

Shelves in the entry hallway adjacent the living room showcase, left (top to bottom), a Dinka stool from the Sudan; Indonesian and Malaysian kris handles associated with the Muslim tradition; three Moroccan powder horns; a pre-Dogon Djenne pot from Mali and a long necked Azande jar; a terra cotta Moroccan butter churn. At center (top to bottom), are three Tutsi baskets; Kuba cups and box; a Mangbetu knife grouped with a Zulu club collected by a British officer after a tax rebellion in 1906, and a Mossi adze; a Zulu meat tray viewed from the bottom; a terra cotta Zulu beer pot. Shelves at right (top to bottom), display Nigerian ivory bracelets; three bronze armlets or anklets, possibly from Chad. ("Maybe Chad," Marc says with a smile. "When people don't know where something is from, they always say Chad."); Nigerian currency and necklaces; hats from Congo; and a Zulu pot, with fiber lid used to serve food.

Out of Africa

by Gladys Montgomery — photography by J. David Bohl

lifestyle

In their waterside home, a New York couple showcases a passion for African art that has seeded two world-class collections.

Thirty-five years ago, Denyse Ginzberg experienced what the French call a *coup de foudre*, which literally translates into English as a “lightening bolt,” but usually connotes love at first sight. Shopping in the home décor department of Lord & Taylor in New York City, she had her first look at African masks and figures. The pieces were not antique, not even very good, as she would later learn, but in their own way, stunning. “I loved those things. I couldn’t even look at the furniture,” she recalls.

A year passed before the couple bought their first African mask in a Greenwich Village shop. “It was not good,” Denyse says. “We still have it in a closet.” “We started with statues and masks, the things you typically think of,” Marc recounts. “We were so happy to be collectors, we made some awful choices.”

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The Ginzbergs' home, situated on an inlet off Long Island Sound, was designed by architect Charles Forberg, son-in-law of Walter Gropius. It consists of a central core with a living room, flanked on the right by a perpendicular wing containing a garage, kitchen, dining room, and two bedrooms, and on the left by a smaller rectangle housing a den, master bedroom, and upstairs bedroom and study.

The diamond-shaped windows in the gable ends of the house, brackets at the roofline, and exterior cladding and framing reference the traditional Japanese architecture that influenced Gropius and Forberg.

At one end of the terra cotta tiled entry hall, a Portuguese-Indian inlaid tall chest from the Goa area displays exorcism staffs made about thirty years ago by a group of Christianized Makonde women in the deep bush of Tanzania; these are the first such examples Marc has seen. Above it hangs an abstract painting by Mert Simpson, the well-known African-art dealer in New York City. Next to it are a Berber shawl, a Mangbetu drum from Congo mounted as sculpture, and an incised earthenware Songye pot from Congo. The Y-form of the 69-inch-tall wooden Dogon ladder from Mali, originally used for entry to a granary or dwelling, evokes the *Nommo*, a figure of Dogon mythology.





Nonetheless, Denyse's coup de foudre set the Ginzbergs, who recently celebrated their fifty-first wedding anniversary, on a path. "We bought things because we liked them," Denyse adds. "We didn't spend much. We finally went to a symposium at Columbia University, where we met curators and other collectors, and we invested more in books about art than in art. Very slowly, we started buying small, very good pieces."

Over the next twenty years, the couple assembled one of the finest collections of African art in America, even as prices for masks and figurative sculpture rose astronomically. Marc says, "We always liked to upgrade, but prices had gone up so we couldn't collect at that level any longer. We decided to sell that collection." Dispersed through L. & R. Entwistle & Co. Ltd, London, pieces from the Ginzbergs' first African art collection were purchased by individual collectors and museums, including the Dallas Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City.

The couple then embarked on a connected path, collecting African ethnographic forms distinguished by their superior aesthetic quality and utilitarian roots. As Marc explains, "We started to collect forms, abstract, non-figural objects. We had done the figural thing, so we consciously avoided that." To start their current collection, the Ginzbergs visited



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In a corner of the living room, a pair of Chinese ivory hammock stretchers are displayed as sculpture atop a circa-1685 French cupboard with glass doors and marquetry decoration. On its left, African artifacts include a bronze prestige staff from the Kamba people of Kenya, and a 4-foot-tall Tuareg tent post which supported the long mats used by that nomadic group to divide interior spaces. On the metal side table, made in the 1960s by American artisans Philip and Kevin LaVerne, are a straw cap from Chad and a Kuba cup carved of wood in the form of a face with cowrie shell eyes.

