

Africa in the Attic

The Hodges give their collection to American museums

BY DAVID JARMUL

“When we climbed the stairs to the attic, almost all of the floor space was filled with objects. It was the most amazing thing. There were masks, carved figures of all sizes, weapons, vessels, utensils ... Oh, my goodness! Most fascinating and exciting to me were five or six large tables in the middle of the room on which were hundreds of masks.”

Sarah Schroth, director of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, is recalling the moment when she and two colleagues first glimpsed one of the world’s great private collections of West African art. Like Indiana Jones entering a treasure trove, they beheld the extraordinary artifacts in the Durham, North Carolina attic of two returned Peace Corps Volunteers, Reggie and Celeste Hodges, who met nearly a half-century earlier while serving in Sierra Leone.

Celeste hadn’t expected to go there. She’d signed up for Ethiopia, but a Peace Corps recruiter said there was a problem. “I could hear him shuffling papers,” she recalls. “What about Sierra Leone?” he asked me. I said OK, although I wasn’t sure where it was.” She had no idea she was about to meet her life partner and stay with him in West Africa for nearly two decades.

SOMETHING INTERESTING TO DO

Reggie Hodges became interested in the Peace Corps during his junior year at North Carolina Central, a historically black university in Durham where he was studying to become a high school art teacher. He said he wanted to do something interesting and challenging before he drifted into the school classroom and to avoid being sent to Vietnam, where his brother had served.



► Much of two large shipments of African indigenous art collected by Celeste and Reggie Hodges over 32 years was stored in the attic of their home in Durham, North Carolina. Many are now being donated to museums in the region. Visit the Hodges web site at reggieceleste.com

The Peace Corps had about 300 volunteers in Sierra Leone then. Reggie was supposed to teach art in a teacher training college but, like Celeste, he got a surprise. “The country director told us they didn’t have enough slots for everyone.” He agreed to

serve instead as a primary teacher in a village.

Reggie was the only foreigner in Sembahun, a village of about 900 Mende-speakers where during the next three years he helped build a school, a library and a village water system.

Celeste arrived in the coastal town of Shenge during the start of Reggie’s second year and met him at a Peace Corps training conference. They returned together to Shenge and shared an improvised Thanksgiving din-

ner of a duck wrapped with limes in banana leaves. They talked about their backgrounds — hers in a white Catholic neighborhood in Chicago, his in rural North Carolina — and about their religious families. Both wanted a broader life. They began imagining it together.

“We were only 36 miles apart but it wasn’t easy to see each other,” Reggie says. “Trucks left her village every morning loaded with fish. They drove past my village and into Bo Town, the country’s second-largest city. On their way back, I’d hitch a ride, riding for three or four hours in the back of the truck, which smelled like fish.”

REGGIE’S EDUCATION

As his romance with Celeste blossomed,

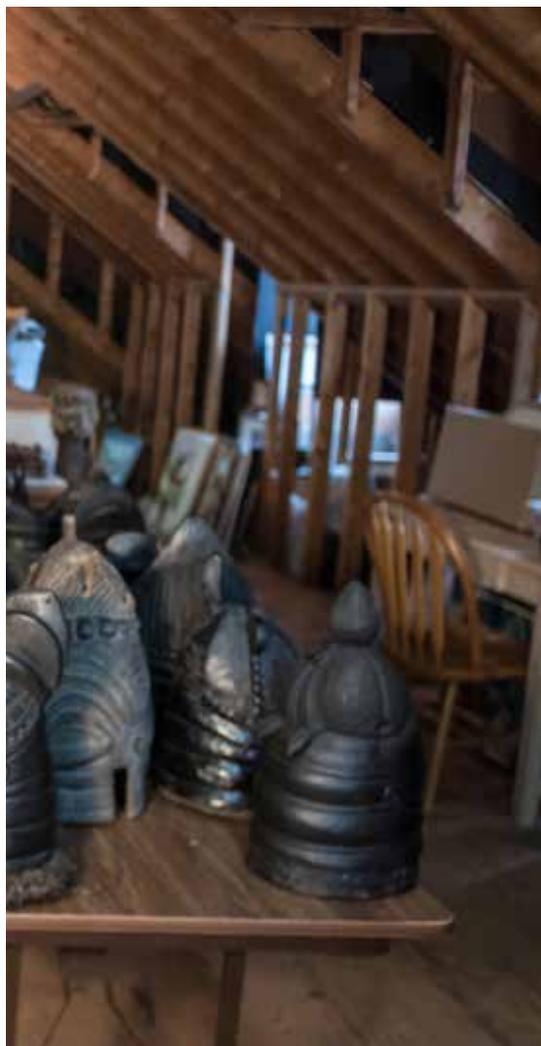
professor, Reggie became an expert in what the world was just beginning to recognize as a compelling artistic tradition with its own aesthetics.

