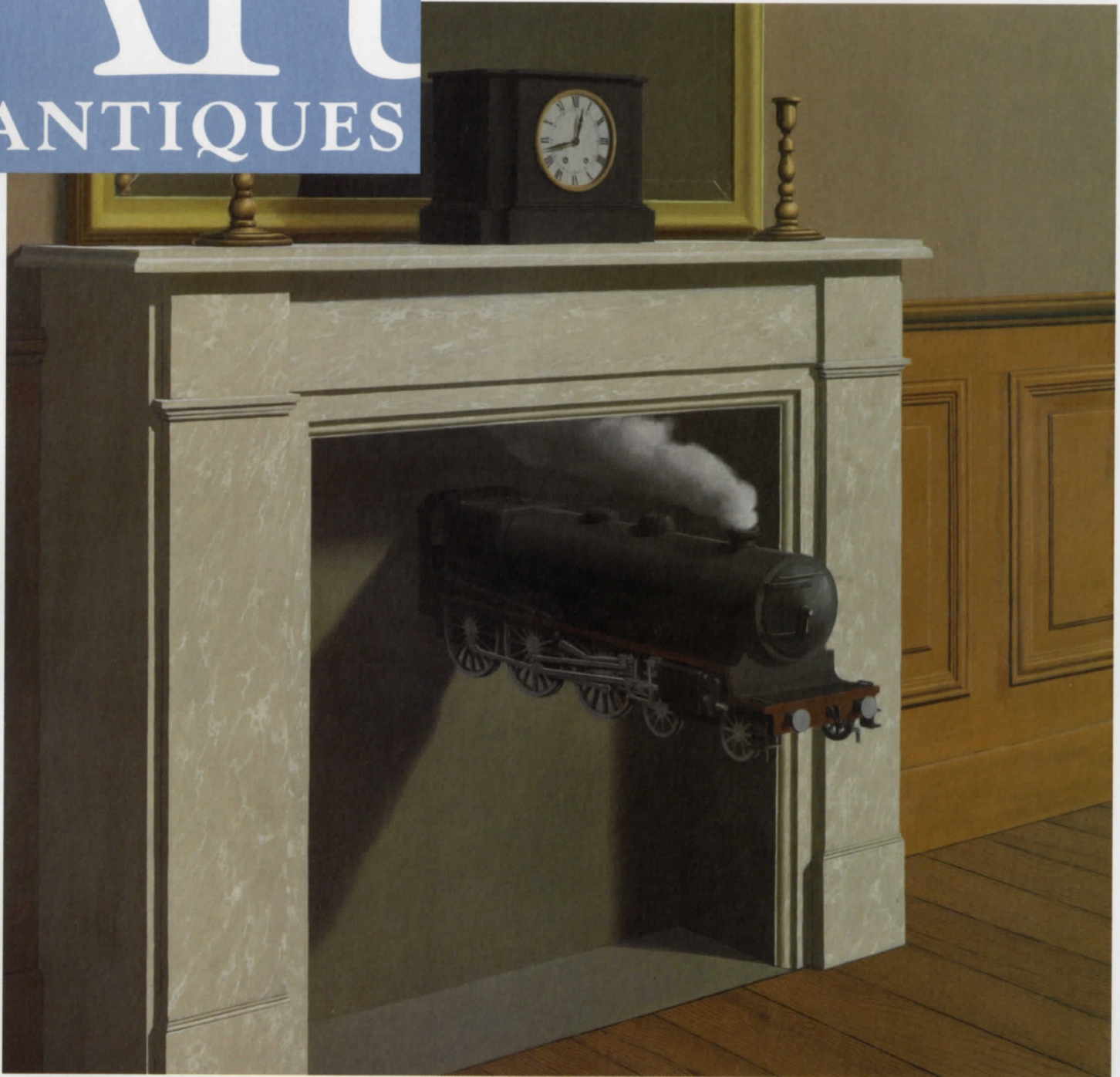


DECEMBER/JANUARY 2013-14

# Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



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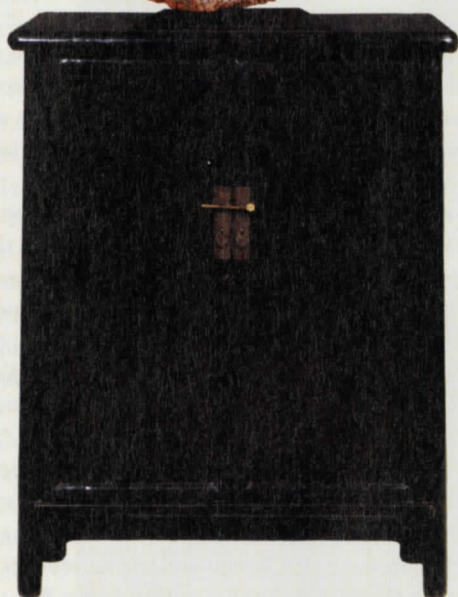
# Living and Collecting

A new type of gallery takes root in Chicago.

GLEN JOFFE, THE OWNER OF **PRIMITIVE**, RECALLS how it all started: "I was jogging one day and came across an African trader who was presenting his artwork to a local merchant out in the open. It stopped me in my tracks. The trader did not want to upset the merchant by showing me the art, so I suggested that he call me later. Subsequently, the trader brought a lot of objects to my home and spread them out in an open courtyard. Pretty soon the neighbors were coming down and ogling at what was laid out before them. It was right then and there I realized how strong a market existed for this type of material."

Three "trunk shows" later with the same trader, Joffe opened **PRIMITIVE**, which started as a consignment gallery devoted entirely to African art. He did not know at the time that the business would go on to present objects and furnishings from every nook and cranny of the world or that he himself would travel to locate and purchase these things. It certainly never occurred to him that the business would serve as a model for a new type of gallery or that it would achieve brand-name recognition.

"Everyone has turning points in their lives," says Joffe. "One of mine occurred just after the gallery had been open for six months. A



Top: A look through to the anteroom of the Buddha Room at **PRIMITIVE**.

Most people think they are on the other side of the world. Bottom: A petite 18th-century antique Chinese lacquered A-frame cabinet mimics a body for the face of a 20th-century oversized Indonesian rice pounder.



man came in hoping to sell some silver jewelry. He worked for KLM, the Royal Dutch Airlines and his job took him all over the world. He would buy jewelry in one city and then sell it in another. As a result of that chance meeting we became fast friends, and it was through his efforts that the travel began. Ultimately, he became a consultant and today his kids call me uncle. That happened 24 years ago."

