



update

may/june 2008

events, exhibitions, lectures, openings ...

The Getty, more info at www.getty.edu

Film Screening – Edward S. Curtis’ *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (Thursday, June 5, 7.30 PM).
Location: Harold M. Williams Auditorium. **Free.** **Reservations required:** 310-440-7300.



A glimpse into the culture of the Canadian Aborigines thru the mind, eyes and lense of pre-eminent American Indian photographer Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952). This landmark 1914 silent film, recently restored at UCLA, will be presented with its original John J. Braham score performed by the UCLA Philharmonia. Originally conceived as a feature film, the work is today treated as a documentary. The footage was shot at a time when major ceremonies of Canada’s First Nations (like the Potlatch) were banned by the Government. Songs and dances presented in the film will follow the screening, performed by descendants of the original actors, members of the Kwakwaka’wakw First Nations.

Edward S.Curtis is best known for his monumental twenty-volume and J.P.Morgan-sponsored work *The North American Indian* (1907-1930), a major photographic and ethnographic record of western American Indian tribes. Incidentally, it was the second most expensive series of books ever produced in the U.S. Curtis died in Los Angeles in 1952.

The film’s survival is a remarkable odyssey. The only somewhat complete copy was retrieved from a dumpster behind a Chicago movie theater, and the original score remained mis-filed for many years at the Getty Research Library. A digital display of Curtis’s photographic work will be presented in the lobby of the auditorium on the evening of the screening.

Incidentally... Sotheby’s Paris is having an auction “*Eskimo and Northwest Coast Art, James Economos Collection*” on **June 11**. Catalog online at www.sothebys.com. One of the highlights:



Lot 8: Transformation mask, Kwakiutl (these are the Kwakwaka’wakw!), B.C.
High estimate: 300,000 EUR.





recession ... what recession?

Prices for high-end art continue to climb

The gloomy state of the world's financial markets apparently did not deter some VHNWIs to spend serious money at the May art auctions of the major N.Y. auction houses. The good results were helped by a strong presence of European and Russian clients. Buyers from across the Atlantic, certainly attracted by the weak U.S. dollar, generated the majority of the sales revenue for **Impressionist and Modern Art**. Also, price guarantees by the auction houses induced some collectors to sell high quality works in a time of uncertainty.

Among the record breakers: Claude Monet's *The Railroad Bridge at Argenteuil* (\$37 million), and Fernand Léger's *Etude pour la femme en bleu* (\$35 million). Works by Rodin, Giacometti, Munch, and Miro also set new high marks.

Results of the **Post-war & Contemporary Art** sales overshadowed these outcomes. A Francis Bacon triptych brought \$77 million and may end up in a European private collection. And for now, Lucian Freud (\$30 million) topped Jeff Koons as the most expensive living artist.

And how did **Tribal Art** do? At Sotheby's N.Y. May 16 auction sales added up to \$ 10 million plus. According to Sotheby's the sale signaled increasing interest in tribal art from collectors of Modern and Contemporary Art. Good news as these collectors are no strangers to writing large checks. For **African Art**, pieces that significantly outperformed their catalog estimates included a Tanzanian, possibly Kwere, female figure (Lot 184 – \$ 205,000, high estimate \$25,000), a record for an East African sculpture. Lot 39: A Punu (Gabon) mask, first published in the 1915 Carl Einstein book "Negerplastik" which had great impact on quite a few expressionists, changed hands for \$337,000 (high estimate \$90,000).

Star of the night, though, was Lot 58: The Magnificent Baga Serpent, which at \$3,289,000 topped its high estimate of \$2 million. The Serpent has an interesting history. It was initially "collected *in situ*" in 1957 by gallerists Hélène and Henri Kamer. The years 1956-1957 were turbulent times in Guinea. Islamization was on the move to eradicate the traditional indigenous Baga culture. The insurgents sold off major ritual Baga objects to French art collectors and dealers who were traveling in the wake of destruction. The tumult of that time is captured by a photo of Hélène Kamer, standing on the back of a pick-up truck directing two natives who are loading Baga snakes and Nimba shoulder masks. Later, the record-setting Serpent was owned for some time by Pierre Matisse (Henri's son) and exhibited in his N.Y. Upper East Side Gallery with works by Joan Miró, Giacometti, Marini and others before the Dinhofer Collection acquired it in 1967. [Note: For more on Baga art and culture, see Frederick Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, Prestel, 1996].

For **Pre-Columbian Art**, Lot 14: A Large Olmec Jade Mask (ca. 900-300 BC) stayed within its estimate, but set an auction record for its kind at \$481,000. For **Oceanic Art** and from a Los Angeles collection, Lot 32: A Fine Nias (Indonesia) Male Ancestor Figure went for \$157,000 tripling its estimate.

Clearly, the high end of the art market is resisting recession. In fact it is moving up. New "crossover" collectors are making their entry into the tribal arena looking for the highest level of quality. The weak dollar plays – for the time being – its part. And, as always, rarity and provenance make for a successful sale.

Now off to Paris for the two (Eskimo... and African...) June 11 Sotheby's Tribal Art auctions. In the African auction, hold your breath for Lot 120: A magnificent Sapi-Portuguese ivory saltcellar from Sierra Leone, late 15th/early 16th century. One of only thirty surviving complete examples of early European-commissioned exceptional African "port art". High estimate: 600,000. Euro that is!

For images and detailed results of Sotheby's N.Y. Tribal Art auction and for an online catalog of the June 11 Paris auction, go to www.sothebys.com.