallery of Fine Art* and in 1947 he and his wife became the sole proprietors.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the range of Old Masters and Primitive arts that Stern exhibited and sold, he undertook the ambitious task of marketing contemporary Canadian artists.<sup>53</sup> He held exhibitions of the work of artists such as Goodridge Roberts, Paul-Emile Borduas, Eric Goldberg, Stanley Cosgrove, Philip Surrey, Emily Carr and the Bouchard sisters.<sup>54</sup> Although the artists have become standard members of the modern Canadian art historical canon, when Stern began to exhibit these artists, their modernism would have been considered somewhat daring. In the 1940s, most Canadians were interested in art that expressed ideas of nationalism through postimpressionist styles of landscape painting that were conservative and formal.<sup>55</sup> Stern's own personal collection of modern Canadian art included works by artists like

Borduas, indicating that his commitment to promoting Canadian artists went beyond mere business strategy.<sup>56</sup>

The taste for modern Canadian and Primitive art was shared by another Montreal couple with whom the Langs were friends, Bruno and Ruby Cormier. Dr. Bruno Cormier was a pioneer in the field of forensic psychiatry in Canada who taught at the University of Montreal and McGill University.<sup>57</sup> He has been described as “a rebel and iconoclast, an art connoisseur, and, in its second acceptation, a dilettante of all things cultural.”<sup>58</sup> Bruno’s rebellious nature became evident in 1948 when he, along with fifteen others, signed *Le Refus Global* (Total Refusal). The document, considered “one of the most influential artistic and social documents in modern Quebec society,” was authored by Paul-Emile Borduas and “called for a total rejection of conventional thinking and advocated a freedom of ideas.”<sup>59</sup> The artists who signed the manifesto, including Jean-Paul Riopelle, Marcel Barbeau, Roger Fataux, Claude Gauvreau, Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Marcelle Ferron, and Françoise Sullivan, were called *Les Automatistes* because of their interest in Surrealism and its theory of automatism. *Le Refus Global* was inspired by André Breton’s 1924 Surrealist manifesto that celebrated the power and creativity of the subconscious.<sup>60</sup> These artists belonged to an avant-garde in the context of the forties and fifties in Montreal.

For Bruno Cormier, art was an expression of freedom.<sup>61</sup> The Cormier’s enduring support of modern Canadian artists, and *Les Automatistes* especially, reveals that their interest in these arts went beyond the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure and embraced a particular set of ideologies. Bruno and Ruby Cormier’s personal collection of art included works by Jean-Paul Riopelle, Paul-Emile Borduas, Fernand Leduc, Rita Letendre, Marcel Barbeau, and Jean-Paul Mousseau, among others. In

addition to collecting the work of modern Canadian artists, the Cormiers also had an interest in Inuit art.

### **African Art Connections in Ottawa and Toronto**

The Langs were also connected to a broader circle of African art collectors and dealers in Ottawa and Toronto. In Ottawa, two galleries were dealing with African arts during the seventies. Victoria Henry opened the *Ufundi* gallery on St. Patrick Street in 1975. She sold primarily East African work from Tanzania and Zambia but had a few West African objects as well. Unlike the Lippels and the Langs, who were more concerned with “traditional” objects, Victoria Henry was very much interested in contemporary African arts. Prior to opening her gallery, Henry had worked in Africa as a volunteer with University Service Overseas (CUSO), an organization that works with people in other countries who are “striving for freedom, gender and racial equality, self-determination and cultural survival.”<sup>62</sup> After her CUSO work ended, Henry continued to travel to Africa every year for at least 14 years.<sup>63</sup> The types of objects Henry sold at her gallery reflected her commitment to the contemporary arts of Africa. She explains that she saw women wearing textiles, commemorative cloths, and beadwork in Africa and wanted to bring home part of that living history to share with members of the Canadian public.<sup>64</sup> Where Elisabeth and the Lippels exhibited primarily sculptural works, Henry displayed large amounts of beadwork, textiles, jewellery and basketry in addition to sculptural works.<sup>65</sup>

Despite their somewhat different interests in the arts of Africa, Victoria Henry and Elisabeth Lang developed a close friendship. Mrs. Lang was one of the first people to come through *Ufundi* when it opened its doors in 1975. Henry remembers Elisabeth Lang coming to the gallery with a number of family members in tow and buying three or four items.<sup>66</sup> At the time, Henry was shocked that Mrs. Lang was

willing to buy so many African items because the cost added up quickly. After their initial meeting, the two kept in touch and Henry frequently travelled to Montreal where she would stay with the Lang family in their home. During those visits, she and Mrs. Lang often discussed purchasing African objects. When African traders came to see Elisabeth Lang at the *Galerie des 5 Continents*, she sent them up to Ottawa to sell to Henry as well.<sup>67</sup>

The other gallery dealing in African arts during the seventies in Ottawa was *Giraffe* on Sparks Street. Run by Betty Kieran, the gallery specialized in African art and wearables.<sup>68</sup> Jewellery was a major source of income for the gallery, and Kieran, who was born and raised in Uganda, designed much of it. Like the *Ufundi* gallery, the majority of the objects for sale at *Giraffe* were products of contemporary African cultures.<sup>69</sup> It was common practice at both *Ufundi* and *Giraffe* to purchase beads and other materials in Africa and then put together their own designs.<sup>70</sup> It is likely that gallery owners like the Langs and the Lippels, who were concerned with obtaining objects used in a “traditional”, or older, African setting, would have considered these types of jewellery “inauthentic”.

In Toronto, one of the better-known galleries working with African art was Susan and George Barkley and Robert and Barbara Barde’s *The Best of Africa*, which opened in 1976 and closed in 1983.<sup>71</sup> *The Best of Africa* specialized, like the *Ufundi* and *Giraffe*, in contemporary African art. The gallery included some more traditional objects, but the focus was on a variety of crafts.<sup>72</sup> Victoria Henry often collaborated with the Toronto gallery, showing contemporary artists and work. The owners of *The Best of Africa* had also been CUSO volunteers and had worked as photographers in Africa.<sup>73</sup>

The cluster of dealers of African art in Canada during the seventies formed a small and interconnected group. Gallery owners often purchased works from each other and discussed their respective activities. While there seems to have been a genuine sense of camaraderie among the individual galleries, there also seems to have been a distinction between two very different collecting attitudes. The Langs and the Lippels, who came from a strong European tradition and spent less time in Africa, focussed on collecting older, more traditional African works that were primarily sculptural. The Ottawa gallery owners who had spent lengthy amounts of time in Africa, through work with CUSO, or who, like Betty Kieran, had grown up there, seem to have been more interested in fostering an appreciation of contemporary African arts and crafts in Canada.

Justin and Elisabeth Lang's contacts in Toronto also included Barbara and Murray Frum, the collectors responsible for amassing the highly regarded African collection that is now at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Murray Frum is a former dentist and the head of the Frum Development Group, a land development company.<sup>74</sup> Barbara Frum, his first wife, was a nationally recognized broadcaster for CBC.<sup>75</sup> The couple began collecting African art in the late 1960s. Murray Frum bought his first piece of African art without the intent of forming a collection, but over the next several years, he quickly turned into a serious collector. Like the Langs, Murray and Barbara Frum did the majority of their collecting through dealers and auction houses and were primarily interested in African sculpture.<sup>76</sup> However, unlike the Langs, the Frums were committed to developing a collection of "masterpieces". According to Philip Fry, the Frums meticulously researched and rigorously evaluated every piece before they added it to their collection.<sup>77</sup> As a result, their collection is much smaller than the Lang Collection (it only includes 77 objects) but each piece was chosen to be

of outstanding quality. William J. Withrow emphasized this approach in his foreword to the 1981 exhibition catalogue for *African Majesty: From Grassland and Forest, The Barbara and Murray Frum Collection*:

The Frums have made no attempt to assemble a comprehensive ethnographic group of objects to represent each of the dozens of African tribes and geographic regions. Rather, the emphasis has been on individual aesthetic and sculptural qualities. Each carving has been chosen on its merits from the very best examples available. The fact that almost every major publication on African art in the last few years has included works in this collection attests to the Frums' standard of taste and judgement.<sup>78</sup>

Murray Frum's decision to donate the collection to the Art Gallery of Ontario rather than the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in 1999 further emphasized his commitment to the aesthetic qualities of African sculpture. When defending his decision he explained that

The ROM's interest is anthropological. I collected this as an art form. It's a battle that was fought a long time ago. Anthropology doesn't distinguish objects in terms of esthetics, I do. I collected art objects, it's important that be understood.<sup>79</sup>

Frum also argued that his collection belonged in an art gallery because of its "profound influence on Western art."<sup>80</sup> He told a journalist that he found the pieces in his collection particularly interesting because of the ways that their illustrations of the human form affected Western impressionist, expressionist, and post-impressionist artists.<sup>81</sup> In addition to his interest in its influence on Western arts, Murray Frum was also passionately committed to learning about the historical and cultural contexts of the carvings in his collection.<sup>82</sup> The Frums solicited the opinions of several prominent scholars in the field of African art including William Fagg and Jacqueline Fry. Like many of the Lang's other contacts, Barbara and Murray Frum also collected modern Canadian paintings by artists like Betty Goodwin, Jack Bush, and Michael Snow.<sup>83</sup>

Two other important and influential members of the Lang's Modernist Primitive circle were Father Ernest Gagnon and Jacqueline Fry. Gagnon was a Jesuit

scholar who collected a range of Primitive arts that he displayed in a makeshift gallery space in Montreal. Fry was a French Anthropologist who specialized in the Arts of Africa and who developed an interest in Native, Inuit, and modern Canadian arts after moving to Canada in 1970. The Langs developed close relationships with both of these individuals that had significant impacts on the formation of their collection of African art. These relationships will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> William Stanley Rubin. "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," in *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, edited by William Stanley Rubin, Vol. 1, 1-81, (New York; Boston: Museum of Modern Art; Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1984), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Robert John Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-85.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-55.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald W. Hawker, "Northwest Coast Art as National Heritage: Two Federal Projects of the Late 1920s," chap. 4 in *Tales of Ghosts : First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922-61* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, rev. ed., (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information about Justin and Elisabeth Lang was provided by their son, Robert Lang, in a personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Biron, Normand. "Les Vertiges De l'Éternité: Rencontre Avec Elisabeth Lang." *Vie des Arts* 31, no. 123 (Été 1986): 90.

<sup>20</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *Visions and Models : African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 2 February-31 March 1985, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada*, (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1984), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Biron, "Les Vertiges."

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.

