



## ...the e-newsletter of the Ethnic Arts Council

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### Tribal Soul, Modern Eye

#### More contemporary art collectors discover the allure of tribal art

By Wolfgang Schlink

Twenty-five years ago, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) mounted the seminal exhibition “Primitivism” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art. The must-have, invaluable catalog included extensive research and pictorial material on how the indigenous art of Africa, Oceania, and North America had influenced major western artists of the last century. The show was subtitled *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. So, the point of view was restricted. The curators placed primitive, tribal, or ethnic art - there is no single accepted label of the art of non-western cultures - in the category of an inspiration, a relationship, a connection, or an impact on European art.

Tribal art indeed served as such a conduit. An outstanding example is Pablo Picasso’s 1907 ground-breaking painting “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J.)”, clearly influenced by African form. Another one is Constantin Brancusi’s 1914-1917 wood sculpture “Madame L.R.” (*image, right*), distinctly inspired by Mahongwe (Gabon) reliquaries. From the early 1900s, artists had access to tribal art in the ethnographic showrooms of the colonial powers, particularly in France, Germany, and Belgium. The allure of “the other” influenced western artists to focus on what is best described as the simplicity of minimalism, the soul of ritual expression, the intrigue of abstraction, or the emotion of raw force. Many 20<sup>th</sup> century artists were surrounded by tribal sculptures and masks in their studios; some even became collectors in their own right, e.g. Max Ernst, Jacob Epstein, and André Breton. MoMA’s 1984 “Primitivism” show cast a brilliant spotlight on exquisite works of tribal art, illuminating the influence of “the other” on western art. Yet at the same time it also held tribal art hostage in its highlighted role as a mere, if important contributor.



#### Beyond ethnography

Tribal art embodies much more than an influential stimulus for modern artists. It represents a multi-faceted creative practice that intrigues the instincts of the romantic traveler, the curious ethnographer, but more than ever the connoisseur and collector of timeless aesthetics. As for the latter, Picasso - in a 1940 conversation - condensed his deep respect for tribal art to this credo: “Primitive sculpture has never been surpassed.” A far-reaching statement of maybe some hyperbole that elevated primitive art to its sovereign standing within the art world. It was made at a time when the art of Africa and Oceania was still widely recognized to be just ethnographic curio fabricated by cultures deemed inferior to western civilization. Now it would be art. Timeless. Standalone. Period.



Works of art have long become a tradable commodity. Databases like artnet provide pricing reconnaissance online. It is not too difficult to figure how much a square inch of - let's say - a Mark Rothko painting is "worth" these days, give and take a discount for recession, a surcharge for popular coloring, or an adjustment for inflation. Tribal art does not fit the same bill. Here, in most cases the creative mind is unidentified, and no comparative auction results exist. Rarity, prominent provenance, attractive aesthetics contribute to establishing value, an inaccurate process at best. Many tribal pieces are unique and do not have published equivalents. The irrelevant hype that permeates the market for modern and contemporary art does not enter the tribal milieu unless an important collection is up for sale. And even then, price levels - on average - are rather moderate.



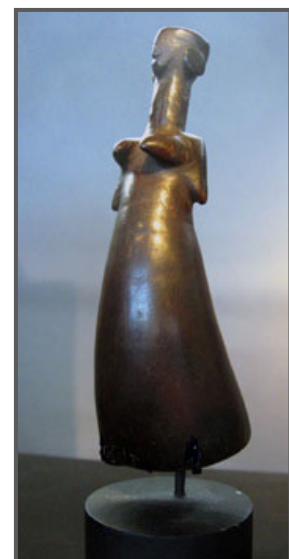
### Modern eye

More and more art collectors with a taste for the modern and contemporary are discovering tribal art. No surprise here. Yet, what took them so long? It is, in a nutshell, the power of tribal form that keeps resonating with a widening group of art buyers. Also, it is good news that tribal acquisitions do not necessarily bust the budget of the entry level collector. If there is one important message that could help thwart buyer's remorse, it is: "Compare, compare, compare!" And no better way to school one's eye and taste, or to engage in a one-on-one inquisitive conversation with an expert than to explore the wide spectrum of tribal art at a leading fair. The mid-February **San Francisco Tribal & Textile Arts Show**, now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> year, happens to be one of the world's finest pow-wows of its kind, a first class gathering of some

