William C. Siegmann
(1943–2011)

by Kevin D. Dumouchelle

There is a tradition among Liberian peoples that an object which once belonged to a deceased person may be used to contact the spirit of the departed. When a person dies, a possession which he or she has been especially associated with in life—a ring, a spinning bobbin or a pipe, for example—may be taken by a relative and placed first in the hand of the deceased and then over his heart while the spirit of the deceased is told to depart in peace.

The spirit is asked not to look back in anger upon the living, but to aid in bringing fertility, health, and prosperity to the survivors and the community at large. The ancestral spirit is also called upon to return with his aid when hidden through this, his former possession, which the Kgelle ca a namo kori or “rock of the ancestor.” —William C. Siegmann, 1977: inside cover

Bill was, himself, the ultimate “rock of the ancestor.” As he explained in the prologue to the catalogue he wrote in residence at the Africana Museum at Cuttington University College in 1977, a namo kori functioned as a conduit between one entering the ancestral realm and the memories that the individual in question left behind. Bill lived this larger principle as a mission. Bill’s life can be read as a series of ongoing and overlapping drives to make connections to and around African art.

As a connoisseur, Bill sought to restore links between an object and its original maker and users, in a tireless and often fruitful search for individual hands. As a scholar, his long and cherished time in the field allowed him unique insights uniting an object and its social life. As a curator, he brought together a number of collections, most notably that of the Brooklyn Museum, and a public eager to participate in a shared exhilaration inspired by incredible works. As a collector, Bill had a well-honed capacity to see and easily explain an individual work against the totality of a corpus, with a keen understanding of the market. Finally, as a kind, gregarious, and unfailingly generous colleague, mentor, and friend, Bill was a seemingly endless source of insight and support. (Indeed, the list of those who interned and worked with him at Brooklyn reads as a veritable “Who’s Who” of the current field.) I remain grateful and humbled to have learned from him in all modes, and to have shared a place in that circle of support.

Bill’s strengths were not flashy, and not those of a man whose approach to African art was merely a career. For Bill, his work was his passion. In taking on a new project, his prevailing mode was one of thorough and serious dedication. This innate sincerity seemed a direct product of his proudly Minnesotan upbringing. While his great life’s fixation was for objects and the connections they engendered, he valued honest, deep, and long-lasting relationships above all else. Indeed, Bill maintained life-long acquaintances with childhood friends, making his last extended trip to Minneapolis for a fiftieth high-school reunion in the late summer of 2011. (I recall fondly—though not without my own perhaps overly cynical initial befuddlement —extended earnest expositions from this man of the world on the relative merits of the culinary delights of the Minnesota State Fair.) For all of his achievements, Bill maintained a humility and solidarity that made him an ideal interlocutor for the many connections that he maintained.

This quiet, open, and grounded spirit informed his earliest work in Africa, which began with service with the Peace Corps in Liberia in the late 1960s. Here, he grew in his deep affection for the country, his conviction in the necessity of knowing the continent through time spent there and, above all, in his capacity for patience. Posted to Cuttington University College, where he taught history, Bill developed his skills in museum practice on the ground, founding the Africana Museum and developing its collections from scratch. Pivoting from working with practitioners of the arts of masquerade and initiation in the field to developing links with the art traders in the cities, Bill parlayed that penchant for patience into diplomatic skills that would pay off handsomely in his later work. Yet Bill’s connection to Liberia remained profoundly and uniquely personal as well. He was adopted, in the most literal manner possible, by the Bolay family of Bolahun, with whom he continues to hold a place as a brother, uncle, and son.

Returning to the US and embarking upon doctoral work in history at Indiana University upon the end of his Peace Corps service, Bill caught the eye of Roy Sieber and became an essential member of the circle of early African art adherents that the professor cultivated in Bloomington. Bill’s relationship to Sieber was one of mutual admiration and respect, with the “big man” of African art maintaining a uniquely deferential respect for Bill’s extended time in the field, and above all for an impeccable connoisseur’s eye that Sieber quickly recognized and admired.