On a wall of the living room an Indian screen affords a filtered view of the dining room. Beneath the console table are Tuareg (left) and Yemeni (right) boxes. The sculpture by contemporary artist Amy Uhl complements the Nancy Flanagan painting and echoes the curvilinear decoration on the Luo shield from Kenya. The metal coffee table and the small side table are by Philip and Kevin LaVerne. The room's neutral colors defer to the objects it contains and its view of Long Island Sound.

In the living room, between the sofas, three Tuareg knives stand next to a lamp by Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933). On the 1960s coffee table by American craftsmen Philip and Kevin LaVerne are arrayed Nigerian currency buried in the early 1900s when the British colonial government banned it and Djenne harness pendants and bracelets from Mali. On the console table, below the painting by contemporary American artist Nancy Flanagan are a chess set Marc Ginzberg's father commissioned in Japan and a polished *coco de mer* (sea-tossed coconut). To the table's left stands a figurative Senufo pounder. The shelves displays (top to bottom, left to right) an Ashanti wooden stool; Ethiopian crosses; a sixteenth-century wooden reclining Buddha with a disciple at its feet; an intricately carved bushcow horn used as a vessel for drinking palm wine by the Kuba people of Cameroon; a Senufo gong grouped with an Ethiopian finial and an iron Senufo offering plate used in a dance; a dual chambered terra cotta amphora made by Kabyle women in Algeria; and a Thai pot; along with a variety of snuff bottles. In the hallway, a Burkina Faso pot stands next to an antique German refectory table.





Colette Ghysels, a dealer in African ethnographic materials in Brussels, Belgium. Marc remembers, “Colette had three little rooms full of these objects. We looked around and asked prices, then asked to be left alone to talk. She came back, and we said, ‘This, this, and this we don’t want. We’ll take everything else.’ I suppose there were about seventy objects. She nearly fell through the floor.”

Over the past fifteen years the Ginzbergs’ collection, focusing on objects of adornment, containers, furniture, and weaponry, has grown tenfold. “These objects don’t have the spirituality of statues or masks, but they have a whole social tradition...a certain clan identity, and a function, in most cases,” Marc says. The collection was featured in a five city tour, *African Forms: Objects of Use and Beauty from the Ginzberg Collection*, in 2004, and in Marc Ginzberg’s book, *African Forms* (2000).

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The couple bought the abstract painting by Jean Michael Atlan (1913–1960) early in their marriage; it was years before they realized that the artist was North African. “I was attracted to African forms,” Denyse says. Born in Constantine, Algeria, Atlan moved to Paris in 1930, where he began his career as an artist in 1941. The life-size Dogon figure was revealed in carbon 14 testing to be approximately 900 years old.

The Ginzbergs eschewed a formal dining room, choosing instead square tables on casters, each seating eight people, which are wheeled out and configured as needed. Located in the kitchen wing and on the side of the house facing Long Island Sound, the room features terra cotta flooring and a gray-stained wooden cathedral ceiling with exposed roof trusses. A wicker sofa with kilim pillows is easily moved when necessary. In the hall beyond, a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century German refectory table, surmounted by a hammered metal relief by a Cuban artist, displays ivory trumpets from northeast Congo.

Used as a coffee table, a 70-inch-long Baumum bamboo and wood chief’s bed from the Cameroon Grasslands was originally used both for sleeping and as a bier after death. It holds a Philippine wooden bowl containing antique ivory bracelets from Nigeria, Sudan, and elsewhere; three Han dynasty bronze pots, and a pair of 11¾-inch-long sandals, attributed to the Songye of Congo, with wear evident in their ivory posts, and with wooden soles that bear the imprints of the toes and musculature of the foot. The three small paintings above the sofa are by African-art dealer Mert Simpson, the painting on the wall at left is by Mexican-English painter Toby Joysmith, active from 1957–1990. The floating staircase leading to second floor bedrooms partitions the hallway from the kitchen at right.



