

DIDIER CLAES

African masks from the collection of Dr. Rafaeli

Tefaf 2015 13-22 March

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À l'occasion de sa seconde participation à la Tefaf (13-22 mars), Didier Claes nous fera découvrir trois masques de la célèbre collection du Dr Alex Rafaeli: un masque inédit du « Maitre de Bouaflé », un masque Kwélé du Gabon mais aussi un masque Yaouré de Côte d'Ivoire.

Ici l'histoire s'écrit avec un grand H:

En effet, le masque du « Maître de Bouaflé » appartenait à l'une des plus grandes figures de l'art moderne: **Paul Guillaume** (1891-1934), marchand de Soutine, Modigliani, Derain, Picasso, Matisse ou encore Van Dongen, pionnier par ailleurs de la découverte de l'art africain, en Occident.

En avant-première et en exclusivité, Didier Claes nous dévoile trois masterpieces...

Alex Rafaeli mena une existence pour le moins hors du commun...

Né à Riga (capitale de l'actuelle Lettonie) en 1910, il vécut à la fois les dernières années de l'Empire Russe et la révolution de 1917. Fils aîné de parents communistes, dès l'adolescence, il acquiert l'intime conviction de la nécessité d'un État juif en Palestine, ayant été le triste témoin de pogroms.

Il foule le sol de Jérusalem, pour la première fois en 1933, il s'y installa définitivement, en 1954. Entre ces deux dates, il voyage abondamment.

Arrivé aux États-Unis en 1940, il intègre l'armée américaine en 1943 et participe au débarquement en Normandie, lien avec la France, dont il maîtrisait la langue.

Son épouse, Esther Rafaeli, explique qu'après son installation définitive en Israël, il prit le temps d'agrandir sa collection de masques africains:

«He had time to develop his interest in art and to expand our collection of paintings and African masks», in Rafaeli – A Eulology (Colloquium June 17 2007, Weyman Institute, New York).

Il la valorisera au travers d'expositions, d'abord en 1953 au National Museum Bezalel de Jérusalem (cette exposition sera ensuite montrée à Tel-Aviv) puis en 1955 au Museum of Modern Art d'Haïfa.

Figurant dès la première de ces expositions, les trois masques que Didier Claes présente à la TEFAF, correspondraient ainsi aux premières acquisitions d'Alex Rafaeli, sans doute avant le début de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, en 1939.

Cette hypothèse est corroborée par la mention, dans les catalogues de ces expositions, d'une provenance "Ancienne collection Paul Guillaume", pour au moins une de ces pièces.

TEFAF 2015, the collection of African masks of Dr. Alex Rafaeli, by Didier Claes (stand 135).

For our second participation in The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) (13-22 March), Didier Claes will help us discover three masks from the famous collection of Dr. Alex Rafaeli: one previously unshown mask by the "Master of Bouaflé", a Kwélé mask from Gabon along with a Yaouré mask from Ivory Coast

Here History is written with a capital H:

The mask of the "Master of Bouaflé" in fact belonged to one of the greatest figures of modern art: **Paul Guillaume** (1891-1934), whose dealings included works by Soutine, Modigliani, Derain, Picasso, Matisse and Van Dongen, and who was also a pioneer in the discovery of African art in the West.

As a preview, and exclusively, Didier Claes shows us three masterpieces:

Alex Rafaeli had an extraordinary life, which is the least one can say... Born in Riga (capital of present-day Latvia) in 1910, he experienced both the last years of the Russian Empire and the 1917 revolution. The eldest son of Communist parents, as a teenager he became deeply persuaded of the need for a Jewish state in Palestine, having been the sad witness of pogroms.

He set foot in Jerusalem for the first time in 1933, and settled there for good in 1954. Between those two dates he travelled a great deal.

Arriving in the United States in 1940, he joined the US army in 1943 and took part in the Normandy landings, a link, for him, with France—he spoke fluent French.

