

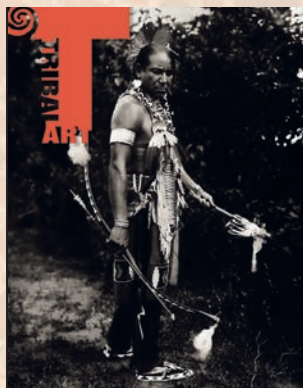
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Collaborating with the Past

The Ambrotypes of Shane Balkowitsch





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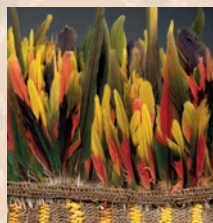
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For several years now, the Musée Barbier-Mueller has been exploring the affinities between contemporary Western art and the traditional arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas through exhibitions based on the concept of dialogue developed by a well-known artist. *Scarifications*, an exhibition that opened in Geneva on October 11, 2023, is the latest iteration of this series, and it offers a stimulating interaction between the world of Miquel Barceló and the museum's collection of traditional world art. The Felanitx-based artist is known for his

We visited the exhibition with the artist and were able to learn more from him about the evolution of the project, about his own creative process, and his relationship with Africa.

Tribal Art magazine: Talk to us about the genesis of this interesting exhibition.

Miquel Barceló: The trigger for this project was a meal with friends, including Monique and Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller. This was in Geneva in 2008, at the time when I was working on the dome in the United Nations building there. We were sitting at the table when Laurence Mattet, who was then director of the Musée Barbier-Mueller, asked me to think of a topic for an exhibition that we might work on together. My mind right away jumped to scarification—in the broadest sense of the term, meaning any kind of creative action that involves the removal of material. Beyond the interest that lies in its multiple formal concrete manifestations, it's a practice that allows us to explore such

FIG. 1 (left): Installation view of *Scarifications*: dialogue between the Miquel Barceló painting *Jaune piquant* (1996) and a head from the Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, from the Barbier-Mueller collection.

Photo © Tribal Art magazine.

FIG. 2 (below): Installation view of *Scarifications*: dialogue a work on paper by Miquel Barceló titled *Masque Psoriasis* (2000) and a Mississippian pendant mask from the Barbier-Mueller collection.

Photo © Tribal Art magazine.



SCARIFICATIONS

A Stroll through Two Universes with Miquel Barceló

Interview by Elena Martínez-Jacquet

interest in Africa—and particularly Mali, where he lived and created for many years—as well as for the deep bonds of friendship that connected him to Monique and Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller. Although this would be enough to justify the present rapprochement, the topic of scarification as the common thread for this show adds a noteworthy dimension to the subject. The scratches, nicks, burns, and discoloration that animate the surfaces of Barceló's works find harmonious reflection in the museum's masks, statues, pottery, and other objects from Africa, Oceania, Native North America, and Thailand. These are presented to the visitor as manifestations of individual artistic impulses as much as being expressions of cultural values and traditions.



fascinating aspects of art as the artist's gestures and intentions, in addition to examining its cultural dimensions. What's more, in some way it's an omnipresent subject in art. Everywhere and throughout time there have been artists who have scratched, notched, or engraved their material—and others who have not. In fact, the world can be divided into two categories: those who scratch and those who do not. Or, if we were to make a humorous analogy, those who eat snails and those who do not. Clearly, in both cases, I belong to the first category!



T.A.M.: *How did you decide on the selection of artworks? And how did the collection that Monique and Jean Paul had built inform your choices?*

M.B.: The *Scarifications* corpus is the fruit of consideration that was built up over a long period of time. We started with a proposal from me that included a group of twenty-five of my works that I felt were particularly well-suited to the project as well as to the exhibition galleries, given their relatively small format and the techniques used to make them. Most of them had never been shown in a museum before. Once the contemporary works had been defined, Anne-Joëlle Nardin, the museum's director



after Mattet's retirement, sent me a long list of pieces from the collection that she felt resonated with my work. We then began a process of winnowing the pieces until, after a lot of back-and-forth between our teams, we came up with the selection of around fifty pieces that are now on display in the galleries. Even though we were always keen to build a dialogue between the contemporary and traditional works based on affinity, it was only during the editing process that the relevance of our choices became fully apparent to me.

