



5 Fly River/Kiwai Islands Male Spirit Figure, *mímia*

Fly River or Kiwai Islands, Western Province, Papua New Guinea

Ex. Pierre Langlois, Paris

Ex. Comte Baudouin de Grunne, Brussels

Sotheby's, New York, November 10, 1987, lot 130

Ex. Carlo Monzino Collection, Castagnola

Pre-contact, stone-carved, late 19th century

29" (73.6 cm) in height

What we know about *mímia* figures in large part comes from the research Gunnar Landtman did between 1910 and 1912. He recorded that the Kiwai Islanders would take them along in their canoes on fighting expeditions and would entreat them to go on ahead and fight the enemy so that by the time the warriors arrived, their advisories would already have been pre-killed and all that would remain would be for the men to administer a few perfunctory blows to finish the job (Landtman, 1927, p. 379). The present *mímia* has an elongated body atop a staff. It has a wide gaping mouth, blank staring eyes, articulated shoulders, defined ribs and a somewhat slack-limbed composure—almost as if the figure is manifesting the dead body of the pre-killed enemy.



Carlo Monzino, Collector (1933–1996)

Valentin Boissonnas

Of all the celebrities and personalities Andy Warhol chose to memorialize in his iconic silkscreen portraits, it would be hard to find one as discreet and reclusive as the collector Carlo Monzino. He is perhaps best known in the tribal art world for his coup as a 32-year-old for buying the bulk of the Jacob Epstein African and Oceanic Art Collection out from under the British Museum in 1965. With this auspicious start, Monzino continued to build the collection until his death in 1996. Since then, a number of great pieces have reentered the market, including this Fly River figure, bearing his provenance.



Carlo Monzino, by Andy Warhol, 1974

Carlo Monzino was born in Milan in 1933 to a family of successful entrepreneurs. Two years prior, his father, Francesco, had opened the first large department store, *Standard*, later renamed *Standa*, which after WWII became the largest department store chain in Italy. The Monzino family emerged unscathed from the turbulences of the war, having managed to retain 35 stores in major cities of Italy. As the city was being rebuilt and the economy began to recover, contemporary art galleries began to appear, showing European artists such as Picasso, Dubuffet, Ernst, Asger Jorn and Lucio Fontana. Some galleries even promoted American abstract expressionists such as Pollock and Sam Francis. These were among the first artworks that captured the attention of the young Monzino, who years later would make them the very heart of his collection.

When he was 21, Carlo was sent to London to perfect his English, which had become the new lingua franca. He found himself a paying guest in the house of William Wilberforce Winkworth (1897–1991), one of the foremost experts in Chinese and Japanese art at the time, who also advised the British Museum. With Monzino showing an interest in art, Winkworth introduced him to the world of auction houses and collectors. Japanese miniature pieces such as Netsuke, Inro, Tsuba and Katana were relatively cheap in the 1950s and, under the tutelage of Winkworth, Monzino started purchasing pieces with small sums taken from his student allowance. The collection grew over the next 15 years into an important ensemble, the bulk of which was sold at Sotheby's in 1995 and 1996, after having lingered for some 30 years in a Swiss bank vault.

Back in Milan, Monzino started to purchase his first post-war paintings with the important financial backing of the family. At the Galerie de l'Ariete he secured a Francis Bacon—the only one sold in the show—which turned out to be a solid investment. He was a regular visitor at the Galerie Apollinaire, where he purchased several works by Jean Fautrier that joined the Kandinsky and Pollock paintings

he had already purchased by the age of 24. Monzino equally valued Italian artist contemporaries such as Tancredi, Emilio Vedova, Alfredo Chighine and Fontana. Monzino was an impulsive buyer who purchased art that touched him; this said, he was also an astute businessman who would acquire art as an investment. At times, this paid off, allowing him to expand his collection through the sale of pieces that had increased in value.