Reggie took photographs and made notes on what he was seeing. Celeste took photographs, too, creating a stunning photographic archive of the region. Reggie began collecting objects as examples to bring home to the American students he expected to teach. “I wasn’t collecting them as art,” he

and bought a loom of his own.

“What is so special about the Hodges collection, in addition to the great variety of styles and forms, is the documentation they collected on their objects, drawn from their years of contact with Sierra Leone artists,” says Frederick J. Lamp, retired curator of African Art at the Yale University Art Gallery who served in Sierra Leone from 1967 to 1969..

When Reggie ended his service as a Peace Corps Volunteer, he was hired as a



► Left: A Sande Society ceremonial helmet carved by Johnny Mong in nearby Bo and acquired by Reggie Hodges in 1972. Right: Reggie acquired this Dan Poro Society initiation mask in Ganta, Liberia, in 1984.

said. “I thought these objects would help me be a better teacher.”

He began with a small soapstone figure and moved on to household items, musical instruments and hand tools. His Sembehun neighbors liked his plastic comb, so he traded his comb their hand-carved wooden combs, some of which are now worth \$500.

His collection grew, supplemented by textiles Celeste began gathering. His neighbors gave him objects. When a student made a traditional Bundu mask for a class project, Reggie bought it for two dollars and then paid the boy’s father, a carver, to teach him how they made it. He asked the blacksmith to show how he made tools. He learned how women made blankets

regional director for Peace Corps in Sierra Leone and visited more than 100 rural communities in the country. Everywhere he went Reggie found art. Local chiefs gave him gifts. In return he brought them school supplies he paid for out of his own pocket. Some people who had recently converted to Islam and Christianity gave him family objects they regarded as conflicting with their new beliefs.

“I didn’t put a lot of money into this,” Reggie says. He and Celeste had moved in together after he began working on Peace Corps staff, and new artifacts began accumulating in their home. When he returned from visiting Volunteers at their sites, he arrived with new artifacts. Celeste began

Reggie also fell in love with the art and crafts that surrounded him. A talented artist himself whose paintings now adorn their Durham home, he admired the craftsmanship and cultural significance of what he saw in Sembehun. He asked his neighbors how they produced and used different objects, and about their meaning. He observed dances and ceremonies. Without books or a

Celeste and Reggie Hodges unless otherwise noted

wondering what Reggie was going to do with all of his collection.” She asked him. “Why are you spending every Saturday afternoon looking for new stuff?”

“It was sort of like an addiction,” Reggie laughs.

Others in Sierra Leone learned about his fascination with local art. When art scholars made their way to Sierra Leone, officials at the American embassy sent them to Reggie’s house. Years later when he visited Washington, D.C., Reggie met with Warren Robbins, a former diplomat whose legendary collection evolved into the National Museum of African Art. “When people like this talked with us, we began to realize the importance of what we were doing,” Reggie says.

CONSCIENTIOUS COLLECTOR

Reggie and Celeste married in 1972 and remained in West Africa far longer than they expected. They lived nine years in Sierra Leone, six in Liberia and two in Ghana. They had two children there, Kadiatu and Hassan.

Celeste held several jobs and Reggie continued with the Peace Corps, including

time as acting country director in Sierra Leone. He then took on other development work, including a four-year stint setting up technical training programs in Liberia. He remained there with Celeste and their children even as the country descended into chaos following a 1980 coup. One day they found a body in their driveway. Reggie began sleeping beneath a window to avoid stray bullets.

