In Remembrance

GENEVIÈVE McMILLAN
Timeline

1922 Born Geneviève Lalanne on December 23, 1922 in Orthez, Pyrénées, France.

1943 Earned a baccalaureate degree in English from the University of Bordeaux, and was one of the first women to graduate from the École des Sciences Politiques, the leading French university for public administration in Paris.

1944 Met Robert McMillan, an American officer and architect by training, after the liberation of Paris.

1944 Met Madeleine Rousseau, a collector of African and Oceanic Art, who became her mentor and sparked her interest in collecting and learning about diverse cultures. By 1946, she had married Robert McMillan and settled in the U.S.

1950 After her divorce, opened Henri IV, a restaurant with a pastry shop and nightclub in the heart of Harvard Square, Cambridge.

From the 1950s on, summers were devoted to her passion of understanding diverse cultures and people. Traveled the world extensively: throughout Africa, Eastern and Western Europe and the former Soviet Union, the Americas, Asia, Australia and the Middle East.

1980 Establishment of the Reba Stewart Memorial Scholarship at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA).

1995-6 Establishment of the Geneviève McMillan- Reba Stewart Professorship in the Study of Women in the Developing World at MIT.


1997 Establishment of the McMillan-Stewart Fellowship in Distinguished Filmmaking at the Film Study Center at Harvard University.

1999 In honor of her friend Dr. Harold Amos, the first African American professor at Harvard Medical School established the Geneviève McMillan – Harold Amos Endowed Scholarship Fund for African Americans at Harvard Medical School.


2007 Establishment of the Geneviève McMillan- Reba Stewart Chair in Painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

2007 The first Geneviève McMillan- Reba Stewart Traveling Fellowship awarded at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

2007 "Material Journeys:” a temporary exhibit of part of her collection featured at the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston.

2008 Collection to be featured at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

# Table of Contents

Taking a Path Less Traveled  
Cate McQuaid (reprint from *The Boston Globe*) ................. 2

Aunt Ginou  
Catherine Lalanne-Gobet and Virgine Lalanne ............................... 4

Bonding with Ginou McMillan  
Carole Bertonèche ........................................................................ 6

Henri IV  
In Ginou’s Voice ........................................................................ 8

In Ginou’s Orbit  
Larry Joseph ................................................................................. 10

A Life Shaping Friendship  
Kibebe Gizaw ............................................................................... 12

Club Henri IV  
Michael O. Finkelstein (reprint from *The Harvard Crimson*)........ 14

Gabrielle  
In Ginou’s Voice ........................................................................... 16

A Powerful Woman  
Jacob Olupona ............................................................................... 18

The Breadth of Her Interests  
Norman Hurst .................................................................................. 20

Learning from Ginou  
Alan Helms ...................................................................................... 22

Our Shared Passion  
William E. Teel ............................................................................... 23

An Enduring Legacy  
Malcolm Rogers ............................................................................. 24

An Art Lover Who Cared for People  
Stephanie Xatart ............................................................................ 25

Life Histories  
Christraud Geary .............................................................................. 26

African Art  
In Ginou’s Voice ............................................................................... 27

Ginou’s “Favorite Place”  
John Gianvito .................................................................................... 28

Ginou and Harvard  
Lucien Castaing-Taylor .................................................................. 30

Ginou Had the Secret  
Gaston Kabore .................................................................................. 32

Memories of a Remarkable Woman  
Fred Lazarus ..................................................................................... 34

Encountering the World  
Kay Sloan .......................................................................................... 36

Students  
In Ginou’s Voice ............................................................................... 37

Advancing African Studies  
Henry Louis Gates, Jr ................................................................. 38

A Unique Personality  
Philip S. Khoury ............................................................................. 39

A Passion for Justice  
Nancy Murray .................................................................................. 40

Ginou’s Multiculturalism  
Anne Marie Stein ............................................................................. 42

A Love of Life—and the World  
Marisa Escribano ............................................................................. 44

Visiting Geneviève  
Odile Cazenave ............................................................................... 45

She Showed Me Her World  
Jessica Pendleton ............................................................................ 46

She Knew the Gold from the Brass  
Fatma Albaiti ..................................................................................... 47

The Sphinx at 40 Bow Street  
Donald C. Kelley ............................................................................... 48

A Letter to Ginou  
Jamie Cope ........................................................................................ 49
If you map the trips Genevieve McMillan has taken in her life, the lines dart around the globe. Then chart the paths traveled by the magnificent objects in her collection of African and Oceanic art. All the trails meet in the two-family house McMillan owns in Cambridge.


Most exhibitions of such collections are put together around themes or chronologies. MFA organizers Christraud M. Geary, curator of African and Oceanic art, and research assistant Stephanie Xatart took an original tack and built this show around the paths traveled by the collector and the objects she acquired. The setup throws into vivid relief the evolving market for African and Oceanic art and the market’s role in assessing originality and value.

McMillan was born in the French Pyrenees and studied in Paris during World War II. African art had, early in the century, caught the imagination of artists such as Picasso and Braque who were captivated by its forms. By the time McMillan came on the scene in the 1940s, curators and collectors were cultivating interest in provenance, culture, and history as well as design.
The young collector’s first acquisition kicks off “Material Journeys”: a stunning reliquary figure from the Kota peoples in Gabon. McMillan bought it in Paris in 1945 from her mentor, the collector Madeleine Rousseau. This is the kind of work the Cubists relished, with a bold, brassy face over a wooden diamond that could represent shoulders or legs, knees cocked. Such figures were found on top of baskets in shrines. The Kota converted to Christianity around the turn of the 20th century, and the reliquaries were given away or sold. Today, African carvers make them for money.

A war bride, McMillan came to the United States by ship and would relax on deck on a beautifully carved wooden stool from the Nuna peoples of Burkina Faso. Made for a man, the stool had the beveled ribbon of a spine sweeping up its back. Already, she was ahead in the collecting game, acquiring utilitarian objects before the market for them caught fire.

The marriage, to an architect, didn’t last, and McMillan moved from the Lexington home she had shared with her husband to Cambridge. She opened the Henri IV restaurant in Harvard Square, which she closed every summer to travel. She brought many treasured objects home with her; others arrived via the usual trade routes of international art (Paris, New York).

She bought an elaborately adorned hunter’s tunic and hat in Bamako, the capital of Mali. Such textiles didn’t interest collectors until the 1960s, when McMillan acquired this one. Worn during public celebrations, it’s covered with evidence of the hunter’s exploits in the form of protective amulets and mirrors to deflect evil.

Weapons became popular among collectors the following decade. A throwing knife from the Ngbaka peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which McMillan picked up in Paris in the 1970s, is a type that was still in use in the 1990s. Shaped like a sideways trident with a fourth blade projecting from its back, it’s designed for accuracy.

Oceanic art is often grouped with African art in part because Westerners have approached them from the same perspective. The pathways of the objects from their places of origin have also been similar, filtered through cities in areas once colonized by Western nations.

One such city is Rabaul, New Britain, Papua New Guinea, where in 1954 McMillan came across a delightful bark cloth mask. Its eyes splay out like airplane wings; its tongue lolls from a beaky, smiling mouth. The concentric eyes are made of bamboo twigs and colored with red and black pigments. The mask, made by the Uramot Baining peoples, was used in ceremonies to summon benevolent spirits and ancestors.

Like the bark cloth mask, many of the objects in “Material Journeys” exude a sense of authenticity. But what is truly authentic in a constantly changing world, where porous indigenous societies respond not only to the market, but to what comes to hand, is up for debate.

It took a daring and original eye for McMillan to purchase a necklace in 1967 made of shell, twine, nylon thread, and pink plastic. Even today, purists would frown on such a piece, although it shares the strong composition and purpose of a necklace made just of shells and twine. It was created by a jewelry maker in Papua New Guinea, which is not a plastic-free zone. Why shouldn’t it be considered authentic?

These objects tell stories of ritual, spiritual practice, family bonds, and survival. But they have more to them than that: They relate tales of colonialism, of the way we in the West have conjured the places we consider exotic, and of the impact a voracious market has had on local economies and indigenous cultures. McMillan’s prescient collecting provides us an exacting and generous lens through which to examine these narratives.

By Cate McQuaid
Published Tuesday, May 29, 2007
Aunt Ginou
Catherine Lalanne-Gobet and Virginie Lalanne
My first memory of our aunt was in Orthez in the Pyrénées in 1959. Our father, Jacques, had just died in an air crash and our mother, Marie-Pierre, had managed to get in touch with her sister-in-law Ginou who was in Zaire at that time. Ginou made it to Orthez for the funeral. I was a little girl and my sister Virginie was still a baby.

Is it a real memory or is it what was I was told by my mother?

I have the picture in my mind of a very tall, young, blond and beautiful woman arriving in her native village like a queen. She was wearing original African jewellery. She was so attractive with her long tanned legs and great style. She smiled at her two young nieces and “Tatie Ginou,” as we called her, entered our lives forever.

We were very close, even if we were separated by the Atlantic Ocean. Every year, Ginou used to come to France and we shared wonderful dinners and visited art exhibitions together. In 1982, as the lawyer for a young painters’ group called “Beau Lézard,” I helped to organize a huge exhibition in the Latin Quarter. As soon as Ginou arrived in Paris, she wanted to visit the “Beau Lézard” exhibition with me. She didn’t like it. As a matter of fact, she did not share my attraction to contemporary art. But she was open-minded, and always interested when I spoke to her about my own collection.

When Virginie was a student in the law school at La Sorbonne, she stayed for three years in Ginou’s apartment in rue Bourbon Le Château. Virginie loved this charming place, especially the terrace where Ginou kept stones from all over the world.

Ginou was loving with her nieces and also very close to our mother. They were both independent and elegant women, fighting in life to find their own way. Both of them were optimistic and feminist and gave me a strong desire to help women from all over the world to get “a life that they could choose,” in the words of Simone de Beauvoir.

Ginou was very generous and also very discreet. I was amazed and proud when I learned of all she had done to help people fulfil their dreams. Her name, her presence and spirit will remain alive through the Geneviève McMillan-Reba Stewart Foundation, which is truly her child.

