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Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

Tribal Arts: Yard-Sale Iroquois Moccasins and \$10,575 Eskimo Snow Goggles

by Jeanne Schinto

One of those proverbial \$10 yard-sale items fetched a tidy sum at the latest American Indian and ethnographic art sale at Skinner's Boston gallery on Saturday, January 13. In this case, a young woman in the Carolinas found among somebody's household castoffs what turned out to be a pair of Iroquois beaded and quilted hide moccasins from the second quarter of the 19th century. After the sale, which totaled \$970,961, the ecstatic consignor e-mailed to Skinner's department head Douglas Deihl a photo of herself and friends celebrating. They were holding the catalog open with the hammer price writ large on its page. Including buyer's premium, an Internet bidder paid \$9800.

It seems that every few weeks someone is finding Native Americana or some other tribal artwork in the wild. Is the perception accurate or illusory? Deihl believes that his field isn't blessed with more than its share of these events. "It just seems that way, because the media always report them," he said. But a dealer in Native American art once told us that yard-sale discoveries do seem to happen more often in her realm than in some of the others. "That's because you're looking at bits of hide and hair without a lot of intrinsic value," she said. "People have always valued the little porcelain teacup with the gold rim or the silver that sits on the sideboard, but some great Native American costumes or pottery have been relegated to the attic or the barn."

The top lot of this sale, a solid but not record-breaking event, did come from a collection: an early Plains war shield and cover from the first half of the 19th century. It was consigned by the family of George Rich III, a Chicago socialite and private investor whose family once owned the Simoniz Company, now Simoniz USA. According to the Skinner catalog, Rich was also once married to heiress Dorothy Wrigley.

The shield, perhaps Dakota, was made of thick buffalo hide. Light in weight but large enough (21½" diameter) to protect a warrior who knew how to handle it, it was painted with a pattern of concentric circles. Its multiple perforations were meant for feather attachments, now gone. This good example of a fairly rare item fetched \$49,350 (est. \$20,000/ 30,000) from one of three bidders on the phones.

The same phone bidder was successful on the second-highest lot of the day, a Northwest Coast carved wood club, a 19th-century Makah item, that came to the sale from overseas. The consignor bought it at a small sale in Great Britain a year or two ago, said Deihl. The 14¾" tall club with its head in the form of a stylized owl's head was cataloged as "possibly a shaman's" and estimated at \$5000/7000. It brought \$30,550.

As is increasingly typical these days, all of the most desirable lots in the sale went to phone bidders or absentee bidders. Even so, the gallery seats were filled with dealers and collectors who specialize in many categories of tribal arts, from Pre-Columbian effigies to Native American baskets to African textiles and masks. They bought what they could, often multiple lots, packing up as each category was concluded.

Several choice items in the approximately 440-lot sale, nearly 90% of which sold, were from the estate of the Reverend Thomas W. Phelan (1925-2006). Phelan, a well-loved chaplain, professor, and dean at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, had a good eye. That is becoming more and more apparent as Skinner continues to sell his collection at various sales. When Skinner sold Phelan's George Nakashima table on June 24, 2006, for \$204,000, it broke the then-record for a table by the artist. At Skinner's Americana sale on November 4 and 5, 2006, an unusual relief-carved and painted wooden plaque issued by the Buffalo Insurance Company was offered from the collection and went to folk art dealer David Wheatcroft at \$8812.50.

At this sale, Phelan's unsigned Southwest polychrome pottery jar from the second quarter of the 20th century, attributed to San Idefonso Pueblo potter Maria Martinez (1887-1980), brought \$28,200 from an absentee bidder, identified by Deihl as a dealer and pottery expert. It's a safe guess that he or she believes the attribution is correct.

Bidders also liked the fresh-to-the-market items that descended in the family of two brothers, Barclay and Howard White, who worked as government appointees in charge of Indian affairs in the Plains region in the 1870's and 1880's. That consignment included a pair of Northern Plains beaded hide man's half-leggings that were bought by another private collector, bidding as an absentee, who paid \$7637.50.

