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Collecting

Eskimo artefacts: fantasy in a cold climate

A Canadian dealer brings some of the finest examples of art from the Pacific Northwest to Frieze Masters



Yup'ik complex mask (1890-1910)

SEPTEMBER 29, 2017 by Susan Moore

“These are more Surreal than we are!”, an indignant André Breton apparently exclaimed when he first encountered a Yup'ik ceremonial mask in New York. It is little wonder that the Surrealists were fascinated by these coloured, strikingly adorned artefacts since they are among the most inventive, expressive and fantastical of all tribal arts.

The whole range of visual art hailing from the Pacific Northwest intrigued the Surrealist exiles who haunted the Third Avenue gallery of Julius Carlebach that Max Ernst discovered in the 1940s. As the little-known French-Swiss Surrealist Isabelle Waldberg, who came under the sway of Breton, Ernst and Marcel Duchamp during her five-year stay in New York, wrote in 1943, “We threw ourselves into the poetic atmosphere of the Eskimo masks. We breathe in Alaska, we dream Tlingit, we make love in Haida totem poles. Carlebach’s place on the Third Avenue has become the place of our desires.”

It is this art that Canadian dealer Donald Ellis now celebrates in his exhibition *Two Thousand Years of Inuit Art* at Frieze Masters.

Ellis is the pre-eminent specialist dealer in ivory and arguably its most ardent advocate; this whistle-stop survey begins with prehistoric marine mammal ivories. It continues with the drawings of the Inuit artist known simply as Parr (1893-1969), whose 2,000 or so works record the traditional nomadic hunting life of the Inuit, and on to similarly reductive contemporary soapstone sculpture — but it is the masks that inevitably steal the show.

In pride of place — and accorded its own room — is the Yup'ik mask of about 1890-1905, which belonged to the Italian-American Surrealist painter and sculptor Enrico Donati (1909-2008). Arguably the most arresting and important example remaining in private hands, it is certainly the most valuable. This museum-quality rarity, complete with a wide grin of pointed teeth, appended hands, fibres and feathers, belongs to a group of 12 shamanic “weather” masks evidently made by two distinct hands.



The Yup'ik mask (1890-1905) once belonging to Enrico Donati © John Bigelow Taylor

It was acquired by one Adam Hollis Twitchell, who began trading along the Kuskokwim River in Alaska in 1905. As such masks were usually destroyed after their use in the ceremonial dances intended to appease their gods and prevent starvation, Twitchell must have timed his purchase well. This one was known to the Yup'iks as “the mask that brought the south winds” – meaning springtime and therefore sustenance.



Ivory Madonna figure (500 BC-200AD)

Donati bought this mask from Carlebach’s New York gallery in 1945 and it hung above the sofa for the rest of his life. It was there, in an image the size of a postage stamp, that Ellis spotted it while flicking through a magazine. He tracked the artist down. “We became dear friends,” the dealer says. “He was a father-figure to me for 20 years.”

The last such work to reach the market had been exhibited in MoMA's seminal *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* show of 1984-85 before being bagged by Ernst Beyeler for his foundation in Basel.

But Ellis had been able to cherry-pick from Donati's estate before it went to auction after his death, and he first flourished this then-unknown mask at the Winter Antiques Show in New York in 2011. The North American collector who bought it there, for a record price of just over \$2.1m, has now offered it back.

"I was a little surprised," the dealer admits, but he is nonetheless delighted to have another opportunity to show it — this time with a price tag of \$4.8m. "If it were an African mask of this quality and rarity, it would probably cost \$12m," he claims.

Not to be overlooked in this bravura display, however, is the affecting and monumental ivory Madonna figure of about 500BC, whose presence belies its scant 21cm height. He had paid a record price for it, and sold it in 1999 for yet another. He is offering the Madonna now for \$1.2m, and says: "In my opinion, it is the most important prehistoric Inuit ivory in existence."



seal mask from Alaska (1880)

October 5-8, frieze.com

Photographs: Donald Ellis Gallery; John Bigelow Taylor