Catherine Lalanne-Gobet and Virginie Lalanne, who live in Paris, are Geneviève McMillan’s nieces and closest living relatives.
Ginou was inspirational for me. When I arrived in the United States in 1986 as the spouse of a young visiting professor at Harvard Business School, Ginou was very supportive and often acted as a mother figure. She made it easier for me to adapt to this new country and welcomed me every time I needed someone to listen. Ginou was the best listener I knew. She always gave the wonderful impression that what you were saying was special or tremendously interesting.

Ginou and I bonded around two of subjects in particular: my father and philanthropy.

She and my father had much in common. They came from small villages in the Pyrenees, in the southwest of France, only twenty kilometers apart. Their families knew each other well. They were very much alike and became closer when my father’s sister married Ginou’s brother. But the resemblance between Ginou and my father went further. Both lost their mother at a young age and had been raised by a stern father. Despite difficult childhoods, they kept a great sense of humor, a profound lust for life and a deep affection for one another. Rumor even has it that Ginou was my father’s first love.

But it was the beginning of the war and their lives took on different paths. She was a young girl who dreamt of going to Paris, away from provincial life, while he wanted to stay and prosper in his region, where he was studying to become a doctor. My father married my mother, had six children and remained in the Pyrenees. Ginou married a GI and left for the United States. Yet they kept a deep affection for one another and very often my conversations with Ginou started with the same question: “Et comment va Charlie?”

Our second favorite subject of conversation was philanthropy. Ginou always showed great interest in my research on philanthropy and American higher education. When she endowed a chair at MIT, she introduced me to Philip Khoury, who was then Dean of the School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences so that I would have a better understanding of philanthropic procedures.

The idea of creating her own foundation may have been the result of one of numerous conversations we had on that subject. But Ginou did not wait to create her foundation to become a philanthropist. She was a kind of venture philanthropist, as defined by David Rockefeller III in 1969 when he talked of “the adventurous funding of unpopular causes.” The support she gave women from Africa and the Middle East over the decades would qualify as “adventurous funding.” When she believed in something, she was very determined and nothing would or could make her change her mind.

Ginou was one of a kind who will be greatly missed by many. My family will always remember her greeting us in her exotic apartment in the heart of Cambridge, up a narrow and risky flight of stairs, which we would willingly climb amidst mirrors, paintings and pictures of her past, to share a bowl of soup or a glass of wine, surrounded by books, sculptures and masks of her unique African art collection, overlooking the city that she had adopted, along with us.

Carole Bertonèche, a long-time family friend of Ginou, is a Maître de Conférences (Associate Professor) at the University of Bordeaux and a researcher on philanthropy.
In Ginou’s Voice
In conversation with Josefina and interviewer Mo Lotman, February 24, 2005
Henri IV

My restaurant was called Henri IV because he was born in the Pyrenees, in Orthez, my city... It was the first foreign - French - restaurant - open in 1950. That is already 55 years ago. Ahh! 55 years ago!...

I came here as a GI bride - that's what we were called then....My marriage didn’t last very long and in 1950 I decided I was going to open a restaurant, which was complicated because I had to find a chef. I kept my restaurant for about five years under complete control, then it was more or less under management and lost its charm. Because at the beginning everyone was French there - they were all GI brides - everyone spoke French there, and students were delighted to go and have their accent corrected during their lunchtime [laughs].

After five years I gave it to management and it was never the same – for a long time, probably 25 years at least. And the reason I was so unhappy was because after five years I lost the chef who I brought in, who was also from the Pyrenees.

[To Josefina] Did you ever meet my chef? Do you remember Jean Baptiste?.. Probably you didn’t meet him...

He was a great guy. He was in the kitchen working so hard, handling everything, he didn’t even have a cook to help him in the beginning. He was doing everything – peeling potatoes, preparing the omelets, preparing the sauces, answering to all these girls - it was great.

And after five years he went back to France for one summer, and his mother wanted him married because he was beginning to be 42 or 43 which in the Pyrenees is kind of old enough to be married. So she married him to a woman who was very intent on not being the wife of a cook but she wanted to be the wife of a restauranteur – so she took him away from me and after that I had lots of problems finding chefs, and there was never anyone like him, he was a wonderful guy. Too bad he got married and she didn’t like the idea of staying here with him. But, you can’t win....

I didn’t have many Nobel Prize winners in my restaurant but I did have Calder. Every time he came here to teach once a week he used come to my restaurant. And he was the most delectable, delightful, wonderful guy. I told him he could have all the wine he wanted, and he enjoyed that. He was a wonderful guy this Calder – so funny...some of these guys have such a great sense of humor, it just makes you laugh even before the joke, it’s so strong.

My restaurant used to be called – because they didn’t know about Henri IV – they called it 'The Hungry Cat'. We are meeting you at 'The Hungry Cat' [laughs].

JOSEFINA:
She had the brilliant idea of having lunches with wine. I asked, how did you have the idea to have wine cheaper than milk –

GINOU:
[Laughs] It’s true actually. With a gallon of wine you had about 48 glasses, and with a quart of milk you had four portions –

JOSEFINA:
Milk was more expensive than wine at that time...

GINOU:
I had these gallons of wine – of course they were a little heavy for a GI bride actually. But I remember serving so many – and to fill a glass like this from a gallon, it was kind of difficult not to spill some wine. But most of the people who were there, especially at the beginning, would ask the waitress to give them another one and then they wouldn’t charge them.

For 99c at the time they would have soup, salad, bread, dessert, coffee, and a glass of wine or two. For 99c! And the reason why it was 99c was that they didn’t have to pay the Commonwealth of Massachusetts 5% tax – or else it would have been $1.10...

These were the good old days [laughs].
In Ginou’s Orbit

Larry Joseph

Geneviève and Reha Stewart

Winthrop Street Apartment
I am now seventy-three years old, but I was twenty-five when I met Ginou, who remained a friend for almost a half a century. She was, in 1960, an arrestingly beautiful young woman, tall and blonde, dressed with elegant simplicity, who rarely raised her voice, but whose soft-spoken and gentle manner concealed deep reserves of energy, tenacity and intelligence.

She was, in the still somewhat provincial Cambridge of the 1960’s, an exotic creature, partly because she had never lost her native accent, which was that of Southern France (and not that of Paris). Her business enterprises, first the Patisserie Gabrielle, later the Restaurant Henri IV, introduced to her adopted city new and seductive tastes and the culture that produced them, and she was surrounded with an aura brought back from travels to the ends of the earth. And not only an aura: she continued to return from her adventures in remote places with textiles of strange colors and designs and with puzzling objects in wood, bronze and gold whose origin and function remained mysterious.

The surroundings in which she chose to live were extremely simple and somewhat austere. For many years, she lived in a long, narrow room, in parts of which it was impossible to stand upright, under the roof of her restaurant at 96 Winthrop Street. She enlarged this somewhat confining space by constructing a terrace where, like the adept of some primitive religion, she spent hours offering herself to the sun. She was, in fact, an excellent example of the proposition that spaces reflect the person who constructs and lives in them.

As she became increasingly affluent, she acquired a number of other residences. Wherever she went, she constructed the same room, always painted white, always on the top floor of the building opening out onto a sunny terrace with a distant view: such were her apartments in Montmartre, in Saint Germain des Prés and in San Juan, Puerto Rico -- and later of course on Bow Street in Cambridge. Retiring in manner, she was nevertheless a sociable woman who succeeded in getting to know all the people in Cambridge and Boston whom she thought were worth the effort. She gave wonderful parties, often in the bar of her restaurant, and exquisite dinners that brought together scholars, painters, musicians, writers, business people and the occasional diplomat. Although she was discriminating in her social relations, she was the very opposite of a snob and welcomed warmly those who shared her tastes and beliefs from whatever walk of life they came. Unlike most people of means, she had no interest whatever in luxury -- or even in basic comfort.

Her tastes, true foundations of her character, lay elsewhere and were far from canonical: she loved the cinema, American jazz and most of all, the arts of Africa and other Third World cultures of which she was one of the earliest and most discriminating collectors. Her esthetic sensitivity led her to form a deep attachment to Reba Stewart, both to the brilliant young artist inspired by her residence in Japan, and to the beautiful woman, for whose untimely death after a trip to Africa Ginou felt herself partly responsible and never ceased to grieve.

More than thirty years ago, an accident in her cherished red Mustang convertible left Ginou with an injured back, which, over the years, brought on a host of other painful afflictions. They gradually reduced her mobility, forcing her to give up her annual journeys to France, gradually shrinking the perimeter of her visits and finally confining her to her bed. But even in pain, she continued to make her way in a wheel chair to the Carpenter Center to see new films as well as the classics she loved.

Ginou has devoted her fortune to the support of a number of causes advancing the status of women, Black culture and the civilizations of the Third World, movements of which she was all her life a devoted advocate. I suspect that even her lawyers remain unaware of the full extent of her philanthropy. She was a thoroughly modern woman who insisted, in her quiet way, on making her own way in the world, on living her life on her own terms, in her own style. But now that it is over, we can see that it was governed by the most ancient of values, passionately held and promoted: beauty and justice.

Larry Joseph, Professor Emeritus of French at Smith College, was a student at Harvard University from 1953 to 1963.
A Life-Shaping Friendship

Kibebe Gizaw

Kibebe Gizaw, Geneviève, and Abderrahmane Sissako
No matter what you want out of life, there’s often nothing more exciting than finding yourself in the company of a wonderful human being… and if that person is also really interesting, so much the better.

One day in the early 1970s my friend Claudine invited me to a party at Ginou’s Winthrop Street apartment. We rang the buzzer and I immediately felt pulled three flights upward by the jumble of artistic expression lining the stairwell walls. I wanted to look at that one, the next one and the one after that all the way to the top, where a door opened into the biggest little apartment in Cambridge.

Crossing the threshold, Harvard Square—intense, purposeful and self-absorbed—seemed to fade into the background in the relaxed, exploratory and sociable environment of Ginou’s home. As we passed through the minimalist Euro-kitchen, we were greeted by a riot of masks—the walls were covered with them, mostly of African origin. On that first visit I was preoccupied with the masks. They had so many personalities: some benign, some funny, some knowing and others a little ominous, and the apartment felt crowded though only seven or eight other people were there.

Sitting in the living room with friends, we were served cheese and wine as Ginou presided over the most interesting exchange of ideas one could have in Cambridge—and that’s really saying something! Her guests were so diverse. Rarely was a nationality, ethnic group, or age of person duplicated. The conversation ranged freely through politics, literature, religion, art and the talk of the town.

