



Photographing African Art Like A Pro

An Interview with Hughes Dubois

November 29, 2019
By: Adenike Cosgrove

Hughes Dubois first started photographing art in 1977—forty years later he has produced over 50,000 photographs of more than 38,000 art objects that have been featured in 190 publications. According to the award-winning photographer, to capture African art digitally one must “be respectful of the object. The photograph should enhance the object’s expression and emotion and, even more importantly, its soul.” This respect for African art and experience in capturing its allure places Hughes Dubois in the unique position of providing guidance on what good looks like when photographing the art.

With many of us striving to effectively catalogue our collections, we ask Hughes for his tips and advice on how to photograph African art like a pro.



© Arthur Wollenweber

Tell us a little about yourself, how did you discover African art and how long have you been photographing it?

I have been photographing art objects since 1977 —forty years of observing, appreciating and showing what touches me and moves me in the arts in general and in particular those called ‘art premier’ or first arts. All these years spent with them has brought me joy and wonder. It’s opened me up to the diversity, the richness of expression, creativity and spirituality of world cultures.

In 1983, I collaborated with the art dealer Émile Deletaille on a publication on Pre-Columbian art titled, Rediscovered Masterpieces of Mesoamerica, that he had been working on with two collectors, Gérald Berjonneau and Jean-Louis Sonnerly. Émile asked me to photograph the previously unpublished pieces of Mesoamerican art. I discovered with him the most formidable pre-Columbian art—Olmec, Aztec, Nayarit and of course Maya. Émile initiated the education of my gaze by emphasising the understanding of objects

and angles.

After the book was publishing, in 1985, we immediately embarked on a second project, Chefsd’Oeuvre Inédits de l’Afrique Noire [Masterpieces of Black Africa], a prelude to the opening of the Dapper Foundation in Paris. This second job took me to the Foundation’s African art collection for which I took the photographs for their first publication, Art et Mythologie (1988). Because of this book, Michel Leveau, the founder of the Dapper Foundation, learned of my work and I became the photographer for his institution. Over thirty years, we produced more than forty books with the Foundation. From that initial engagement with the Dapper Foundation, I got to know all of the major players in the tribal art world in Paris and elsewhere.

All these publications have contributed to providing a wider audience with openness, stimulation and a reliable source of information on African art. The creation and success of the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum (Paris) only confirmed this later.

[On aperture] “The more you close, the more depth of field. It also depends on the optics used because all optics have an optimum aperture. It is therefore to be discovered with experience.”

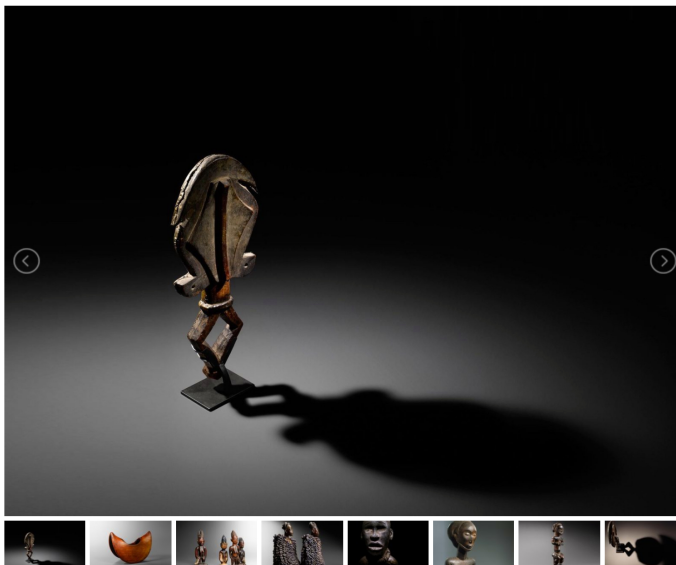


How did you start photographing African art?

At the time, I was working as an art director at an advertising agency in Brussels, which obligated me to be in contact with many photography studios. One of the best known was Roger Asselberghs, whom I met in this context. One day, while I was in his studio, François Neyt and Jacques Blanckaert arrived with a Hemba figure for him to shoot for La Grande Statuaire Hemba du Zaire (1977). I was completely fascinated by this object's personality.

Photography had fascinated me since my childhood, but I never thought I could make a career of it. I let everything go to work with Roger. We did lots of advertising shoots and, from time to time, we photographed objects. There was a wonderful synergy between us, but he didn't tell me much about the objects and I wanted to know more about these remarkable art pieces that had been entrusted to us. My second even more pivotal encounter was with Émile Deletaille. With him, I really learned to see. The photo was important, but the object came first.