Joffe acknowledges that this encounter had a profound effect on **PRIMITIVE**. Shortly afterward he began traveling to international destinations with his "consultant" in search of material to present. In effect, he was eliminating the middleman. First came India, then Indonesia, then China, and within a short period of time the gallery went from a traditional consignment model featuring only African art to one featuring art and furnishings from over 100 cultures worldwide.

"People think I backpacked after college and then decided to start a business," says Joffe. "Actually, the travel began out of the need to





create a viable business model. While margins increased with direct importing, more importantly, the nature and type of objects available increased dramatically. The choices are usually greatest at the source, and because the objects were now owned by the gallery I was forced to truly believe in and understand the fair-market value of what was being presented." Over time, the gallery began presenting articles in six broad categories—furniture, artifacts, textiles, jewelry, fashion and artwork.

Joffe was no stranger to the idea of PRIMITIVE being a "presenting organization" or to the role of impresario. His early career was spent working for The Orchestral Association, the parent organization of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. "Instead of presenting conductors, soloists,

ensembles and programs, I suddenly found myself presenting more tangible artworks, and if people didn't respond it might have been a problem. Thankfully, they responded positively."

Joffe remembers discovering Chinese furniture over 20 years ago in Indonesia, not China. Soon afterward he was traveling to the Chinese mainland and importing antique Chinese furniture by the 40-foot container load. "I think the introduction and popularity of this material is what pushed the gallery onto a more engaging, popular path," he says. "Ultimately, the conversation went from being solely about what people collect to how people live with what they collect." Today, "Living + Collecting" is the tag line affixed to the PRIMITIVE name.