<sup>27</sup> "The Lang Collection of Canadian Art: Auction Estimates," Jacqueline Fry Fonds, African Art Series: Box 2, File 5: African Art - Lang Collection, 1984-1991, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Fry, "The Lang Collection," Jacqueline Fry Fonds, Other Professional Papers Series: Box 20, File 5: Correspondence - Lang Collection - Museology Course, 1977-1982, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>30</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>31</sup> *Montreal Gazette*, "Gallery Owner Elisabeth Lang was Lover of Art," 1 Feb 1990.
- <sup>32</sup> Victoria Henry, personal communication to the author, 11 July 2006.
- <sup>33</sup> Ann Duncan, "Lippel a Pioneer in Promoting Africa in the West," *Montreal Gazette*, 14 December 1991.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Victoria Henry, personal communication to the author, 11 July 2006.
- <sup>38</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>40</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ann Duncan, "Leon Lippel was One of Canada's Leading Experts on African Art," *Montreal Gazette*, 17 March 1994.
- <sup>43</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>44</sup> Alan Hustak, "Publisher's Work Reflects Love of African Art," *Montreal Gazette*, 1 October 1995.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006. Note: There have been conflicting reports about the Lang's relationship with Max Stern. Both Robert Lang and Robert Swain remember Justin and Elisabeth Lang having a friendly (although not close) relationship with Max Stern throughout their lives; however, Dorothy Farr remembers that there may have been some ill-will between them. Regardless, everyone I spoke with agreed that the Lang's had known Max Stern and purchased at least some of the Canadian works in their collection from him.
- <sup>47</sup> Dominion Gallery (Montréal, Quebec). *Dominion Gallery*. (Montreal: The Gallery, 1964), 8.
- <sup>48</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>49</sup> Clarence Epstein, Foreword to *Max Stern, Montreal Dealer and Patron* by Michel Moreault, 9-10, (Montréal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2004), 9.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Édith-Anne Pageot, "A Dealer of 'Living' Art," in *Max Stern, Montreal Dealer and Patron*, edited by Michel Moreault, 15-31 (Montréal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2004), 15.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 27-28.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>57</sup> Institut Philippe Pinel de Montreal, "Bruno Cormier," [http://www.pinel.qc.ca/cormier/bruno\\_cormier.html](http://www.pinel.qc.ca/cormier/bruno_cormier.html) (accessed 10 July 2006).
- <sup>58</sup> J. Arboleda-Flórez, "Breaking the Chains: Bruno M Cormier and the McGill University Clinic in Forensic Psychiatry [Book Review]," *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, <http://www.cpa-apc.org/Publications/Archives/CJP/2001/Mar/Reviews3.asp> (accessed 10 July 2006).
- <sup>59</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "Launching of Le Refus global." *The CBC Digital Archives Website*, 2006. [http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-68-260-1299/arts\\_entertainment/refus\\_global\\_launch/clip1](http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-68-260-1299/arts_entertainment/refus_global_launch/clip1) (accessed 18 July 2006).
- <sup>60</sup> Dorthea Rockburne, "Resplendent Anarchy," *Time International* (24 August 1998): 1-2. [http://www.time.com/time/magazine/1998/int/980824/the\\_arts.art.resplenden6a.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/1998/int/980824/the_arts.art.resplenden6a.html) (accessed 10 July 2006).
- <sup>61</sup> Institut Philippe Pinel de Montreal, "Bruno Cormier."
- <sup>62</sup> CUSO, "About CUSO," [http://www.cuso.org/about\\_cuso/index\\_e.php](http://www.cuso.org/about_cuso/index_e.php) (accessed 14 July 2006). Note: CUSO provides volunteer opportunities for Canadians, links people and organizations globally so they can better tackle social justice issues together, and increases awareness of global issues while encouraging people to take action.
- <sup>63</sup> Victoria Henry, personal communication to the author, 11 July 2006.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Nancy Gall. "Exotic Ethnic Jewellery." *The Ottawa Citizen*, 2 February 1989.
- <sup>69</sup> Victoria Henry, personal communication to the author, 11 July 2006.

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<sup>70</sup> Nancy Gall. "Exotic Ethnic Jewellery."

<sup>71</sup> Robert Barde, *Bruce Onobrakpeya: Nigeria's Master Printmaker*, (Toronto: The Best of Africa, 1978), [http://staff.haas.berkeley.edu/barde/\\_public/african%20art/onobrakpeya/text.pdf](http://staff.haas.berkeley.edu/barde/_public/african%20art/onobrakpeya/text.pdf) (accessed 15 July 2006), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Victoria Henry, personal communication to the author, 11 July 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Fulford, "How Africa Taught Us to See: A Private Collection, Newly Donated to a Public Gallery, Reveals the Roots of Modern Art," *Toronto National Post*, 14 December 1999.

<sup>75</sup> Dan Brown, "Murray Frum Donates \$12-Million Art Collection: 77-Piece African Trove 'Known Around World'," *Toronto National Post*, 8 December 1999.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Fulford, "How Africa Taught Us to See."

<sup>77</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.

<sup>78</sup> William J. Withrow, Foreward to *African Majesty: From Grassland and Forest* by William Fagg (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1981), 7-8.

<sup>79</sup> *Toronto Star*. "African Art Belongs in AGO, Frum Says," 10 December 1999.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Dan Brown, "Murray Frum Donates \$12-Million Art Collection."

<sup>82</sup> Withrow, Foreward, 8.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Fulford, "How Africa Taught Us to See."

## CHAPTER TWO: The Collection

Although Justin and Elisabeth Lang shared aesthetic values with their acquaintances and participated in a Modernist Primitive ‘taste culture,’ their collection of African art also reflects the unique set of tastes and experiences that contributed to its formation.

### The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art

The Lang’s African collection, now housed at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, consists of objects that originated from nineteen African countries and approximately eighty cultural groups, but it is particularly rich in materials from West Africa. Objects attributed to the *Akan* peoples of Ghana comprise nearly twenty-five percent of the collection. Objects made by the *Yoruba* peoples of Nigeria make up the second largest segment of the collection (eight percent), and the *Ashanti* peoples of Ghana are also represented by a substantial number of works (six percent). The *Dogon* and *Bamana* of Mali and the *Baule* and *Senufo* of the Ivory Coast are also well represented within the collection (around five percent each).

The types of objects collected by the Langs vary; however, they are all sculptural. Figural objects make up about a third of the collection, followed by goldweights (fifteen percent), masks (fourteen percent), jewellery (ten percent), and utensils (ten percent). The remainder of the collection includes tools, headdresses, containers, musical instruments, accessories, furniture and toys. Specific dating for most of these objects is unknown, but an approximate date of nineteenth to twentieth century can be assigned to the majority of the collection. One exception to this dating is a terracotta figure made by the *Djenne* peoples of Mali that dates between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the Lang’s African art collecting was done through dealers in North America and Europe but they also made exchanges with other collectors from

Belgium, France, Germany and Holland.<sup>2</sup> Although they began collecting African works around 1938, neither Elisabeth nor Justin Lang travelled to the continent until 1970. According to their son, Robert, the trips Justin and Elisabeth Lang made to Africa were “to try to gain a better understanding of the culture” rather than for buying, though they did pick up several small objects while they were there.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Lang felt that “one should not go to Africa to collect, because one finds there, less and less, authentic objects...the population has often become Muslim or Christian.”<sup>4</sup> While Elisabeth Lang was the main collector, Justin Lang also played a significant role in the selection of objects. According to Jacqueline Fry, it was after the couple’s first trips to Africa in the early 1970s that Mr. Lang became a more active participant.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Nature of the Collection**

As Jacqueline Fry stated in her essay for the inaugural exhibition, the Lang collection is characterized by “an almost museological attempt to construct differentiated series based on a common model.”<sup>6</sup> Where other collectors sought pieces considered highly ‘exceptional,’ the Langs, and Elisabeth Lang specifically, were more interested in obtaining objects that revealed subtle variations between like forms. Philip Fry explains that the Lang Collection

wouldn’t have one Yoruba piece of a certain kind, it would have five...and if [Elisabeth Lang] found another one that had a variant that she found significant inside that piece, well, she’d get it as well. So the idea wasn’t to get the high class art piece that you can show off but rather to have the system of forms that the community was working with.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to suggest that the Langs did not collect objects that would be considered ‘high art,’ in fact they did have a number of these types of works (many of which are now in the possession of their son, Robert Lang); however, obtaining those pieces was not the priority of the collectors throughout most of their collecting years.<sup>8</sup> According

to Philip Fry “the main thrust of the collection was style, style variants and how they can be shown by a collection of several... token pieces in each grouping that she was working with.”<sup>9</sup> As the primary collector, Elisabeth Lang was particularly interested in the ways that a specific community of artists would work through a system or series of styles and how the variants reflected back on what individual artists were doing.<sup>10</sup>

In her catalogue essay for the exhibition *Visions and Models* Jacqueline Fry explained that “Elisabeth Lang treats a work of art as the channel of a very personal message and it is the success of this communication, whether the object involved be majestic or humble, which provokes the aesthetic emotion.”<sup>11</sup> Fry went further in her discussion of Mrs. Lang’s collecting practices to identify two significant phases. The first phase identified by Fry was a more “emotional” period (1952-1970), inspired by a lecture on Teilhard de Chardin that the Jesuit Father Ernest Gagnon presented in the mid to late forties at the University of Montreal.<sup>12</sup>

### **Ernest Gagnon S.J.**

Elisabeth Lang met Father Gagnon, a professor of French literature, art history and aesthetics, around 1943 at an exhibition of his collection of sub-Saharan African art. Since there were very few people there, she had the chance to speak with him and felt that in doing so she learned a great deal. Gagnon later took her to a gallery on St. Catherine Street in Montreal where she saw a number of beautiful pieces of African art.<sup>13</sup> From that point forward the Jesuit Father became a teacher and dear friend to Mrs. Lang.<sup>14</sup> Robert Lang remembers that his mother was especially fond of Father Gagnon and had a great respect for and interest in his work.<sup>15</sup>

In 1975, the Jesuit Order in Quebec donated Gagnon’s 500-piece collection to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>16</sup> Before its donation, the collection had been

housed at the Centre d'Etude et de Coopération Internationale on Côte-des-Neiges Road and, previously to 1972, at the Musée d'Art Primitif de Montréal at Collège Sainte-Marie.<sup>17</sup> The Musée d'Art Primitif was a kind of makeshift gallery space created by Gagnon to display his personal collection of non-Western art objects. Gagnon amassed the collection between 1947 and 1970 while he was teaching at the University of Montreal, Collège Sainte-Marie, Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, and l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Montréal.<sup>18</sup> The majority of the approximately 500-piece collection is from Africa and Oceania. Sculptures from Sierra Leone, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Upper Volta, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon comprise the African works; and sculpture and arms from New Guinea, New Caledonia, the Samoan Islands, and New Hebrides make up the Oceanic works. The collection also includes some masks from Japan and figures and objects from India and other Asian countries.<sup>19</sup>

According to Father Langlois, who was the vice-provincial of the pastoral sector of the Society of Jesus at the time of the donation, Father Gagnon's purpose in acquiring the collection was to bring together objects that were "a vital instrument for the study of the symbolism of man."<sup>20</sup> Gagnon's essay "Le Sens de l'Art Africain" provides further insight into his perspectives on African art.<sup>21</sup> In his essay, Gagnon argues that African objects have the universal power to respond to the highest exigencies and complexities of Western culture despite the fact that they came from "another universe" and escape our classifications. Throughout his discussion, he emphasizes the spiritual role of African objects and the "power" that they possess. He suggests that the essence or "power" of an African sculpture can be found universally within individuals.<sup>22</sup> The power that he sees as lacking in the Western art tradition is not absent from our culture in his view, but rather, he feels individuals have not recognized and celebrated the deepest essences of humanity because they have

become preoccupied with frivolous concerns. Gagnon attacks Western attitudes to art, calling them narcissistic, and suggests that decorative art forms are highly superficial. He claims that “the unconscious of a grand Western tradition” imprisons Westerners and he contrasts these attitudes to those of African peoples, who he believes embody humility.<sup>23</sup> He proclaims that African art is “without complaisance, without tenderness, not meant to be reassuring nor vain, but authentic. Completely.”<sup>24</sup> For Gagnon, African art exemplified the purest nature of the wider human condition. Like the early twentieth century European artists who turned their attention to Primitive arts, Gagnon’s feelings about African art were riddled with anti-modern sentiments.

The “emotion” that Jacqueline Fry identified in Elisabeth Lang’s early collecting phase is certainly evident in the words of Father Gagnon. To Gagnon, African objects embodied all that was lacking from the Western tradition while simultaneously transcending cultural barriers and speaking to the deepest part of the Western self. The fact that this perspective was attractive to Mrs. Lang makes sense in light of her feelings about the “superficial” and “phoney” Austrian Baroque aesthetic that surrounded her while growing up in Vienna.<sup>25</sup> Like Gagnon, in the aesthetic rebellion of Elisabeth Lang there are echoes of the feelings expressed by many of the early modern artists who rejected traditional European arts in favour of African objects. For those artists, African and other Primitive arts were both an ideological and aesthetic alternative to modern Europe. It is possible that Elisabeth Lang’s traumatic wartime experience of being driven from her home and imprisoned in an internment camp intensified her rebellion against the classical European aesthetic of her youth. It is notable that the first African object collected by Mrs.

