

Box 951549, Los Angeles, California 90095-1549
phone 310/825.4288 fax 310/206.7007
www.fowler.ucla.edu

Rowanne Henry
rowanne.henry@arts.ucla.edu
310/825.4288

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Fowler Museum presents exceptional gifts of African Art donated by collector Jay T. Last
and dealer Merton D. Simpson

FOWLER IN FOCUS

The Collector and the Dealer: Gifts of African Art from Jay T. Last and Merton D. Simpson

May 8—August 7, 2016



Drum, Lobala peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Fowler Museum at UCLA, Gift of Merton Simpson Estate.

This *Fowler in Focus* exhibition presents important artworks that entered the Fowler Museum at UCLA's collection as a result of the enduring friendship between two individuals, collector and long-term Fowler patron Jay T. Last and the late New York-based artist and dealer Merton D. Simpson. *The Collector and the Dealer: Gifts of African Art from Jay T. Last and Merton D. Simpson*—on view May 8 through August 7, 2016—underscores the lasting impact that these two men have had on the development of the Fowler's acclaimed African art holdings.

The Simpson Estate recently offered the Fowler two rare objects, a Yaka mask and a Lobala drum from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, centerpieces of the exhibition. The imposingly large Yaka mask, known locally as an *mbawa*, is a remarkable example of a powerful ceremonial object that served as a social tool for maintaining order. Also large in scale, the Lobala drum represents the power of forest spirits embodied in its form and the prestige of the chiefs who may have owned it. Historically placed in

villages throughout Lobala territory, drums like this were used as a means of long-range communication from village to village across a leader's domain as well as to provide music for festivals and dances.

These monumental works were donated by Simpson's family based on their knowledge of Simpson's decades-long relationship with Last and Jay's close connections to the Fowler Museum. In addition, the exhibition features numerous examples of art made by the Lega peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Zulu peoples of South Africa, which Last purchased from Simpson's New York gallery before donating them to the Fowler. Last had a particularly keen interest in collecting Lega art because it satisfied his passion for the serial image; he frequently purchased particular object types in large numbers as a way of exploring the many variations on a form. Over the years Jay Last has donated over 300 examples of Lega art to the Fowler—mostly masks and figures—making the museum one of the foremost repositories of art by the Lega in the world.

When Simpson and Last first became acquainted in the 1960s, the market for African art was drastically different from the market today. Collectors of African art at that time favored figurative wooden sculpture with strong lines, smooth surfaces, and symmetrical features. In contrast to these typical preferences, Simpson and Last shared a unique interest in the simplicity and abstraction of both Lega and Zulu arts. The two men quickly established a close rapport fueled by their shared aesthetic preferences.

"The exceptional works on view in "The Dealer and the Collector" donated by Last and Simpson are testaments of the lasting impact that individuals can have on the shape of an art institution's collection and legacy," said Marla C. Berns, the Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

Merton D. Simpson was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1928. As a young man, he was prevented by segregation from taking university-level courses. This prompted his move to New York in 1949 where he studied art at both New York University and the Cooper Union. During this period he developed an abstract expressionist style of painting that garnered him accolades in the New York art scene. Simpson established a gallery in New York City specializing in African art in the mid-1950s. Early in his career he had been exposed to fine works of African art in Julius Carlebach's New York gallery, and this helped him to hone his eye as a collector and dealer. Although his reputation as an art dealer grew, Simpson never stopped painting, considering himself first and foremost an artist. Simpson passed away in 2013, at the age of 84.

Jay T. Last received his PhD in physics from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is one of the eight original founders of Fairchild Semiconductor Corporation, who are known as the "Fathers of Silicon Valley." He is also the president of Hillcrest Press, a publishing house that he founded in 1982 to focus on books dealing with California art, ethnic art, and the graphic arts. As with his contributions to the fields of science and engineering, Last has left a deep and abiding impression on the world of African art in Los Angeles. Last helped fund the construction of the Fowler building and has provided significant financial support and gifts of art over the decades.

The Fowler Museum at UCLA is one of the country's most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays

through Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. and on Thursdays from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$12 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call (310) 825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.