To answer the second part of your question, Monique and Jean Paul and I were great friends. I knew them in Côte d'Ivoire, and then, in the early 1990s, Monique came to visit me at my home in Sangha, in Dogon country. She climbed down the cliff to share a dinner in my house, which could best be described as "neolithic." She was a very brave woman! We saw each other regularly in Paris after that, and when I moved to Geneva for a while to work on the UN dome, their house became my safe haven. The memory of these great art lovers was always present in my choice of works, particularly those from their collection. I wasn't guided by my personal tastes and interests, as evidenced by the fact that there is (almost) no Dogon art. Instead, I've focused on the variety and strength of the resonances between the works. That said, I didn't set out to create an "ethnic" or

FIG. 3 (left):
Miquel Barceló, *Moi*, 2005.
Mixed media on canvas.
52 x 38 cm.
Private collection.
Image © Miquel Barceló, ADAGP
Paris, 2023; photo: Luis Lourenço.

FIG. 4 (above):
Installation view of
Scarifications: dialogue
between a woodcut by
Miquel Barceló titled *Arthur*
Schopenhauer (2015), from
the series "Lletraferits," and
a helmet mask from the
Benue River region in Nigeria
from the Barbier-Mueller
collections.
Photo © Tribal Art magazine.

**Three Questions for Anne-Joëlle Nardin, Director
of the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva**

Tribal Art magazine: *The Scarifications show is the first exhibition you have presented since you were named head of the museum in January 2023. What does this project mean to you?*

Anne-Joëlle Nardin: First of all, it's an incredible opportunity because Miquel Barceló's work speaks to me. To be able to present a selection of works by this great artist together with objects from the museum, which also touch me deeply, has been an enriching experience. Secondly, as Barceló points out in the catalogue, this exhibition is very much a tribute to Monique and Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller and to the long history of friendship nourished by a shared passion for Africa and artistic creation in all its forms. I hope our visitors will be won over by what we have been able to put together to offer them. I, for one, am deeply moved.

T.A.M.: *Some of the greatest highlights of the Musée Barbier-Mueller's holdings are among the pieces featured in this show. What place has been left to new discoveries?*

A.J.N.: Our priority was to select works from our collection that would best resonate with Barceló's creations, so formal convergence was the main selection criterion. That said, we also sought to indulge ourselves by putting out some of our truly emblematic pieces, like our large Senufo *deble* figure (FIG. 5), as well as pieces less often seen by our public, such as the small Mississippi pendant mask (FIG. 2) and pottery pieces from Burkina Faso and Nigeria. But overall, what we're offering our visitors here might be thought of more as rediscoveries than as discoveries.

T.A.M.: *And for you at the museum, has this new immersion in your collection allowed you to gain new insight into the objects in it?*

A.J.N.: Absolutely! This project was an opportunity to take stock of and review what we had published in the past about each of the works on display. Then, based on what we found, we turned again to the various specialists who had written about them and asked them to update their assessments to reflect their more recent research. We also asked them to reexamine the objects carefully in the light of the scarification topic at the heart of the exhibition. This allowed us to revisit the relevant vernacular terminology while also gaining a better understanding of the particular contexts in which the pieces were used. And that was just the start.



encyclopedic exhibition with as many cultures and object types as possible. I wanted to look at the subject of scarification as a universal gesture. The subject could have been tackled more broadly, for example, by including Renaissance paintings in which the painter had cut into the pigment on the canvas, but I stuck to tribal art—the heart of the Barbier-Mueller milieu, as it were.

T.A.M.: *The exhibition is based on a convergence in the use of specific techniques but also in the aesthetic results of two very distinct artistic realms, yet it has the merit of also highlighting significant differences, notably in the interplay of chance and intent in the artist's gesture. To put it simply, your work is the result of a kind of letting go, whereas in African art, every gesture is controlled and intended to realize precise detail that has meaning within the context of the artist's culture.*

M.B.: Yes, that's true. In African art, there's a quest for a concrete form that's almost pre-existing, in the sense that it's already part of a tradition. Scarification is a mark of belonging, and it is rich in meaning. That said, some of the works in this exhibition bear marks that are the result of chance. I'm thinking, for example, of works that have been broken and then repaired, such as the Bembe mask from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is presented alongside an early painting of mine from 1983 called *Peintre brûlant ses tableaux* (Artist Burning His Paintings).

T.A.M.: *How does the more controlled and measured gesture of the African artist speak to an artist who practices letting go?*

M.B.: I find it compelling and inspiring! What I do always straddles the line between chance and control. As soon as one creates a ceramic or a painting and one puts a mark on it, will has been expressed. But there is also something that escapes us, and that can never be reproduced identically. That is precisely what interests me. It's all about accepting the unpredictable: fire, termites, dust, hornets. Life on earth has primacy, and that expresses itself in my work.

Here's an anecdote related to several of the works on paper presented in the exhibition.



FIG. 5 (far left):
Rhythm pounder. Senufo;
Lataha village, Côte d'Ivoire.
19th century.

