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ART REVIEW

A Global Smorgasbord of Wonders for the Eye

By HOLLAND COTTER

Americans may be nervous about their borders, but the country's cultural horizons grow ever more global. Witness the New York International Tribal and Textile Arts Show. With its confluence of galleries from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and North America, it's about Epaniveness with a capital E. At once low key and wall-to-wall gorgeous, it's my absolute favorite of all the New York art fairs.

As installed at the Seventh Regiment Armory, the show has the feel of a cosmopolitan city laid out in a grid, Manhattan style. Walking its

The New York International Tribal and Textile Arts Show Seventh Regiment Armory

boulevards and byways, you change countries and epochs every few steps. You may start in Nigeria, but you soon move to Mexico, Tibet, the Pacific Northwest. An Olmec stone mask at Throckmorton Fine Art takes you back to 1000 B.C. A Coptic tunic adorned with slender dancers at Gail Martin Gallery brings you to the seventh century A.D. With oil painting by the contemporary Ethiopian artist Gera at Cavin-Morris, you arrive at 1995. By then hard distinctions between high and low, art and craft, decorative and functional have dropped away.

Do such shifts and leaps leave you perplexed? Of course, and how great. Any art fair worth its salt should blow your mind at least a little, mess with your compass. One minute it should have you marveling at how everything from everywhere is connected, and the next it should have you thinking, "But I've never seen anything like that before."

This back and forth never let up for me, and I loved it. But in the interest of less confusion-tolerant visitors, let me do some sorting.

The Tribal and Textile Arts Show continues through tomorrow (today, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.; tomorrow 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.) at the Seventh Regiment Armory, Park Avenue at 67th Street, (212) 472-1180.



Trotsky and Sanders Gallery

From an Ethiopian illuminated gospel, a scene of St. George slaying the dragon, above; below, a north Persian kilim, from around 1900.

If your passion is for so-called classical African material, you have much to choose from. Dalton Somare from Milan has a textbook-worthy selection, as do J. Visser from Brussels; Oumar Keinde from Dakar, Senegal; and Joan Barist Primitive Art and Robertson African Arts, both from Manhattan.

At Barist, there's a masterly carving of a Baga male figure; with his chin resting on his raised hands, he's like "The Thinker" standing up. Robertson's prize items include two West African hunter's shirts hung with koranic amulets. These shirts are old and rare, but exactly the same protective charms can be spotted in news photographs of rebel soldiers fighting in Darfur today.

A few galleries specialize within the field. Axis, renowned for its exhi-



Alberto Levi Gallery

bitions of Zulu beadwork, focuses on South Africa and has made New York history by integrating African art, old and new, into the fabric of the contemporary Chelsea gallery scene.

Tana-Sachau Collection from Germany is devoted to Ethiopian Christian art, and the spiritual vivacity of the painted altarpieces at its booth is picked up by an illuminated gospel at Trotsky and Sanders.

Maybe Oceania is your goal. Mark A. Johnson will take you there with a ceremonial dance mask from Borneo; its prowlike nose and big pink ears make it a kind of vertical hovercraft. Or you can zip to the top of the world with a suite of tiny prehistoric ivories at Brant Mackley, while Tibetan Buddhist bronzes at Hardt & Sons take you to a high place that

Is that a Cy Twombly or a ceremonial cloth from Cameroon?

some call heaven.

Anyone in search of textiles will certainly find some version of heaven here. The variety of forms is endless, the craftsmanship superb. Let me point out, almost at random, a rainbow-hued Moroccan carpet, its pile as thick as moss, at Gebhart Blazek; a Turkish calligraphic piece — gold script against an emerald-green silk ground — at Esther Fitzgerald; and a multipanel north Persian kilim at Alberto Levi, with a slightly off-register pattern of black and white bands.

But wait. Surely this is no carpet. It's a 1951 Ellsworth Kelly. And that marvelous wall piece at Gail Martin labeled "ceremonial cloth, Cameroon," the one with the looping penmanship patterns, is a Cy Twombly by some other name. And isn't that that exquisite patchwork kimono at Thomas Murray an Anne Ryan collage, the largest she ever made?

It is only natural to filter the unfamiliar art of other cultures through our own art. This is what everyone everywhere does, at least at first. The important thing is to go further, to let the unfamiliar grow familiar on its own terms. That's the dynamic the Tribal and Textile Arts show sets up, and it's so alive: art without borders, ideas in free flow, a politics of generosity, the only way to go.