

From Around the Globe, a Mustering of the Tribes

All art fairs are messy, but the New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show is messier than most. It assembles a ridiculously broad range of tribal art from Africa, Oceania, Asia and North and South America. It is a forceful, entrancing ensemble nonetheless.

ART REVIEW

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This year's fair has relocated to smaller quarters in the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue, at 26th Street, far south of its former home in the Park Avenue Armory. There is a tighter floor plan downtown — where the fair actually began 14 years ago, under a different name — but it looks and feels pretty good, with 76 participating galleries from 10 countries.

More important, the fair has kept its stalwarts, including high-end European dealers like Esther Fitzgerald Rare Textiles, Joss Graham, Galerie Flak and Tribal Gathering, along with a core group of American specialist galleries. All welcome news, for it secures the usual bounty of lavish textiles; sculpture and statuary in clay, stone and wood; rugs of all stripes; and a tasty selection of jewelry.

"Tribal art" is considered a pejorative and outmoded term by dealers and scholars. It implies primitive. Here, though, it serves merely to corral a loose confederation of objects from indigenous and precolonial cultures. It is about identifying cultural authenticity.

Anyone who loves traditional textiles should not miss this show. The variety and beauty of forms are dizzying, and the craftsmanship exemplary. A handful of examples: an 800-year-old Peruvian, feather-patterned woolen mantle as fetching as any modern designer shawl, at Gail Martin Gallery; a Balinese silk ikat-weave woman's shoulder or breast cloth, from the late 19th or early 20th century, at Apsara Arts of Asia; and a 19th-century hand-stitched woman's tunic, from Bhutan, at Thomas Mond Carpets and Textiles.

Maybe rugs are your thing.

The New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show runs through Sunday at the 69th Regiment Armory, Lexington Avenue at 26th Street; (212) 532-1516, caskeyles.com.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIROKO MASUIKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show has drawn displays from 76 galleries.

New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show 69th Regiment Armory

Carpets of all descriptions line the walls and floors of the booths. At Joss Graham there is an eye-catching Iranian wool and cotton kilim from the early 20th century, with an intersecting diamond design at the center, surrounded by blocks of pure color. Another spectacular kilim, from around 1900, is from Eastern Anatolia.

Prices for tribal art are significantly lower than for fine arts and antiques. Few objects in the show cost more than \$25,000, with the bulk in the range of \$5,000 to \$15,000. Among the most expensive pieces is a male figure from Congo, at Joel Cooner Gallery, from around 1900. It is \$165,000.

As always, there is an abundance of African material, but it takes patience to sort through the booths to find really unusual stuff. Tribal Gathering's includes a collection of elegantly carved, forked sticks — possibly fertility symbols — used as wedding gifts by the Afar tribe in Somalia and Ethiopia. They are given by the bride to the groom on their wed-



A megalith from the Indonesian island of Sumba, at the Thomas Murray booth.

ding day.

Ethiopian art tends to be immensely varied, for the country was a crossroads of cultures. At Tana-Sachau is a collection of Coptic crosses and painted icons, Ethiopian in origin, from the 13th to 18th centuries. The icons are not terribly rare, but their presence here never fails to intrigue visitors. Painted on olive wood using tempera, they have a rustic beauty.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional images from the New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show:
nytimes.com/design

Those passionate about Oceanic tribal art are in luck, for this year's fair contains exceptionally strong material. Lewis/Wara Gallery is presenting a decorative front piece from a large, horizontal ceremonial village drum, carved with pre-metal tools. It comes from along the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, a region known for fine sculpture and masks.

Equally impressive is an upright limestone megalith from Sumba Island in Indonesia, at Thomas Murray. Old and rare, it is one of the prize items of the fair. In ancient times the people of Sumba would raise up great stone megaliths like this to memorialize a chief.

Not that everything here is so august. The "tribal art" category embraces all kinds of exotica and weird primitive novelty items, some of which border on kitsch. But that is the fun of this fair, where the mediocre and vacant mix with the great, to the benefit somehow of both.