At Winthrop Street I first learned about the struggle of the natives of the Amazon River and the importance of saving the rain forest they inhabit. Ginou was an environmentalist decades before it was politically fashionable and that orientation extended naturally to the causes of indigenous people everywhere who lived in a respectful relationship with the earth.

After that first visit, I was invited to Ginou’s every Friday or Saturday and for other special occasions. We became friends easily, and I benefited greatly from her practical approach to life through her advice to me as a student, working person, and businessman.

What made Ginou so intriguing was her many personal connections with people, cultures and arts, and the way she shared those connections with her friends. In her living room, there was no such thing as political correctness. It was not needed, because people talked together with honest interest, curiosity and respect. This kind of conversation and the wisdom it imposes was actually more impressive than the hundreds of artifacts that also peopled her apartment.

In the early 1990s, Ginou traveled to the annual African Film Festival in Ouagadougou. At the home of Selome Gerima she met and had wide-ranging discussions with African filmmakers. She learned that many of them had difficulty accessing U.S. distribution networks. On her return home, Ginou funded the annual Harvard University African Film Festival, introducing many African filmmakers to a wider audience.

In Cambridge, her personal philosophy was expressed not only through Harvard’s African Film Festival, but also in the Club Nicole, later called Ahmed’s. Always a lover and creator of a festive social life, Ginou created there an atmosphere which brought together African, Middle Eastern, Asian, Latin American and American students. Ahmed’s was a meeting place for conversation, dancing and drinking where foreign students felt at home. I have a friend who met his future wife on Saturday night at Ahmed’s and married her the next Saturday. They have three children and live a wonderful life.

Ginou was also an ardent supporter of the Palestinian cause and a staunch supporter of African National Congress. Her dream was of peaceful coexistence between the Palestinian and Jewish people—a dream that many of her friends shared and continue to work for.

It was my good luck to find myself in Ginou’s company often during the years I studied and worked in Boston, in Seattle and in Virginia where I now live. We became such good friends. I will miss her morning phone calls to talk about politics or business. It was my pleasure to return her confidence and trust. She came into my life and helped shape the person I have become.

Kibebe Gizaw is a trustee of The Geneviève McMillan – Reba Stewart Foundation.
"On still nights," said Geneviève McMillan, the blonde proprietress of Club Henri IV, "I can hear my bells from Harvard Square." The four bells, bought at Filene's and tied to a cherry branch which overshadows Geneviève's terrace, tinkled restlessly in the wind. Like most of the decorations of Club Henri IV, Geneviève's own creating, the bells lent an air very simply, with little effort. Geneviève's restaurant occupies the two lower floors of an ancient frame building on Winthrop Street.

Geneviève's success as a decorator is evident in the atmosphere of the Club. With a twist of odd fabric for a curtain, a dangling red shaded lamp, and a small record player equipped with Charles Trenet records, she achieves a complete and quiet atmosphere for the Champagne lounge on the second floor. A "Cocteau machine," which relays the orders for Rose or Alsatian wines from downstairs, completes the picture. In the restaurant on the ground floor, a strategically placed modern lamp or a bull fight poster are some of the fitting additions to the twenty-five checkered cloth covered tables.

Despite its closeness to the disjointed rattle of Boylston street, this unlabored decor has captured a rare kind of leisure for Henri IV. "Even the Americans," Geneviève claims, "seem to eat slower and really enjoy themselves here at night. And I discovered that Americans like fancy things after all; snails are the most popular dish. I import them from France, but the sauce, the most important part, is made right here."

The excellent food and vigorous Gallic flavor of the restaurant, with its almost militant, straight backed chairs, have attracted many notables. Geneviève remembers William Faulkner, who used to eat lunch in the same corner every day, as "a small man, sharp blue eyes and a mustache. He seemed to be watching for something and always ordered Coq au Vin." Thornton Wilder and Miro frequented the restaurant, but neither made the impression on Geneviève that Louis Jouvet did, in a single visit. He came to Henri IV early one evening, out of temper and unwilling to talk. With some escargots and two bottles of Chateauneuf du Pape all this changed. He stayed until four in the morning, he and the chef, a wiry Frenchman, roaring off-color Gallic songs to each other.

The Club's success must go to Geneviève's ability to draw her world of French and Italian friends around her in her restaurant. Speaking French or Spanish almost all day at the restaurant, she says her English has even deteriorated since she came to this country. On her own, she mastered Italian and plans to import an Italian expresso coffee machine as well as bull fight, flags to give the restaurant a "Latin" feeling.

But French history and France itself, to which she returns each summer, are her first loves. She named the Club, Henri IV, in honor of that great French king's benevolent gluttony. Every French family, he vowed, would have a Poule à la Maison, at least on Sundays—and this is the Club's specialty, to keep Henri company. Geneviève is opening a pastry shop called Gabrielle across Boylston Street. "Gabrielle," explains Geneviève, "was Henri's mistress. It's only right that they should be together, don't you think?"

By Michael O. Finkelstein
Published Tuesday, April 28, 1953
In Ginou’s Voice
Gabrielle Patisserie
After that I opened a pastry shop which Josefina probably remembers – I had a wonderful couple from France – from a little north of the Pyrenees, we are both strong with the southwest you know – I think they have opened a restaurant in Martha’s Vineyard....

Well the French are doing well, I saw yesterday in the *Globe* that there is a Frenchman who had a pastry shop in Marblehead and he became a chef and is interested in teaching Americans to make pastry, so now he is at the culinary school of Cambridge. I don’t know where that is, perhaps you do... This is a pastry man of great quality who is now teaching. He probably thought he wasn’t doing enough by producing this great pastry, now he wants Americans to learn... Very generous, nice feeling.

The pastry shop lasted ten years under my control. Then I had a friend who was a French dentist, she didn’t want to continue her work, she didn’t like it, and she wanted to buy this thing, so she bought the place. I think the pastry man left her then, and she began to have the same problem I had – if you didn’t have the cook or the pastry man on your side all the time, you’re in trouble. So it didn’t last – well it was taken over recently – two years ago – by a Lebanese who was trying to do French pastry but not quite correctly....

At the beginning it was called ‘Gabrielle’ because Gabrielle was one of the first mistresses of Henri IV, so I called it ‘Gabrielle’. And then it changed to ‘Maurice’, after one of the cooks who learned very fast how to make a few things....

The pastry shop was outside, it had a table, it was an incentive for people to sit down, have a long coffee, have an extra croissant... This was a great thing for Harvard Square.
A Powerful Woman
Jacob Olupona
Ginou McMillan was a friend and someone I admired and very much respected. My first contact with her was in 1977 when I arrived in Boston to study at Boston University. I do not remember exactly who introduced me to her. But I recall that by 1978, I and my late friend and colleague, Ope Onabajo, along with a cadre of other international students, were already visiting Ginou.

She created an atmosphere of love and compassion for those experiencing America for the first time. We were always welcomed to her house and treated to French cuisine and wine. Of course, the basis of our friendship was that we were both Africanists in the making.

Upon meeting Ginou, I was impressed with her elegance, her generosity, and her strong interest in African arts. I must confess that I never got over the fact that she could live alone among those numerous objets d’art, or what we refer to as ere in Yoruba. In Africa, only medicine men and women can live among images unperturbed. I remember telling Ope in our local Yoruba parlance that she was “a powerful woman” to live among these images. I specifically recall a medicine garment with patches of talismans, of which she asked me to interpret the inscriptions. She also had a very unique pair of ibeji statues that immediately caught my attention. I had never seen such an impressive collection of African art.

My encounter with Ginou raised certain important intellectual questions because I began to see how, as a Yoruba Africanist, my own imagination and understanding differed very strongly from hers. For her, these objects were material and not part of her cosmological worldview. However, for me, many of those works of art formed a part of my enchanted universe. My encounter enabled me to understand the different worldviews and the different ways of viewing art. At that time, I perceived a chasm between our two worldviews, but it certainly diminished over the course of our lively exchanges.

My regret is that it took me more than twenty years to rediscover her in my second coming to America. I wish our paths had crossed earlier, because I know she would have offered her help and assistance in our new quest to make Harvard a world-renowned center for research in African studies. But nonetheless, her generous donations to the Du Bois Institute have certainly benefited numerous African scholars.

I was privileged to attend her funeral and I was quite impressed with the way she transitioned to the world beyond. As she made her journey, gathered around her were her friends, relatives and students who had all been touched and moved by her love and her legendary generosity.

Ginou, I bid you farewell. As the Yoruba say in their dirges, “Do not eat centipedes and worms in heaven, but eat ortolan and drink Saint-Emilion—whatever the good people of heaven eat.”

Jacob Olupona is Professor of African and African American Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University, and Professor of African Religious Traditions in its Divinity School.
The Breadth of her Interests
Norman Hurst

I was first introduced to Geneviève McMillan in the late 1970s through her small black and white ads in the journal *African Arts*. I was dealing Tribal, Asian, and ancient art from my apartment in Cambridge, and *African Arts* was the only English language forum for academics, collectors and dealers.

As I later learned, she was not really a dealer at all, but counted her subscription and advertising costs as a way of supporting the magazine and what it stood for. She almost never sold pieces, but she did use her ad as a calling card and a way of meeting dealers and other collectors from outside the area, many of whom would look her up when they found themselves in Boston and its environs. For a few African traders she was the reason to come to the Boston --- for others she was their first port of call.

One day in 1980, I spied a hand-written *For Rent* notice and phone number in the window of what had been the Gold Coast Valetoria, a dry cleaner to generations of Harvardians at 30 Plympton Street (one of the three addresses for Geneviève’s fabled triangular building). I took one night to consider the prospect of becoming a bricks and mortar establishment, before arranging the first of hundreds of visits to the fourth floor of 40 Bow Street, her residential address for the building. Like every first-time visitor, I was astonished and amazed at the quantity, the variety, and the floor-to-ceiling and from-the-ceiling display of her collection.

Although the McMillan collection is strongly African, it also includes dozens of works by contemporary artists. There are photographs by her countryman Henri Cartier-Bresson, works by Maud Morgan, and Ivan Massar. A great many
works by her beloved Reba Stewart, including her dramatic wooden mobiles, dominate almost every room.