100+ dealers that covers sculptures and textiles, ceramics and stone, architectural elements and jewelry, ritual and utilitarian objects, superior tribal art from every continent. This year, the pursuit of the modern and the timeless in tribal art at the Fort Mason fair proved again to be an exciting and rewarding endeavor.



The images speak for themselves. The selection for the highlight reel is naturally incomplete and subjective. It includes the slender, minimalist Koro (Nigeria) figure at Brussels gallerist **Alain Naoum** (*Fig.1, top of page*). **Dori Rootenberg** of **Jacaranda Tribal** (New York) showed an exceptional Zulu (South Africa) geometrically incised vessel, originally used for the storage of beer or sour milk. The lid, a disc-shaped head on top of an elongated neck, transformed the container into a brilliant abstract anthropomorphic sculpture (*Fig.2, left*). In the same booth, a petite Sotho (South Africa) snuff tobacco container (*Fig.3, right*) carved from horn and converted into a floating elegant female shape had many admirers.





By contrast, a pair of Borneo ancestor shrine figures (*Fig.4, detail, center left above*) at **Primary Source** of Los Angeles gave the viewer a dramatic tongue-lashing. Significant erosion enhanced the intense drama of the two plank sculptures. A few booths away, **Thomas Murray** of San Francisco picked up the Indonesian Islands theme by juxtaposing a powerful *hampatong* guardian sculpture from Borneo (*Fig.5, detail, far left above*) with a demure looking *tau tau* funerary effigy from the Toraja region of Sulawesi (*Fig.6, detail, far right above*). Los Angeles dealer **Mark A. Johnson** had a striking, classic tomb door from the same island (*Fig.7, center right above*) on display while at **Ron and April Dammann's Stendahl Gallery** (L.A.) the outstanding jaguar-shaped pre-Columbian ceremonial stone *metate* from Costa Rica (*Fig.8, detail, right*) exuded the essence of divine cat power.



Elegance in simplicity was found in **Joris Visser's** (Brussels) Fidji oil dish - bottom's front! - of anthropomorphic shape (*Fig.9, below, right*), while his exquisite blue, white and ochre pigmented, enigmatic sculpture (*Fig.10, detail, below left*) from Vanuatu (?) charmed countless viewers. Max



Ernst is said to have a similar sculpture in his ethnic art collection, now acquired by and in storage at the National Gallery of Australia. As for textiles, a favorite piece was the 19<sup>th</sup> century *lawon* shoulder cloth (*Fig. 11, p. 4, top left*) from Sumatra (Indonesia) at the booth of San Francisco's **Zena Kruzick**. Obviously, there exists a collective artistic subconscious through generations and across continents. In New York, a century later, a prominent artist had visions similar to those that Sumatran weavers poured into their silk *lawons*. Yet, if you love the creative process and are not compelled, inclined, or able to buy a "name", here you had a chance to

acquire the soul of Rothko-esque colors and shapes for a tiny fraction of the otherwise required humongous financial outlay.



Mark Rothko, thrifty all his life, would have approved of budget decisions. As the story goes, he backed out of the Seagram's Co. commission for several large canvases at their New York Four Seasons Restaurant when he deemed the cost of food at the swanky high society eatery way overblown. As a result, London's Tate Modern became the unintended beneficiary of Rothko's magnificent Four Seasons suite.



At the booth of - first time in San Francisco - exhibitor **Yann Ferrandin** (Paris) a charming, petite Leti Island (Indonesia) carving of a crouched figure was red-dotted early on and soon out of view. Yet the signature gazelle sculpture (*Fig.12, right*) from the Zaramo / Tanzania (?) in front of his exhibition space



continued to attract many viewers and made them smile. A unique abstraction of a beast, reportedly without any published equivalent.

