

Our Town

[snip] **Conservative evolution.** A lot of liberals may assume that because conservative patriarchal families are reproducing faster than liberal, secularist ones, America's headed back to the Dark Ages. But as sociologist Kieran Healy writes at

crookedtimber.org, "the terms 'conservative' and 'liberal' are moving targets. Even assuming all the kids of conservative parents grow up relatively conservative, does this mean they'll hold the same substantive views as their forebears? Insofar as there

has been any drift in generally shared ideas, it seems to have been in the direction of adopting views that would have been considered liberal or radical in previous generations." —Harold Henderson | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

Art

The Genuine Article

Tribal art dealer Larry Kolton wants the stuff the tourists can't get—and he'll risk life and limb to find it.

By Burt Michaels

"This is magic," Larry Kolton says as he lifts a tiny wood sculpture from a display case in his kitchen and holds it gingerly in his palm. "This is a Dayak tun-tun from New Guinea, just a wooden stake to warn passersby that a boar trap lay hidden below ground." Its finial features an exquisite carving of a human face, complete with eyelashes, brows, lips, teeth, and an intricate necklace. "The Dayak tribe didn't have TV; their most utilitarian possessions became art," Kolton says. "Carving is a deeply religious experience for them. In our culture we'd just buy an orange plastic stake from Home Depot."

Kolton, a tribal art dealer, lives near the Indiana Dunes in a log house built in 1856 as a rest stop for stagecoaches. Inside hundreds of primitive artifacts commingle, from a 20-foot hand-carved canoe to thumb-size metal figurines. On his kitchen wall hang 30 masks, each uglier and scarier than the next, made by the forest tribes of Ivory Coast. His office and library contain more than 3,000 art books and periodicals. Elsewhere on the grounds are a workshop for fabricating display stands and a two-story warehouse jammed with thousands of carvings, costumes, pottery, and weapons.

There's a brisk world market for tribal art, built around commercial galleries and auction houses, but one of the most amazing things about Kolton's inventory is that he bought the bulk of it directly from indigenous people, at or near the place of origin. The big, burly, bearded 66-year-old is one of only a handful of Westerners who venture into urban slums and remote villages, some accessible only by river, to procure genuine artifacts. He's made dozens of trips, each typically six weeks long, to the hinterlands of Africa, New Guinea, Australia, Panama, Mexico, and China. "Buying directly from tribal people puts you in touch with their cul-



Larry Kolton; roof finial birds from New Guinea and a Tintam figure from the African Dogon tribe



ture," he says. "For me it's the difference between going to a ball game and watching it on TV."

Kolton, who grew up on the south side of Chicago, first encountered tribal art while studying painting at the School of the Art Institute. "Primitivism defined 20th-century art," he says. "Modigliani, Brancusi, Henry Moore all collected tribal art. Africa taught the West abstraction." He worked briefly as a commercial artist after graduating in 1963, but says the "corporate world gave me ulcers." After quitting his job he hooked up with a group called Five Starving Artists, sketching portraits for tourists in Old Town, then tried a stint as a restorer at Wally Findlay Galleries, but he remained restless. Having spent some time working at a Victorian antique shop in college, he decided to open his own store in Lincoln Park. In addition to his local sales, Kolton would truck oak furniture and stained glass to California, where it commanded higher prices. Along the way he'd stop at Indian reservations to purchase silver jewel-

ry and pottery.

The Gods as We Shape Them

WHEN Through 9/10: Tue 10 AM-8 PM, Wed-Sun 10 AM-5 PM
WHERE Loyola University Museum of Art, 820 N. Michigan
PRICE \$4-\$6
INFO 312-925-7600

Hunt & Gather

WHEN Through 5/13: Mon-Thu 10 AM-10 PM, Fri-Sat 10 AM-4 PM, Sun 1-4 PM
WHERE Evanston Art Center, 2603 Sheridan, Evanston
PRICE Free
INFO 847-475-5300, evanstonart-center.org

By the mid-70s Lincoln Park had grown too gentrified for Kolton. "The neighbors didn't like seeing my pickup truck on the street, and I was tired of hauling uninteresting furniture," he says. "So I sold the shop and moved to the Dunes." He took a job with Czarnowski Exhibits, designing and installing trade show exhibits nationwide, which paid him enough to finance his first trip to Africa. He chose Abidjan, the commercial capital of Ivory Coast, as his destination. At the time the city attracted people from all over the continent seeking work, and they often brought familial artifacts. A market flourished in Treichville, the city's immigrant shantytown. Kolton hired a driver to take him there, and as they neared the market, three men jumped on the car. "No one knows you're there," he says. "There's no police in a place like that. I figured it was all over." But after much shouting and gesticulating, it turned out the men were money changers wanting to help him exchange dollars.