His wife, Esther Rafaeli, explains that after settling for good in Israel, he took the time to enlarge his collection of African masks:

"He had time to develop his interest in art and to expand our collection of paintings and African masks", in Rafaeli – A Eulology (Colloquium June 17 2007, Weyman Institute, New York).

He would further develop his collection through exhibitions, first in 1953 at the National Museum Bezalel in Jerusalem (that show would subsequently move to Tel Aviv), then, in 1955, at the Museum of Modern Art in Haifa.

Featuring in the first of those shows, the three masks which Didier Claes is presenting at the TEFAF were thus part of Alex Rafaeli's earliest acquisitions, probably made before the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1939.

This hypothesis is corrobarated by the mention, in the catalogues for exhibition, coming from the former collection of Paul Guillaume, for at least one of those pieces.

GURO

de Bouaflé (en référence au chef-lieu d'une subdivision administrative de Côte d'Ivoire) ou à son

The Guro mask on view, hitherto never shown and purchased from **Paul Guillaume**, can probably be attributed to the Master of Bouaflé (referring to the centre of an administrative subdivision in Ivory Coast), or his workshop.

The art dealer had a particular soft spot for the Master's sculpture, and several of his works passed into his hands between 1920 and 1930. He incidentally sold one in 1926 to the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

Shedding light:

On the style:

A headdress made of a single straight lock rises over the front of the forehead. It calls to mind that of the anthropomorphic loom pulley in the illustrious Félix Fénéon collection. Acquired between 1930 and 1944, it features to this day in the collections of the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris), (inv.73.1975.1.1). The three vertical folds trace ornamental scarifications. This was the custom applied to women in the south of the Guro region, while men had four. An opposite tradition reigned in the north of the region. Our mask delights the eye through the canons of Guro beauty which it brings together: a refined and harmonious face, hair with parallel grooves extending the high forehead, arched eyebrows, lowered eyelids, and a delicate nose.

Note, on the back of the mask, two numbered labels, glued on, one of which refers to the catalogue of the Israeli exhibitions.

On the meaning:

In terms of religion, among the Guro, the sacred nature of masks does not directly refer to the object but to the altar where the rite was carried out.

On the influence of Guro art, in the early 20th century:

Before being associated with the "Master of Bouaflé", and before being regarded as Guro, the first pieces in this style were called "Zénouela dance masks".

This name has, needless to add, been abandoned by art history, but it is still meaningful: an evocation of the European enthusiasm for masks from central Ivory Coast in the early 20th century.





KWÉLÉ

On the style:

Brought from the French Congo during the first quarter of the 20th century, the very classical form of the heart-shaped face, with its refined décor, is highlighted by a small crested hat covered in kaolin.

Note the eyes, slanting towards the temples, and upside down when compared to the illustrious specimen, in the Tristan Tzara collection, held in the Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva. The studded decor of the nose and eyebrows is also distinctive.

On the meaning:

Kwélé masks were associated with the male initiatory society of the Beete, bringing together notables and warriors, at once a social and political marker.

Its rites held on community occasions, initiations and mourning, for example, galvanized the group's magic powers, to solve crises and encourage the collective life of the village in general, and hunting in particular.

The small sanctuary building which housed them also served as a secret place for the meetings of initiated members.





YAOURÉ

On the style:

Indentations frame the face, and the hair adorns the forehead in three semi-circles, a sign of both power and wealth.

The indented edge traces the face, with its serene and internalized expression created by the halfclosed eyelids.

Refined Yaouré masks are often enhanced by a sculpted element at the top of the headwear, reproducing horns, braids and animal figures.

This one has the form of two ringed horns directly above pointed ears. Like a zoomorphic imprint on a young female face, this mask typology belongs to the religious ensemble of the Dyé masks, which we also find among the Guro.

The Mandé origin closely links the Yaouré and Guro peoples. They live in a wooded, gold-bearing region. The geographical position between Guro and Baoulé can easily be found in the reciprocal stylistic influences of their sculpted works.



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