Papua New Guinea expert **Michael Hamson** (Palos Verdes Estates, CA) had a busy show. Plus, at his downtown gallery loft, Hamson had mounted the extraordinary exhibition "**Art of the Massim & Collingwood Bay**" in collaboration with fellow Australian dealer and field collector **Richard Aldridge**.



The exceptional assemblage was a tour de force of spatulas used as betel chewing implements (*Fig. 12, detail, far left*), splashboards called *lagim* (*Fig.13, near left*), wave splitters, *kula* trade armbands, ceremonial staffs and clubs, as well as tapa cloths from Papua New Guinea's far east region and the neighboring Trobriand Islands.



Incidentally, the often heard notion that indigenous cultures were devoid of a distinct “art concept” is - case in point - clearly dispelled in context of the splashboards for the *kula* trade canoes. Trobrianders made a clear difference between a good technical carver and an inspired artist. The latter would be endowed with the gift of *sope*, meaning “water” in local Kiriwani language. He would insert a unique free-flowing swing and rhythm into the carving, in addition to his deep knowledge and application of spiritual symbolism. Trobriand chiefs were most discerning art critics. They would assign the attribute *kakapisi lula*, literally meaning “it moves my inside”, only to the rare piece in which the professional carver had brought the spirit of *sope* to bear.

Good art has to “resonate”, it has to “hit you in the gut” – a universal, if subjective standard of appreciation no different in the remotest islands of Oceania than in the urban galleries of the western world. Tribal art, no doubt, does quite a bit of just that.

Notes:

1. Descriptions of artworks were provided by exhibitors at the show.

2. Literature -

W. Rubin (ed.), “Primitivism” in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art, 1984

Michael Hamson & Richard Aldridge, *Art of the Massim & Collingwood Bay*, 2009

Ulli Beier, *Aesthetic Concepts in the Trobriand Islands, Gigibori, Vol.1, Nr.1, 1974, pp.36*

Chief Narubutal, *Trobriand Canoe Prows, Gigibori, Vol.2, Nr.1, 1975, pp.1*

3. Photography - Fig.1 through 11: Wolfgang Schlink; Fig.12 and 13: Brian Forrest

## The Artistic Lens

In this new segment EAC e-news will publish members’ photos of ethnic art and exotic travel. Share your images of the Pushkar camel fair, the visit to a Borneo longhouse, the sunset at Uluru, the ascent to Mt. Kilimanjaro, or the colors of the market at Solola with the readers of EAC e-news. I know there is a treasure trove of images and stories. Please send your high resolution jpg image with a brief description to the e-news editor at [wolf@tribalearthgallery.com](mailto:wolf@tribalearthgallery.com).

Expert ethno-travelers **Martha and Avrum Bluming** provided this first emotive image and description. An inspiring kick-off for **The Artistic Lens!**

“In northern **Ethiopia**, the January holiday of **Timkat** celebrates the annual consecration of what its adherents believe to be the original **Ark of the Covenant**. Replicas of the Ark are kept in every northern church, shielded from view by brocaded coverings and zealously guarded by ecclesiastical officials. In **Lalibela**, where a series of famous churches were carved down beneath the surface of the mountains, the celebration begins early in the morning as chanting and drumming reverberates from these dimly lit chambers.”





