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IN MEMORIAM

# RENÉ DAVID



1928–2015

With René David's passing, a fulfilled and successful life as a traveler, art dealer, and connoisseur has come to an end.

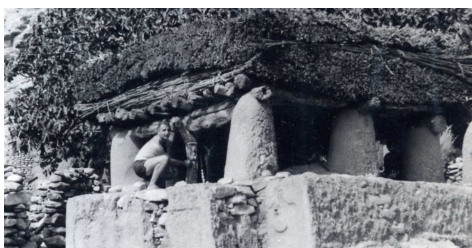
Driven by curiosity and the urge to explore and cross boundaries, he lived his life fully and never ceased to astonish all who knew him.



*Four generations, 1933  
great-grandfather, grandfather, father and son*



*Paris, 1966  
Denise, René, Claudine, Eva and Jean*



## Riehen

His journey began in 1928, in Riehen near Basel, as the third child of a haute-bourgeois family. On his parent's estate, he was the perpetrator of all sorts of mischief, which later he loved to recall, and which showed even then his sense of humor - though his victims may have seen things differently. His youth, however, was also influenced by the events in neighboring Germany, and these circumstances were certainly of importance in forming another side of René's personality. Poems from this time testify to critical ideas and the yearnings of a sensitive thinker who increasingly opposed everything that was not to his liking.

The school in Basel did not appreciate this malcontent, and the boarding school Rosenberg in St. Gallen was also not able to redirect René's critical thinking into what it considered a more appropriate direction. And so the inevitable had to happen - an early and final break with his parents.

## Basel

René, on his own now, completed training as a bookkeeper and tax consultant. As an employee of the internal revenue authorities he gained useful knowledge that later helped him to optimize his business dealings. After a short period in the building-material business, René's interests soon turned to the nicer things of life. He married, and he founded a gallery for antiques and curiosities in Basel. The gallery flourished, but his first marriage failed. A second gallery followed the first. And a new love, as well. In London he married Denise, whom he had known from school times, and in 1961 Jean joined Claudine and Eva, the two children from Denise's previous marriage.

## Africa

Reports from his friend Theo Gerber on his travels in Africa awakened René's curiosity about the "dark continent." This curiosity had already lain dormant in him since his contact with his great-uncle Adam David (1872-1959), well-known all over Switzerland as a zoologist, an Africa researcher, big-game hunter, publicist, and brother of Jean Jacques David (1871-1908), also an Africa researcher.

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In the context of the 1960s, young people intent on changing the world considered Africa, in particular the land of the Dogon, an interesting alternative to the "classical" journey to India with its temples, gurus, and consciousness-altering substances.

René and Denise's first trip to Africa had to do with their interest in the cultures, thoughts, values, and art of the peoples who lived there. The desire to share their experiences, paired with a natural gift for business, soon led, however, to several boxes filled with artworks to be sold in Switzerland.

What they experienced there, and the successful sale of the objects they brought back, for example to the famous art dealer and collector Ernst Beyeler, led to a definitive outbreak of the "Africa virus." There followed numerous months-long trips to Mali, Cameroon, the Congo, and the Ivory Coast, trips about which he always loved to tell, along with lots of anecdotes. So, for example, the travel route with Swissair at that time was via Moscow, there still being no direct flights. Another wonderful story belonging to this bygone epoch was the one about the Peugeot that got shipped from Basel to Abidjan. It was also during this time that René got sick with bilharzia and was successfully treated as a test-patient at the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute. The medication bears a name made up of the combined initials of both the researcher and René. Or there's the story of the three crocodiles that traveled to Basel in Denise's handbag: when the crocodiles got too big to keep at home they were donated to the Basel zoo.