 Corrections

We regret that due to a proofreading error, Enid Schildkrout’s surname was misspelled throughout the review of her book Dynasty and Divinity (co-authored with Henry John Draelaw) in vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 90–91.

The editors would also like to state that the decision to blur sections of pictures published in Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann’s article “Under Imperial Eyes, Black Bodies, Buttocks, and Breasts” in vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 46–57, was solely that of the author of the piece.
As was his wont, Bill devoted himself deeply and fully to the arts of Liberia and Sierra Leone, his adopted home. Over the course of his lifetime, he wrote continuously on the arts of masquerades and age grades in this area, as well as on issues in museology, collecting, and interpretation. Articles that he authored in the pages of this journal continue to remain the primary reference for the local arts of Poro and men’s masquerades in the region, for example. Yet even beyond the select number of publications he completed in his lifetime on the arts of Liberia and Sierra Leone, his knowledge of the subject was encyclopedic, widely recognized, and generously offered to all seeking to learn more on the topic. He was, in the oft-referenced adage of Amadou Hampâté Bâ, a walking archive on the subject. This understanding was informed by the sophisticated personal collection he developed over the years from the region, which has been generously shared, following his wishes, with a number of US public institutions. The highlights, such as a spectacular and oft-published Mano mask, given to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, or an impressive full-body Gola gbetu masquerade costume offered by Bill to Brooklyn last year, will be exhibited in an exhibition in the coming years, organized by Minneapolis (and travelling to several venues) and conceived and partially written by Bill. This was a project that we discussed, and on which he labored, until the end.

Bill returned to Liberia to pursue research between 1974 and 1976, which was supported by a Fulbright-Hays fellowship. Upon his return to the US, he began to realize his calling as a curator, developing and reinstalling the collections at the Museum of the Society of African Missions, in Tenafly, NJ, and then at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco from 1979–84. Upon being awarded another Fulbright fellowship in 1984, Bill once again returned to Liberia. In conjunction with the West African Museums Programme, he became Director of the National Museum of Liberia, in Monrovia, where he oversaw the renovation of the museum’s nineteenth-century building and the expansion and reinstallation of its collections. That penchant for patience, cultivated in his earlier work in-country, and seasoned by translating those experiences into the differing expectations of Bloomington, New York, and San Francisco, would be tested and refined in Samuel Doe’s Monrovia, where he learned to quietly work the system to the museum’s advantage. It would also steady him over the coming decades, as he watched so much hard work reversed at a pained distance, as the country later spiraled tragically out of control.

Over the years, Bill shared the skills he honed in collections development broadly, conducting frequent seminars on museum management and curatorial training in Europe, Africa, and South America through grants from UNESCO and the US Department of State. Not one to set his missions easily aside, Bill continued to work as a consultant to the Saint Louis Art Museum until late last year.