## “Welcome” New Members

Rick and Sasha Baum  
Robert Ross

Teresa Mayer  
Judith and Sheldon Spector

Gene Polgar

## Recent EAC Events

- **Program #5, The San Diego Art Tour** (January 31) attracted a caravan of 40+ EAC members to the **San Diego Museum of Art** for the just opened exhibition ***Oceanic Art - A Celebration of Form***. The morning began with a Pacific Invocation and an informative panel discussion, moderated by SDMA’s energetic Executive Director Derrick Cartwright. Curator George Ellis had brought together a selection of about 100 pieces from the collections of Mina and Ned Smith (EAC members), the Sana Art Foundation, and Valerie Franklin. One of the signature artworks in the show, the life-size *tinu aitu* statue (Smith Collection, *image, detail, right*) from the Caroline Islands’ Nukuoro



atoll, will soon be on its way to Basel, Switzerland. At Fondation Beyeler the effigy joins a group of nine companion pieces at the recently opened exhibition *Visual Encounters: Africa, Oceania, and Modern Art* (see **Calendar**, p.7). The Basel show is a dazzling juxtaposition of exceptional modern and tribal art. Only 32 *tinu aitu* sculptures are known to exist in western collections. After an enjoyable lunch at Prada restaurant - Mina Smith seen here poking fun at Feelie Lee - the group was off to La Jolla to visit the diverse Africa collection of Susan and Richard Ulevitch and the Peru-focused, exquisite collection at the Kleinbub residence. Those who stayed overnight were treated to a fascinating tour of “Bromeliad King” Larry Kent’s nursery. A heartfelt “Thank you” to our gracious hosts!

- **EAC’s February Valentine Fundraiser** at the BoTree Source showroom was a significant success. Funds raised will contribute to the Council’s future grants program which benefits our local museums. Thanks to so many recession-proof, Valentine’s Day-minded, or otherwise motivated shoppers who bought Asian artifacts, architectural elements, and jewelry as well as member artists’ contributions and other donated items. Purchases ranked from the exotic to the decorative. EAC e-news editor Wolf Schlink took home a “Nepalese bridal litter support staff” topped by a finial of symbolized horse heads. A fitting Valentine’s/anniversary gift, as he and spouse Karen House had - 23 years ago - exchanged nuptials in a spiritual Buddhist ceremony at Kathmandu’s Swayambunath monastery. Finally, a big “Thank you” to EAC members Bruce and Marion Hughes of BoTree Source for generously donating a percentage of their proceeds to EAC.



*Photography: Tamara Hoffman (above left) and Wolfgang Schlink (2)*



## Calendar

- **CULTURAL CROSSROADS**, more info at <http://www.latribal.com/CULTCROSS.htm>  
**Traditional art from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas**  
**An exhibition by nine EAC members/galleries, March 13 - 15**  
**Where:** Helms Bakery Building, 8723 Washington Blvd., Culver City, CA  
**When:** Opening Night March 13: 6 PM - 10 PM; March 14: 11 AM - 6 PM; March 15: 11 AM - 5 PM.  
**Note:** An "Antiques Road Show" type, verbal appraisal clinic will be held by the exhibitors on March 14 and 15: 1 PM - 3 PM. Limit three tribal art items; appraisal fee waived for EAC members.
- **LACMA**, more info at [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)
  - **Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures**, ongoing through April 19, 2009  
The landmark exhibition traces the political and cultural discourses during the Cold War in the art worlds of West and East Germany. Curated by Stephanie Barron. Superb web-support and catalog.
- **Fowler Museum**, more info at [www.fowler.ucla.edu](http://www.fowler.ucla.edu)
  - **Continental Rifts: Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa**, ongoing through June 14, 2009
  - **Transformations: Recent Contemporary African Acquisitions**, ongoing through June 14, 2009
  - **Fowler in Focus Gallery: Masks of Sri Lanka**, from March 1, 2009
- **San Diego Museum of Art**, more info at [www.sdmart.org](http://www.sdmart.org)
  - **Oceanic Art: A Celebration of Form**, ongoing through January 3, 2010. Catalog.
  - **Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body**, ongoing through April 26, 2009. Catalog.
- **The Getty Center**, more info at [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu) and [www.kehindewiley.com](http://www.kehindewiley.com)
  - **African American artist Kehinde Wiley on his art and its influences**. Lecture: April 2, 2009, 7 PM
- **Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Switzerland**  
More info at [http://www.beyeler.com/fondation/e/html\\_11sonderaus/01\\_aktuelle/intro.htm](http://www.beyeler.com/fondation/e/html_11sonderaus/01_aktuelle/intro.htm)
  - **Visual Encounters - Africa, Oceania, and Modern Art**, through May 25, 2009. Superb catalog.