It was soon evident that we were destined to seal the deal and embark on our multi-faceted relationship, dealer-collector, tenant-landlady, neighbors and friends. Over the nearly three decades intervening, we shared power outages, zoning appeals, all weathers, two cats, dozens of objects from many cultures, many friends, countless bottles and meals and even one memorable afternoon at a spare little Paris apartment "dans le seizième.”

Geneviève valued her collection mostly for its personal associations and for the way it reflected the artists' ingenuity and vision. Its contribution to her net worth was never a consideration. As a dealer and an appraiser, I often found this puzzling. I was naturally pleased when she found pieces among my offerings that she wished to make her own, but she was as likely to select something of relatively little monetary value as an object costing several thousand dollars.

She never ceased to amaze me with the breadth of her interests. Hurst Gallery objects in the McMillan collection include a Mesopotamian antiquity, an 18th century Japanese woodblock print, one or two Japanese minge pieces, as well as ethnographic objects from cultures such as Indonesian, American Indian, Fijian, Samoan, Melanesian and of course many African cultures.

She was not a collector who viewed her pieces in isolation, or compared them to objects in other collections. She never talked about what she might have paid for an item or for what it might be sold. She was most generous with her time and with her collection, socializing with curators and world experts and novices alike in her modest quarters where she kept almost everything in full view. She was especially pleased to welcome young people and students. I never heard her brag about her collection or any of the many remarkable pieces in it. She preferred to let the collection speak for itself.

An imaginatively made trade object or an ingenious creation by a local artist could catch her enthusiasm as much, if not more, than one of her most classic "pure" pieces. The intimate connections she made with artists, places, and cultures contributed immensely to her enjoyment and valuing of individual pieces in her collection. She usually allowed visitors to have their own experiences with her collection. Of course no two people took away the same experience or impression … testimony to the richness of her unique ambience.

To say that Ginou traveled widely would be an understatement even in these times. In the 1950s – 70s, however, her trips and travels were remarkable in their number and variety, especially for a single woman. Not only did she travel in Africa on numerous occasions but she also made more than one trip to New Guinea, Latin America, and, of course, widely in her own European continent. She had “second” homes in Puerto Rico, Paris and in Magnolia, north of Boston. Her aesthetic interests were broad, but she valued most highly the pieces she associated with persons, places, and experiences in her life.

Geneviève McMillan was a primary exponent of frank speech; she never expected anyone to censor their tongues at her table. Lively exchanges and multilingual debate were frequent on the menu. Indeed these exchanges and the intellectual feast that Ginou always sought to provide was a marked contrast to the actual menu, which was usually very simple, in keeping with her personal life style.

Ginou certainly did live very simply. Her dining table was an old cable spool from the 1960s. The furniture that was not African might have been picked from the neighborhood trash. She never had air conditioning and only a modest black and white television that of course had no cable service. She had two student-sized, mini-refrigerators; in cool seasons she stored her produce on her unheated stairs. Half of her fourth floor quarters were ripped out to the studs and totally unfinished, save for a welter of masks, mobiles, and African objects hanging from hundreds of nails from floor to rafter. A computer and internet access arrived during the very last years of her life.

Although there was great diversity to her collections, her interests, and her favorite causes, the greatest testimony to the breadth of her influence and interests may be seen in the variety of those among us who loved and now miss her presence and vitality.

Norman Hurst is an appraiser, consultant, and dealer who has operated the Hurst Gallery at 53 Mount Auburn Street for over 27 years, concentrating in antiquities, Asian, and tribal art.
Learning from Ginou
Alan Helms

It’s been maybe 15 years since someone in the world of African Arts told me of Ginou’s extraordinary collection and gave me her telephone number, saying that if I asked nicely, she might let me visit her to see it. I called and she invited me over.

She greeted me in a somewhat leery fashion, by then exasperated (I later learned) with ignorant people who came to gawk on a Cook’s tour of her apartment. But as soon as she realized that I knew the difference between Dogan and Senufo, and could locate Bamako on a map, and admired her Masker’s tunic made of human hair as much as she did, she relaxed. When she discovered that my favorite African dealer was also hers (Mon. Huguenin in Paris), we were off and running. It probably didn’t hurt that I speak French.

Soon we began making trips to Tim Hamill’s gallery and then to his home. On that first visit to his place in Milton, I bought a dozen Kuba textiles, the beginning of an important part of my present collection. After a weekend at her country place, she said she would like to visit some friends on the way back to Boston. In short order, Bertha Teel was giving me a tour of her and Bill’s amazing collection. Occasionally Ginou and I traded pieces (my Cameroon beaded figure for her Tellem neck rest) and often she came with Monni Adams to my home for dinner—always lentil stew in winter, one of her favorite meals.

I’ll always remember with deep gratitude how generous Ginou was with her knowledge and her enthusiasms, shepherding this younger collector along as I learned more about the many worlds of African art—collecting and dealing it, preserving and curating it, appreciating and learning about it, and finally, in one of her last, magnificent gestures, donating it. For many years now I’ve collected African metal currency, and partly because of Ginou’s example, I now make annual donations to the Museum of Fine Arts.

So Ginou not only became a friend; she became an important influence that will be with me for the rest of my life. I’ve always believed that except for the Alexanders and Napoleons of history, the only immortality any of us will ever know consists of what remains in the memories of those who loved us. In that sense, Ginou is for me one of the Immortals.

Alan Helms is a collector of African currency and Chinese scholar rocks and a Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts/Boston.
Our Shared Passion
William E. Teel

Fifty years or more – I cannot believe it’s that long I have known her: first as a figure striding through Harvard Square, then as proprietor of the Winthrop Street Club Henri IV where my wife and I were regulars, subsequently invitees to her upstairs apartment where we learned we shared with her a passion for those strange objects called tribal arts.

Over the years we exchanged a few objects and many droll tales of African runners and Paris dealers. We shared in some exhibitions and in newfound friends of the growing field of African and Oceanic arts. Her travels and hospitality to an extraordinary range of people made visits with her both exciting and enlightening.

Her often repeated query, “What shall I do with my collection?” may have been partially answered when the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, finally mounted a permanent display of African and Oceanic arts. Last year the same museum presented a superb exhibition with a catalogue that admirably chronicled her adventures in collecting.

Now, as a memorial remembrance honors her, she remains present in the minds and hearts of those of us who knew and loved her.

William Teel is an old friend of Geneviève McMillan.
Three years ago I had the privilege and pleasure to meet Ginou for the first time. It was a memorable visit. Little did I know of the treasures hidden behind the unassuming doors of her gray three-story building in the heart of Cambridge near Harvard Square. When I had climbed the long staircase to the top floor, where Ginou usually entertained her many friends and guests, I felt transported into a different world. Ginou had created a truly unique environment, reflecting her keen eye as a collector, and her love of African, Oceanic, and other arts. Colorful objects – masks, figurative sculptures, works in metal, vibrant textiles – enlivened the wide open space.

Ginou was a most gracious hostess. Our conversation initially focused on her collecting and soon enough on her intention to donate many objects to the Museum of Fine Arts. Her decision was not made lightly because she had contemplated for years how the collection could have a real impact beyond academic settings and become meaningful to as large a constituency as possible. I assured her that her gift would greatly enhance our collections of African and Oceanic art and would allow us to reach out to diverse communities, one of the most important goals of the Museum.

Ginou has fulfilled her promise. She donated funds to mount the 2007 exhibition, “Material Journeys: Collecting African and Oceanic, 1945-2000. Selections From the Geneviève McMillan Collection,” which highlighted important works. The intimate opening luncheon brought together many of her friends and admirers and became a celebration of her lifelong commitment to the arts. Ginou, in the company of her niece Catherine Lalanne-Gobet from Paris, cherished that moment although she was already very frail.

In the 1990s, other generous donors, William E. and the late Bertha L. Teel, dear friends of Ginou’s, had laid a marvelous foundation for collecting African and Oceanic art, giving the Museum many extraordinary works. Ginou’s gift now broadens the scope of our holdings beyond the classic sculptural works that are the hallmark of the Teel Collection. Vibrant and multimedia art traditions of Africa and Oceania, such as metal implements, utilitarian objects, jewelry, and textiles, which Ginou sought out throughout her life, will grace our galleries in years to come and can also be accessed on our website (www.mfa.org). Ginou’s legacy will live on at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and for that we are tremendously grateful.

Malcolm Rogers is Ann and Graham Gund Director at the Museum of Fine Arts.
n the occasion of the First World Negro Arts Festival held in Dakar, Senegal in the spring of 1966, the writer, poet and politician Aimé Césaire stated about African Art that it is “before anything else, in humanity, in man’s emotion, transmitted to things by man and its society.” These words illustrate very well the heart of Geneviève McMillan, who followed Césaire’s path to Dakar as part of her around-the-world trip the following summer. When she visited African countries during her summer travels, she did not just collect objects, but whenever possible, also gathered information about their life stories.

Ginou, as she liked to be called, was an art lover who above all cared for people. She was interested in tracing the history of the African and Oceanic objects she had acquired over the years, but her primary interest was in the people who created them, cared for them, dealt with them and curated them.

Ginou took pleasure in entertaining her many visitors, and enjoyed arranging encounters of individuals who shared a common interest. In this, she had been inspired by her friend and mentor Madeleine Rousseau during her years in Paris as a political science student. Ginou had her standards in terms of dining because she was born and raised in the Pyrenees region, renowned for its fine cuisine and hospitality. Every reunion was also a feast!

From 2004 to 2007, it was my great pleasure to work with Ginou and her long time friend Christraud Geary, the Teel Curator for African and Oceanic Art at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, to document and research her remarkable art collection for an exhibition and accompanying catalogue at the MFA. Our working sessions as a team of three women, representing three generations, contain wonderful memories for me. For months we shared early morning breakfasts, discussing her encounters, searching her extensive archives, documenting the life history of the objects in her collection. Then came the days of professional packing and objects handling with Museum of Fine Arts specialists. Our project culminated in the superb MFA Exhibit “Material Journeys: collecting African and Oceanic Arts in the second half of the twentieth century.”

I only knew Ginou for a few years, but her friendship made them an intense and fulfilling time of my life. Being her Cambridge neighbor, co-patriot from our beloved Pyrenees, co-reader of Le Monde and Le Canard Enchaîné, southeastern France cuisine lover, and Oceanic Art lover, we had a lot to share! It was an honor and privilege to meet Ginou at that very special time in her life, when the Exhibition and Catalogue dedicated to her friend the artist Reba Stewart and celebrating her lifelong passion for African and Oceanic Art came to fruition.