Wood. H: 118 cm.
Ex. Emil Storrer (until 1952);
Josef Mueller.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, inv. 1006-1.
Image © Musée Barbier-Mueller; photo:
Roger Asselberghs.

FIG. 6 (above):
Installation view of
Scarifications: dialogue
between a ceramic by Miquel
Barceló titled *PSR* (1998)
and a Luluwa figure from
the Democratic Republic of
the Congo from the Barbier-
Mueller collection.

Photo © Tribal Art magazine.

FIG. 7 (left):
Ritual spoon. Bembe;
Republic of the Congo.
19th–20th century.

Wood. H: 17.2 cm.
Ex. Josef Mueller (acquired before 1939).
Musée Barbier-Mueller, inv. 1021-8.
Image © Musée Barbier-Mueller; photo :
Studio Ferrazzini Bouchet.





FIG. 8 (left):
Installation view of
Scarifications: dialogue
between a ceramic by
Miquel Barceló titled *CAPO2,*
Quadriculat (2009) and an
Owo elu mask from Nigeria
from the Barbier-Mueller
collection.

Photo © Tribal Art magazine.

FIG. 9 (below):
Miquel Barceló, *De Bamon*,
2009.

Mixed media on paper.
65 x 51 cm.
Private collection.
Image © Miquel Barceló, ADAGP
Paris, 2023; photo Luis Lourenço.

mixed media, prints, paintings, ceramics—and executed over a period of time ranging from 1983 to 2022. The selection functions like a retrospective in many ways.

Also, I was interested to observe how, once the works were hung, the boundaries between the different worlds became blurred. It's as if the lines had been erased, and it became impossible to tell at a glance to which creative context each piece belongs. I like this “muddling” because it reminds us that, wherever they come from, works of art are made for the same reasons: to enhance the world while also responding to a need on the part of the artist.

T.A.M.: *Let's conclude with a more general question that skirts the margins of this project: How are you affected by non-European artworks? And do you own any?*

M.B.: I am touched by artistic creations from all over the world. I like to surround myself with a wide variety of objects, but I don't consider myself a collector. I have some ceramic

There was a time when I tried to get a grip on the action of termites, for example, and I tried to develop a technique that I referred to as “xylophagy.” That was in Mali around 1987. I had painted several works on paper, which I left at home while I went on a trip. When I returned, I found they had been eaten away by termites. My first reaction was consternation, but ultimately I came to the conclusion that, all things considered, this was not bad, and sometimes it was an improvement! I experimented with a number of variations, applying a repellent product to parts the paper while using shea butter as bait to “guide” the termites into action. It became quite a sophisticated technique (FIG. 9).

T.A.M.: *Has the interaction with the Musée Barbier-Mueller works in Scarifications provided a different perception of your own practice?*

M.B.: What I've retained from the experience is, above all, a heightened understanding of the extent to which the theme of scarification runs through my work. Many of my pieces are self-portraits, quite diverse in their techniques—





FIG. 10 (above):
Ancestral figure, *kulap*.
Southern New Ireland,
Papua New Guinea.
19th century.

Chalk stone, pigment. H: 29.3 cm.
Collected in 1890.
Ex Josef Mueller (acquired before
1939).
Musée Barbier-Mueller, inv. 4317-C.
Image © Musée Barbier-Mueller;
photo: Studio Ferrazzini Bouchet.

FIG. 11 (left):
Miquel Barceló, *Sin título*,
2022.

Ceramic. H: 54 cm.
Private collection.
Image © Miquel Barceló, ADAGP
Paris, 2023; photo: Luis Lourenço.



FIG. 12 (above):
Installation view of
Scarifications: dialogue
between a work on paper
by Miquel Barceló titled *Sin
título* (1999) and two Dogon
figures from Mali from the
Barbier-Mueller collection.
Photo © Tribal Art magazine.

*Scarifications, Miquel
Barceló & le musée Barbier-
Mueller*

Through 21 April 2024

Barbier-Mueller Museum
10, rue Jean Calvin, Geneva
www.barbier-mueller.ch
Catalogue available.

pieces from Mali, for instance, and these initiated me into the art forms from that area. In fact, I learned almost everything I know there! The place gave me my schooling in both art and life!

I have a small collection of Dogon figures with raised arms, which I purchased in the 1980s at the Bandiagara Cliffs. Two similar figures from the Barbier-Mueller collection are included in the exhibition alongside an untitled work on paper from 1999 featuring Nommo-like figures with raised arms (FIG. 12). Come to think of it, that is the only conscious reference to African art among my works in the show.