Lang was during her time in Amsterdam - the first part of her flight from the Nazi invasion.

### **Jacqueline Delange Fry**

Jacqueline Fry has suggested that the second phase of Elisabeth Lang's collecting began around 1970 and was characterized by "active research and critical reflection."<sup>26</sup> It is undoubtedly not coincidental that this second, arguably more scholarly phase, corresponded with the beginning of Jacqueline Fry's own relationship with Justin and Elisabeth Lang. Jacqueline Delange Fry was an anthropologist, curator and critic who wrote on non-Western and modern art. Trained as a specialist in African ethnology, she was the head of the Black Africa section at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris from 1960 to 1970. In May 1968, during the student revolts in Paris, Jacqueline Delange met Philip Fry, a Canadian who had recently finished his doctorate in Paris. They were both heavily involved in the protest movement of 1968 and they shared an interest in African art, although this was not Philip Fry's specialty. The two married and in 1970, they moved to Winnipeg where Philip Fry had taken a job. It was after moving to Canada that Jacqueline Fry developed an interest in Native, Inuit and modern Canadian art and became concerned with the intersection of Native and Inuit arts with the arts of Africa. While in Manitoba, Jacqueline Fry worked as the Curator of Non-Western Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. She remained in that position from 1970-73. In 1973, Philip Fry began working for the Canada Council and the couple moved to Ottawa. Between 1973 and 1976 and again in 1980 Jacqueline Fry commuted from Ottawa to Montreal to work as a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Montreal. She later became Lecturer at the University of Ottawa and continued in that position from 1976 until 1991.<sup>27</sup>

The publications and exhibitions that Fry produced during her time in Paris and Canada offer insight into her approach to African art. In 1967, she co-authored *Afrique Noire, La Création Plastique* with Michel Leiris.<sup>28</sup> Fry's relationship with Leiris is also an important factor for understanding her approach to African art. Leiris was an anthropologist who was connected to the Parisian Surrealist movement in the early twentieth before he shifted to a more existentialist position after the Second World War.<sup>29</sup> In Paris, he was friends with a number of the avant-garde artists who proclaimed the aesthetic value of Primitive arts, including Picasso. Fry and Leiris developed a friendship prior to the 1960s that was solidified when they worked together at the Musée de l'Homme and through their relationship, Jacqueline Fry developed contacts with several members of the avant-garde literary and visual arts community in Paris.<sup>30</sup> During the time that Fry became close to Leiris, he was known for his self-reflexive approach to the ethnography of non-Western cultures in which he rejected the idea of scientific disinterestedness.<sup>31</sup> This position is evident in his own work of the period as well as the work of Jacqueline Fry. Both anthropologists made a point of acknowledging the difficulties of understanding African art in the Western context and provided detailed information about the original contexts of art objects as much as possible.

It was while both Fry and Leiris were working at the Musée de l'Homme in the early sixties that Leiris approached Fry to write a portion of *Afrique Noire, La Création Plastique*.<sup>32</sup> The text that the pair co-authored was divided into segments. Leiris addressed the broad issues of the West's discovery of African art, Western and African aesthetics, the culture and geography of Africa, sources and styles of African art and the different types of art objects created in Africa. Fry was responsible for authoring the section on the Art and people of Africa. The emphasis in her portion of

the text is on situating African art objects within their specific cultural contexts. This predominantly anthropological approach to the discussion of African art is also evident in *Arts et Peuples de l'Afrique Noire, Introduction à l'Analyse des Créations Plastiques*, which Fry published in 1967. The text, translated into English in 1974, provides a survey of the arts of sub-Saharan Africa. A reflexive preface, written by Leiris, opens the discussion to Fry's text. Leiris explains that Fry attempted to include objects that had a significant amount of documentary evidence so that the reader could "understand their use and [could] begin, more or less, to rediscover the attitude of the creators and users of these works, which are diverted to such an extent from their original purposes when they are found on display in museum cases."<sup>33</sup>

While the text has been lauded for its "sensitive handling" of cultures like the Fulani, it has been criticized for not adequately integrating images and a detailed discussion of the objects' artistic qualities.<sup>34</sup> The catalogues that Fry produced in association with her exhibitions of African art in Canada reveal the same level of attention to describing the cultural origins of the African sculptures on display and interest in problematizing the exhibition of African objects in the Western museum.<sup>35</sup> It is remarkable, however, that the exhibitions themselves did not promote the same emphasis on context and self-reflexive concerns. Victoria Henry remembers that Fry's exhibition *Twenty-Five African Sculptures*, which the National Gallery of Canada presented in 1978, encouraged viewers to view the African objects from a primarily aesthetic perspective.<sup>36</sup> When discussing her exhibition practices at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Fry emphasized the importance of displaying African objects as aesthetic masterpieces in their own right.<sup>37</sup> It seems that Jacqueline Fry's approach to African art was divided between a desire to elevate the objects to the status of art through exhibitions that focussed on their formal qualities and the belief

that the appreciation of these objects required knowledge of their original contexts of creation.

Through her work with African, Inuit, Native and Canadian art, Jacqueline Fry had an important impact on a number of Canadian art worlds. She brought attention to African arts in Canada by organizing exhibitions at Dalhousie University, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Winnipeg Art Gallery as well as through her role as associate curator for the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston. In 1972, when very few others were doing so, Fry exhibited and wrote critically about contemporary Native arts. Artists like Robert Houle, Ron Noganosh, Daphne Odjig, Viviane Gray, Alex Janvier, Carl Beam and Eddie Poitras interested Fry and many of them later expressed their gratitude for her generous efforts at making their art known to a wider public.<sup>38</sup> Described as a scholar of “tremendous integrity” Jacqueline Fry placed the interests of artists and cultural communities foremost in her work. It was important to her that the cultures that produced objects had a voice within anthropological, art historical and museological discourses.<sup>39</sup>

Elisabeth and Justin Lang met Jacqueline Fry in 1969, before she moved to Canada, when she and her husband, Philip Fry, were invited to attend a symposium in Montreal. At the symposium, Jacqueline and Philip Fry also met Leon and Louise Lippel. During their years in Winnipeg and after moving to Ottawa in 1973, when Jacqueline Fry began teaching at the University of Montreal, Jacqueline and Philip Fry continued to develop their friendship with the Langs. On the days that Jacqueline Fry was in Montreal, she stayed with the Lang family in their Westmount home. When Philip Fry visited, he stayed with the Langs as well. This arrangement

continued for about seven or eight years, during which time they became close friends.<sup>40</sup>

Both Jacqueline and Philip Fry took an interest in Mrs. Lang's collecting attitudes because they "corresponded with some of [their] more disciplinary concerns."<sup>41</sup> Philip Fry, who has a background in philosophy of art and art criticism, was interested in the theoretical issues and systematics associated with the collection, while Jacqueline Fry approached it from an art historical and ethnographic point of view. Philip Fry suggests that his wife's interest in the Lang collection and in African art more generally, was a product of her involvement with immigrant workers in Paris. Through this social work, Jacqueline Fry had discovered how important particular objects were to them and how the objects offered a connection to their home countries.<sup>42</sup>

This more academic and socially-oriented approach to African art would have differed significantly from the more emotional collecting habits that Elisabeth Lang had developed under the tutelage of Father Ernest Gagnon. While Philip Fry asserts that "Elisabeth was not the kind of person who gets influenced," he concedes that she may have been "inspired" by her relationship with Jacqueline Fry.<sup>43</sup> As an expert in the field, Jacqueline Fry was both knowledgeable and sensitive. Her approach to discussions of African art objects was to ask "very pertinent and pointed" questions.<sup>44</sup>

Philip Fry explains that

When Jacqueline went to visit someone's collection and she found a piece, she would stand there and look at it and everybody would just be holding back wondering what she was going to say and then... she would ask a question. The way that she would look at a work was questions about everything that just kept coming and coming.<sup>45</sup>

Jacqueline Fry did make judgements about which pieces she liked more than others, but she did not take on an advisory role in Elisabeth Lang's collecting, nor did she join the Langs on any of their buying trips.<sup>46</sup>

With their close relationship and Jacqueline Fry's Socratic approach, it seems unlikely that Jacqueline Fry had no bearing on Elisabeth Lang's understanding of African art and in turn, her collecting practices. In fact, Robert Lang noticed a change in his mother's collecting attitudes and approach to African art after her friendship with Jacqueline Fry developed. He suggests that Jacqueline Fry's more academic approach influenced the way that Elisabeth understood and was able to speak about the objects.

The development of Jacqueline Fry and Elisabeth Lang's relationship may also have a connection to the Lang's decision to travel to Africa. Although Mr. and Mrs. Lang had done a lot of travelling in Europe and Latin America because of Mr. Lang's business contacts, they had not yet been to Africa when they met Jacqueline and Philip Fry. In 1970, Justin and Elisabeth Lang's son, Robert, travelled to Africa for his first freelance job as a photographer's assistant to work on a publicity campaign for British Caledonian Airways.<sup>47</sup> The Langs decided to go and meet up with him. They rented a car and travelled from Ghana across Togo and Dahomey (now Benin) and into Nigeria. The group spent time in a number of small villages and towns and Elisabeth picked up a number of small objects along the way.<sup>48</sup> They enjoyed the trip immensely and made several more visits to different areas of Africa over the next few years. Their travels took them to Mali, Ivory Coast and parts of East Africa as well. On at least one occasion Leon and Louise Lippel, owners of the Lippel Gallery in Montreal, joined the Langs.<sup>49</sup> Although it is very likely that the Langs would have travelled to Africa of their own accord eventually, it is possible

that their encounter with Jacqueline Fry's more socially-oriented approach to African art solidified their desire to see African culture firsthand.

The Lang's relationship with Jacqueline and Philip Fry may have also contributed to another change in their collecting practices after 1970: they became more interested in collecting the so-called "masterpieces" of African art.<sup>50</sup> Elisabeth Lang became more conscious of filling out the collection so that it illustrated a whole range of works, from simple utilitarian objects to large, beautiful sculptures.<sup>51</sup> This meant moving toward the purchase of works that had a documented pedigree or were visibly high quality and would attract major interest. Philip Fry remembers being very frustrated by the fact that the Langs did not try to get the "head of the series" in their earlier collecting.<sup>52</sup> Is it possible that he conveyed his feelings to the Langs and had some kind of effect on their decision to shift their collecting focus in later years? It may have been a contributing factor. However, a number of other circumstances likely had a strong influence as well. In the seventies, the Langs had far more disposable income available to purchase larger and more sought after pieces than ever before.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Mr. Lang became more active in the collecting of objects after 1970. In her discussion of the Lang's collecting practices Jacqueline Fry quoted Justin Lang as having said that he "fight[s] to get the big pieces."<sup>54</sup> It was also in the seventies that Mrs. Lang opened her own gallery, the *Galerie des 5 Continents*. Robert Lang feels that the opening of the gallery also contributed to a change in his mother's collecting attitudes because her collecting impulse and passion gained a new focus.<sup>55</sup> Elisabeth Lang moved a number of objects from the house to the gallery and began to concentrate her efforts on the work she was doing there.