In the 1960s, Monzino started to explore the less well-known art from Pre-Columbia, Africa, Oceania and Indonesia. The Italian art scene at the time was very traditional and collectors and publications on non-European art were scarce. For Monzino, it was a steep learning curve and many of the early pieces he purchased were of lesser quality or outright fakes. It was only after he made it a habit to visit museums abroad and befriended connoisseurs such as Ezio Bassani (1924–2018) that he developed an eye for quality and authenticity. In 1965, a unique opportunity came up as the collection of the artist Jacob Epstein came onto the market. With the help of the Parisian dealer Charles Ratton, Monzino managed to purchase the best part of the collection (some 900 pieces), much to the frustration of William Fagg (then director of the Museum of Mankind), who wanted the collection to stay in England with the British Museum. Overnight the Monzino Collection of Tribal Art had become one of the most important in private hands.

When the sculptor Epstein started collecting African and Oceanic art at the beginning of the 20th century, only a small circle of collectors was interested in what was generally considered grotesque and primitive sculptures from Africa and the South Seas. Epstein, unlike his contemporaries Derain, Matisse, Vlaminck and Picasso, assembled a truly exceptional collection that had both depth and quality and greatly influenced his own sculptural cubist and futurist works. Epstein treasured the pieces for their unique expressive qualities that forced him to explore and reinterpret nature from new perspectives.

Monzino had some very strong opinions on the essence of tribal art. Despite travels through Africa with the sculptor and Africanist Franco Monti, he disregarded indigenous interpretations. Instead, he was a firm believer in the artistic qualities that sculptures have without considering their original use and context. Monzino's approach to art was much influenced by his friend Ezio Bassani, who was an ardent follower of the art critic and philosopher of art Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti. The exploration of the aesthetic criteria of African art was at the core of the exhibition held in 1986 at the Center of African Art in New York entitled *African Aesthetics: The Carlo Monzino Collection*, with an important catalog written by Susan Mullin Vogel, which remains the most important reference for the Monzino Collection of African Art.

In the late 1960s, Monzino moved to the shores of Lake Lugano in Switzerland, where so many collectors lived at that time. In Castagnola, on the slopes of Monte Brè, he was a neighbor of the photographer and collector Helmut Gernsheim, and further down by the lake the Thyssen family collection adorned the magnificent Villa Favorita. It was in Switzerland that Monzino founded the association Poro, "Associazione degli Amici dell'Arte Extraeuropea" with the goal of advancing studies in African and Oceanic art. He organized a number of conferences and interviewed well-known scholars of the time who contributed to the periodical *Quaderni Poro* (1976–1995), which he edited and that was given for free to scholars and amateurs.

Monzino never stopped collecting, purchasing pieces from private collections, auctions or art dealers such as Paolo Morigi. For over forty years he amassed a vast amount of tribal art, the best of which he displayed in juxtaposition with important post-war art in his homes in Switzerland, Milan and Venice. Throughout his life, Monzino retained a deep-seated disregard for what he described as a lack of understanding and provincialism of his hometown, Milan, and Italy in general. When interviewed in 1991 by Antonio Aimi, he judged that there was only a handful of specialists in Italy who actually understood African art. It was only in 1995 that he lent some important objects to his hometown for the exhibition *La terra dei Moai* at the Palazzo Reale, possibly a late gesture of reconciliation with the city where he discovered his passion for the arts. With the help of the curator and anthropologist Paolo Campione, attempts were made to secure the collection for the city of Lugano and Milan, but much to Monzino's disappointment, both cities declined the offer that would have enriched them with an incredible art collection. Before his death in 1996, he started to sell some of his core collection, such as the superb Fang pieces that went to the Musée Dapper in Paris. Over the last twenty years, the collection has been dispersed on the art market by his family and stellar pieces can nowadays be found in major museums and collections around the world.

It is likely that Carlo Monzino purchased the Fly River figure discussed in this volume at the Sotheby's New York sale in 1987. It had previously passed through the hands of Pierre Langlois and Comte Baudoin de Grunne. When it briefly reappeared on the market in 2016, it came directly from the family estate in Castagnola.

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