Stephanie Xatart was Research Assistant for Oceanic Art at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts from 2003 to 2007. She currently lives in Paris with her family and conducts independent research.
Life Histories
Christraud M. Geary

Many years before I started working at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, I met Ginou. It was the late 1970s, and I had just arrived in the Boston area from Germany with my American husband whom I met when he was in the military service in Europe. Monni Adams, who always made certain that new arrivals encountered people who shared their interests, took me to Ginou’s place. Ginou kept a salon in the French tradition. Everybody was welcome and friends and guests from around the world assembled among the works of art gracing her residence. The conversations were always stimulating and the food was excellent. Ginou was a gracious hostess and an elegant, impressive lady - and she kindly remembered me.

When I returned to the area five years ago, it was only natural to visit Ginou again. As she began to explore whether part of her collection would come to the Museum of Fine Arts, our visits became more frequent and our friendship grew.

To me, the most interesting and intriguing aspect of our meetings was the opportunity it gave me to discover more about Ginou’s life history - the way she had journeyed from Paris to Boston and gone to distant places around the world during her numerous voyages. Her travels became the inspiration for the catalogue of her collection, entitled “Material Journeys,” which appeared in 2007.

Ginou shared many stories with me. One of my favorite accounts was her lively and funny description of the voyage on a Liberty ship from France to Boston when she was a young war bride. She was to join her American husband who had been in the military in France when they met. She must have looked stunning – she was tall, blond, smart, and had a delightful French accent. I am certain that she turned the head of many a service man on board.

African art was already her passion and so she decided to use one of her first acquisitions, a man’s chair from Burkina Faso, to sit on deck. It is three legged and a really low slung affair, and I can only imagine the sight of her lounging on that chair and the way male passengers reacted to this slightly eccentric choice of seat.

“Americans did not know anything about African art,” she would state, and they certainly had no idea where her chair came from. So it became one of her goals to further the appreciation of African and Oceanic art in this country. She succeeded - for now Americans are able to enjoy the finest pieces of her African and Oceanic collection in several museums.

Ginou’s journey is complete and her mission accomplished. Hats off to this remarkable and inspiring woman who was her own person before feminism was ever invented!

Christraud M. Geary is the Teel Curator of African and Oceanic Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
In Ginou’s Voice

African Art

When I was a student in Paris before coming here - that’s where I met my ex husband. I was a student of political science… he introduced me to a French woman who had a very small apartment compared to this, about half the size – absolutely crowded with African art, enormous African art… that day really changed my life.

I came from the provinces, the Pyrenees – the art there is really painting, maybe some sculpture, but there is nothing of the strength of African art, so from then on I was interested in collecting.
Ginou’s "Favorite Place"

John Gianvito
As a once-regular habitué of the Harvard Film Archive, from the time of its beginnings in 1979, I couldn’t help but become familiar with the intriguing and somehow formidable presence of Geneviève McMillan occupying her preferred seat in the very back row of the Carpenter Center theater night after night. Let the records show that there was no individual who ever saw more films at the HFA than Ginou McMillan (at least parts of films, since Geneviève was never one to hesitate about exiting in the middle of a film she thought inferior or soporific). However it wasn’t until I was handed the reins of the Film Archive as Guest Curator beginning in 1996 that we were properly introduced and began what developed into a most fond and enduring friendship.

Geneviève’s ardor for African art and African cinema is already legend. Among her myriad acts of generosity (many of which I know she kept private), her financial establishing of the Geneviève McMillan and Reba Stewart Fellowship Award for Distinguished Filmmaking brought, and continues to bring, some of the finest filmmakers in the world to Boston, principally those from various quarters of Africa. One of my great rewards as a film programmer was helping facilitate the visit in 2001 of the doyen and properly-dubbed ‘father’ of African cinema, Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene, at that time 78 years of age, six years before his own passing.

While Geneviève treated each guest to her house, regardless of pedigree, with the utmost graciousness and bountiful curiosity, as so many can attest, it was a special thrill to see how very happy Sembene’s visit made Geneviève, and also how readily he took to her as well. I recall Geneviève sharing with me some wonderful letters and gifts that Sembene sent her following his visit.

Geneviève’s love for film was hardly restricted to African cinema and, given her strong responses to things, positive and negative, I was always interested in what excited her. It would be too long a list to recount, but I do hold clear memories of how enamored she was by Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s work when I mounted a retrospective, by Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, and by American director James Blue.

Recently, I was reminded of how much she was taken by the work of Swiss director Daniel Schmid (also a Fassbinder protégé). I came across a letter Geneviève took the time to write me to thank me for this series in which she states, “I really was as enthusiastic as I have ever been, watching this variety of films, showing so much imagination, concern for men and women, political views, and such a poetic understanding of human beings (and locations).” She goes on to express her thanks for making the Carpenter Center “my favorite place.”

As Geneviève’s mobility slowed, I felt that the Archive remained a special refuge where she could still be transported to all parts of the world, through all kinds of experiences and emotions. When her health deteriorated to the point where she could no longer make her way up the street to attend screenings, my heart broke for her. And while a number of us sent videos to her home, I know that the removal of this nightly ritual of hers was a terrible blow.

But, for me, the thought of no longer engaging in friendly exchanges before each film, of no longer sharing wine and cheese and political critique together, the thought of no longer climbing the stairs on Bow Street and entering that enchanting apartment that literally left me awestruck when first I visited—these would all be terrible blows to imagine recovering from were it not for the warmth and company of the memories themselves.

John Gianvito is a filmmaker, curator, and teacher, currently Assistant Professor in the Department of Visual & Media Arts at Emerson College.
Ginou and Harvard
Lucien Castaing-Taylor

Geneviève with Ousmane Sembène
I met Ginou in 2002, soon after I arrived at Harvard and the Film Study Center (FSC). In 1997 she had given a generous gift to the Film Study Center that had resulted in the establishment of the McMillan-Stewart Fellowship in Distinguished Filmmaking. Each year, thanks to Ginou, the Film Study Center now brings to Harvard an African filmmaker—a francophone African filmmaker—to share their work with the FSC fellows, the university community, and Boston more broadly.

Ginou and I hit it off immediately. In part, this was because of what we had in common—a love of art and of cinema, a fascination with Africa, especially francophone West Africa, and shared heritage in southwest France. Ginou was born in Orthez, in the Béarn region of the foothills of the Pyrenees, an area I was just then beginning to discover through my relatives living in the area. A New Zealander, my mother’s nom de jeune fille was Castaing, and her ancestors had been settlers from Gascony. Others were Maori, which I knew nothing about growing up, and which intrigued Ginou no end.

I was immediately attracted to Ginou’s piercing wit, her outspokenness, her intolerance of cant and pretension, and her political militancy. We would spend hours debating French—American cultural differences, whether relating to the status of women, the construction of racial and ethnic identities, national political trends, or anything else.

In the last few years, as Ginou became weaker, I would come over with a francophone DVD from West Africa, postcolonial Indochina, or Europe, and we would watch it together over wine and cheese on the minuscule screen she kept within sight of her dining table. Towards the end, we would listen to CDs I had of traditional contes from the Béarn and other regions of the Pyrenees, or I would bore her with endless tales of transhumance, in the New World and Old, with which I have become increasingly obsessed over the last decade.

Ginou’s munificence has made a unique contribution to the arts at Harvard. Through the McMillan-Stewart fellowship, we have been able to bring to the Film Study Center such remarkable filmmakers as Idrissa Ouedraogo, from Burkina Faso (in 1998), Abderrahmane Sissako, from Mauritania (in 1999), Med Hondo, from Mauritania and Senegal (in 2000), the late Ousmane Sembene, from Senegal (in one of his last visits to the US, in 2000-1), Souleymane Gissé from Mali (in 2001-2), Gaston Kaboré, from Burkina Faso (in 2002-3), Moufida Tlatli, from Tunisia (in 2004-5), Merzak Allouache, from Algeria (in 2005-6), and Fanta Regina Nacro, also from Burkina Faso (in 2006-7). We have shown these McMillan-Stewart fellows’ works, with their makers in attendance, in the Harvard Film Archive, in the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, the Sensory Ethnography Lab, the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, the Department of Anthropology, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, Kirkland House, and many other venues.

Whether discussing a film we had both seen at the Carpenter Center, the works or personality of one of the McMillan-Stewart fellows, a news story or editorial from that day’s Le Monde, or issues of art, culture, or politics more generally, I would never cease to be surprised by her intelligence, her sympathy, and above all her wit—transgressive, unrestrained, and quirky to the end.

Ginou lived life unabashedly, at full tilt. My days are duller now that I can no longer punctuate them with visits to 40 Bow Street, but with each year’s new McMillan-Stewart laureate, Ginou’s spirit and generosity will continue to light up Harvard.

Lucien Castaing-Taylor teaches in the Departments of Visual & Environmental Studies and Anthropology at Harvard, where he heads the Film Study Center and the Sensory Ethnography Lab.
Ginou Had the Secret
Gaston Kabore
I made the acquaintance of Geneviève McMillan twenty-four years ago when I went to Boston, invited by Claire Andrade Watkins for a film panel. Ginou, who was among the attendees, had to leave the conference room early, but wrote a few lines in French to be given to me expressing her desire to have me as a guest for lunch the next day at her house on Bow Street. In her note she added that I would have the opportunity to meet Don Cherry, a famous jazz musician, if I accepted her invitation. I was curious to find out about this mysterious lady speaking French. It was a triple discovery: of Ginou herself, her house with hundreds of African art pieces and Don Cherry. The surprising thing was that I soon felt myself familiar with the world and the friends of Ginou. Later that night, I went to listen to Don Cherry performing at Charlie’s Step, not knowing that four years later I would use his music in my second long feature film, entitled “Zan Boko.” Ginou attended the Pan African Film Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) two or three times, which takes place every two years in the capital city of Burkina Faso. During these two and a half decades that I knew her, we could not see each other very often, but every time we met, it was like we were together the week before. I was fully impressed by her curiosity, her generosity, and the way she liked to share with diverse people her experience of arts and life. So many different worlds, cultures, and individual destinies were turning around her, dancing in the fantastic ballet of symphonic music … Ginou had the secret. The last time I saw her was during spring of 2006, when she told me about her desire to support the Imagine Institute, a training center in cinema and audiovisual creativity that I started in February 2003 in Ouagadougou. She was sad the partnership she had encouraged me to establish with the Du Bois institute at Harvard University didn’t work out for various reasons. The interest she had for my work as a film maker gave me some strength and I was honored to receive the Geneviève McMillan Award when I exhibited my films at the Carpenter Center. I slept many nights in her house and I shall keep a nice memory of it.