Despite the large sums of money he travels with, Kolton says people have never presented a real problem. "You're carrying \$30,000 to \$50,000 cash. The people know you have it because you're there to buy, so of course there's a sense of danger that I'll be rolled or killed. But warrior peoples have a sense of honor, and so far I haven't been harmed." Once, in rural Burkina Faso, Kolton needed to exchange \$6,000 for local currency. He hired four bodyguards to drive him to the nearest bank. "The bank had to close—we took all their cash," he says. "The townspeople surrounded our car and we just inched our way through the crowd. They'd never seen so much cash." He says he never carries weapons: "I just wear colorful police T-shirts, or a T-shirt with a devil on it. Police are the biggest problem, looking for bribes."

Disease is a more immediate concern. "Ptomaine is my greatest fear," he says. "I carry charcoal capsules to flush out the digestive system, but mostly I don't eat much. I lose about

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20 pounds on a trip." He says Papua New Guinea is the most primitive spot he's visited. "There are a lot of bugs and no amenities. No hotels. You bring your own mosquito netting, your own food. If you get sick you're in trouble—there's no communications, and you can be weeks away from the nearest doctor. You sleep outside because it's hard to sleep indoors with people who don't bathe." To get to remote villages up the Sepik River, he hires two 50-foot canoes with outboard motors, paying as much as \$500 for a 55-gallon drum of fuel. "Usually one of the crew speaks some English, but I mainly rely on pictures to communi-

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tures. A piece may lose significance, like a ghost-dance costume discarded after the ceremony and left in the forest to rot. A carving might be rejected by a shaman. Alan Leder, director of the Evanston Art Center, which has included Kolton in its current exhibit, "Hunt & Gather," dismisses the notion that collectors like Kolton are robbing people of their cultural treasures. "It's a misperception that tribal cultures are naive," he says. "For generations they've traded with the West. They know what's important to them. When an object doesn't meet their spiritual needs, they have no trouble selling it."

Kolton's inventory includes both museum-quality and collectible art. According to Leder, dealers define museum-quality as older than 50 years, with known provenance and most likely not reproducible. "Almost all artifacts of this quality are already in museums or a few private collections," he says. "Collectible works are made in the last 50 years for tribal use, and actually used. They display excellent craftsmanship, but they could be reproduced since there are still many skillful artisans."

Determining whether a piece was actually used is challenging, he says. "For instance, if it smells of smoke, it may have been used in a firelit ritual or stored near a cooking fire. Or a clever counterfeiter could have held it over an open flame to give it instant patination."

Kolton's collection can be seen online (tribalartworks.com) and at his home showroom by appointment. He's exhibited at university museums at Valparaiso and Governors State, and in addition to the Evanston exhibit, one of his pieces is currently included in "The Gods as We Shape Them" at the Loyola University Museum of Art. He'll also be part of a group show at Purdue University planned for the fall. Kolton will head to China in May for another expedition and is conducting research to prepare for his first trip to northern India. "I'll be ready in a year or two, maybe for my 68th birthday," he says. "I guess I'll just keep this up till the supply of artifacts gives out—or I do. Whichever comes first." ■

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cate what I'm looking for," he says.

Kolton spends at least a year doing research and collecting sample pho-

tos before each buying trip. He finances the expeditions himself, then sells the goods from his house. "I look through probably a hundred objects before buying one," he says, "and sometimes it takes days in a village before I start seeing anything worthwhile. First the villagers bring *yama yama*," or objects made for tourists or export. "Then they bring damaged goods. It can take a whole day to find one Kuba skirt. Hardly anyone makes them anymore because it takes two months to make one and they now have Western notions of hourly worth. They wear factory-made cotton."

He says changing economic realities are making his job more difficult.

"In ten years you won't be able to find genuine tribal artifacts. Western companies move in and destroy their way of life. Young people don't care about this old stuff." Douglas Dawson, whose Chicago gallery specializes in ancient non-Western art, agrees. "Most tribal art is now being made for the benefit of Westerners, who care less about authenticity than appearance," he says. "So there's an unending supply of fakes, but authentic pieces made for tribal use are becoming rarer and more expensive."

Kolton says indigenous people sell artifacts for many reasons: A farmer or construction worker excavating land might upturn old metal sculp-

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