

# "Spirits, Relics and Rituals"

## A lawyer's passion for African art

By Naseem Stecker

**T**he mystery, striking beauty, and originality of African art and iconographic objects has always appealed to Detroit attorney John F. Korachis. Masks, sculptural figures, furnishings, and sacred and fetish objects made mostly of wood and endowed

with the abilities to cure, curse, teach, and protect have preoccupied him for 40 years. Although some of the artwork he has collected is decorative, most was made for ceremonial use—"birth, death, agrarian festivals to celebrate the harvest, the moon, the weather, they all have some sort of religious expression," Korachis explained.

His unique collection (see photos) came to the attention of Bruce Winslow, director of the Alden B. Dow Museum of Science and Art in Midland, and Eugene Jenneman from the Dennon Museum Center at Northwestern Michigan College in Traverse City. After a flurry of telephone conferences, correspondence, and a visit to see his collection, both men suggested that Korachis allow them to showcase his art at their museums—an unexpected surprise and a great source of satisfaction for him.

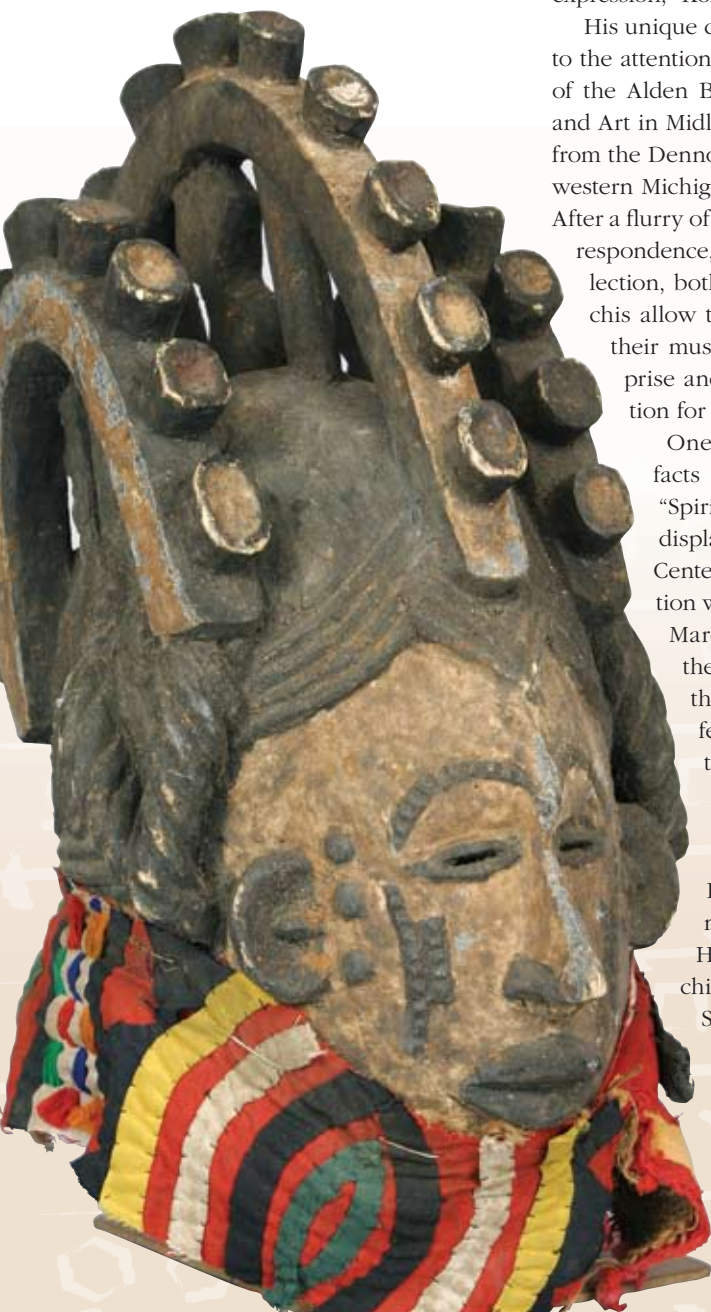
One hundred and thirty artifacts from his collection titled "Spirits, Relics and Rituals" were displayed recently at the Midland Center for the Arts. The exhibition will re-open in Traverse City, March 24 to September 2, at the Dennon Museum where the National Governor's Conference is also scheduled to take place this summer.

A native of Kalamata, a small Greek town that directly faces northern Africa, Korachis has long felt a connection with the continent. He recalls that during his childhood, windstorms in the Sahara would deposit sand in Kalamata. His fascination with Africa grew deeper over the years, even when his family migrated to the

United States. He actually started collecting African art when he was only 18—the beginning of a lifelong passion for things beautiful, authentic, and expressive. The pieces he acquired had varied functions, but they were also a way to document cultural traditions and practices passed on through the generations.

When he was in his late 20s, he bought the most significant artifacts in his collection. These artifacts, from countries in the Central and Western regions of Africa, were purchased from dealers in New York and Washington, D.C., and from trips to Europe, particularly Brussels and Paris. On these trips, he would spend entire days scouring African art galleries and museums to see and learn more about the finest art objects in the world. "I get an emotional as well as an intellectual satisfaction when I look at the collection. I think they're magnificently made, each has a strong emotional expression, and the more you study African art history, the more you'll realize that they're from a very complex, very interesting society of peoples," Korachis said. In fact, he points out that the discovery of African art played a leading role in the development of modern art. The great European modernists, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, and others, found inspiration in African sculptures at the turn of the twentieth century, which helped them to break away from the constraints of the representational tradition.

With the heyday of collecting over, Korachis is now focused on preserving the art that he has acquired—much of it from traditions and cultures and ways of life quickly disappearing. "Due to the type of materials used to create such objects, the constantly hostile environmental conditions to which they are exposed, as well as their repeated ceremonial or other usages, it is quite rare for these objects to survive for more than 50



Head Mask. Nigeria, Igbo. Early twentieth century; wood, cloth, paint.

"...each has a strong emotional expression, and the more you study African art history, the more you'll realize that they're from a very complex, very interesting society of peoples."

to 100 years," he points out. That's why the exhibitions and the efforts of the museums to bring in students from public schools and local colleges to view the artwork and to generate discussions are good opportunities to deepen our understanding of the historical, cultural, and artistic significance of this kind of art, he says.

Korachis is a partner at Simon, Korachis, Stella and Zingas, P.C., where he focuses on business and real estate law. He is also the vice chair of the board of directors of the Detroit Artists Market (DAM), the oldest nonprofit art center in the Midwest. For the last two years, he has sponsored the annual John F. Korachis Scholarship and exhibition at the DAM. This year, art students

at Wayne State University will be invited to participate. Several scholarships in varying amounts will be awarded to select students. Scholarship recipients and students who receive an honorable mention will be invited to exhibit their work along with WSU alumni and faculty from April 20 through May 26.

"I feel very strongly in supporting the humanities, especially since it is quite evident that over the last three decades our cultural institutions and liberal arts study programs could only survive if we support our young scholars and artists," Korachis added. ■

*Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. She can be contacted by e-mail at [nstecker@mail.michbar.org](mailto:nstecker@mail.michbar.org).*



Antelope Headresses.  
Mali, Bamana, Chi Wara.  
Early twentieth century;  
wood, cowrie shells, beads,  
fibers, burlap, leather, basketry.



Female Figure. Probably Ivory Coast, Ebric.  
Nineteenth to twentieth century;  
wood, beads, cloth.

Photography by Greg Near