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Frieze Masters: show-stoppers

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This year's highlights include an Igbo shrine figure, Klimt drawings and Plains Indian art



Buffalo hide (1840), Donald Ellis Gallery at Frieze Masters

Despite the presence of such important names as Rembrandt and Picasso, many of the most powerful and moving works of art at Frieze Masters were made by those whose identities are lost to posterity. And they are not all on the largest or most prominent stands.

Just about as far away as could be from the fair's entrance, for example, is one of the real show-stoppers. The stand of Toronto-based dealer Donald Ellis offers a record of a tumultuous time and place (always a good recipe for artistic creation) when the US government was doing its best to destroy a whole way of life. Dominating the stand is a great buffalo hide from about 1840, painted with nine pictographic red and blue horses arranged in frieze-like bands of three, and it is surrounded by some 70 Plains Indian ledger drawings made between 1865 and 1900. There has never been a dealer show like it, and Ellis has been amassing this material for over 20 years.

This hide-painting tradition commemorated acts of valour: braves were literally cloaked in their own histories. But as the buffalo herds were systematically depleted, artist-historians began to use not hides but the pages of accountants' ledger books. With coloured pencils, sometimes ink or watercolour, they told tales of horsemanship, inter-tribal warfare, camp life and courtship.

These drawings have a verve, immediacy and spirit, and a strange pictorial expansion of time and space, that is breathtaking. "Cheyennes attacking a Pawnee Camp" was snapped up by a major contemporary art collector who described it as having "as much energy and movement as anything I have ever seen". The hide was claimed by the artist Julian Opie, for \$150,000; the drawings range in price from \$9,500 to \$95,000. Ellis also offers five 19th-century Yup'ik painted masks from Alaska, something of a gallery speciality, at \$350,00 and \$550,000 per pair.

It was the tragedies of the Biafran war that brought to western attention the likes of the Igbo female shrine figure from Nigeria at Pace Primitive. There is nothing quite like this example, probably from the early 20th century, her rhythmic form most notable for the breasts emerging from her trapezoid shoulders. Remarkable too is her sacrificial patina of millet porridge and chicken blood – and goodness knows what else – that was made to feed and activate this powerful intermediary ancestor figure (price \$900,000).

Some of the original polished surface survives on the oldest work of art at the fair: a tiny (10cm high) neolithic Aegean marble seated idol, some 7,000 years old. Perhaps because of her enormous swelling backside, this symbol of abundance and fecundity sits so comfortably in the palm of one's hand. She can be found at Rupert Wace Ancient Art, price £450,000.

There is a comparably primal and totemic quality about the impressive group of David Smith's seminal "industrial" Forgings made in 1955, on offer from the artist's estate through the Mnuchin Gallery. Within an hour of opening, one had sold to a private collector for \$2.4m. They bring to mind the spare human figures of Alberto Giacometti – but so does one of the Chinese 18th-century scholars' rocks presented by new exhibitor M.D. Flacks.

Another tour-de-force, this time attributable to a sculptor whom even most art historians would fail to recognise, is the beautiful and unmistakably seductive Virgin Annunciate offered by medieval specialist Sam Fogg (£300,000). She is believed to be the work of Guillaume Regnault (c1450-1530) who worked with Michel Colombe, France's leading sculptor at the turn of the 16th century, and she represents the final flowering of the late Gothic style that was blown away by the School of Fontainebleau. Fogg almost immediately sold a unique carved fruitwood prayer mill made for Henry VIII or a member of his court.

Of course not everything wonderful here is three-dimensional, as indicated by the fact that Richard Feigen's tempera and gold-ground Pietà by the 15th-century Calabrian Goncal Peris was promptly reserved by a US museum, price \$950,000. The other stand-outs of this year's edition are works on paper, far too many to list. There are great examples by Klimt and Schiele at Wienerroither & Kohlbacher, and a major Léger at Thomas Gibson. Luca Baroni offers three of the best, including a Gauguin gouache, "Nègreries Martinique" (1890, £1.3m), and a wonderfully fresh Cézanne (£650,000). Both have come from the estate of another dealer with great taste, Jan Krugier.

That remarkable collector Calouste Gulbenkian used to say that there are no great collectors without great dealers. Frieze Masters is a good place to find them.

To Sunday, friezemaasters.com

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