Although Jacqueline Fry likely had a significant impact on the way that Elisabeth Lang thought about and discussed African art, she in no way erased the

more emotional aspects of Mrs. Lang's collecting attitudes. Instead, Jacqueline Fry's more academic approach may have modified or shaped Elisabeth's passionate belief in the power of African art to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries to include an emphasis on the importance of what can be learned about African peoples through their material culture. In her introduction to the catalogue for her gallery's tenth anniversary in 1988, Mrs. Lang wrote that

The arts of Africa not only enlarge our understanding of the indigenous people of that rich continent – of their fears, longings and mythical beliefs – but may also reveal to us the deepest longings of mankind. I believe that the African sculptor who carves objects of authentic value feels basic human emotions and passes them on to us in great depth and intensity.<sup>56</sup>

Evident in this passage is the way that Mrs. Lang merged the emotional and academic aspects of her collecting in later years. She speaks of the ability of African objects to “enlarge our understanding of the indigenous people” while still maintaining her belief in their universal power to convey “basic human emotions.”

#### **Elisabeth Lang and Bourdieu's 'Aesthetic Disposition'**

Almost everyone who discussed Elisabeth Lang's collecting habits with me referred to her amazing “eye.” Her son, Robert Lang, explained that

You could go into a real junkie type of shop, cluttered to the ceiling, and she would walk in and literally her eye would just zoom in on something and she would go scurrying right to the back, right in the corner or somewhere that you wouldn't have even seen, and nor would I, and she would pick out this thing and it would be a little gem...she had that kind of knack and intuition and great eye for quality.<sup>57</sup>

The ability to identify a high quality aesthetic object has long been considered an innate gift that only certain individuals possess.<sup>58</sup> Popular belief in the West suggests that some people are simply born with the capacity to make aesthetic discriminations while others are not. “Having good taste” or, as in the case of Elisabeth Lang, having an “eye” are terms used to describe this supposedly instinctive talent.

Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the “eye” is not an innate quality but “a product of history reproduced by education.”<sup>59</sup> In his 1979 text *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* Bourdieu offered his analysis of ‘taste’ based on a survey questionnaire administered to 1217 people in France in 1963 and 1967-68.<sup>60</sup> Although his analysis can be read as a kind of French ethnography, some of Bourdieu’s conclusions are useful when extrapolated to a discussion of Western culture more broadly, and, in this context, to understanding why Elisabeth Lang “had a good eye” and how her upbringing contributed to the internal logic of her collection.

The main argument put forward by Bourdieu is that despite the entrenched belief that taste is a gift of nature, scientific observation has shown that cultural needs are the product of an individual’s education and socialization.<sup>61</sup> In other words, a person’s taste is developed and reinforced through familiarization with particular types of cultural goods that occurs in school or through the family and social circles. Bourdieu suggests that because tastes are intimately linked to a person’s education and socialization, they also function as markers of class. He argues that those at the top of the taste hierarchy tend to view objects from an aesthetic or purely formal perspective, whereas those at the bottom are more concerned with function.<sup>62</sup>

Bourdieu uses the term ‘aesthetic disposition’ to refer to

...the capacity to consider in and for themselves, as form rather than function, not only the works designated for such apprehension, ie. legitimate works of art, but everything in the world, including cultural objects that are not yet consecrated, such as, at one time, Primitive arts.<sup>63</sup>

He indicates that the aesthetic focus is the “dominant definition of the legitimate way of appropriating culture and works of art.”<sup>64</sup>

According to Bourdieu, this dominant definition relates to the shift toward autonomy in the field of artistic production. He states that “an art which, like all Post-Impressionist painting, is the product of an artistic intention which asserts the primacy

of the mode of representation over the object of representation demands categorically an attention to form which previous art only demanded conditionally.”<sup>65</sup> Where artworks previously referred to outside subjects, their formal treatment of the subject is becoming the focus of the viewer. For example, when looking at a painting of a horse, one would not say that the horse was handsome, but rather, he had been handsomely painted. In order to know that the horse had been handsomely painted the viewer would have to have seen a number of other paintings of horses from which to make a comparison. In this way, the field of artistic production becomes a self-referential and self-contained enterprise. Consequently, individuals who did not obtain the educational tools with which to make these comparisons, find themselves excluded from discussions of this nature.<sup>66</sup>

The connoisseur, then, is not someone who innately possesses the capacity to discriminate, but rather, someone who received the social and academic education to make aesthetic comparisons. Elisabeth Lang, who grew up in a privileged household in Vienna, would have been well equipped with the cultural tools to engage in aesthetic contemplation and would have been bred to believe that this was the appropriate way to approach objects of art. In addition to her private tutoring and the studying she later undertook in art history, Mrs. Lang’s artistic education would have developed further through her family and social contacts, for example, her uncle who worked in the art business. Although she did not personally appreciate the Austrian Baroque aesthetic of her parents’ home, the exposure to cultural goods she experienced from a young age would have had an influence on her ability to make discriminations in matters of taste. Elisabeth Lang herself was well aware of the extent to which education and experiences contributed to one’s capacity to make judgements about art. In an interview with Normand Biron she explained that she had

developed her skills by spending time in art galleries and exposing herself to a range of artistic traditions.<sup>67</sup>

Bourdieu's proposal that the field of artistic production is a self-referential system that focuses on the formal qualities of objects may offer some further insight into the internal logic of the Lang Collection. He suggests that

...an art which ever increasingly contains reference to its own history demands to be perceived historically; it asks to be referred not to an external referent, the represented or designated 'reality', but to the universe of past and present works of art. Like artistic production, in that it is generated in a field, aesthetic perception is necessarily historical, inasmuch as it is differential, relational, attentive to the deviations which make styles.<sup>68</sup>

If it is true that individuals who received cultural education tend to view objects from this aesthetic perspective then it may explain the impulse behind the serial nature of Elisabeth Lang's collecting habits. In effect, by selecting objects that exhibited variations of a particular style, Mrs. Lang was creating a micro version of the autonomous field of artistic production. Although she did express an interest in learning about the functional roles of the items she collected, her primary concern was to develop a collection of objects that would illustrate a range of formal innovations. Had she been more interested in providing examples of objects with different functions, her collection would not have included multiple versions of the same type of object. In light of Bourdieu's theories, it is not surprising that Elisabeth Lang approached the act of collecting African art in this way. Coming from a tradition that promoted the aesthetic disposition as the appropriate way to consider and evaluate works of art, Elisabeth Lang drew on her artistic education and experiences when making decisions about how to form her collection.

#### **Inclusions and Exclusions in "African" Art**

Collectors establish certain parameters when bringing objects together. These "rules" form the logical basis of the collection and create a narrative structure within which

we can understand individual pieces in terms of their relationships to one another.<sup>69</sup> Shifts and changes to these parameters may occur over time, as happened at several stages in the formation of the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: when Justin took on a more active role, when the Langs had more resources to devote to purchasing African works, and when the couple encountered individuals who offered alternative perspectives. Regardless, at any given moment of collecting, the Langs were negotiating which objects they would include and which they would exclude based on their own specific set of parameters. Most noticeably, Justin and Elisabeth Lang favoured West African sculptural objects from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries throughout their collecting years.

Susan Vogel has discussed the fact that the majority of collections of African art amassed by Western collectors share the same general limitations as the Lang Collection. Most include only the sculptural types of objects from Sub-Saharan Africa - predominantly from West African countries, and, like the Lang Collection, date to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>70</sup> This means that private and public collections in the West have excluded a number of different kinds of objects, geographic areas of Africa and time periods and, in turn, the canon of African art history does not recognize their value. Art collectors have largely ignored most of the African art forms categorized by Westerners as “craft”, for example, basketry and beadwork. This is due, in part, to the hierarchies embedded in the Western system of fine and applied art. In addition, collectors overlook art forms like wall paintings, which are not portable or sculptural, for reasons that are likely both practical and aesthetic. The rationale for why collectors have favoured sculptural objects over other African art forms, as scholars have suggested, probably owes much to the

greater ease with which sculpture assimilates into Western structures of thinking about and understanding art.

The Western collector's focus on Sub-Saharan countries has meant that arts from the Maghreb, the Mediterranean coast, Egypt, and Sudan do not receive adequate representation in African collections.<sup>71</sup> Many of these traditions are considered to exist independently of "Africa", despite being located geographically on the African continent. Similarly, the arts made by the European peoples of South Africa are not included in Western definitions of "African" art.<sup>72</sup> I do not intend to suggest that all arts made on the continent of Africa should assimilate easily into the same category, but it points to the difficulties of labelling any one group of objects as "African" to the exclusion of many others.

The period covered by most Western collections of African art is another area where a multitude of exclusions have been made, perhaps most notably, the contemporary arts of Africa. Collectors have been primarily concerned with obtaining objects made prior to the mid-twentieth century when arts began to reflect the influence of Christianity, Islam, and Europe to a larger degree.<sup>73</sup> It is not the age of the piece that collectors have been concerned with so much as the degree of acculturation it embodies. They choose to collect only "pure" African works that have not been "contaminated" by the influence of other cultures.<sup>74</sup> Elisabeth Lang expressed concern about avoiding acculturated objects in her collecting. She stated that "one should not go to Africa to collect, because one finds there, less and less, authentic objects...the population has often become Muslim or Christian."<sup>75</sup> This issue of authenticity is a central concern for African art collectors. Susan Vogel explains that "the fact of having been made by Africans is not sufficient to make an object "real;" the consensus is that only a work made for traditional use and actually

used can be considered authentic.”<sup>76</sup> This criterion has led to an entire market of fakes that individuals have painstakingly worked with a variety of oils and patinas to foster the illusion of age and use.<sup>77</sup> In the meantime, contemporary African arts that reflect the current social and historical circumstances on the continent receive relatively little attention from buyers.

Christopher Steiner has pointed out that in this manner the tastes of Western collectors have not only dictated what is available for view in museums through their donations, but also, have controlled what is available on the art market from Africa.<sup>78</sup> African traders have paid close attention to the comments and criticisms of Western buyers in order to ensure that the objects they offer for sale will suit their needs and desires. Steiner provides the example of the Dutch collector, Harrie Heinemans, who commented that when traders visited his home they were not only concerned with selling their objects but they also showed an interest in “books with pictures of masks and figures. In this way they could find out what we considered beautiful and then they could have it made.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, the tastes of Western collectors have been a driving force in the field of African art production. Elisabeth Lang certainly participated in this process. Indirectly, the objects she purchased from dealers and auction houses would have shaped market demands, and in a more direct way, African traders who visited her gallery in Montreal would have catered to her tastes.

While she certainly would have exerted her own personal influence on the African art market to some degree, it is clear that Elisabeth Lang’s tastes did not deviate far from the majority of other individuals collecting African art during the mid to late twentieth century. By establishing parameters that favoured “traditional” Sub-Saharan sculptural objects, these collectors shaped the corpus of works that defines “African” art in the West.

### **The Typical African Art Collector**

Just who were these individuals who played a large role in dictating the canon of African art history? According to Susan Vogel, “they have been an intrepid and unconventional lot.”<sup>80</sup> She explains that her sense is that African art collectors

...are more passionate and adventuresome than collectors of other art. In their lives and in their politics they are probably more independent and less conservative than their peers; many are professionals, especially psychiatrists; most earned their fortunes – disproportionately few African art collections have been made with inherited wealth; quite a few deployed modest means to form vast, valuable collections.<sup>81</sup>

Vogel goes further, to describe African collectors as dedicated organizers and generous supporters of lectures and programs that provide education on the arts of Africa. As well, they have a commitment to studying this art and often develop extensive personal libraries to accompany their collections.<sup>82</sup> With the exception that neither of the Langs was a psychiatrist, this profile fits them well. The early histories of Justin and Elisabeth detailed in the preceding chapter illustrate the extent to which terms like “passionate” “adventuresome” and “independent” apply to both of the Langs, in their lives and their politics. Although Elisabeth was born into a wealthy family, when she and Justin took refuge in Montreal they started with nothing. Justin’s business became more profitable over the years but it was when they had only a very modest amount of disposable income that Elisabeth began to develop their collection of art.<sup>83</sup> The Lang’s decision to donate their collection to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, a university museum, along with an endowment to support its research and exhibition, shows their dedication to promoting African art education. Also, the library of more than three hundred African art books that was donated along with the Lang collection testifies to their commitment to educating not only others, but also themselves. A more detailed discussion of the donation to the Art Centre takes place in the following chapter.