Born in France, Denyse moved with her family, as they fled the Nazis, to Cuba in 1942. She grew up in Mexico, where she developed an appreciation for what she terms “folkloric art.” Marc, whose family founded Golodetz, the commodities trading firm to which he devoted his long career, was raised in Manhattan; his parents collected Chinese snuff bottles and other forms. “As in many such cases, as a couple collects together, each develops strengths,” Marc says, with a nod to Denyse’s sure judgment, naturally good eye, and quick decision making, and his own focus on study and contacts with curators and dealers, notably Mert Simpson in New York City and Colette Ghysels in Brussels.

“Collecting is just a matter of informed taste,” Marc says. “As a collector, you try to develop your own eye and consult people who know better than you do. You can have a favorite dealer, but it’s wise to work with more than one.”

The Ginzbergs have been active supporters of the National Museum of African Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and were among the founders of the Museum for African Art in Queens, New York, slated to move to a permanent home on Museum Mile/Fifth Avenue and 110th Street in 2008. As a volunteer with the museum, Denyse organized trips to private collections and museums, such as Musée de L’Homme in

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In the den, Kuba cloths from Congo make a graphic statement. Men weave the kasai velvet undercloth, which women embroider, tuft, and shear to form the patterns. A form of currency, valued and regarded as a legacy upon the death of the owner, each 18 by 20 inch cloth is unique in its design. On the desk, a Dinka wooden stool or neckrest is flanked by Hadendoa knives from Eretria and carved, stained, and polished ivory combs from the Bini people of Nigeria. A Tanzanian drum stands on the credenza. The den’s neutral color scheme, leather sofa, and modern granite-topped desk complement the tribal pieces.

In a corner of the dining room, a table on casters displays musical instruments from Uganda, Tanzania, Cameroon, and Ethiopia. To its right are a metal-covered stool from Congo, a gourd from Tanzania, and a Benin ceremonial staff. The Ginzbergs purchased the Mogul empire screen inset into the wall at Sotheby’s. Marc points out that “it divides yet connects” the living and dining rooms, recalling its original use, to screen the women’s quarters from the public areas in a house in India.





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Of this 21¼-inch-long wooden stool, Marc Ginzberg writes in *African Forms*, "They could be used as casual furniture or in religious rituals. In the owner's lifetime, the stool was tied to his soul; at death it could become a shrine at which the departed's spirit could be invoked.... (This example) is of the type called *kotoko dwa* or porcupine, the symbol of the Ashanti nation. The darkened wood indicates that it was the property of an honored person and thus treated on his death."

A highly decorated wooden spoon used for eating by the Boni people of Somalia contrasts with a pair of intricately worked metal spoons, the one at right hammered, the one at left cast, made by the Akan and originally used to transfer gold dust to the scale in Ghana (the old Gold Coast).

Ancient Phoenician adze blades assume a visage-like aspect when mounted as sculpture. They are grouped with a Cycladic head, ancient Mediterranean glass, and a Northwest Coast Native American rattle. Below are an executioner's knife from Congo, a red Zulu hat made of vegetable-dyed cotton (earlier examples were made of human hair), and an East African staff with an ivory inset.

An assortment of wood and ivory whistles or flutes ranges in size from the 10-inch example at right to the diminutive ivory one, third from right. Both of these are from Congo. Others include a wonderfully incised ivory Burkina Faso example. The normal color of ivory is off-white. Marc points out that the indigenous peoples of Africa darkened ivory by using vegetable-dyes or palm oil, and its color deepened naturally when it was handled and worn next to the skin.

Paris, the Musée Royal de l'Afrique in Tervuren, Belgium, and the Museum of Mankind in London. Interest in African art is different from most other fields of art, she remarks; it is characterized by a "small, tight group of collectors."

