

Merton D. Simpson

(1928-2013)

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the gallery world of African Art has probably heard of the New York dealer Merton Simpson. For three score years he dealt with the beauty and mystery of the art form, much of that time as *the* major American purveyor of it.

Merton Daniel Simpson was born in Charleston, SC in 1928 into a world where the product of any black artist, other than the output of the necessary trades, was a devalued commodity. A sickly child, he was kept home, not going to school until the fifth grade. Perhaps it was this, along with the sketching he did to fill the hours of his un-well days, that strengthened and informed his eye; it is a truism that pedagogy can often stifle creativity as well as engender it.

While still a teen Merton got lucky. As a black American he was not permitted to study art at the Gibbes Gallery, a city-run institution (that became Charleston's Gibbes Museum of Art where Simpson was honored with a show in 1995.) An artist working there, William Halsey, gave him private instruction, however. As well, he helped sponsor Merton's first art show just after high school graduation — actually, his first two shows as it was necessary to have one opening for whites and another for everyone else.

Attending New York University and the Cooper Union through a fund from his hometown (the first black person ever to receive it) he also worked at Herbert Benevy's Gramercy Art Frame Shop where he met many of the prominent artists of the day. In his oral history interview for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art he said that the frame shop was where he received his real art education.

Merton was also a skilled saxophonist and would often have a jazz combo at his openings where he would 'sit in' and play. For a time he played with the Air Force Band until the military decided they needed his skills as an artist more than as a musician. Once when I mentioned to him I was living near the Pentagon he said that some of his works were still displayed there. He also was in shows at MOMA and The Guggenheim in the 1950s and eventually decided to live part-time in Paris to develop his art. In the 1960s Merton was active in a movement known as the Spiral Group, a loose collective of black artists put together by Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff.

But it is from the realm of African art that most of those reading this will know of Merton Simpson. What might not be generally known is that, like many of us, he began as a collector, buying his first piece in the late 1940s after looking at items that Paul Robeson and others of his circle had collected. He also spent time at the NYC gallery of Julius Carlebach (1909-1964) and wandered the great galleries of Paris.

Merton could display a wicked sense of 'stick-it-in-&-twist-it' humor. And, like all big-time dealers, he could sell an item for zillions where most of us would flounder.

A friend of mine once had an item he knew was superb but had not been able to sell privately. Questioning his own taste he went to New York and decided to visit Merton. Holding his breathe he asked for \$30,000.

Mert asked if he really wanted that much.

"Yes."

"OK, I'll take it."

Afterward, like all sellers, my friend thought he might not have asked nearly enough because there was no haggling over the price.

The next time he was in New York he stopped in the gallery and Merton said, "Man, I wish you had another one of those things! I sold that one for \$90,000." And he had.

His sometimes quirky personality, gallery and its stock and his eye will be much missed.