- <sup>1</sup> This information is based on an analysis of the AEAC database report on objects in the collection.
- <sup>2</sup> Newspaper article without citation information, partial title in top left corner "collection Lang", Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection File. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.
- <sup>3</sup> Deborah Melman-Clement, "Not just Art for Art's Sake," *Kingston Whig-Standard*, 7 Dec 2002.
- <sup>4</sup> Normand Biron, "Les Vertiges De l'Éternité: Rencontre Avec Elisabeth Lang," *Vie des Arts* 31, no. 123 (Été 1986): 90.
- <sup>5</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed. *Visions and Models: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 2 February-31 March 1985, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada* (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1984), 11.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> J. Fry, *Visions and Models*, 11.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Newspaper article without citation information, partial title in top left corner "collection Lang", Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection File. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.
- <sup>14</sup> Biron, "Les Vertiges."
- <sup>15</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>16</sup> Ken Whittingham, "Montreal Museum Gets African Art," *Montreal Star*, 22 April 1975.
- <sup>17</sup> Untitled Document that discusses the donation of the Gagnon Collection. F Dossier Général, Donation de la Province du Canada Français de la Compagnie de Jésus. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Montreal, Quebec.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, the research and documentation gathered by Ernest Gagnon that was reported to have been donated to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts along with his collection could not be located. As a result, I will have to base my analysis of Ernest Gagnon's thoughts about African art on the following article that was donated by the Langs to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre along with the rest of their African library: Ernest Gagnon and Musée d'art Primitif, *Le Sens de l'Art Africain*, vol. 1 (Montreal: Collège Sainte-Marie, 1970).
- <sup>22</sup> Ernest Gagnon and Musée d'art Primitif, *Le Sens de l'Art Africain*, 3.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>26</sup> J. Fry, *Visions and Models*, 11.
- <sup>27</sup> Jacqueline Fry Fonds: Finding Aid, Biographical Sketch. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.
- <sup>28</sup> Michel Leiris and Jacqueline Delange, *Afrique Noire, La Création Plastique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).
- <sup>29</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 105.
- <sup>30</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.
- <sup>31</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 106.
- <sup>32</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.
- <sup>33</sup> Michel Leiris, Preface to *Arts et Peuples de l'Afrique Noire, Introduction à l'Analyse des Créations Plastiques* by Jacqueline Fry (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), xviii
- <sup>34</sup> Doran Ross, "The Art and People of Black Africa, Jacqueline Delange, Translated by Carol F. Jopling Et Al," *African Arts* 8, no.3 (Spring 1975): 80.
- <sup>35</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these exhibition catalogues see the literature review in the introduction and the discussion of Fry's approach to exhibitions at the AEAC in the third chapter.
- <sup>36</sup> Victoria Henry, personal communication to the author, 11 July 2006.
- <sup>37</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *Heroic Figures : African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection : 12 may-25 September 1988, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada* (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1988), 1.
- <sup>38</sup> Nancy Baele, "Artists, Scholars Mourn Loss of Canadian Expert in African and Native Art," *Kingston Whig-Standard*, 8 Jun 1991.

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- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.
- <sup>53</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>54</sup> J. Fry, *Visions and Models*, 11.
- <sup>55</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>56</sup> Elisabeth Lang, Introduction in *Héritage Africain = African Heritage : Galerie Des 5 Continents, Montréal, 10e Anniversaire, Septembre 1988 = 10th Anniversary, September 1988* by Elisabeth Lang, Normand Biron, and Galerie des 5 continents (Montréal: Galerie des 5 continents, 1988), 3.
- <sup>57</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.
- <sup>58</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 13.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 1.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., 2.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 31.
- <sup>67</sup> Biron, "Les Vertiges."
- <sup>68</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 4.
- <sup>69</sup> Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 33.
- <sup>70</sup> Susan Mullin Vogel, ed., *The Art of Collecting African Art* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1988), 4.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup> Biron, "Les Vertiges."
- <sup>76</sup> Vogel, *The Art of Collecting African Art*, 4.
- <sup>77</sup> Christopher Burghard Steiner, "Authenticity, Repetition, and Aesthetics," in *Unpacking Culture : Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* by Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher Burghard Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 98.
- <sup>78</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, "The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness: Fashioning the Canon of African Art," in *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, edited by Elizabeth Mansfield, 132-145. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 142.
- <sup>79</sup> Quoted in Steiner, "Taste of Angels," 142.
- <sup>80</sup> Vogel, *The Art of Collecting African Art*, 5.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>83</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.

### **CHAPTER THREE: The Museum**

In the early 1980s, Justin and Elisabeth Lang began to look into finding a permanent home for their collection of African art. They were getting older and had approached their sons about looking after the collection, but neither Robert nor John Lang felt that he could accommodate the sizeable collection in his own home.<sup>1</sup> It has been rumoured that Mrs. Lang initially contacted the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts about its interest in accepting the collection, but did not receive a welcoming response.<sup>2</sup> To assist them in their search for an appropriate institution, the Langs enlisted the help of their close family friends, Jacqueline and Philip Fry. At the time, both of the Frys were working in the Visual Arts Department at the University of Ottawa. When their discussions with the Langs indicated that the couple wished to see their collection available for both scholarly and public use, Philip and Jacqueline Fry suggested that the University of Ottawa might be a suitable option. The Langs agreed that the location of the University of Ottawa, its bilingual status, and its academic programming made it an ideal setting for their art collection.<sup>3</sup> The University of Ottawa did not yet have an art gallery and Jacqueline and Philip Fry were excited by the idea that the Lang's offer might provide the impetus for creating one.<sup>4</sup>

In 1980, Philip Fry wrote to the University of Ottawa to establish whether or not they might be interested taking on the Lang Collection.<sup>5</sup> The University replied with a tentative but positive response and the parties entered into a series of negotiations that took place over a period of about two years. The primary concern for both the Langs and the University was identifying a suitable space for exhibiting the collection after its donation. An area of the University Centre previously occupied by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC) became a likely possibility. According to Philip Fry, the location seemed ideal because the bank wanted to get out

of its lease, which had not yet ended, and might have been willing to provide the University with some kind of deal in the gallery's first few years of occupancy. Unfortunately, the students of the University of Ottawa voted in favour of using the former CIBC space to create a campus bar.<sup>6</sup> In combination with this scenario, the University of Ottawa found that it was unable to support the renovation of any other space for the collection financially and feared that in the end, it would not be able to come up with the resources needed to maintain the collection. In April of 1982, the Rector of the University, Reverend Roger Guindon, O.M.I., wrote to the Langs to let them know that the University of Ottawa was regretfully declining their generous offer.<sup>7</sup>

Soon after the Langs became aware of the University of Ottawa's decision, they began to consider offering their collection to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC) at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. As both a regional and University art gallery, the Art Centre offered the combination of public and academic accessibility that was so important to the Langs. In addition, their son, Robert Lang, had pursued his undergraduate degree at Queen's.<sup>8</sup> The Langs were also encouraged to consider the AEAC by Philip Fry, who was working there as the guest curator for an exhibition of Robin Collyer's work at the time.<sup>9</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Lang decided that they would be pleased to see their collection go to the AEAC and Philip Fry agreed to approach the gallery's director, Robert Swain, to find out whether or not accepting the Lang's African art donation would be a possibility for the Art Centre.

Robert Swain received the Lang's offer with a great deal of enthusiasm and arranged for the Langs to bring photographs of the collection to Kingston for members of the Art Centre staff to view. Thoroughly impressed with what he saw, Swain prepared a proposal and arranged meetings with the Acquisitions Committee

and the University to get the approval needed to accept the donation. In June of 1982 Robert Swain and Dorothy Farr, curator at the AEAC, travelled to Montreal for a personal viewing of the collection. During this meeting, the Langs discussed their stipulations for the donation to the Art Centre and later outlined them in a formal letter to Robert Swain, dated 5 July 1982: the collection would be transferred to the AEAC over a period of 5 to 7 years; two external evaluators (listed as “Mrs. Helene Kamer-Le Loup and Mrs. Susan Vogel”) were to be hired to make an inventory and evaluate the collection – the cost of which would be borne by the Art Centre; the collection should be kept intact and identified by its collectors’ names; a special room needed to be provided and a portion of the collection exhibited at all times; the collection was to be used for study and other cultural and educational institutions should have access to it; all or part of the collection could be used as part of a travelling exhibition; and Mrs. Elisabeth Lang was willing to act as a consultant.<sup>10</sup> On 7 October 1982, Robert Swain wrote to Justin and Elisabeth Lang to let them know that he had received the final necessary approvals and the Art Centre was enthusiastically accepting the donation of their African art collection.<sup>11</sup>

#### **The AEAC’s Decision to Accept**

The Art Centre’s decision to accept the donation of the Lang’s African collection was not the product of an easy or simple process. In order to accession the collection, the AEAC had to expand their regionally focussed collecting mandate and this required the permission of both the Acquisition Committee and the Board of Trustees. Robert Swain was responsible for convincing these groups that the Lang Collection would be a valuable addition to the Art Centre’s permanent collection. Some of the reasons that he was in favour of accepting the collection, interestingly, have strong Modernist Primitivist undertones. Swain argued that because the AEAC collection already

contained a few Oceanic objects collected by missionary professors at the turn of the century, it would not be stepping very far from the gallery's current collection to accession African sculptures. In addition, he felt that having the African objects in the collection would provide an interesting visual resource for investigations into their relationship with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century French school. Swain has explained that his interest in the Lang Collection was primarily aesthetic and was oriented from a Eurocentric perspective.<sup>12</sup>

In her discussions with Robert Swain, Dorothy Farr had the opportunity to express her opinions about the value of the Lang Collection to the Art Centre. Both Farr and Swain shared an attraction to the serial nature of the Lang's African Collection. During her student years at the University of Toronto, Farr had been particularly interested in the arts of China and spent time studying the Royal Ontario Museum's Chinese Collection amassed by Bishop White in the early twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Like Elisabeth Lang, Bishop White had focussed on collecting relatively smaller objects that illustrated a range of styles; as a result, his collection had an internal logic that was similar to the Lang's African collection. In her art-historical studies at the University of Toronto, Farr found the nature of Bishop White's collection both interesting and informative. She applied these experiences to her evaluation of the Lang Collection and suggested that it would be an excellent academic resource.<sup>14</sup> Robert Swain agreed. For a University art gallery, they argued, the range of "types" exemplified by the Lang Collection made it an exceptionally interesting object for study.

While the Lang Collection is characterized by its serial nature, it still includes a number of objects that have been considered very high in quality. This was yet another reason that both Farr and Swain wanted to accept the Lang's donation. Farr

felt that some of the objects in the Lang Collection were of higher aesthetic quality than anything else they had at the Art Centre at the time. This observation was reinforced for Farr when, after the Collection's donation, several high profile American institutions requested loans of specific objects for their exhibitions.<sup>15</sup> The size of the Lang Collection was also a selling point for the AEAC. Robert Swain thinks that if the collection had only included a couple of hundred pieces, the Art Centre would not have been so eager to accept it.<sup>16</sup> The combination of size, quality, and collecting style made the Lang Collection appealing because it offered a range of exhibition and research opportunities. In the end, the administration agreed with this assessment of the Collection's value to the Art Centre and approved its donation.