In my career, I have taken 50,000 photographs of 38,000 art objects from all the continents published for the most part in some 190 books. I had the privilege to have in my hands and in my lens the masterpieces of the world.



How do you go about capturing African art digitally? Where do you begin?

At the beginning of my career, the photographer's role consisted of a simple 'applied art' view of observation. I was asked to 'show' the objects from a simple angle and perspective, regardless of light.

For my part, I have never considered my profession from this perspective alone. Coming from the world of advertising, where the role of light and framing are important, I wanted to enhance the plastic and aesthetic qualities of the objects I was asked to photograph, leveraging more elaborate lighting.

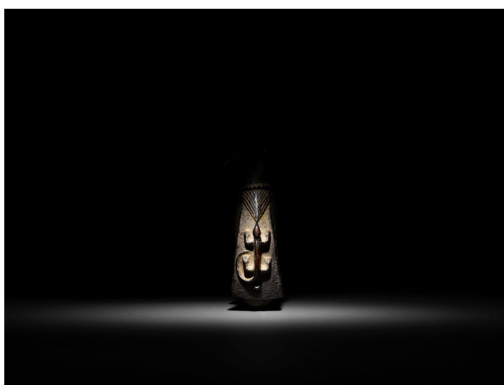
I work with a Linhof Technika camera equipped with a Leaf back of 80,000 pixels and a Schneider Kreuznach Apo-Digital 5.6/120M lens. I start by looking at the object and choosing the angles of view. Then I start the work of lighting, using lighting enhances the understanding of the object.

[On ISO settings] "As low as possible, 50 ISO is perfect!"

What are the unique requirements for capturing the lines, volumes and patina of classic African art?

Be respectful of the object. Observe and analyse the object to restore its specificities and density. The photograph should enhance the object's expression and emotion and, even more importantly, its soul.

What is important is to emphasise what distinguishes an object in relation to others of similar type and to capture its essential features.



Is it worth hiring a professional to capture a private collection or is an iPhone good enough?

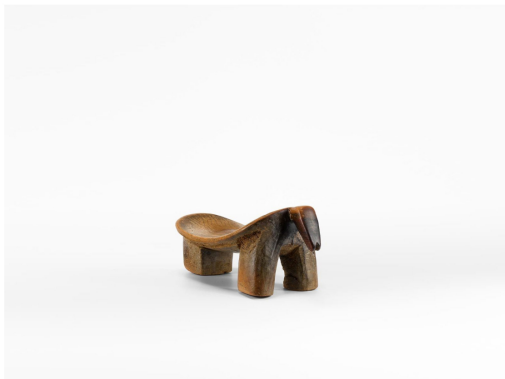
It all depends on what you want the photograph for—is it for social media or for a publication? The quality levels are not the same. It is up to everyone to determine where they stand regarding their requirements for quality and the image of professionalism that they want.

The professional has know-how, techniques and equipment that guarantee superior quality. But the most important thing is the coherence that a professional photographer brings to an editorial project. Making a beautiful photograph can be a chance-encounter accessible to a great number of people, but having a coherent set of photographs is no longer a coincidence, it is a profession.

In your experience, do you think it's possible for the photograph to become more 'art' than the object itself?

Of course! Of course! It is not only masterpieces that make beautiful photographs. Many medium objects are sublimated by photography. The object is the photographic subject but through the play of light, angles and framing, the photographer develops his own photographic artistic expression—it is his sensitivity and his writing.

[On lighting source] "Personally I use continuous light that is used in the cinema."



Based on your experience in working with private collectors and museums, what advice would you have for collectors starting out in African art?

Buy books, see them and review them to train your eye. Then confront all kinds of objects by going to galleries and museums.

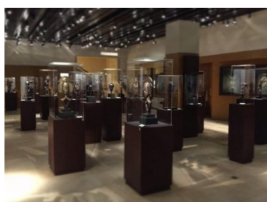
What one object are you still waiting to photograph?

The next one! Whatever it is because it is always a new adventure and a beautiful discovery.

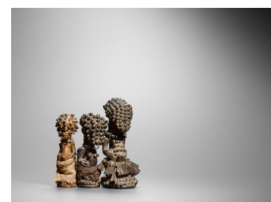
Related Articles



Preserving African Art



In Defense of Museums



Ex-Africa

SHARE THIS



ÌMỌ DÁRA

Connecting African art collectors with dealers and scholars, based on a foundation of knowledge about the origin, use & distinguishing features of listed pieces

Copyright 2019©

FOLLOW US



CONTACT US

INFO@IMODARA.COM

JOIN OUR NEWSLETTER

EMAIL ADDRESS

JOIN