But it is, perhaps, in his role as curator at the Brooklyn Museum, for twenty very productive years, that Bill’s public legacy lives on most prominently. It is certainly where his talents for collecting, scholarship, diplomacy, and patience were tested to their most fruitful ends. It is certainly where his public legacy lives on most prominently. It is certainly where his talents for collecting, scholarship, diplomacy, and patience were tested to their most fruitful ends. During his tenure at Brooklyn from 1987 to 2007, Bill acquired over 1600 objects for the museum, a prolific record of considered connoisseurship that is effectively unmatched in the history of the museum’s African and Pacific collections. (Our storied predecessor Stewart Culin acquired a similar number of objects in the early 1920s—almost all from one source—but I offer Bill the “win” for the considerable added challenges of collection building in the late twentieth century and for the overall quality of his acquisitions.) Bill worked assiduously to promote the inherent strengths and marvels of Brooklyn’s collec-
tions (among, if not the, largest and oldest for an American art museum), from rambunctious school groups to the most rarefied of collectors, all while continuing to develop the museum’s holdings in areas, such as Ethiopia or Liberia and Sierra Leone, which had previously been underrepresented. Several stunning large caches of objects acquired over the course of his tenure illustrate his successes. In his first year at Brooklyn, Bill accepted a generous gift of nearly 200 high-quality pieces, mostly from Melanesia, from John and Marcia Friede and Melville W. Hall, which did much to transform the museum’s Oceanic holdings into one of the most important public Pacific collections in the region. Through a patient application of sincerity and a connoisseur’s charm, Bill acquired a bequest in 2003 from Beatrice Riese, whose collection—shaped by her experiences as an artist in Paris in the 1920s—contained profound and previously unknown masterpieces, such as a rare and enigmatic Fang mask whose form speaks tellingly of an early, Parisian avant-garde taste in African art. Sharing a deep and abiding passion for the region, Bill also acquired hundreds of works from Blake Robinson, whose gifts, such as an early twentieth century We gbaule divination object, made Brooklyn into a rich resource for the arts of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Bill organized a significant number of major exhibitions at Brooklyn, several of which, including “Image and Reflection: Adolph Gottlieb’s Pictographs and African Sculpture” (1989–90), “In Pursuit of the Spiritual: Oceanic Art Given by Mr. and Mrs. John A. Friede and Mrs. Melville W. Hall” (1990–91), and “Masterworks of African Art from the Collection of Beatrice Riese” (2000), celebrated and shared major gifts he had acquired for the collection. Other shows, such as “African Art and Leadership” (1989) or “Assemblage of Spirits: Idea and Image in New Ireland” (1988) took thematic approaches, with the goal of speaking to Brooklyn’s diverse yet enthusiastic audiences. Bill’s tenure also included four separate reinstallations of the African and Pacific Islands collections, reflecting the changing trends and scholarship of the time. As a final project, he spearheaded, edited, and was the primary author for African Art: A Century at the Brooklyn Museum (2009), the first major catalogue of the museum’s collection and an ongoing resource in promoting the collection’s strengths while interpreting its fascinating and instructive history.

It was through work on that catalogue that I came to know Bill, first as a generous and supportive supervisor, and then later as a mentor and friend. Over the course of what was originally supposed to be a three-month project, Bill and I began a series of lunches that soon turned into warm and expansive exchanges that extended beyond his departure from the museum in 2007 and which ranged in topic from the nature and importance of field work, the changing shape of scholarship, and friendly invitations to consider switching my area of focus to Liberia, to the finer points of connoisseurship, museum practices, collecting, the New York African art scene, museum politics, and work/life balance. As I grew in my responsibilities at the museum, I worked with the confidence that, when questions arose or successes needed sharing, Bill was always only a phone call or short walk away, and that—even when we occasionally disagreed—I could always count on a thoughtful, sincere, intelligent, and often wickedly funny conversation.

Bill and I continued those conversations until his final day. Indeed, even when increasingly bound to his home, Bill’s social calendar remained dizzyingly full. The breadth and depth of the relationships he had cultivated throughout his life came home in a truly beautiful manner as he continued to receive countless daily phone calls and visits, drawing upon formidable reserves of strength while benefitting, in turn, from the goodwill and camaraderie. Bill’s approach to the cancer with which he struggled in the past decade was one of dogged tenacity, experimenting with new therapies while nevertheless shrugging off limitations and embarking on excursions to China or cruises around Tierra del Fuego. He exhibited a combination of guile and grace that was, in the end, informed by an ecumenical, yet deeply held and personal Episcopal faith. Bill lived with a confidence secure in his connections to where he had been, and where he was going.

His internments and memorial/birthday celebrations each occurred simultaneously across the Atlantic, in Minneapolis and Lofa County, Liberia, and then in New York and Monrovia, respectively. His Liberian burial included visits from three Loma landai masks in Bolahun. The most powerful Poro masks in the region, they are considered the guardians and interlocutors of the society’s most important secrets. I can think of no more fitting tribute.

Depart in peace, dear friend, and look back on us with aid from the realm of the ancestors, secure in the knowledge that the many namôa koni you have left behind—museum stores developed, scholarly interpretations offered, art collected, relationships fostered—live on in your memory.

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References cited