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ANTIQUES

Wendy Moonan

Long in Love With Artifacts Of the Indians

Donald Ellis is a clever man: he turned a childhood hobby into a profession. Mr. Ellis, a Canadian dealer in 18th- and 19th-century Canadian and American Indian artifacts, is exhibiting for the first time at the International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show, which opens today at the Seventh Regiment Armory (review, Page 47). In a fair known for its sumptuous Louis XV furniture, old-master paintings and Tang horses, Mr. Ellis's booth is bound to stand out.

He sells what he loves: Alaskan Eskimo bird masks, Micmac porcupine quill boxes from Nova Scotia, Navajo chiefs' blankets from Arizona, Northwest Coast Indian war helmets and indigenous textiles of all kinds.

"You couldn't learn about this at school when I was growing up," he said. "I started collecting pottery shards and arrowheads when I was 7. My family lived near the Grand River on the edge of the Six Nations Reserve in Brantford, Ontario. I discovered things on the river banks."

His training was a combination of immersion and osmosis in Indian culture. He took a paper route to earn money to buy Indian treasures at the yearly powwow each summer. "I was fascinated by these vestiges from another time," he said. "There was a gathering of the tribes at the powwow, and I was able to buy old Navajo rugs and beaded bags."

He started dealing in Indian artifacts at 15, when he was still in school, though he didn't do it full time until 1976, after he graduated from college. Success came fairly quickly.

"I like things with strong visual appeal," he said, "so I attempted to take the best Indian art away from the ethnographic world in order to show it as art."

He specializes in three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional works. "Masks and objects used in rituals and day-to-day life are like sculpture," he said, adding that he believes that is why so many of his clients are collectors of modern art. "Major collectors of 20th-century art find it mixes well with their collections."

He has also sold Indian art to museums, including the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Donald Ellis Gallery

A portrait mask from a tribe in British Columbia, from 1840-60.

In treating Indian artifacts as art, Mr. Ellis said, he is following a tradition begun by Picasso and other early 20th-century artists. "Eskimo art had a strong influence on the Surrealists," he said.

Later on, Mr. Ellis said, André Breton, the poet and art critic who was a founder of Surrealism, came to New York and bought Indian artifacts. His collection is now at the Louvre.

The material gained legitimacy as an art form when the dealer Eugene V. Thaw, a collector of old masters and a major museum benefactor, moved to Santa Fe, N.M., in the late 1980's and began acquiring Indian artifacts. He is giving his collection to the New York State Historical Society Association in Cooperstown, N.Y. It is already on display there at the Fenimore House Museum.

"Gene Thaw had a seminal influence on the field," Mr. Ellis said. "He helped the art world open their eyes to it. It was about time."

Mr. Ellis does not speak any Indian languages. "You couldn't study them when I was young, but now public schools in British Columbia are teaching languages like Salish, a Northwest Coast tongue."

A private dealer who works out of his home in Dundas, Ontario, Mr. Ellis participates in only two shows a year. (The other is the Winter Antiques Show in New York in January.) He spends much of his time on the road, visiting Indian reservations with his wife and partner, Mary Ann Bastien. He is particularly knowledgeable about Canada's Northwest Coast tribes.

"Unlike many other tribes," he said, "these people lived in an abundant part of the world, so they stayed in one place and developed a rich cultural life. They put their clan emblems on bowls, spoons, blankets, rattles and drums. In fact, there was very little that was not adorned."

Mr. Ellis said the emblems had to do with society and ranking. "Northwest Coast Indians showed who they were by what they carried," he said. "It's the equivalent of a coat of arms. The emblem identified who the person belonged to."

Some of the rarest objects he is selling this week are also the most mysterious. One is a Native American pipe carved in the form of a human figure drinking from a rum keg. The Indian sits on the ground (the top of the pipe bowl), elbows on his knees, as he raises the keg with two hands to his lips.

"It was probably made by the Wyandot Indians of the Great Lakes," Mr. Ellis said. "In the early 18th century they moved from Ontario to Ohio. The pipe chronicles an interim time in the native world, when the Wyandots were exposed to foreign influences."

Before the introduction of rum to the culture, "only shamans had visionary experiences," Mr. Ellis explained. "When Indians began drinking rum, they had what they perceived to be mass hallucinations. For the tribe, this brought on a profound change."

He continued: "I don't know the meaning of this particular pipe bowl. It was manufactured in the context of this new happening. It would have been used in some kind of social or religious context."

The pipe bowl, which is made of figured tiger maple, was carved with great care. The carver used the ribbing in the maple to simulate the man's ribs. "It is a remarkable piece of sculpture with tension, surface and movement," Mr. Ellis said. "It's also exceptionally rare." As is the price: $100,000.

He also has a pair of striking, century-old wooden dance masks created by the Koniag tribe of Kodiak Island in Alaska. One is male, the other female, though their hairstyles are similar. "I think they have to do with birth and reproduction," Mr. Ellis said. "They are the only matched pair that has survived from this culture."

Mr. Ellis is showing a late-19th-century Aleutian hunting helmet from the far western regions of Alaska. "Whale hunters wore these helmets when they chased whales," Mr. Ellis said. "Harpooning a whale was dangerous. Helmets made the men one with the animal during the hunt. Originally, it would have had sea lion whiskers and ivory attachments to make it look like a sea bird."

The helmet is made of paper-thin wood. Mr. Ellis said the wood was steamed, scraped thin with a mussel shell and sewn together with vegetable cord. Because indigo blue was considered a precious pigment, the helmet's soft palette of blues and greens mean it was a special object. The helmet is one of 25 known to exist, Mr. Ellis said, and 23 are in museums. Its price is $85,000.

The appeal of these unusual and handsome objects is obvious, and although they are expensive, the prices are a fraction of those fetched by 20th-century sculpture. It's all in how you define art. These artifacts are not merely aesthetically pleasing. They are also laden with intention and purpose.