The leggings were cataloged as Metis-Sioux, last quarter of the 19th century, and decorated with upside-down American flags. We were curious about this imagery and learned from the literature that some Native Americans who incorporated the oppressors' symbol right side up in artworks and artifacts hoped that the flag's power would be transferred to them, offering status and protection. The inverted flag is something else again. Suffice it to say that it's not an expression of unbridled patriotism.

What truly drives the tribal arts market today is aesthetics. "It's about the art-there's no doubt about it," said Deihl. That's one reason why one cannot confidently predict where this material is headed after it is auctioned. Southwestern material doesn't necessarily go to the Southwest, and California material doesn't necessarily go to California. In fact, Native Americana doesn't necessarily go to Americans.

"The Europeans are big on Northwest Coast items," said Deihl. "They're big into tribal in general. The tribal arts scene there is crazy right now." African tribal arts in particular are highly sought in Europe, he said. "The Europeans were the colonials in Africa. Plus, the big new museum in Paris has put a whole new light on tribal material."

Deihl was referring to Musée du Quai Branly (www.quaibrnaly.fr), which opened on June 23, 2006, to house France's large, formerly scattered collection of primitive art. President Jacques Chirac, its champion, had hoped it would bring France to the tribal arts forefront. The international press reports say he was successful and also claim that, thanks in part to the new museum, Paris, not New York City or Brussels, is now the center of the tribal arts market.

The current collector taste for Modernism worldwide is one reason why that center is not a bad place to be. Modernist painters appreciated, collected, and were influenced by tribal arts; so do many collectors of Modernism today. As a result, crossover can occur. "This whole field is getting a boost because that kind of art is so big," said Deihl, adding that crossover collectors are thought to have been among the buyers who spent multimillions at the sale of the Pierre and Claude Vérité collection, conducted by Enchères Rive Gauche at Drouot in Paris on June 17 and 18, 2006.

Father and son Vérité were collectors and dealers of Africana, mostly from France's former colonies in West and central Africa. Their clients included Pablo Picasso and André Breton. A 19th-century Fang mask from Gabon, said to have inspired Picasso, was in their famous collection and sold for more than \$7.5 million (est. \$1.5/2.5 million), a record for a work of primitive art. "That's what's happening with the very best of it," said Deihl.

And with the very worst? "The fakes are getting so good, and there are so many of them," said Deihl. Some are 50 or 60 years old by now. Others have been aged artificially. "They put them out with the termite mounds." It amounts to a small industry. That's why provenance is perhaps more important in this field than in any other, in Deihl's opinion.

Pre-Columbian fakes are even more difficult to discern than Native American or African ones, he said. "You can get a feel for the fakes in African and American Indian, once you've seen enough of the good ones. Pre-Columbian is different. You need the black light." That may be one reason why prices in that specialty haven't risen as dramatically.

Yet we think someday these pieces may appeal to a younger generation of collectors, those who understand and appreciate the art of graphic novels. The monkey-man gods, the zigzag snakes, and the seated rats of the Mayan and other Pre-Columbian cultures are uncannily similar to the imagery of some of today's comic-book artists, whose work is being taken more seriously by the literary world, even garnering reviews in such places as the New York Times. And there is another current popular culture link to the field. "I'll be interested to see if the movie

Apocalypto makes a difference for the Pre-Columbian," said Deihl, referring to Mel Gibson's most recent epic, whose milieu is Mayan civilization.

Skinner's next sale of tribal arts is scheduled for late September. At that time the auction house will offer yet another yard-sale find. "A guy in Maine bought it four years ago—a Northwest Coast rattle," said Deihl. Was it, too, bought for the proverbial ten spot? No, it was \$100. Well, that's inflation.

For more information, contact Skinner at (978) 779-6241; Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

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