### **Community Responses**

The Art Centre received a variety of responses to their decision to accept and exhibit the Lang's collection of African art. While many members of the Kingston and Queen's University communities were excited about the collection, other responses ranged from anger to apathy. Shortly after the AEAC staff announced their decision to accept the Lang Collection, they were approached by a couple of members of the Kingston community who were upset because they felt that there was absolutely no reason to have African material in their regional art gallery.<sup>17</sup> As far as the individuals were concerned, the role of the Art Centre was to promote and display the arts of the majority culture within the region. Farr believes that it would be very unlikely for someone in the Kingston community to make the same complaint now.<sup>18</sup> The AEAC also received comments from members of the Queen's University community. A group of Africanists from the school were angered by the fact that Queen's had agreed to take on the Lang Collection of African art but had refused to fund the Canadian Association of African Studies annual conference. They saw the

university's actions as contradictory and Eurocentric in nature because the school was willing to accept the sculptural objects but did not encourage or support the scholarship of the cultures responsible for creating them. In addition to their complaint, the group requested permission to establish a small committee to work with the collection and oversee all of the activities related to it.<sup>19</sup> Although the AEAC welcomed their comments and ideas about exhibitions and other programming, Robert Swain felt that from a management perspective the existence of a committee would pose serious difficulties for administering the collection. He argued that a committee supervised no other segment of the Art Centre's collection and the African objects should not be treated any differently.<sup>20</sup> In the end, the university rejected the proposal for a committee but agreed to fund the Canadian Association of African studies annual conference in 1988.

The conference, and the exhibition *Heroic Figures*, presented in complement to it, aroused further concern and complaint from some members of the Kingston community. On 11 August 1988, Robert Swain received a letter from the Kingston Committee for Racial Harmony. The letter explained that the committee was concerned about what they perceived to be the lack of "participation by any person who is black" in the "formal opening ceremonies in May for the Lang Collection of African Art." They stated that "how eloquent it would have been had you invited a black voice to stand and speak at those formal opening ceremonies."<sup>21</sup> According to Robert Swain, the complaints lodged by the Kingston Committee for Racial Harmony were based on misinformation. He admits that the criticism was embarrassing but maintains that the AEAC fully recognized the importance of having African peoples' participation in the exhibition. One of the essayists for the exhibition's catalogue was

Nkiru Nzegwu, an African scholar living in Canada. Nzegwu received an invitation to participate in the panel of speakers, but declined.<sup>22</sup>

For Dorothy Farr, one of the most disappointing responses to the AEAC's decision to accept the Lang Collection has been from the Department of Art at Queen's University. According to Farr, the academic community was not overly supportive of the acquisition and in subsequent years has remained largely indifferent to its existence.<sup>23</sup> As was previously mentioned, none of the faculty in the Department of Art has formal training or specializes in the field of African art. From time to time, students have pressured the administration to offer classes in African art and both the students and the AEAC have raised the issue of hiring an African scholar. Unfortunately, their requests have not met with a positive response and the department continues to maintain a Western and largely Renaissance focus.<sup>24</sup>

#### **Challenges for the AEAC**

Although both Robert Swain and Dorothy Farr were enthusiastic about accepting the Lang Collection, they faced some significant challenges and had a few concerns about properly maintaining the collection. At the most practical level, Robert Swain was worried about the conservation issues that some of the African objects might present.<sup>25</sup> It is common for sculptures like the ones in the Lang Collection to harbour insect infestations because of the materials used to create them and the circumstances of their acquisition. After accepting the collection, the Art Centre had to undertake a careful evaluation of all the objects and provide the necessary conservation treatments. This was important not only for the preservation of the specific object that had an infestation, but also for the other works of art stored in the gallery's vaults. An infestation of insects that gets out of control can mean disaster for a museum that holds a substantial collection of valuable works of art.

Another important challenge that the AEAC faced in caring for the African Collection over the subsequent years was securing adequate funding for programming. The Art Centre receives about forty percent of its funding from Queen's University. This only covers the basic cost of running the building – electricity, heat, maintenance, etc.<sup>26</sup> In order to present exhibitions and arrange other activities related to the art collection, the AEAC regularly applies for external grants. As a regional gallery, much of their funding comes from bodies like the Ontario Arts Council, whose main interest lies in supporting Ontario artists and contemporary work.<sup>27</sup> Because of the strict national focus of many Canadian funding sources, it is difficult to apply successfully for monies to present programming of a collection of traditional African sculpture. In addition to the difficulty of finding funding for African programming, the Art Centre does not have the finances to purchase research resources on African art for the Queen's libraries and the University has no budget for acquiring sources in this particular field.<sup>28</sup>

Justin and Elisabeth Lang were aware of these concerns, and along with their donation of the African objects, the couple presented the University with their extensive personal library of African art resources and established a modest endowment to fund research and programming related to the collection.<sup>29</sup> The library provided by the Langs includes some three hundred books, exhibition catalogues, journal articles and auction catalogues, published as early as the eighteenth century. The collection is comprehensive only up to the early 1990s, however. The Art Centre makes an effort to purchase publications that it feels are exceptionally important to the field of African art, but, for the most part, publications produced after the passing of both Justin and Elisabeth Lang are largely absent.<sup>30</sup> The modest endowment provided by the Langs offers enough funding to mount one exhibition of their African

collection each year. Without the Langs' generosity, the AEAC would likely be struggling to offer any kind of programming related to the African objects.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, the endowment does not provide enough funding to publish catalogues of these exhibitions. Often, exhibition catalogues bring attention to lesser-known collections and can spark public and academic interest. Not being able to publish catalogues of the Lang Collection means that less attention is garnered for the objects, the Art Centre, and the specific exhibitions being presented.

When it accepted the Lang Collection, the AEAC was also concerned about the lack of expertise in the field of African art in the Art Centre and in the Queen's Department of Art. Despite her lack of formal training, the AEAC assigned the responsibility of programming the African Collection to Dorothy Farr who had received some instruction on African art in a course on 'Primitive Art' she took with Joan Vastokas while a student at the University of Toronto.<sup>32</sup> This experience provided her with a basic idea of the important principles that inform African art and Farr rigorously pursued independent research after assuming responsibility for the Lang Collection to ensure that she could respond to the issues of exhibiting the collection with adequate scholarship and skill.

In addition to donating their personal library and endowing future study of the African Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Lang responded to the Art Centre's concern about its lack of expertise by providing funding for an Affiliate Curator in the early years after the Collection's donation. The AEAC hired Jacqueline Fry to work with the African material on a part-time basis, beginning in 1985.

### **Jacqueline Fry's Role**

Under the terms of her contract, Jacqueline Fry was required to perform and publish research on the collection; undertake research to prepare exhibitions; develop

proposals for exhibitions over the long-term and nominate potential guest curators; assist with the arrangement of accessibility and storage of the collection; be involved, as necessary, with the development of the photo and literature resources associated with the collection; offer opinions on conservation issues; and provide reports of her work with the Lang Collection.<sup>33</sup>

As Affiliate Curator of the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection, Jacqueline Fry produced three major exhibitions: *Visions and Models* (2 February – 31 March 1985); *Visual Variations* (1 March-3 May 1987); and *Heroic Figures* (12 May-25 September 1988). Aside from the basic copy-editing of texts and catalogues, the Art Centre left the creation of these exhibitions in the complete control of Jacqueline Fry.<sup>34</sup> The inaugural exhibition, *Visions and Models*, included sixty-four objects that Fry selected from the larger collection. She chose the objects for their abilities to exemplify both the visual inventiveness of the African artist and their significance within African societies. In this show, Fry sought to make viewers aware of the ways that these African sculptures reflected the vision of the artist rather than an imitation of nature. *Visual Variations* brought together ten series of objects from the Lang Collection to illustrate the “dimensions of sculptural variation” that could be found among the African works.<sup>35</sup> Fry explored the subtle inventions and divergent sculptural approaches of artists as well as the similar structural characteristics of different peoples and communities. *Heroic Figures* was presented as a complement to the Canadian Association of African Studies annual conference that was held at Queen’s University in May of 1988. The conference’s theme was “Domination/Resistance/Liberation.”<sup>36</sup> In the exhibition catalogue, Fry notes that in this particular exhibition, the Art Centre deviated from its “usual guiding principles for this type of study, that of seeing sculpture not simply as illustrations of diverse

usages and functions, but rather as artistic creations in their own right.”<sup>37</sup> For the first time, the focus of the exhibition of the Lang Collection was not primarily aesthetic. Instead, the works chosen for the exhibition were those “whose inspiration, goals and applications have contributed to the social and ethical cohesion of certain societies, and which have catalyzed thereby a cultural and political resistance movement.”<sup>38</sup> The thread tying all of these works together was their perceived “heroic” character. This “heroic” aspect was identified by Fry according to the role the character, which was represented by the sculpture, had played in African myth, history and popular culture.<sup>39</sup>

As time went on, Jacqueline Fry continued to plan exhibitions, comment on records and storage issues, and work on identifications in the collection. Dorothy Farr felt that as the end of Fry’s contract drew nearer, she seemed to want to pursue projects beyond her work with the Lang Collection.<sup>40</sup> At that point, both Justin and Elisabeth Lang had passed away and the Art Centre had established a more solid foundation of experience for dealing with the African art collection. Sadly, Jacqueline Fry passed away suddenly in June of 1991. Because she died before her contract with the Art Centre came up for review, it is not clear whether or not Dorothy Farr’s insights were accurate and Fry intended to move on from the collection.

### **Challenges of Exhibiting African Art**

In addition to the challenges the Art Centre has faced with respect to conservation, funding, and expertise, it has also had to negotiate how it would situate itself in terms of contemporary approaches to exhibiting African art. When the Langs donated their collection, they made no stipulations about how they would like the objects exhibited, but, as Dorothy Farr explained, the Langs “were looking for an artistic approach, so they gave [their collection] to the people who were trained in examining objects from

an artistic point of view.”<sup>41</sup> This is not to suggest that art museums should be bound by the directives of their donors – as discourses shift and change, the institutions that present exhibitions need to respond to developments in the field. However, the Lang’s desire to have their collection permanently housed in an art museum raises important questions about the role of that museum and how the role becomes manifest in their exhibition strategies for displaying African objects.

James Clifford has argued that with the rise of modernism and anthropology in the twentieth century, non-Western objects have been distinguished as either “aesthetic” or “anthropological”, and these categories have been institutionally reinforced. According to Clifford,

...in art galleries, non-Western objects were displayed for their formal and aesthetic qualities; in ethnographic museums they were represented in a ‘cultural’ context. In the latter, an African statue was a ritual object belonging to a distinct group; it was displayed in ways that elucidated its use, symbolism, and function.<sup>42</sup>

In recent years, scholars and critics, like Clifford, have begun to question these categories and an intense debate over the art-artifact distinction has ensued. Art museums have been criticized for considering only the aesthetic or formal aspects of non-Western objects at the expense of their cultural context. Critics have argued that a purely aesthetic approach to works of art is a Western construct that does not necessarily apply effectively to non-Western objects without jeopardizing their cultural integrity. Curators and scholars on the other side of this debate have offered a variety of explanations to justify their privileging of the aesthetic in art exhibitions.