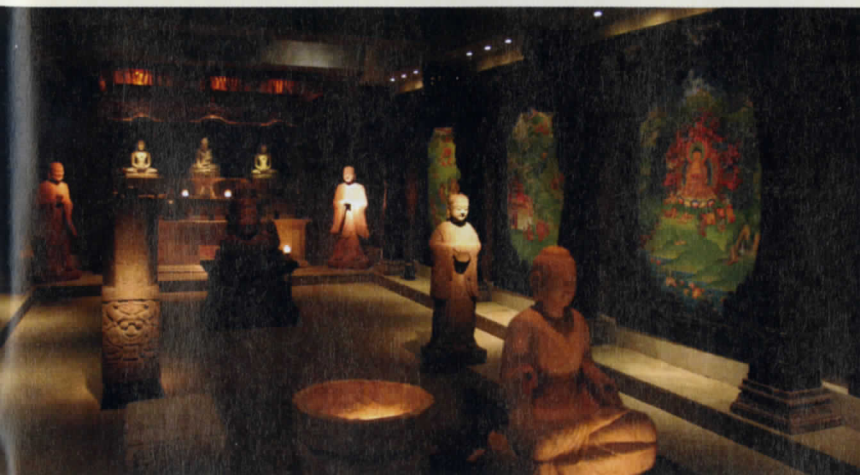
Along the way, the gallery added services such as restoration and custom base fabrication, and in response to requests from the professional design community it soon started manufacturing furniture. Ultimately, proprietary items began popping up in other categories such as fashion, jewelry, and even artwork,



Clockwise from top left: A sandstone figure of Quan Yin collected in Fujian Province, China; authentic objects mixed with antiques and furnishings from the PRIMITIVE Collection, conveying the idea of Living + Collecting; the side of an expertly restored, exceptionally long (153-inch) "Temple Table" from the 18th century; a look inside PRIMITIVE's Buddha Room.

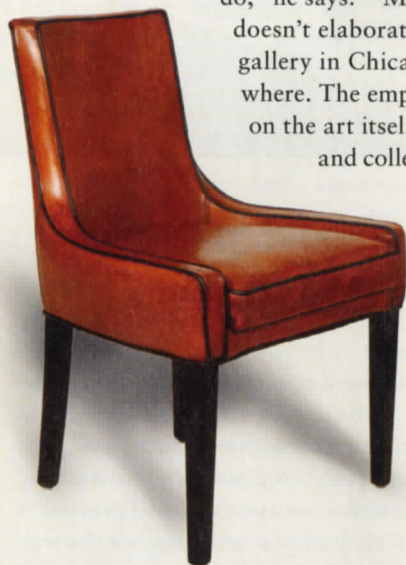
but Joffe insists PRIMITIVE-branded products are not what make the gallery unique. Rather, it is the manner of presentation. "We do not ask people to qualify themselves as our client. Really, it's the other way around. We want people to know who we are and what we have to offer. It is celebratory of everything we present."

PRIMITIVE's manner of presentation is anything but the traditional austere gallery model. Inside their main downtown location there is a fully hand-carved library/bookstore known as the Five Elements library, as well as a complete Himalayan temple, known as the Buddha Room; both were designed by Joffe's wife and partner, Claudia. Joffe says the design and creation of these venues within the gallery was meant to give people an experience they might not otherwise have and to put certain types of objects in context. What he didn't expect was for the gallery to be heralded as a leader in "experiential retailing." He says, "Our goal is to elevate the experience of every client to the level of theater, to give visitors an unforgettable experience." This approach may be unpretentious and appealing, but it is not without its challenges.





"People always ask if we are a museum," says Joffe with a laugh, "and I assure them it's all for sale!" However, there may be some truth in people's perceptions. As in any good museum, there is an unmistakable attraction to the products and environments presented at PRIMITIVE. In the background, a steady dialogue attests to beauty, authenticity and meaning. "Everything we present has a story, history, purpose and design heritage, and once revealed it illuminates everything else we present and do," he says. "More than anything else, we are storytellers."



Joffe doesn't elaborate further, but the story being told at this unique gallery in Chicago is quite different from those to be heard elsewhere. The emphasis is as much on the client's experience as it is on the art itself. Joffe lights up when discussing how people live and collect, how everyone inevitably surrounds themselves with special objects to help tell their own story. "Everything we do and present is about feeling," he adds. "It all comes from the hand and the heart."

Left: Primitive's collection elevates contemporary furniture like this sheep leather armless dining chair to collectible status. Right: A fully carved and painted room called the Meditation Room showcases Tantric lingams collected from the Narmada River in India.

The dome features a mystical symbol called the Mandala of Creativity.



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