For me, meeting Ginou has been a kind of special gift in my life and I am deeply sad that she left us so quickly while she still had a lot to give and share with all of us. I am sure she will remain a kind of invisible link between all the people she liked so truly and so sincerely.

I do hope she will continue inspiring everyone. In fact she is not dead, she is still around and if we pay attention we can hear her frank laughter and catch a glimpse of her smiles. She was an exceptional lady, sweet in her heart, profound in her soul, sharp in her spirit and immense in her vision. Now we have an angel we can always feel and talk to.

Gaston Kabore is a film director from Burkina Faso and General Manager of the Imagine Institute, a film training school in Ouagadougou.
Memories of a Remarkable Woman
Fred Lazarus
eneviève McMillan was a generous supporter of our college, but for me she was also a wonderful friend. Twenty-eight years ago this fall, I paid my first visit to 40 Bow Street, having recently begun my presidency at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA).

Ginou had become involved with MICA through her friend Reba Stewart, a popular and highly regarded artist and teacher on our faculty. After Reba’s early death, Ginou wanted to honor her memory at the place where she had influenced so many students and made so many wonderful friendships. Thus began the Reba Stewart Memorial Scholarship, which has been awarded to more than forty young women in the decades since—and a relationship between Ginou and MICA, which most recently led to the establishment of the Geneviève McMillan/Reba Stewart Chair in Painting.

After attending Reba’s memorial service at the College in 1971, Ginou visited Baltimore only once more, for a 1984 exhibition of Reba’s work we organized that included a project to tape reminiscences of Reba by her friends. Ginou threw herself into the visit—acting as moderator for the taping, visiting the Baltimore Museum of Art’s African collection, having drinks in the moonlight at the Inner Harbor—or, as she wrote, “on the lively pier of your great city.” She drove past Reba’s house and studio and walked through the galleries filled with Reba’s prints, mobiles, paintings, and drawings. Documentation of the exhibition, including the tape, now resides in the Archives of American Art, much to Ginou’s satisfaction.

Ginou became a member of the MICA family. She exchanged cards, letters, and postcards with many of our staff, and she hosted, with Fay Chandler ’67, an alumni reception at Bow Street. Many who came in contact with her, including Fay and our vice president for development, Douglas Frost, forged a special bond with Ginou.

Whenever I visited the Boston area, I would return to 40 Bow Street. In those years, I saw many changes around Harvard Square, but my visits to Ginou had a timeless quality: I rang the buzzer. Ginou’s voice issued the invitation to walk upstairs, through Reba’s mobiles, and past her drawings, paintings, and prints, and then to tour the art-filled loft discussing favorite pieces in the marvelous collection of African and Oceanic objects.

I spent many pleasant afternoons in Ginou’s life-affirming space, experiencing her charming hospitality…the flash of her African rings…light streaming through the loft’s window…the simple, round wooden table…lovely port…strong coffee…always in the company of a cat—for many years the sweet Jolie.

Ginou loved flowers—the more colorful and unusual the better—so I brought them, and my homemade preserves, which, in her thank-you notes, were elevated to “self-made confiture.”

What did we talk about? Travel, politics—conversations in this direction could become very animated, especially in the past eight years. Ginou frequently expressed her distaste of holiday celebrations, including her own birthday. Mostly, she wanted to know about me, my family, and our travels. She loved my sister Ellie, who joined me on one of my last visits.

Bob Harding, a colleague of Reba’s at MICA, wrote that “Reba always said that one’s life ought to be a work of art…full of honesty and devotion to the essence of the human experience…and compassion should guide it.”

I can think of no truer words to describe Reba’s mentor, Ginou.

Fred Lazarus IV is President of the Maryland Institute College of Art.
Encountering the World
Kay Sloan

In 2007, the first Geneviève McMillan – Reba Stewart Traveling Fellowship at Massachusetts College of Art and Design was awarded to a graduating senior majoring in printmaking. Geneviève established the Fellowship in memory of her dear friend, painter, and world traveler, the late Reba Stewart.

To launch the award and to pay tribute to Reba Stewart, MassArt hosted an exhibition of Ms. Stewart’s work, which was accompanied by a beautiful catalogue. The opening was crowded with friends and well wishers, all enthusiastic about the work and inspired by Geneviève’s generosity of spirit and global outlook. Geneviève’s warmth and vivacity generated an extraordinary celebratory atmosphere.

In establishing this fellowship program for young artists, Geneviève McMillan, herself an intrepid traveler, knew how much the students at MassArt would benefit from an opportunity to travel abroad. The first student who competed for and won the fellowship traveled to Kyoto, Japan to study traditional Japanese water-based printmaking. He, like many of our students, had never been out of the United States. His love of tools and craft and his artistic and spiritual soul found a meeting of the minds that has made an indelible mark on his career. For him, Geneviève McMillan will always be his Guardian Angel.

The second student to win the Fellowship is traveling to Mexico to study about and meet artists involved in the historic El Tailleur Grafico Popolar – a printmaking collaborative begun in the 1920s that ignited an explosion of imagery dealing with political upheaval and social change. This student speaks Spanish fluently and feels a strong affinity for the continuum of cultural synthesis that exists in Mexico. This trip is a pilgrimage for him to experience his artistic heritage.

There will be a long list of students who are yet to win this Fellowship and whose life and work will be entirely transformed by the opportunity to realize their dreams. Geneviève McMillan’s spirit will live on in each of these students as their Muse – and through Geneviève’s enormous generosity, MassArt will be able to offer a traveling fellowship to a deserving graduate each year.

Kay Sloan is President of the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.
In Ginou’s Voice

Students

I am disappointed by the fact that the students of Harvard don’t seem to be very active politically. Aren’t you a little disappointed that there are no manifestations against what’s happening in this country? Twenty years ago they were doing something... The students don’t seem to have the pep that we had in the 1960s and 1970s...
My encounters with Geneviève McMillan were too few, but my memory of her is vibrant. She was a whirlwind of artistic and intellectual activity and a glowing conversationalist who could draw out even the most reserved academic, especially on the subject of her beloved African art.

I loved visiting her house on Bow Street. Did I say house? It was a museum, a museum of the most sublime private collection of classical African art that I have ever had the pleasure of dining around. Ginou lived and breathed African art, everyday, from the time she woke up in the morning until she went to sleep. Art as furniture, art as décor - Africa was an organic part of her daily routine and her environment, through its most beautiful representation, its finest pieces of art.

Ginou’s contribution to Harvard’s W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research is an enduring legacy. She endowed the McMillan-Stewart Lectures in 1996, in honor of her friend and colleague, the young artist Reba Stewart, a painter in Liberia and Ghana who died too young. Ginou intended the series to advance African studies, which it has done remarkably well, by bringing to Harvard speakers whose standing in African arts and African life is beyond measure; these include Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and N’gugi wa Thiong’o.

Other luminaries have lectured under her sponsorship as well: Ali A. Mazrui, Francis Abiola Irele, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Emmanuel Obiechina, Maryse Conde, and Jean Bidima. Each has taught us about African ethics, aesthetics, politics, social life, and art - about Africa’s own people and Africa’s engagement with the world. The speakers’ humanity, eloquence, candor, grace, and artistry have matched Ginou’s, and I hope she was proud of this series to which she gave her name and her support.

Geneviève McMillan’s passing was a loss to us all, but through her art and her generosity to artists, writers, and scholars, her spirit is unmistakably, and vibrantly, with us.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University and Director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research.
A Unique Personality

Philip S. Khoury

I first met Ginou McMillan in 1977 when I was a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard. My friend and fellow student, Marisa Escribano, already knew Ginou. I assume through their Catalan connection.

One day Marisa asked me if I wished to attend a party Ginou was hosting. I tagged along and had a superb time engaging with Ginou about a host of topics – from African politics and art, to the status of women in the Arab world, to the Palestine question.

Like Marisa I was (and still am) a Middle East specialist and could tell how deeply interested Ginou was in the Arab world. She revealed not only her strong political views and compassion for the underdog, but also her keen intellect and breadth of learning. Having been raised by highly successful women with similar intellect, I felt Ginou could have been one of my aunts, though she was much more mischievous than any of them.

With Marisa, I visited Ginou fairly often during my graduate school days; her parties were simply delightful and inspiring and the cheese, champagne and wine she served raised my standard of living considerably back then. However, once I joined the faculty at MIT my contact with Ginou diminished significantly.

Years later, after I became dean of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at MIT, I got a call from Ginou asking me to visit with her. I had no idea what she had in mind. It turned out that she had been looking to honor in some lasting way the memory of her dear friend Reba Stewart, and she felt more comfortable doing so, she said, at MIT than at Harvard. I think MIT was fortunate not to be in Ginou’s backyard. Had it been there instead of Harvard, Harvard would have been the beneficiary of her philanthropy. I also think Ginou admired MIT’s independence and its embrace of scholar-activists such as Noam Chomsky.

In the end, and after some difficult negotiations - Ginou would have made a brilliant lawyer, though I think she disliked most lawyers - we settled on a permanent chair titled the Geneviève McMillan-Reba Stewart Professorship in the Study of Women in the Developing World, and attached to it a permanent lecture series on women in the developing world in the names of McMillan and Stewart. The professorship would focus on women in the Middle East and North Africa and the lecture series on women’s issues anywhere in the developing world. The holder of the professorship would also chair the lecture series.

I believe that at the time of its creation in the late 1990s, the professorship was the first of its kind in the United States (and perhaps in the world). The professor could be from any major discipline or field in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. The first incumbent was an anthropologist and specialist on women and culture in the Arab world. I am not sure Ginou and the professor got along so well but Ginou understood the importance of high standards in scholarship and trusted MIT to follow its principles and traditions. A search is now underway to find her successor.

That I am forever grateful to Ginou McMillan for her tremendous generosity to my institution goes without saying. My personal gratitude to her for her lasting friendship and confidence in me is legion. I have known a good many brilliant, dynamic, passionate people in my time, but I have never known anyone quite like Ginou. She was truly sui generis. We had our moments, even our days and weeks, and yet my enormous admiration for her never wavered. I miss her terribly.