One of the most often repeated arguments for the aesthetic display of art objects is that beauty is a universally identifiable quality that can be evaluated objectively in terms of higher and lesser achievements. In a museum, objects on display would be those that exhibit the highest quality of beauty. The legacy of this

belief, which still clearly operates today, is evident in the ideas of eighteenth-century philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Hume was primarily concerned with ideas of ‘taste.’ He argued that individuals could refine their aesthetic judgements through education and experience. Those who were able to “preserve minds free from prejudice” would eventually come to a consensus that would form a universal “standard of taste.”<sup>43</sup> Kant aimed to demonstrate that judgements of beauty are based in the artworks themselves, not in people or their preferences. His argument was rooted in the idea that humans label objects (often in unconscious ways) in order to function in the world. Mental responses to specific elements of the object in question create these labels. Thus, because something has certain qualities, humans instinctively label it as “beautiful.” In order to identify beauty, however, Kant claimed that the human response has to be disinterested so that other considerations (like flavour in the example of a food object) do not taint judgements.<sup>44</sup> Kant’s ideas laid the groundwork for a theoretical tradition concerned with aesthetic response. One of the greatest proponents of this line of thought was Clive Bell (1881-1964). In his essay “The Aesthetic Hypothesis,” Bell states that

. . . to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life.<sup>45</sup>

Bell emphasized the importance of “significant form” (a combination of colours and lines that elicit an aesthetic response) over content in an art object.<sup>46</sup> Another major force in twentieth-century art scholarship, Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) also subscribed to notions of universal aesthetics. He championed the work of Jackson Pollock because it “celebrated form as the quality through which a painting or sculpture refers to its medium and to its own conditions of creation.”<sup>47</sup>

Bound up with the idea of universal beauty is the argument that true art has a powerful presence that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries to evoke responses from its varied viewers. Susan Vogel has argued that “for Western audiences the artwork is distinguishable from the ethnographic object by its ability to evoke meanings and feelings across time and cultural boundaries.”<sup>48</sup> From this perspective, the power of the art object to affect its viewer is separate from its originating context. An understanding of that context is unnecessary to experience the qualities that make it a work of art. Susan Sontag promotes a version of this perspective in her essay “Against Interpretation.” Sontag claims that “real art has the capacity to make us nervous. . . interpretation makes art manageable, conformable.”<sup>49</sup> According to this view, the contextualization of non-Western art forms could be another form of colonization. In order to control the objects (and their cultural creators), curators situate them within a well mapped out structure that positions the culture relative to the West. The “us” and “them” paradigm is therefore reinforced.

Over the last several decades, critiques of the traditional canon of art history have led many scholars to consider the fact that its origins and value system are rooted in Western ideals. Critics have pointed out that the canon has excluded many valuable art forms because of its inherently biased nature. One of the responses to this revelation is to find ways to include previously excluded art objects in the already existing canon.<sup>50</sup> Non-western objects have been included according to how closely their formal elements satisfy the apparently “objective” notions of artistic value that dictate the Canon. Critics have proposed, however, that what was previously understood to be a set of “objective” standards by which to measure artistic achievement, is actually a series of values promoted by the dominant Western belief

system. In his introduction to *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, Emory Elliott argues that

. . . what is posited as universal and essential is nothing more than the classical Western canons of art and literature, which were primarily constructed by white male anthologists, literary editors, and genteel intellectuals in the last two centuries.<sup>51</sup>

This leads to another argument for aesthetically focused exhibition practices. While many critics have acknowledged that the Western framework for evaluating art was established by a specific group of elitist individuals, some respond with an unequivocal, “so what?” Robert Redfield argued that Westerners have had greater exposure to different art forms from different societies and are in the best position to make judgements of artistic quality.<sup>52</sup> Although he identifies the fact that the value judgements derive from Western experience, he still maintains for them a level of objectivity. Christopher B. Steiner responds to this perspective by saying that it is mistaken to believe that “aesthetic judgements and distinctions of taste can be made under objective conditions free from moral, political, economic, and social influences.”<sup>53</sup>

Many critics do not refute Steiner’s claim that judgements are inevitably biased but still maintain that an aesthetic exhibition format is appropriate for the display of art objects in Western institutions. In her article “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” Svetlana Alpers argues that art museums are Western institutions that exhibit objects according to their own criteria, which may or may not correspond to those of the object’s makers. In essence, the role of the museum is to heighten the visual interest of objects, not to educate audiences about other cultures. Alpers explains that “the taste for isolating this kind of attentive looking at crafted objects is as peculiar to our culture as is the museum as the space or institution where the activity takes place.”<sup>54</sup> Both Svetlana Alpers and Susan Vogel point out that very few objects

currently found in art museums were originally intended for that space. Vogel argues that the only reason there is so much heated debate over the inclusion of African objects in the art museum is because they are the most recently arrived on the art-historical scene.<sup>55</sup>

A final argument for aesthetically focussed exhibitions is that presenting non-Western objects with more contextualization than Western objects could degrade their value in the eyes of Westerners. In order to assert their value, these objects must be displayed on the same terms that Western objects are displayed. In her discussion of her work with the Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan, Vogel explains her concern for too much contextualization of African works of art relative to the other exhibitions presented at the art museum:

During the years of preparing the Rockefeller Wing, we discussed including large photomurals, and playing African music in the galleries. I opposed these ideas because I felt that in the context of other installations in the building, they would have conditioned perception of the African galleries as an anthropological exhibit.<sup>56</sup>

In response to all of these aesthetically focussed arguments, a number of scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding contextual information when approaching non-Western arts. In his essay "Art for Life's Sake," Dele Jegede discusses why the Western framework makes it difficult to understand African art comprehensively. He explains that "in many instances, [African art] is a physical manifestation of abstract and subjective doctrines; it is a metaphor for socio-religious ethos." In this sense, many highly important elements of a work of art could be lost if it is displayed within a primarily aesthetic programme. It is not that African peoples do not appreciate beauty, but rather, beauty is only one of the aspects that combine to create an art object. The Yoruba peoples of Nigeria do not separate the concept of beauty from socio-cultural goodness. In his book, *Calliope's Sisters: A Comparative*

*Study of Philosophies of Art*, Richard Anderson explains that “to please the members of the spirit world, a sculpture should possess exemplary beauty not only in physique but also in representing the highest ethical standards.”<sup>57</sup> The meanings of these objects, which are central to their role as art, are not visually conveyable to viewers with no previous understanding of the Yoruba belief system.

Clifford Geertz shares this perspective in his discussion of “Art as a Cultural System.” Geertz asserts that even if a so-called universal sense of beauty does exist, it does not seem to enable people to respond to foreign arts with “more than an ethnocentric sentimentalism in the absence of a knowledge of what those arts are about or an understanding of the culture out of which they come.”<sup>58</sup> This position is further solidified, despite Clive Bell’s assertions, through Anderson’s study of ten different cultural groups and their respective art systems. He concludes that there is “virtually no empirical evidence for the existence of the formalist’s ‘affective response’ in other societies.”<sup>59</sup> He concludes his investigation by recommending that

. . . if one’s aim is to appreciate art of foreign origin (or, indeed, of domestic origin) on its own terms, then obviously an understanding of the philosophical basis of that art is imperative. And clearly, the more distant the aesthetic system is from our own, the more information is necessary.<sup>60</sup>

While a number of different scholars have weighed in on both sides of this important museological debate, there has been no final agreement on how to exhibit the arts of non-Western peoples in Western art museums most appropriately. Generally, individual galleries of art have positioned themselves somewhere along the spectrum between contextual and aesthetic approaches. Where they position themselves depends on a number of factors including their size, location, collection holdings, curatorial expertise, and administration, among other things.

### **The AEAC and its Exhibition Style**

The Modernist Primitive perspective, which was shown to have played a significant role in the development of the Lang Collection in the earlier part of this thesis, is firmly rooted in the appreciation of primarily aesthetic aspects of non-Western and modern arts. The belief in both a universal aesthetic sense and the ability of great works of art to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries is what allowed Modernist Primitivists to group African, Oceanic, Native North American, Inuit and modern arts in the same artistic category. When the AEAC made its decision to accept the Lang Collection of African art, aesthetic considerations that had significant Modernist Primitivist undertones formed a central part of their rationale. This primary interest in the aesthetic aspects of the Lang Collection, logically, has translated into exhibition strategies that highlight the formal qualities of the African objects on display.

With the exception of *Heroic Figures*, which Jacqueline Fry explained was an aberration in the Art Centre's general approach to displaying the Lang Collection because it was designed to coincide with the 1988 Canadian Association of African Studies conference, the exhibitions prepared by Fry in the early years of the Collection's residence at the Art Centre emphasized the formal or aesthetic qualities of the African sculptures. Although Fry was an anthropologist by training, she was deeply concerned with having the African art objects viewed as works of art in their own right - for Fry, this meant being attentive to their aesthetic form. To this end, she conceived exhibitions that explored the inventiveness of African sculptors and encouraged the recognition of subtle variations between like forms. Her anthropological training, however, comes through in the detailed descriptions of processes and contexts that pervade her catalogue essays. In almost every essay written by Fry for Canadian exhibitions of African art, she paid special attention to acknowledging the difficulties of presenting non-Western art in Western institutions

and attempted to provide at least some amount of cultural information. A number of art museums have employed this strategy: design the exhibition space to highlight the aesthetic qualities of objects and provide the contextual information in the catalogue to accompany it. Some critics have suggested that this approach is not sufficient for providing contextual information because viewers may not take the time to read the catalogue, but others feel that it is a suitable compromise to the question of art and context because it allows those who want more information to seek it out while not imposing it on viewers who prefer to consider art on a purely aesthetic basis.

Either way, the strategy ended at the Art Centre because over the long run they have not been able to afford to publish catalogues in association with their exhibitions. Since the passing of Jacqueline Fry in the early nineties, Dorothy Farr has prepared the majority of the Art Centre's African exhibitions. In her exhibition strategies, Farr has remained fairly in line with the aesthetic approach of earlier exhibitions, though she has sometimes created exhibitions that were a bit more political. She describes her approach as "not totally anthropological but not just art historical either."<sup>61</sup> Farr has found that even when exhibitions focus on an exclusively formal or aesthetic subject, viewers are interested to find out the original function or meaning of the objects on display. She has responded to this desire by including some kind of statement about the cultural context of the object in most of her labels. Farr has also made a regular practice of enlarging images to display on the walls of the African galleries. She does this for both aesthetic and contextual reasons. Aesthetically, she feels that the images (which generally depict examples of other African objects, scenes from African society, or scenarios of objects similar to the ones in the gallery used in Africa) animate the gallery space and provide opportunities for further formal comparisons. For the most part, the African objects on display are

contained in plexiglass vitrines and having images on the wall helps break up the space and adds another visual dimension to the exhibition. From a contextual perspective, Farr feels that the images show viewers how people in Africa used the objects on display and reminds them of the vitality of African culture.<sup>62</sup> It is rare for the galleries that display Western art at the AEAC to include enlarged photographs or other media aside from the artworks intended for viewing. Farr has suggested that the AEAC treats the African galleries with more drama than the other galleries. She would like to see the other galleries change to meet the style of the African galleries, rather than the other way around. Farr provides the example of the European gallery space at the AEAC and proposes that including arrangements of tapestries and fruits for visual comparison would enrich the paintings of Dutch still lives.<sup>63</sup> It will be interesting to see whether the challenges of exhibiting African objects at the Art Centre will influence the treatment of the gallery's Western works in years to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Swain, personal communication to the author, 4 July 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Fry's letter to Reverend Father R. Guindon, O.M.I., Rector of the University of Ottawa. Jacqueline Fry Fonds, Other Professional Papers Series: Box 20, File 5: Correspondence - Lang Collection - Museology Course, 1977-1982. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Fry's letter to Reverend Father R. Guindon, O.M.I., Rector of the University of Ottawa, suggests that the Langs were looking for a home for their African collection as well as their Inuit, First Nations, and Contemporary Canadian art. A letter later written to Justin and Elisabeth Lang from the Rector refers to the "generous offer of a part of your African Art Collection." This suggests that either the Langs changed their minds about how much of their collection to donate or during the negotiation process the University of Ottawa expressed an interest in only part of the Lang's African Collection. I do not have access to all of the correspondence during the negotiations between the Langs and the University of Ottawa so I cannot determine how the shift occurred. Both letters that I refer to can be found in Jacqueline Fry Fonds, Other Professional Papers Series: Box 20, File 5: Correspondence - Lang Collection - Museology Course, 1977-1982. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Reverend Roger Guindon's letter to Justin and Elisabeth Lang, dated 26 April 1982. Jacqueline Fry Fonds, Other Professional Papers Series: Box 20, File 5: Correspondence - Lang Collection - Museology Course, 1977-1982. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Lang, personal communication to the author, 30 June 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Fry, personal communication to the author, 13 June 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Justin Lang to Robert Swain dated 5 July 1982. Jacqueline Fry Fonds, Other Professional Papers Series: Box 20, File 5: Correspondence - Lang Collection - Museology Course, 1977-1982. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Robert Swain to Justin and Elisabeth Lang dated 7 October 1982. Jacqueline Fry Fonds, Other Professional Papers Series: Box 20, File 5: Correspondence - Lang Collection - Museology Course, 1977-1982. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.

