
Prospero
Books, arts and culture

Winter Antiques Show

Donald Ellis and the Eskimos

Jan 21st 2011, 22:03 by P.W. | NEW YORK



DONALD ELLIS, a leading [dealer in Native America](#)

(<http://www.donaldellisgallery.com/index.php>) n objects, is so excited about what he is exhibiting at New York's [Winter Antiques Show](#) (<http://www.winterantiquesshow.com/>) he looks as if he might break into a ceremonial dance himself. He gestures to what he describes as "among the most extraordinary objects I've owned in my 34-year career." You needn't be an

expert to understand the power of these pieces, which include two 19th-century ritual masks made by Yup'ik-speaking Eskimos. One features a shaman astride a big wide-eyed seal; the other a large smiling face with a protruding open mouth. Both have arms stretched wide to welcome the spirits, and both are decorated with feathers. (Yes, American law forbids the sale of feathers from eagles and migratory birds; these masks recreate the effect with the plumage of domestic fowl, like swans and geese.) The third of Mr Ellis's treasured objects is a carved caribou antler club from Northern British Columbia. The sculptor would seem to be influenced by the soaring abstract works of Brancusi, except that this piece was made in the 18th century.

This trio of objects from Donald Ellis are among the standouts at the Winter Antiques Show, which opens today at the Park Avenue Armory. The smiling mask is one of its shining stars.



Native American art is an undervalued collecting area. Interest is growing in Canada and the United States, and Europe too, especially France. (Indeed, Paris is the capital of the tribal-art market.) Prices are rising but remain comparatively modest. So there was much excitement at the Winter Show's preview benefit party last night, when within the first hour Mr Ellis sold the shaman on a seal mask for more than \$2.1m, breaking the world record for a Native American artwork. He then set a new record half an hour later, when he sold the other mask for more than \$2.5m.

These are hardly tiny sums, but they are modest compared with prices for other art masterpieces. This may be because most collectors have yet to be convinced that Native American pieces are in fact art. Artists and curators, however, have not had this blind spot. In 1941, for example, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called "Indian Art in the United States" mixed together art by Native and other Americans. Already the [Vancouver Art Gallery](http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca) (<http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca>) has asked to borrow the masks Mr Ellis has just sold as part of its forthcoming exhibition "The Colour of My Dreams: Surrealism and Revolution in Art", on

view from May 28th to October 2nd.

Mr Ellis was in his twenties in Canada when he began buying and selling Native American objects. From the start he considered them works of art, a view he shared with Lord Thomson of Fleet (known as Ken Thomson in his native Canada), for whom he became a dealer and advisor. Indeed, nearly all of Thomson's First Nations collection (the Canadian term for Native Americans) came from Mr Ellis's gallery. Today these works are part of the wide-ranging art collection [Thomson gave](http://www.ago.net/thomson) (<http://www.ago.net/thomson>) to the Art Gallery of Ontario (he died in 2006).



The prized Yup'ik masks Mr Ellis has unveiled at the Winter Antiques Show were previously owned by Enrico Donati, a Surrealist painter who died in 2008, aged 99. They are part of a series of 12 "weather related" masks; the only two not in museums. Mr Ellis calls the series "perhaps the greatest body of North American native art ever created." André Breton, the Surrealist ring-leader, and Georges Duthuit, an art critic who was married to Matisse's daughter Marguerite, owned others in the series. Breton's is now in the Louvre.

Even before the Winter Antiques Show opened, images of the masks began appearing in the arts press. Mr Ellis picked this year to finally hire a public-relations firm, and a bit of anticipation has served him well. As the fair was opening to the public today, his gallery reported selling 19 objects for a little more than \$8m, along with another nine pieces from the catalogue for a

further \$1.3m. This well surpasses the previous auction record from the [Sotheby's sale](http://www.sothebys.com/app/live/lot/LotResultsDetailList.jsp?event_id=27952&sale_number=No8268) (http://www.sothebys.com/app/live/lot/LotResultsDetailList.jsp?event_id=27952&sale_number=No8268) of the Dundas Collection of Northwest Coast American Indian Art. Mr Ellis admits that his decision to promote his collection was inspired in part by the competition coming from the auction houses, which have been noisily advancing themselves for buying and selling art. He also hoped to raise the profile of Native American art. It seems he succeeded.

*The **2011 Winter Antiques Show** (<http://www.winterantiquesshow.com/information/>) is at the Park Avenue Armory, New York, from January 21st to the 30th*