Philip S. Khoury is the Associate Provost and Ford International Professor of History at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
A Passion for Justice
Nancy Murray
My friendship with Geneviève McMillan began some 20 years ago with a mysterious phone call. “Is this Nancy Murray?” said an elegant accented voice. “Please come to my house tomorrow afternoon. I want to give you something.”

The next day at the appointed time I ascended the staircase in the tall house in Harvard Square to encounter a stately figure in a forest of African masks. Having worked in East Africa for seven years, I assumed that the African continent was somehow connected to her summons.

I was wrong. “Please take this,” she said, handing me a check. It was addressed to The Middle East Justice Network, an organization I had recently established to work for a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“When are you Americans going to recognize that we Palestinians are people too?” This question had been asked of me earlier that same year, by a Palestinian woman standing in the ruins of her West Bank house that had just been destroyed by the Israeli army. It prodded me to action.

Ginou may well have been asked a similar question when she traveled to the West Bank and saw the Israeli occupation at first hand. For during the following decades, she did what she could to educate her adopted countrymen about the common humanity of Palestinians and of peoples everywhere, whatever their material circumstances.

This was a thread connecting many facets of her generous giving, much of it behind the scenes for which she declined to accept any credit. Ginou enabled voices to be heard which do not often reach our shores. In so many ways, she opened eyes and hearts here to the creativity and lived reality of other human beings, whether through high profile programs like the African film series she sponsored at the Carpenter and the “Material Journeys” exhibit at the MFA, or the less visible support she extended to a wide array of writers, independent film makers, artists and solidarity activists, all with stories which she believed needed to be told.

Her giving did not stop there. This passionate internationalist was determined to do what she could to confront inequality and discrimination at home. And so she supported domestic programs to combat racism and protect civil liberties and civil rights, and to give young people the skills and incentive to create a better future for themselves and the broader society. These were not just passing interests. In her very last weeks and days, she continued to express her worries about the direction the country was headed in and the egregious policies of the Bush Administration.

Ginou had so many personae – world traveler, collector of African and Oceanic art, pioneering restaurateur, canny businesswoman, devoted friend, lover of beauty, cat fancier, exotic stylist, vibrant party giver, scourge of the medical profession, philanthropist, empathetic listener who brought people from around the world to her table. In her house one could meet refugees from the Spanish Civil War, leading figures of African independence movements, and activists for peace in the Middle East, as well as artists, film makers and fascinating characters from her adopted city of Cambridge. Privileged to know this unique woman in all her complexity, I was especially moved by her visceral hatred of oppression.

“Injustice anywhere,” wrote Dr. Martin Luther King, “is a threat to justice everywhere.” Ginou, a citizen of the world in a very profound sense, lived her life by these words.

Nancy Murray is Director of Education at the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts and a long time human rights activist.
Ginou’s Multiculturalism
Anne Marie Stein
It’s hard to remember when exactly I first met her. But it’s very easy to remember a few things about the beginning.

When I started working at the Boston Film/Video Foundation, Christian and Steffen Pierce were editing their film about Morocco, Bride Market of Imilchil. It was somehow through them, and Marie-France Alderman, the accountant at BF/VF and Christian’s girlfriend at the time, that I knew about Ginou and went to her apartment.

I vividly remember the first time I walked up the stairs. I had lived in France for seven years and missed it terribly. When I first got buzzed through that solid grey metal door and it clanged behind me, I suddenly felt like I was back in the home I had adopted. In the place where what things smelled like, what you noticed along the way mattered. As I climbed the stairs, lined with photographs and prints, filled with musty smells, I felt like I was headed to a Parisian fifth floor walk-up. Only I wasn’t in Paris.

The apartment and the collection—it made me so oddly happy to know that there was someone living in the middle of Harvard Square, living as she did and making Paris, or what it meant, come alive, really alive, there.

And that was Ginou’s power. It’s hard to both “assimilate” and yet remain culturally distinct. Not many do that successfully, yet Ginou did. Her apartment was not a fifth floor Parisian walk-up—Ginou had left France and stayed in the US. She learned the language, built her wealth. She brought her cultural influences and the benefit of her cultural traditions to us. With her interest in Africa and the Middle East, Ginou knit together a disparate and fascinating community.

My first job after returning to the States in 1985 was at the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, running a grant program for instate artists. There was much talk about multiculturalism and race— a discourse that was completely different than what was going on in France.

In 1986, I left the Council for the Boston Film/Video Foundation, and one of my first tasks was to oversee the implementation of a film program on multiculturalism in film. It was primarily funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and we ran it as a festival called Issues of Cultural Representation in Filmmaking. Ginou came to many of the screenings, and hosted many of the filmmakers at her apartment.

There are few people in America who are truly comfortable with multiculturalism. It’s not really an environment most people grow up in. It seems similar to the way people mistrust the idea of art—for too many it’s not an integral part of their early years, let alone their adult lives.

Ginou was multicultural, and she brought the ability to bring a kind of multicultural understanding to others. She was genuinely and deeply interested in other cultures and different viewpoints. Her apartment was a nexus for people who came from different corners of the world, who spoke many languages, whose travels and experiences made them appreciative of complexity. Most of the people I met there spoke two, if not three or four languages.

Ginou herself was complex. She didn’t suffer fools gladly. She could appear autocratic. Some found her entitled and difficult. But for me, she was someone who lived the courage of her convictions, who broke through the boundaries of what her culture and times would have dictated, and who was truly, incorrigibly and delightfully independent. She defied labels, defied definitions. As a collector, she lived with the objects in a way that never made them feel like objects, they lived with her. She earned her wealth and shared it in a way that few ever do.

If only there were more like her.

Anne Marie Stein is Dean for Professional and Continuing Education at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and was Executive Director of the Boston Film/Video Foundation for fourteen years.
What would Ginou think seeing these tributes? I am sure she is asking questions, having a great time while at the same time being humble and deflating whatever she may perceive as too grandiose or flattering. I write the following paragraphs with these thoughts in mind, and with a lot of love and gratitude.

I met Ginou when I arrived at Harvard in the mid 70’s to get my Ph.D. I had just arrived from Paris and we shared a number of interests. But most important, in spite of being from different generations, we shared feelings about our childhood and the past as well as ideas. I was a bit inhibited by her at first, but quickly saw what a great human being she was.

Ginou loved life; she could also be a coquette. She loved the world and tried to make it a better place. She had so many interests: from politics, social issues, Africa, to the arts in its various forms, which she always encouraged. Ginou had a sharp mind and a great sense of humor, which was often misunderstood and sometimes made people uneasy. She could also be sarcastic, but I always thought that was one of her assets.

I owe much to Ginou. She taught me to look at things in a different way. She was the first person who bought a photograph at my first formal exhibit. I gave her many others throughout the years and although I know she was very happy to receive them, she would always claim embarrassment at the gift. Ginou would also tell things rather than teach, and she told me many things throughout our long friendship. My regret is not following some of her “tellings” as I can now see how right she often was.

Ginou often claimed that she was not an intellectual, yet she was more intelligent and intellectually astute than many labeled or self-proclaimed intellectuals. She was shy and humble, and never wanted to talk about her deeds. Her sense of justice led her to get involved in a number of causes and organizations, including the work for Palestinian rights. She came to visit me in the West Bank when I was living there doing fieldwork. I remember how quickly she understood the situation and how infuriated she was about the injustices she saw. I will never forget our complicity as we went through checkpoints together, and the hilarious concoctions we made up to explain to the army why we wanted to enter the settlements. I am sure wherever she is, she is smiling about this.

She kept her curiosity alive almost until the very end. I visited her about a month before her death, right after a trip I took to China. I brought photographs and was telling stories to her and other friends in the room. She was very weak, yet she asked questions and smiled. Soon I saw she was getting tired. I asked her if she wanted to rest and she told me how happy she was just to hear the stories and the laughter and asked us to continue.

I miss Ginou everyday - but I still talk to her and laugh with her.

Marisa Escribano is currently volunteering at Scholars at Risk at New York University.
Visiting Geneviève
Odile Cazenave

I met Geneviève ten years ago while a Bunting Fellow at then Radcliffe College. I was working at the time on a manuscript on the new generation of African writers in Paris. She wanted to hear more about it and invited me to meet her.

Walking up the stairs to her apartment, I immediately felt like I was entering a magic place - with African fabrics, carvings and paintings - artifacts that could be in a museum. And yet, it did not feel like a museum, far from that, because of the way she inhabited the space. Naturally I asked her about how she had started to collect art and became interested in Africa, and, as she was describing her early years in Paris, I could just picture this young beautiful vibrant woman.

A couple of years later, when teaching in the Women’s Studies Program as a Visiting Associate Professor at MIT, I happened to coordinate some of the lectures in the Geneviève McMillan series. Among them were the Togolese filmmaker, Anne-Laure Folly, the Ivorian writer and painter, Veronique Tadjo, the Senegalese writer Ken Bugul, the Cameroonian writer and playwright, Werewere Liking.

Taking the Geneviève McMillan guest to Geneviève’s was a regular feature of their visit. As I accompanied each guest to her place, I realized how Geneviève’s house made a very strong impression on the different artists, how each reacted and was affected differently. Some felt comfortable, with the feeling of being back home, and reconnecting with parts of their culture; others were intimidated, almost oppressed and burdened by the number of masks surrounding them. In all cases, it unfailingly provoked a really interesting discussion about the arts. I would always leave feeling I had learned something new about the artist, and also, thinking how Geneviève, whether she was initially familiar with the artist’s work or not, impressed me by how much she had learned about the person and how in the process, she had also given access to another aspect of herself.

In the last few years, when going to see her for a visit, I would always try to convince her she should write about her own life; and she would just laugh. I do hope though somebody at some point writes about Geneviève’s life. It would be such a rich account.

Odile Cazenave is a professor at Boston University.
My father, Paul Counihan, moved to the second floor of 40 Bow Street when I was six. My parents had just separated and I remember visiting my father and my first meeting with Mrs. McMillan (as I called her then and for most of the time I knew her). She welcomed me to her table where I sat wide eyed next to my father, taking in this tall, beautiful woman and the strange new environment that was, and still is, her apartment.