**From the web-intro:** "For the first time, a Fondation Beyeler exhibition centers around artworks from Africa and Oceania. Our own selected group of sculptures will be enriched by about 180 outstanding loans from over 50 public and private collections. Each of the thirteen exhibition spaces focuses on an African or Oceanian cultural region, emphasizing its unique character. These extra-European works of the highest quality and global significance are juxtaposed with masterpieces of classical modernism from the Beyeler collection. The exhibition sheds light on the visual force and sensuous presence of the works on view, the source of the unceasing fascination they exert on people from all walks of life around the world."

Photo: ©Fondation Beyeler



Beyeler: Malangan and Mondrian



## Art and Recession

### A follow-up...

In the January/February 2009 issue of EAC e-news we reported on how the economic recession affects various constituents of the art market. The subject is, unsurprisingly, of ongoing interest.

**Records...** If the February 23 and 24 auction of the **Yves Saint Laurent collection** - staged with great pomp and fanfare by Christie's (Paris) amidst a layoff of some 300 staff - is any indication, then the market for superior modern art and design is alive and well. Records were set for Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, Marcel Duchamps, James Ensor, and Giorgio de Chirico. Constantin Brancusi's 1914-1917 wood sculpture "Madame L.R." (*image p.1*) - exhibited at MoMA's 1984 "Primitivism" show - changed hands for a record-breaking \$36 million, roughly a cool million dollars for each inch of its height. In the category of 20<sup>th</sup> century design, the hammer dropped for an Eileen Grey armchair at a breathtaking \$28 million. In the end it did not matter that a Picasso from the artist's late Cubistic period did not make it to the low estimate of €25 million. The bottom line: The auction results totaled close to \$500 million. It was the largest single owner sale in history.

**Museums retrench...** A first casualty: The **Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University** will be closed. The art collection worth \$350 million (2006 appraisal) will be sold off. The university's endowment had plunged considerably. The trustees - some of them said to suffer from the Madoff malaise - would not come up with required new funds to make up the shortfall. And, expansion interrupted: *The Art Newspaper* reports that the **Whitney Museum** has been unable to sell a row of brownstones along Madison Avenue, due to the rapidly declining real estate market. The anticipated proceeds of \$100 million+ had been earmarked for a Renzo Piano-designed Whitney expansion on Manhattan's west side. Now, new art space has to wait.

**President Obama's Stimulus...** A paltry \$50 million has been allotted to the **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)**. Even that amount was endangered for a while. According to *The New York Times*, Robert Redford took it upon himself to remind a top law maker of the fact that museums and theaters employ electricians and ticket takers, whose jobs are at risk like everybody else's.

**Artists...** The crowd at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) waited in vain for cult artist **Shepard Fairey**. The creator of the iconic Obama-HOPE image spent the February 7 opening night of his solo show at ICA in custody, courtesy of an arrest by the Boston police on two old outstanding warrants, probably for causing property damage by pasting his street art. Also, Fairey has been sued by the Associated Press for illegally using a photo by one of its photographers for the HOPE image. Fairey invokes his artistic freedom. Copyright infringement vs. fair use, an interesting case.

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Comments? Email Wolfgang Schlink, Editor EAC e-news, [wolf@tribalearthgallery.com](mailto:wolf@tribalearthgallery.com)

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**The Ethnic Arts Council of Los Angeles (EAC)**

**Dedicated to Advancing the Knowledge, Interest, and Appreciation of Ethnic Art**

Planning to join EAC? Contact Lyn Avins, Membership Co-Chair, [lavins@ucla.edu](mailto:lavins@ucla.edu)