

TOUTENKALBAS

A sign of the times — on Fabrice Beuillé

F A B R I C E A I N A U T

As have been, since the earliest ages, the utensils drawn from earth and vegetation and then decorated for the uses of daily life, of leisure, of combat and of ritual — objects bound intensely and movingly to the history of humankind — Fabrice Beuillé makes calabash objects that are at once useful and decorative. Furniture for the most part, but not only: witness the N’Goni, a musical instrument of calabash and goatskin strung with nylon.

The calabash tree is a tropical American tree of the Bignoniaceae family — phanerogamous, dicotyledonous, gamopetalous plants — whose fruit is the calabash. The bottle gourd, a cucurbit, is a false calabash tree; the calabash tree of Senegal is the baobab.

Hollowed and dried, the calabash has long served as a vessel for liquids and solids, and as a resonator. Its voice is singular: in the balafons of Africa (xylophones), the sound is blurred. Musicologists observe that, against the deliberate clarity of Western instruments, the muted tones of African instruments seek to signify the complexity of the world, in the image of the human voice. African music would be a form of speech, playing its part in the structuring of social events — going so far as to draw edible termites from their nests by imitating the sound of rain.

The African water drum is a calabash floating on water inside a larger calabash, struck with wooden spoons. The Islamic ardin and daghumma are calabashes, as is the Mayan and Aztec tecomapiloa drum, held under the arm.

In the art of masks, sections of calabash are used — as in southern Sudan (Shilluk masks), covered with clay and cow dung to represent the leopard. In the Andes, coca is held in a small calabash, the poporo. And for the itinerant monk of Jainism, a calabash serves as an alms bowl.

The earliest use dates back to the Bronze Age, when discs of calabash — as many as of shell or of metal — were threaded onto rods to rattle. This was the origin of the sistrum, known to the Phoenicians, Hebrews, Romans, Abyssinians, Malays, Melanesians and Mexicans, and still used in contemporary music.

Which is to say that the calabash, useful or pleasing, is a precious element of what binds the human to nature and to culture. Fabrice Beuillé is to be thanked for thinking to bring it forward in our world, so forgetful of its roots — as Sylviane Leprun, researcher at the Université Bordeaux III, underlines in an article in the journal *Figures de l’Art* no. 7 entitled “Artiste/artisan”. Her own title being: “African design, an art of alliance”. She recalls that the African object never separated ordinary life from its symbolic frame, and that the artist-designers of the modern city have produced desacralised objects seeking their place in the city of today. “On the frontier of tradition, of colonial history and of contemporary modernity, the design of African creators presents a critical and aesthetic vision of urban societies.”

Critical, because it calls once again for the return to sources that the West undertakes at regular intervals. Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, the young “wandering generation” of Russia rediscovered village themes that set it apart from urban French Impressionism, out of a desire for symbolisation. This would become the Modern style, the Russian version of the German Jugendstil — Art nouveau in France — a kind of neo-primitivism in which realism and surreal fantasy intermingle. The artist then begins to become universal: at once painter, set designer, art critic, writer and theorist, with the discovery of the Orient and of the Primitives extending his territory. In 1910 the Jack of Diamonds exhibition opened in

Moscow, bringing together all the avant-garde painters who distort nature, exaggerate form, struggle against the petit-bourgeois spirit and revel in excess and elation. Around 1909–1910, Larionov and Goncharova rebelled against the tutelage of Western painting to lay claim to their Eastern roots.

The furniture-makers of Art nouveau — William Morris, Grasset, Gaillard, Gallé, Majorelle, and in Italy the Liberty style — brought triumph to the sinuous lines of flowers and plants. Natural wood is used unveneered and waxed, in a search for authenticity: a movement that would end in the excesses dubbed the “noodle” style. Turned instead towards geometric form, the Bauhaus sought to modernise furniture by stimulating invention and calling traditional forms and colours into question. Later, a generation of French cabinetmakers (Ruhlmann, Rateau, Süe and Mare), enamoured of fine materials, created elegant furniture in precious veneers heightened with stringing or inlay.

Today, as Bernard Lafargue explains in his introduction to *Figures de l’Art*, what he calls post-modern pluralism opens the way to new designers in every field of the applied arts — among them Philippe Starck and Gaetano Pesce, makers of furniture. It is in the wake of Warhol and his revolutionary conception of the object (Pop art, which — let us not forget — means “popular”) that make-up (Topolino), hairdressing (Barnabé), adornment (Patrick Veillet) and dress (Issey Miyake, Jean-Paul Gaultier) came to triumph in contemporary art exhibitions. A pluralism that the MADi movement had already established in 1946 in Buenos Aires through the voice of Carmelo Arden Quin, who would write:

“The enlightened artist, in every age, realises his thought and expresses his highest sensibility in the universal. So too the Madi artist. Conscious of the need for a renewal of constructed art that would reflect the cosmic moment our age is living through, he acts more than ever in concordance with the present world.”

And in our present world, the new generations are seized by the acute question of respect for the planet, of an ethical relation to it: to stop exploiting to the last thread what it has generously given, in order to husband it, but also to celebrate it anew — the planet without which there is only death.

Fabrice’s objects meet all these questions: the invention and playfulness dear to Madi, and also that universalism which leads him, consciously or not, to bring together the aesthetic vocabularies of every civilisation, as far as comics and animation. In our fragmented age, Fabrice knows how to reconnect different spaces and different times, towards a repertoire of gesture bound to the accomplishment of everyday acts — while recalling, through their texture and their origin, that these objects belong to the rainforest and hold the status of “fruit”. Fresh and unexpected commentaries, but very subtle reminders: when, for example, his *Table tortue* evokes the Torii workshop in seventeenth-century Japan — the school that dealt with everything required by kabuki theatre, and in which dynamism was served by the traditional device of the calabash-shaped leg.

Fabrice Beuillé, through a talent made of poetry, care, technique, intuition, intelligence and tenderness, brings magical objects to our civilisation. I wish his work long life.

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N O T E S

Fabrice Beuillé — Born in 1982 in Tarbes. Lives and works in Savigny-sur-Orge.