

Symposium on The Civil Rights of Public School Students

For Jack, Lover of African Art, Ringer of Alarm Bells, and Whistle-Blower

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FOR JACK, LOVER OF AFRICAN ART, RINGER OF ALARM BELLS, AND WHISTLE-BLOWER

John Obermann*

When I began my employ with the School of Law in 1994, I was in the midst of my graduate work here at the University. In my first year on the job, I registered for a class called "African Art." I knew very little about Africa (or art for that matter), but discovered upon trolling the halls of the law school that apparently one of our faculty had significant interest in African art. That professor was, of course, Jack Hiller.

Jack was one of the first Americans to teach in post-colonial Africa, serving as a Ford Foundation fellow in Tanzania and as a Fulbright professor in Kenya. He taught tax in those days because his training at Yale led him to understand the importance of a fair system of contributing to society and distributing its benefits evenhandedly. But Jack's interest in Africa went way beyond tax law.

He had a reputation for being as eager to learn as he was to teach. When Jack set out to learn about people, he sought to absorb their culture. He brought both ears to the task and listened attentively to the people he was with, and both eyes to absorb the light and color of the space he was in. He was a lover of art. So once in Africa, he became a lover of African art. For example, he spent time with the virtuoso wood carvers of Eastern Africa, photographed their work, and documented this neglected art form in a groundbreaking article in *The Cresset* back in 1971 ("The Makonde and Their Sculpture").

All that Jack needed to hear from me is that I was in need of some education about African art. I did not have to enroll in one of his classes to become one of his students. His face lit up. He promptly unearthed myriad statues, photos, and information for me to study and absorb. In my final report I ended up using not only Jack's knowledge, but also several photos of the woodcarvings that richly illustrated the article in *The Cresset* I mentioned above.

Needless to say, my instructor was very impressed and my final grade (an "A") reflected Jack's influence on my report that semester. I recall Jack being rather proud (of me, not himself) when he discovered how much I had learned so quickly from him. Today, I am proud of him for taking the time to influence the way I now think of art in general, and of African art in particular.

I work as a techy, but more and more my work is with visual representation of reality. Jack fostered my love for the visual, but was emphatically uninterested in most forms of modern technology. I never

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received an e-mail from Jack nor ever sent him one, for he never owned or used a computer in his life. But that didn't inhibit him from writing prodigiously, both as founding editor of the *Journal of Third World Studies* and as author of his famous letters. Whether a letter from Jack was long or short, he knew how to express himself crisply and to the point. He rang the alarm bell about dictators who arrested and imprisoned fellow lawyers solely because of vigorous advocacy of their clients' causes. And he blew the whistle on corporations large and small if they sold a product that was planned to become obsolete a day after the warranty expired, or if they charged too much for produce. Jack was a pistol. And he didn't need the kind of bells and whistles I specialize in to be an effective communicator.