The couple's home was designed by architect Charles Forberg, son-in-law of Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus School. Sited on an inlet opening onto Long Island Sound, with water on two sides, it is a restrained, modernistic study in angles and light. Denyse designed its interiors, using a neutral palette of tree-bark beiges and natural textures of wood, glass,



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"Ethiopian crosses divide into two groups, processional ones used as finials on a long staff and carried in parades and religious observances, and hand crosses carried by priests and used to bless the devout," Marc Ginzberg says. Dating from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries, some of the crosses in the Ginzberg collection are bronze, iron, and silver. The earliest is a solid bronze quatrefoil. An iron cross bears incised images of the Virgin Mary and the apostles. The latest, made of silver, is a late-nineteenth-century example from the high quality workshops that were operating at the time Marc says. "The quality produced in the twentieth century was not as good." The round cross, he says, is a common type, which the couple has kept because it is so well executed. The crosses' origins were Orthodox, a historic fact reflected in their decorative Coptic motifs. "Sometimes the crosses can be dated from their iconography," he says, "In 1540, the Jesuits came in and the iconography changed. When Jesus is placed on the proper right of Mary, it's pre-1527."

A piece of Nigerian currency, an iron Mumuye ornament from Nigeria, and a Djenne terra cotta bedpost — all items that Marc Ginzberg describes as "authentic, indigenous, chthonic (rooted in the earth)" — evoke their cultures of origin and make a strong sculptural statement.

This long-necked water gourd with a woven straw handle and case is from Cameroon, but also links to African-American history. African slaves brought the practice of conveying information through songs from their motherland. "Follow the Drinking Gourd," a popular black spiritual of the early nineteenth century, was a coded instruction by members of the Underground Railroad to slaves in Alabama and Mississippi to travel north by following the North Star, which they could locate in the sky by looking at the Big Dipper.

metal, and terra cotta as a soft descant to the strong, sure voices of the ethnographic pieces the Ginzbergs love.

Stepping into the entry, a visitor stands beneath the peaked glass skylight in a wide hallway that runs left to right along the length of the house's central core. Straight ahead, floor-to-ceiling shelves flank the wide aperture leading to the step-down living room and frame a view of the sea foregrounded with rhododendron and native maples. The shelves in the entry and living room, totaling some 200 linear feet, display an array of objects so captivating they immediately



A Japanese-influenced diamond-shaped window in the cathedral-ceilinged master suite affords its balcony study borrowed light and a view of Long Island Sound.

divert attention from the water view. Earthenware ewers, gourd bowls and jars with incised decoration, beaded hats, woven lidded baskets, sculptural wooden stools and headrests, Orthodox crosses from Christian Ethiopia, tiny whistles of polished wood, hair combs of warm-hued ivory, iron trumpets, snuff bottles, spoons for measuring gold dust. Suddenly one understands Denyse Ginzberg's coup de foudre upon seeing her first African object and the passion African art ignited in Marc Ginzberg, who has made it his lifelong avocation.

In evaluating the quality of ethnographic pieces, the Ginzbergs consider the patina, the age, and the form itself. "It's a good rule to buy the best. You can rarely go wrong, even if you've overpaid. The gap between the top and second tiers in all areas of the art market is growing wider, and has been for decades," Marc says. In the case of traditional African art, he explains, you might have four masks, good, better, best, and superlative, priced at \$1,000, \$10,000, \$100,000, and more for the world's finest examples. "In the case of forms, that hasn't happened," he notes. "A good one

might cost \$1,000, while a very good one is just \$2,000. Why? Because the distinctions in quality have not yet been made. These are everyday objects, and one is like another. Eventually, you will see a drawing apart as in other fields."

Many collectors of ethnographic art seek culturally "pure" examples. As Marc Ginzberg points out in his book, *African Forms*, "The shibboleth of African art connoisseurs is 'pre-contact': what came before the arrival of Europeans was authentic, valid, what came after, weak, corrupted. And innumerable examples can be given where this is so. But it also has to be remembered that there was always contact—we have simply learned to accept only some of it," he says. "Take materials...the preponderance of beads in Africa are glass; some were imported 2,000 years ago, and by the eighteenth century shiploads were coming in. Similarly, cowrie shells are found on such 'authentic' objects as Kongo fetishes, Kuba cups, and Bambara masks. Cowries (the very word is Hindi) were always imported: some have been found in the Dynastic tombs of Egypt." The same is also

true of design. African craftsmen copied European manilla brass bracelets; the liturgical vestments of European missionaries in the Congo influenced the development of the Kuba cloth; and Madagascan and Kenyan grave markers derive from South Sea prototypes. "Collectors should not let old prejudices define their taste."

