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Tribal Art: Magical Pieces, Sensible Prices

Build a museum-quality collection for under

\$100,000.

By RICHARD C. THOMPSON

Nearly 50 years ago, a young, bespectacled man named Michael Rockefeller went looking for tribal artifacts in the swampy coastlands of New Guinea. He was never seen again. He may have been attacked by sharks; he may have drowned; he may have encountered cannibals or headhunters. To this day, no one knows. Michael Rockefeller's memory, however, has lived on in a novel, a rock song, at least two plays and, spectacularly, the tribal-art wing of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The wing is named after him, and many of its 1,600 pieces came from his father, former Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, the most voracious collector of such art the world has ever seen. For today's growing number of tribal-art fans, Rocky did good.

Luckily, you don't have to risk your own life to start collecting. You don't even need a giant bank account. Museum-quality objects from Africa, the Pacific and the Americas can be had for as little as \$5,000. Though prices have been rising lately, with some sales setting records, you can still build a striking collection of masks, figures, textiles and other tribal pieces for well under \$100,000. The works can lend an air of the exotic to any home; they show especially well in minimalist settings.



Courtesy of Kevin Conru Gallery

A mask for rituals in Papua New Guinea. Price: \$15,000.

Collectors' interest in tribal art was on full display in San Francisco last month at the 25th annual Tribal and Textile Art Show. Some 7,000 patrons buzzed through a veritable city of booths on an enclosed, antiquated pier. Sunlight from the windows above brought the objects to life. A highly rare, seventh-century turquoise and gold mosaic piece from Mexico, which served as an elite's funerary mask for transcendence into the afterlife, reflected piercing hues of blue and green. Dark wood and ivory

handles of Indonesian daggers practically glowed, revealing intricate carvings.

Renowned tribal-art collector Bill Jamieson, who was followed by a television crew, purchased a coveted late-19th-century mask from the Ivory Coast for \$40,000. The mask, shown by the Milan-based Dalton Somaré gallery, is from the African tribe of the Dan People and was used in rituals to head off fires in the dry season. The wooden mask has wonderfully high cheek bones and an ultra-narrow chin. It has been unusually well preserved and boasts an impressive pedigree: It previously belonged to three leading collectors in Paris and Barcelona. Jamieson figures he got not just a striking piece of art but an entirely respectable investment. "I'm going to make more money on this mask than the same money would make sitting in a bank," he said.

IF THE LABEL "tribal art" seems vague, it's because it is. An umbrella term that covers more than three continents, it encompasses thousands of vastly different cultures. During the late 19th century, European colonists in Africa whet the appetite of artists and art collectors when they returned with colorful "curiosities" that flouted realism. Even early modernist painters like Picasso and Matisse collected the art themselves and were quick to incorporate the exotic aesthetic into their own masterpieces.

However, the prices of modern art and tribal art remain worlds apart. While a Picasso sold last year for \$106.5 million, the highest price ever for a painting sold at auction, the top level for African art is about \$7 million. Only two pieces are known to have hit that level, including a stool from the Luba tribe in the Republic of the Congo that went for \$7.1 million at Sotheby's last year. Made in the 19th century by an artist known as the Buli Master, the stool is held up by an intricately carved woman who is leaning forward to bear

the weight. With her eyebrows arched high on her elongated face, she seems both surprised and bemused to be lifting a leader, typically the users of such stools.



Courtesy of Huber Primitive Art
An Aztec vessel used for exotic hot chocolate, 13th-15th century. Price: \$24,000.

Demand for the best pieces of tribal art is almost always strong, reflecting the relatively limited supply of art and artifacts from these cultures. "I sold a very nice Easter Island figure 15 years ago for about a \$100,000 and now you couldn't buy one for under half a million," said dealer Kevin Conru, who operates out of Brussels.

But you do have to watch out for the traps: forgeries and smuggled items. The best defense is to find a dealer who is trusted and well regarded by others. Scientific technologies such as carbon dating can work with older pieces but are imperfect and expensive. Amyas Naegele, a top dealer based in Manhattan, advises collectors to carefully study museum pieces before buying similar objects. Shows like the one in San Francisco are also great places to learn more, and they often have committees that vet pieces and ensure authenticity.

Cultural patrimony laws have put a limit on the number of items that can be taken out of a country. The law is especially strict in Peru and other countries with art from the Pre-Colombian period - early 15th century and older. Until recently, Yale University and Peru had a long-running feud over a collection of pieces that were

obtained in 1912 by Yale archeologist Hiram Bingham III. Now, almost a century later, a resolution has been reached. Yale will send the pieces to a newly created center at Machu Picchu, a 15th-century Inca site in Peru, and the university and the country will run the center jointly.



Courtesy of Amyas Naegele

Balanced on a fly whisk, this \$20,000 feline comes from Cameroon.

Pre-Columbian objects from the Americas still surface from long-held private collections. Africa's laws are somewhat looser, meaning more new items are making their way to dealers. Naegele has been showing some new pieces from the less-collected Cameroon grasslands of Africa, including a vibrant blue and red headdress and an accompanying whisk that's topped off with a grinning feline figure. The beaded set would have been used by dancers at initiations, weddings and other ceremonies. The headdress is priced at \$15,000, the whisk at \$20,000.

Material from Indonesian cultures drew heavy attention at the show in San Francisco, partly because the region is yielding the most new finds. A mask from the Dayak tribe of Borneo, offered by the Mark A. Johnson Gallery, featured a captivatingly morphed face of a pig, dragon and bird, painted in red and black and adorned with a plume of feathers. Used during harvest ceremonies in the 1940s-50s, it's on the market at \$6,500.

Oceanic art like this is on prominent display at the Met. Items collected by Michael Rockefeller before that final trip are displayed in a stunning, slope-walled glass room. The de Young Museum in San Francisco also has a large collection of Oceanic works. But enjoyable as it is to look at all that, there is something even better: admiring great tribal art outside glass cases and inside your home.