Even after he completed that job, Reggie returned to Liberia every year until 2000 to work on programs and promote peace. In 1992 he assisted UNICEF and the Carter Center in assessing how Liberia’s children were affected by the violence and in developing demobilization and rehabilitation programs. He helped negotiate demobilization with the warlord Charles Taylor, who was later convicted by an international court for war crimes that included blood diamonds and sexual slavery. When former President Carter attempted to negotiate peace with Taylor in 1992, Reggie was there, too.

He and others helped to demobilize more than 5,000 combatants in Liberia and Sierra



► The couple lived in a Peace Corps house in Sembehu when Reggie served on Peace Corps staff in 1970. Opposite: The Hodges Sierra Leone home was next door to the mosque in Shenge.

Leone, many of whom were child soldiers. Reggie also interacted with the leaders of several other African countries, discussing both development issues and programs for promoting peace. He received several awards for this work.

His first job back in the States was to oversee vocational educational programs in Africa for OIC International. He later helped to build more than 100 African schools for the International Foundation for Education and Self Help.

Through it all, he kept spending time in Africa collecting African art, always with the knowledge and consent of the previous owners. “I never wanted to be one of those people who takes relics away from a people and deprives them of their own art and culture,” he says. “We got legal permission for what we sent home.” In contrast, “so many works in museum collections were obtained under less than ideal circumstances, sometimes blatantly stolen or looted,” says Amanda Maples, curator of African art at the North Carolina Museum of Art.

“Reggie and Celeste’s careful cataloging of the artists and stories behind their objects carries an enormous amount of educational and cultural value that far outshines its considerable market value,” Maples says.

“The vast majority of material at many museums is unprovenanced,” says Raymond Silverman, a professor and authority in

An Art Windfall

The former African art curator at Yale, Fred Lamp, calls the African art donations a windfall for North Carolina museums. Lamp served in Sierra Leone from 1967 to 1969. “North Carolina has had some good collections of African art, but they have not been well known nationally or internationally, and they have been sparse on the art of this region. This changes things dramatically.”

Reggie and Celeste Hodges donated 27 works of art to the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke and hundreds of Celeste’s negatives and prints to a Duke library. They also have

donated pieces to the Ackland Art Museum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and to the Gregg Museum of Art & Design at North Carolina State University.

“We also want to give back to Duke, where we were both treated for cancer and our daughter received a kidney transplant,” says Celeste, who worked at the university for 18 years.

► Two wooden carved Kongoli masks acquired by Reggie.





Sierra Leone and Liberia. “Many of the items would no longer exist if we didn’t have them,” he says.

RETURN TO DURHAM

Reggie and Celeste made a permanent move to North Carolina, where his aging parents lived, in 2000. They knew it was time. “I got really sick with dengue fever,” said Reggie, who’d had malaria a half-dozen times and now discovered he also had lymphoma. Fortunately, his cancer and Celeste’s own bout

with cancer were resolved. With their children growing up, they eventually settled in Durham, where he led the local literacy group and Celeste worked as a web administrator at Duke University.

They sent home the art they had collected over 32 years in two large shipments. The first arrived in 1979 and the second came six years later. They placed many of the objects in their home freezer before shipment to kill any bugs. Most of the art went to their attic and remained largely unknown to the world until now.

They are working with local museums to catalog and donate much of the collection. Their children want only a couple of the more than 600 objects — both are more interested in Reggie’s own paintings — and they support their parents’ decision to share it with the world instead of selling it privately.

“I learned in Africa that money is not as important as helping others,” Reggie says. “I don’t think people in the West understand that people who live in what we call an underdeveloped country can be happy. I went to Africa with an open mind and my mind opened up even further.”

Celeste says, “We still want to make a positive contribution. Sharing our art is a way to do that.” ●

David Jarmul served in Nepal (77-79) and Moldova (16-18). He lives in Durham, N.C., and blogs at Not Exactly Retired.

African art at the University of Michigan. “Because most objects were collected without documentation, an object’s attribution may say something like ‘Yoruba artist’ and offer a general time period. There’s no artist’s name, no specific place of origin.”

Reggie believes his collecting also saved many of the artifacts from destruction during the years of political chaos and violence in

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APPLICATION DEADLINES

FOR FALL 2020
 Fellowship Consideration: **January 5, 2020**
 Final Application: **February 5, 2020**

FOR FALL 2021
 Early Action: **November 1, 2020**
 Fellowship Consideration: **January 5, 2021**
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