By way of example in the Ginzbergs' home, a Yuruba garment features a European cloth backing and diminutive glass beads, yet its rose-mustard-aqua coloration and a design, comprising rows of triangles, are distinctly African. A rectangular, incised metal *cache Koran*, hung as a pendant on a bead-embellished cord and containing a copy of the religious text, was made and worn by a member of the nomadic Tuareg group which migrates between Niger and Mauritania. A *kotoko dwa* or porcupine form Ashanti stool from Ghana is studded with rows of European brass upholstery tacks. And a wooden Kuba cup, collected by Henry Morton Stanley during one of his 1870s expeditions, recalls European exploration of Africa.

"If you look at the old dealers' catalogues from about 1900, it's mostly the ethnographic objects that were coming out of Africa," Marc maintains. "At that point, the tribes were not selling statues and masks because they were religious in nature and part of their lives." There was another reason for the preponderance of domestic objects on the market. As Marc explains in *African Forms*, "...the foreign visitor found the stool, the knife, the bracelet to be more graceful and esthetically accessible than the 'distorted' statue or 'grotesque' mask, and—not a small point—less overtly sexual."

Age can be problematic in the context of ethnographic materials. "African art, generally speaking, is made of wood, which, of course, doesn't last long," Marc points out. "In general, the ages of pieces are not known. Most are attributed to the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. That's true for seventy

percent of it.” However, according to carbon 14 tests, one of the Ginzberg’s pieces, a life-sized Dogon figure is about 900 years old.

Determining the value and rarity of African forms can also be difficult, “When you’re dealing with a well-known form or type, you’re okay. If you’ve seen a lot, you know how good something is, or you go back to the books and make comparisons. When you’re confronted with an object you’ve never seen before...what you don’t know is whether that’s the end of it or not. If it’s unique or rare, its price should reflect that, but the next month, 1,400 could come out. So what should it cost?” By way of example, Ginzberg points to a semi-circular, leather covered, ceramic piece with a metal oval set into the top of its domed surface. Three such objects—it is unclear if they are wristbands, anklets, armbands, or archer’s guards—came out of Africa several years ago: Ginzberg had never seen the form before and hasn’t seen another since.

One traditional stumbling block to collecting is, however, largely absent in the field of ethnographic forms. As Marc explains, “In forms, you don’t have the same fakery problem as in figurative art, where people do wonderful fakes and it takes years to know the difference. In forms, fakes are not as clever, and are much fewer. There are new Ethiopian crosses, for example, but not good fakes. It is problematic in African art, but not worse than in other forms of art,” Marc notes.

Ethiopian crosses are one of the Ginzbergs’ current interests. Used in that country’s Orthodox churches, and showing Coptic motifs, the metal crosses, Marc says, were “not much collected anywhere” when they caught the couple’s attention eight or so years ago. That is changing, Marc says, thanks in part to an exhibition of Ethiopian religious art in Jerusalem in 2000 to which the couple lent several pieces. Nonetheless, he says, medievalists have little interest in the crosses because they are not European, and objects of



In the master bedroom, a late-seventeenth century painted wooden chest from Tibet anchors an array of Asian objects that include a Japanese hearth hook and calligraphy box, coin silver spiral Indonesian ear or hat pendants, a Miao tribal coin silver necklace from southeast China, and a pair of ivory Naga bracelets from India. At right, a display niche, one of many incorporated into the design of the house, contains an assortment of Chinese snuff bottles collected in the 1930s and '40s by Marc Ginzberg's parents. The painting is by Colorado artist Gino Hollander (b. 1924).

Christian origin do not generally appeal to collectors of African materials. Some of the crosses in the Ginzbergs’ collection date from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, while one shows the meticulous workmanship typical of the late nineteenth century.

A portion of the Ginzbergs’ collection, already packed away, will be sold in Paris

later this year. “After the auction, I would like to jump back in,” Marc says, citing the Ethiopian crosses and wood pieces from Asia, with age and provenance, as possible areas of concentration. “Snuff bottles from all over the world?” Denyse proposes playfully. Marc considers for a moment. “I wouldn’t mind,” he replies. @