- <sup>12</sup> Robert Swain, personal communication to the author, 4 July 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> Dorothy Farr, personal communication to the author, 29 June 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert Swain, personal communication to the author, 4 July 2006.
- <sup>17</sup> Dorothy Farr, personal communication to the author, 29 June 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Swain, personal communication to the author, 4 July 2006.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Document titled "Kingston Committee for Racial Harmony," dated 10 August 1988, marked as received 11 August 1988. Jacqueline Fry Fonds, African Art Series: Box 2, File 5: African Art - Lang Collection, 1984-1991. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.
- <sup>22</sup> Robert Swain, personal communication to the author, 4 July 2006.
- <sup>23</sup> Dorothy Farr, personal communication to the author, 29 June 2006.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Swain, personal communication to the author, 4 July 2006.
- <sup>26</sup> Dorothy Farr, personal communication to the author, 29 June 2006.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> For a number of collectors, the monetary side of collecting and donating is an important issue. Most often, collectors receive tax benefits for their donations, and lending objects to exhibitions can be financially prosperous because the values of objects are often raised by their inclusion in an exhibition. I have chosen not to address the financial aspects of the Lang's collection and its donation in detail because privacy policies have made it difficult or impossible to obtain the information and documentation that would be essential for a useful analysis.
- <sup>30</sup> Dorothy Farr, personal communication to the author, 29 June 2006.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Document titled "A Contract with Jacqueline Fry and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre." Jacqueline Fry Fonds, African Art Series: Box 2, File 5: African Art - Lang Collection, 1984-1991. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa.
- <sup>34</sup> Dorothy Farr, personal communication to the author, 29 June 2006.
- <sup>35</sup> Jacqueline Fry, *Visual Variations : African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 1 March-3 may 1987, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston Canada* (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1987), 1.
- <sup>36</sup> Edna G. Bay, "Heroic Figures: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection [Review]," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no.1 (1990): 166.
- <sup>37</sup> Jacqueline Fry, ed., *Heroic Figures : African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection : 12 may-25 September 1988, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada* (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1988), 1.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Dorothy Farr, personal communication to the author, 29 June 2006.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 199.
- <sup>43</sup> David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Aesthetics*, edited by Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 350 – 364.
- <sup>44</sup> Cynthia Freeland, *But is it Art?* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10-14.
- <sup>45</sup> Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis," in *Aesthetics*, edited by Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Freeland, *But is it Art?* 16.
- <sup>48</sup> Mary Nooter Roberts and Susan Vogel, *Exhibition-ism: museums and African art* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1994), 111.
- <sup>49</sup> Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Aesthetics*, edited by Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 252.
- <sup>50</sup> Lynda Jessup, "Hard Inclusion," in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, edited by Lynda Jessup with Shannon Bagg (Hull, Que.: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002), xvi.

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<sup>51</sup> Emory Elliott, "Introduction: Cultural Diversity and the Problem of Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, edited by Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton and Jeffrey Rhyne (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Redfield, "Art and Icon," in *Aspects of Primitive Art* (New York: The Museum of Primitive Art, 1959), 34.

<sup>53</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, "Can the Canon Burst?" *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 2 (June 1996): 217.

<sup>54</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 30.

<sup>55</sup> Roberts and Vogel. *Exhibition-ism*, 82.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>57</sup> Richard L. Anderson, *Calliope's Sisters: A Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 130.

<sup>58</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," in *Aesthetics*, edited by Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 118.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>61</sup> Dorothy Farr, personal communication to the author, 29 June 2006.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

## CONCLUSION

Knowing the histories of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, their collecting habits, and their position within broader trends of African art collecting in Canada and the West is central to an understanding of their collection of African art. As James Clifford has argued, “it is important to analyze how powerful discriminations made at particular moments constitute the general system of objects within which valued artifacts circulate and make sense.”<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the Langs and their associates played a seminal role in developing the taste for African, Oceanic, Native North American, Inuit and modern Canadian arts. Not only were they the main patrons of these arts, but also, many established commercial galleries that offered access and information to the wider Canadian public. In this way, their influence was relatively wide reaching. Furthermore, most, if not all of the collectors associated with Justin and Elisabeth Lang donated their collections to major art institutions. It is largely the aesthetic legacy of these Modernist Primitivist collectors that is now on display in art galleries across the country.

Once inside these institutions, the context of the collections’ creation is no longer immediately evident and the objects are importantly and repetitively redefined by curators in ways that may or may not have been in the minds of their collectors. Still, the mark of the collector remains. The process of collecting and exhibiting is a process of filtering. From their original contexts, the objects are selected by the collector, or in some cases by a dealer and then by a collector; then, the objects amassed by the collector must be approved for accession by the institution. Some collections are accepted, and others are not, for a variety of reasons that are deeply rooted in contemporary perspectives about art. The filtering process continues when the curator selects particular objects for a specific exhibition. What is presented to

viewers in museum displays, then, is necessarily limited by the interests of the curator who selected the objects; the museum, which determined what collections the curator would have to draw from; and the collector, who set the parameters for the type of objects he or she wanted to collect and determined what kind of institution the collection would be permanently housed in.

In the case of the Lang's African collection, the collectors' Modernist Primitive interests produced a body of objects that originate predominantly from West Africa, are sculptural in form, and date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The character of the collection is serial – it presents a range of “types” that exemplify the subtle variations between forms. The collecting parameters imposed by the Langs mean that many African arts like basketry, tapestries, and contemporary creations are not represented within the collection. When the Langs decided to donate their collection to an institution, they selected an art museum that they felt would present the objects from a primarily aesthetic perspective. In turn, the Art Centre decided to accept the Lang's African objects because the collection's quality, serial nature, and size excited them. The director of the AEAC, who arguably shared a Modernist Primitivist aesthetic taste with the Langs, also valued the collection for its ability to illuminate European works of art already in the Art Centre's collection.

Although the collection includes only African objects, it by no means represents “African art” comprehensively and the exhibitions organized by the AEAC reflect this constraint. As Jacqueline Fry declared in her catalogue essay for *Visual Variations*, “these groupings [of objects] are not the result of an exhaustive search for illustrative examples; comparisons are at times based on the more or less anarchic data provided by a single collection. The sample of works dealt with here is limited, sometimes frustratingly so...”<sup>2</sup> It is essential that curators recognize the specific

histories of the individuals who form museum collections so that they can be aware of the assumptions and values that are embodied in the accumulation of particular sets of objects. By doing this, museums might be more self-conscious in their displays and find ways to fill the gaps that emerge between the discriminations of different collectors.

Although the preceding analysis offered a more comprehensive discussion of the Langs, their collecting circle, and the collection of African art produced out of their specific circumstances than was previously in existence, it also raised many questions that cannot be addressed adequately within the scope of this thesis. How did Modernist Primitivism become manifest within the larger Canadian context in the mid-twentieth century? What was the seemingly essential link between the taste for Primitive arts and the interest in modern Canadian artists? Did the relationships collectors and dealers of Primitive arts had with contemporary Canadian artists influence the kind of art they produced? Examining the Langs and their collection of African art has contributed to developing a picture of the Modernist Primitive 'taste culture' of mid-twentieth-century Canada, but has by no means established more than a small segment of the larger scenario. At the same time, the focus of this thesis did not provide the opportunity to examine the role of objects from the Lang's collection in their originating communities in Africa.

While it is important to recognize the position of collectors when presenting art exhibitions, curators have to be careful not to become so focussed on their activities that the objects themselves and a discussion of their original cultural contexts and creators do not receive due consideration. When Jeanne Cannizzo undertook her investigation of the first phase of African art collecting in Canada, she presented an exhibition that framed the objects from a colonial perspective. Cannizzo

observed that the ROM's collection, made up from bequests of missionary and military men, was fragmented in nature. She felt that as a result it lacked chronological depth, geographical concentration, and ethnographic focus.<sup>3</sup> According to Cannizzo, the collection also lacked a wealth of objects that could compare with the masterpieces of European and American institutions. She stated that "the fragmentary nature of the collection itself thus eliminated the possibility of a major exhibition focussed on a single cultural group, a single topical theme, or any overview of the immensely complex history of the continent."<sup>4</sup> There was, however, a great deal of historical documentation concerning the objects' missionary and military collectors (including photographs, newspaper articles, etc).<sup>5</sup> Rather than creating an exhibition of African objects that she suspected would fall short of audience expectations due to its lack of comprehensiveness, Cannizzo decided to acknowledge the fragmentary nature of the collection as part of her strategy. She conceived of the exhibition as a critical examination of the museum and its collection as a form of visual ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Many visitors to the exhibition expressed anger about the exhibition's content because they felt that Cannizzo had privileged the perspectives of the collectors over those of objects' original creators. Within a few months of its opening, *Into the Heart of Africa* quickly became the site of outrage and controversy. The most vocal opposition group to the exhibition was the *Coalition for the Truth About Africa* (CFTA). Made up of members of Toronto's Black community, the group accused the exhibition of being "racist" and promoting "white supremacist" views of Africa.<sup>7</sup> The CFTA lodged these complaints for a variety of complicated reasons, but at the centre of their concern was a desire to see an exhibition that offered a celebration of African vitality, innovation, and artistic accomplishment. While objects obtained by

collectors are certainly affected by their removal from their original context, this should not be considered the sole determining factor of their future possibilities of display. Instead, curators need to find ways to push the boundaries and limits of museums and collections so that objects can speak to multiple publics in novel and diverse ways.

In the context of current theorizations of museums as sites for the negotiation and articulation of cultural citizenship,<sup>8</sup> increased immigration from Africa to Canada means that the objects in Canadian institutions are acquiring new political significance. How our museums care for and present these objects and the ways that they respond to the communities who share a cultural ownership of the items acts as a kind of micro-representation of social relationships and values within Canadian society. As Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have argued, “the museum’s primary function is ideological. It is meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it society’s most revered beliefs and values.”<sup>9</sup> It is important then, that Canadian museums work to understand the objects in our collections of African art by undertaking further research and consulting with community members. By engaging in these kinds of activities, ethnographic and art museums might be able to present African objects from a variety of perspectives.

As it stands, very little is known about the works in the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art. Without curatorial expertise and funding, the Art Centre has found it difficult to research the origins, functions, and meanings of the works in their African collection. Developing information about the objects in the Lang Collection is just one of the many projects that scholars could turn their attention to in the field of African art in Canada in the coming years. With over 25,000 objects of African origin in Canadian collections, most of which have not been

researched in any capacity, the field is a fruitful and relevant area for future investigation. It is my hope that Africanists from a range of disciplines will take an interest in the material culture available in this country and contribute to the development of rich and informative resources on African art.

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<sup>1</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 221.

<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Fry, *Visual Variations : African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection: 1 March-3 may 1987, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston Canada* (Kingston, Canada: The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1987), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jeanne Cannizzo, "Exhibiting Cultures: 'Into the Heart of Africa'," *Visual Anthropology Review* 7, no.1 (Spring 1991): 150.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Eva Mackey, "Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in a Multicultural Nation: Contests Over Truth in the *Into the Heart of Africa* Controversy," *Public Culture* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 404.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3 (December 1980): 449.

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