Bow Street offered so much for me: the city, special time with my father, Mrs. McMillan, and her African art. At first I was afraid of many of her pieces, but she’d have me up for a drink of juice and some conversation, and eventually I became accustomed to her unique collection. I began to feel at home in this strange place.

She and my father shared two beautiful white cats that could roam freely between apartments through the back stairs. I was very fond of these cats and was allowed to explore her apartment and play with them as I liked. I shared in her sadness when they died, and also in her deep sadness when Jolie, her beautiful long haired calico cat died a few years ago.

Mrs. McMillan always made time for me, was forever encouraging me, and, without fail, made me feel better about myself. She made me feel I could do anything and that my choices were right. For me, this was a rare gift; one that I try to pass to others through her example. When Ginou asked me to become her secretary last year I was honored and excited to spend more time with her. By this time she had stopped accepting most visitors, but permitted me in to her life and to help. She taught me her business, showed me more of her world. She told me stories about my father, always indicating what a wonderful man he was. This time we spent together will always hold a very special place in my heart and my life.

I am blessed to still frequent her home. The art that once scared me now comforts me and makes me feel safe. Thank you, Ginou. You taught me so much. I am a kinder and more confident person because I met you and was let into your life.

Jessica Pendleton is the daughter of the late Paul Counihan and had the privilege of visiting Mrs. McMillan’s home for the past thirty-six years.
She Knew the Gold from the Brass

Geneviève McMillan entered my life when I became a companion to her. I am very honored to have met such a wonderful woman. She was an extremely gracious and generous individual who has touched my family's life in ways I can never fully explain or repay. This was a woman who gave you a sense of imagination. She had a ferocious sense of her own identity. We had an inexplicably powerful connection and understanding for and between one another, and I grew very close to her in her last days, for which I feel truly blessed and honored. Geneviève’s personal history, collections of African art and diverse circle of friends are the stuff of novels. The richness of experience I brought back home whenever I talked about the enigmatic Geneviève piqued my daughters Hala and Safia’s interests. It wasn’t too long before my daughters decided to pay a visit to this remarkable woman.

I remember my daughter Safia picking up a copy of the critically acclaimed African film "Bamako" one day, with Ginou in mind. I had heard of "Bamako" before from my daughter and it had been screened several times in theaters and campuses nearby. I finally decided to watch it that day, because I remembered Ginou mentioning Abderrahmane Sissako, the director of the film, and a good friend of hers. We watched the film together not just for its brilliance, but for giving us a way to remember and honor her magnetism again in our living room.

Ginou was larger than life and because of that, she knew the gold from the brass and pointed it out to us through her amazing work so we could find inspiration in it too.

Fatma Albaiti was Geneviève McMillan’s companion in the last year of her life.
inou created a life centered on her friendships with artists of all kinds—painters, filmmakers, sculptors, writers, and musicians. She was a friend of mine. She herself was an artist, and her art lay in her great talent for collecting both objects and people. Her love of artists and their work gave her a life of adventure.

Her home at 40 Bow Street in Cambridge provided a unique setting for her paintings, drawings, sculpture, and her great African art collection. Prominent among her paintings were those by Reba Stewart. Everywhere were windows illuminating her artifacts, all carefully placed for the fullest impact and the interplay of light and shadow.

She loved to entertain and did so in three places. One was the Harvard Film Archives, of which she was a great supporter and where she frequently took friends as her guests. The other two were in the large open space at 40 Bow Street, at her round table and from her bed.

She would sit with a group of friends at the round table, surrounded by African art, and hold court. Later on, when her health failed, she entertained from her huge bed. You might sit on a corner of the bed, while other visitors were scattered about on uncomfortable African stools. Perhaps the cat would join you. You might read newspapers and discuss the issues of the day. As always, you’d be surrounded by art and would have to be careful about tripping over something, perhaps a rug or piece of sculpture.

Ginou never revealed herself to her friends. Although I knew her for more than four decades, she always remained an enigma to me. I am certain of only two things about Ginou. In equal measure, she was passionately in love with art and deeply devoted to her friends.

Donald Kelley is an artist and one of Ginou’s oldest friends.
A Letter to Ginou

Jamie Cope

I often wondered if you realized how inspirational you were to women. You were a woman with a clear vision of what you wanted from life. As you told me, long before the Cambridge business community welcomed women as sole owners of property, you persevered and actually were able to buy property and open your French restaurant. From there, you continued your path of dreams and became a real estate entrepreneur, a collector of African art and an important champion of women: establishing grants and fellowships toward women’s education, women’s creative careers, women’s art exhibits and publications.

How could we women thank you for your support when you would just wave your hand as a gesture of modesty? I tried to express my gratitude toward your contribution when you and Teresa decided to publish my book of photographs, but you looked at me in silence, smiling, and it was then that I fully realized that it wasn’t the book; it was, in fact, that you were truly interested in me as a person, a woman and an artist.

It must have been your insight and understanding of women that gave you the deepest purpose and pleasure, because as your days shortened, you continued to establish grants to further opportunities for women. Your commitment never faded despite the complexity and length of your life. Ginou, it was just my sheer luck to have met you and I feel blessed to have had you as a major part of my life, as you always will be.

The Cove - A Memory

It was thirty years ago when we were wearing the sun and bending like reeds in the foam of the cove. We plunged our fingers into the coolness of the wet sand probing about to capture an escapee. How diligently we worked. When we returned to the old summer house we rushed clear cold water into the big white buckets to wash the clams and then, with our succulent dinner, our bodies covered in salt, we sat beneath the white cotton awning ballooning in the sea breeze, and it looked like a cloud in the gold of the evening.

Jamie Cope is a Boston photographer now living in Vermont.
When French-born Geneviève (Lalanne) McMillan came to Boston as a war bride in 1946, the most important items in her trousseau were not her wardrobe or perfumes, but the African artwork in her trunk. That was the nucleus of a collection she would one day donate to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

In a 2007 exhibition, the MFA showcased the 236 African and Oceanic objects d’art that Mrs. McMillan had collected around the world or purchased from other sources.

Mrs. McMillan, who also owned and operated the Henry IV French restaurant formerly in Harvard Square and encouraged young people to study the arts through scholarships, endowments of academic chairs, and gatherings in her Cambridge home, died May 18 at Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge of complications of neuropathy, her niece said. She was 85.

“The gift of Mrs. McMillan’s collection to the museum was a very significant one,” MFA director Malcolm Rogers said. “She was a very striking woman with a distinguished manner and she was passionate about Oceanic and African art. She was so stylish in everything she did, in her whole carriage, her bearing, her manner. She was a very determined woman with very strong opinions and also a very generous spirit.”

Rogers said a visit to Mrs. McMillan’s Cambridge residence - which was much like a salon where students, artists, writers, and other literati gathered - was memorable for the display of African and Oceanic art “arranged in a really unique manner.”

Her passion for African and Oceanic art - or works by native peoples of Australia and the South Pacific islands - go back to her days as a student in France, friends said.

Born in 1922 in Orthez in the French Pyrenees, she arrived in Paris in 1943. Anne Marie Stein, dean at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and a longtime friend, said Mrs. McMillan earned a bachelor’s degree in English at the University of Bordeaux and was one of the first women to graduate from the École des Sciences Politiques, the leading school in France for public administration.

In 1944, after the liberation of Paris, she met Robert McMillan, an American officer and an architect. It was he, Stein said, who introduced his future wife to Madeleine Rousseau and her salon in Paris. Rousseau was a collector of African and Oceanic art and sparked that interest in Geneviève, who was also known as Ginou. She became Ginou’s mentor, according to a MFA catalog about Mrs. McMillan’s collection.

“In the young woman’s eyes, the most interesting attendees [at the salon] were fellow students from the French colonies, the future elites of their countries,” it said. Mrs. McMillan sponsored and mentored young students from African countries in years to come.

By 1946, Mrs. McMillan had earned her college degree, married McMillan, and left for the United States.

The McMillans divorced in 1950, Stein said. Mrs. McMillan moved from their house in Lexington to Cambridge, where, friends said, she felt more at home.

In 1950, Mrs. McMillan opened Henry IV, one of the first French restaurants in the Boston area, which had a pastry shop and a nightclub, Stein said. She brought in a chef from France.

The restaurant, which was downstairs in the two-family house Mrs. McMillan had purchased in Harvard Square, attracted such artists and writers as William Faulkner, Thornton Wilder, and Juan Miró, she said.

The MFA catalog tells how Mrs. McMillan expanded her collection in different ways.

“During the summers when Harvard was closed, she went on long journeys,” it says. “In 1954, she visited New Guinea for the first time during a trip around the world acquiring objects and taking photographs. That year she visited an impressive number of destinations in Africa: Dakar, Monrovia, Kinshasa and Tunis.”

In a 1968 visit to Mrs. McMillan’s home and restaurant, a Globe reporter wrote of “the decorative knives from the Congo” and “ceremonial masks” from African countries that decorated the residence.

Stein said that although Mrs. McMillan had not started out wealthy, she was a brilliant businesswoman who acquired properties around Harvard Square, which helped her build her collection and support the arts, civil rights, and various political causes.

She also shared her wealth with others.

Marisa Escribano of New York City, who was a doctoral student at Harvard when she met Mrs. McMillan, said she was “a feminist before the word was coined and an intrepid fighter. . . . One of her main concerns was helping women in developing countries, particularly Africa, to improve themselves through education.”

For this purpose, Ginou facilitated scholarships at the Harvard Medical School, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and elsewhere, Escribano said.

Philip S. Khoury, one of the Harvard students who attended Mrs. McMillan’s salon and is now associate provost at MIT, said Mrs. McMillan endowed a chair there to study women in the developing world.

Mrs. McMillan had dual citizenship here and in France, and she kept up with the news in France and abroad. Although she lived in this country for more than 60 years, Escribano said, “Ginou still had [the French newspaper] Le Monde delivered to her door every day.”

Mrs. McMillan leaves two nieces, Catherine Lalanne-Gobet and Virginie Lalanne, both of Paris.

A funeral Mass will be said at 9 a.m. today in St. Paul Catholic Church in Cambridge. Burial will be in Mount Auburn Cemetery.

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Credits
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Thanks
Rebecca Murray
Jessica Pendleton
Anne Marie Stein
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GENEVIEVE McMILLAN
December 23, 1922 – May 18, 2008