### Paris - Berlin

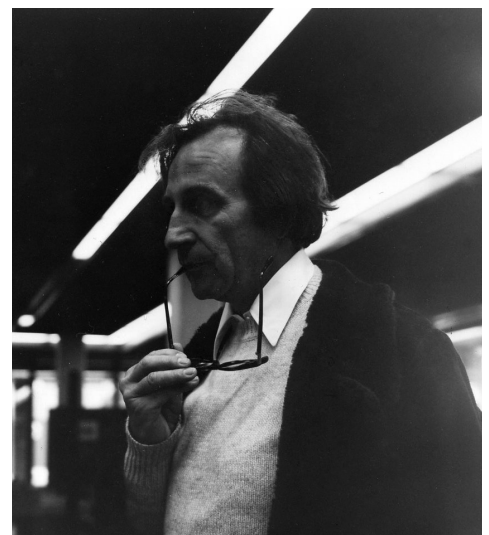
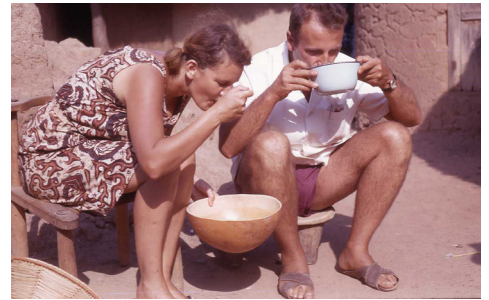
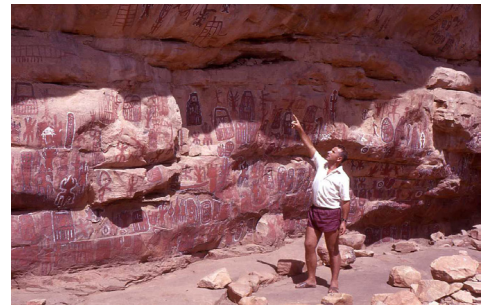
Soon Basel started feeling too cramped for the Davids, and after a one-year break and a long family-trip with the car to Turkey, and back and forth across Europe all the way up into northern Norway, they settled in Paris. Here, they took the time to process in writing their many impressions and experiences. At first, in the intellectual milieu of Paris, where they had their own studio on Rue Mouffetard near Place Contrescarpe, and later, in the 70s, in Berlin, at that time the center for German intellectuals. Socially critical ideas, expressed with both humor and bite, were published in two books.

### Zürich

At the beginning of the 80s, poor investments and an immoderate life-style forced René and Denise to reorient themselves and get back into business. They decided on Zurich as a residence and established Galerie Walu on Rämistrasse as a venue for collectors and lovers of African art. The following years are filled with the growth of the business and the expansion of the space there. René's unconventional way of doing business and his far-sighted thinking fascinated both friends and adversaries. At the highpoint of his activities, he employed eight persons in 200 square meters on three floors.

With Denise, Claudine, and Jean to back him up on the home front, René took every opportunity to travel to Africa and he repeatedly surprised his customers with new, outstanding finds. Anyone who happened to be there at the right time will enjoy remembering the unpacking of the huge packages just arrived from Africa.

René, who was always resourceful, was also pioneering and was one of the first in his field to consistently use all the available testing methods, and he helped to develop them further as well. He documented and certified his objects without fail, offered the right of unconditional return of purchase, and forged new paths in respect to the protection of cultural goods. Over the years, - out of his own conviction - he returned to Africa more than 300 objects valued at several million Swiss francs. It was an obvious pleasure to him to challenge the established bureaucratic institutions in this way. His gifts to the national museums of Ghana, Mali, the Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria attracted a lot of attention, not only in the media. In Africa, as well, it lent him much respect on all sides and great gratitude. In 2007, the Republic of Togo awarded him





the Prix de l'Indépendance as the "Meilleur Défenseur du Patrimoine Culturel," and Nigeria awarded him the status of advisor and accredited agent of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments.

But to limit René's story to his dealership in African art would be a grave misrepresentation. He lived for Africa like hardly anyone else. He switched back and forth between the two worlds, beyond all taboos, prejudices, and morals. Thanks to his openness, he had access to the innermost and most secret circles. Among the Asante, in Ghana, after completing a test, he was accepted as an herbalist, he danced with voodoo priests in Benin, and as a patron of the Ewe he was respectfully called Efo (Big Brother).

### Lomé

With such a passion for Africa, it was understandable that in his old age he would want to move to Togo, to buy a house in Lomé. Denise, who preferred to move to her beloved Tuscany and her daughter Eva and family, agreed to a harmonious divorce. But their strong bond remained as firm as ever up until she died in 2011. After 40 intense years, Galerie Walu was taken over by their son Jean.



But retirement was unthinkable for René. In Lomé he experienced a new springtime with Enam, a 50-years-younger Africa dealer. In 2003, they married in Cyprus and from then on led a life that for each of them could not have been more exciting. In the same year, René bought the residence of the French ambassador, a magnificent estate in the middle of Lomé. There he founded a private museum, continuing what he had started in Zurich - the repatriation of cultural goods to Africa. The museum is the first museum in West Africa to display objects from all African countries, all of which, by the way, have been returned from Europe. At the same time, together with Enam, he opened the Ekoi Gallery, and for his 80th birthday he treated himself to a Hummer H2. In 2011, for health reasons, he sold his estate in Lomé to a Chinese businessman, who up to now is still managing the museum. René fulfilled Enam's wish, also for the future, to do farming and have plantations, hens, and a fishery in Togo.



### Zurich

When René was finally in need of more care, in 2013, he returned to Switzerland. On April 1, 2015, he died in Zurich. The news of his death spread like wildfire all over Africa. The mourning over the loss of this exceptional human being is great and the sympathy that the family experienced in the following weeks was overwhelming. His memory will be upheld in the multitude of stories about encounters with him. Everyone who knew him will remember René David - for a long time to come.

