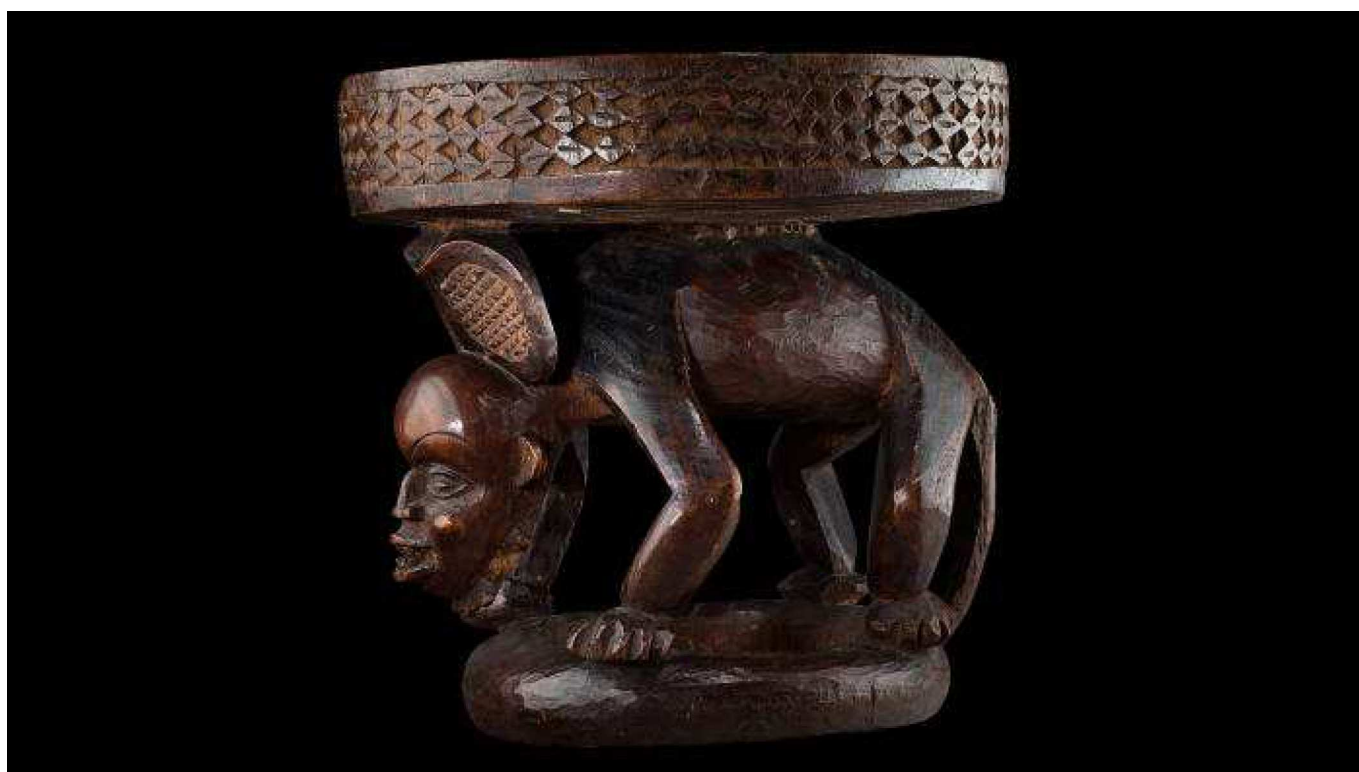


Collecting

Record number of exhibitors of traditional African art at Tefaf

There is growing interest in the best pieces at The European Fine Art Fair



Bamileke caryatid stool (19th century) © Entwistle

MARCH 3, 2017 by: **Susan Moore**

It once decorated the columns of the Oba's palace in the kingdom of Benin, in modern-day Nigeria. This elegant 16th- or 17th-century bronze plaque, on display at The European Fine Art Fair (Tefaf) in Maastricht this month with the Paris-based dealer Lance Entwistle, priced at €850,000, represents an important palace priest descended from a past Oba, and a royal emissary of the court. The Edo peoples began producing such sophisticated bronzes in the 13th century, stunning the outside world.

René Rasmussen is the first recorded western owner of the piece — his Parisian gallery was frequented by the likes of Picasso and the Surrealists. As part of the Alice M Kaplan collection, it was later exhibited at the Met.

Entwistle is one of a record eight exhibitors of tribal art at Tefaf this year: there were just two a decade ago. In January, Brafa (the Brussels Antiques and Fine Art Fair) hosted a record 10 specialist galleries.

Tefaf offers a sense of the cultural diversity and richness of classical African art. Paris dealer Bernard Dulon presents a rare anthropomorphic harp crafted out of wood and animal skin by a Fang master-carver in 19th-century Gabon. Unusually well carved in the round like an ancestor figure and bearing the classic Fang “pout”, the head serves as a reminder that the melody played on the harp’s eight strings was the “voice” that permitted contact with another world — that of the spirits and the deceased.



A Fang harp (19th century) © Galerie Bernard Dulon

At 30, Lucas Ratton is the youngest exhibitor at Tefaf but a third-generation specialist in Paris. “This material is in my blood,” he says. He presents another rarity, a 19th-century Luba caryatid stool that is remarkable for its quality, iconography and original condition, priced around €2m. Such seats were royal insignia, the preserve of chiefs, and give expression to the Luba conception of the

female body as a spiritual receptacle that supports divine kingship. The figure's elaborate scarification, coiffure and bead jewellery point to her importance. Ratton believes it is the only example of such a stool where the child is standing on his mother's knee. "There is a lot of energy and emotion here," he says, "and it has not been on the market for a long time."



A Luba caryatid stool (late 19th century) © Galerie Lucas Ratton

Not all the African pieces here appear so benign. Other highlights include two intimidating Congolese power figures. These are not representations of spiritual entities but vehicles for the magical ingredients placed within. Once activated, its powers could be protective or aggressive. Brussels' Patric Didier Claes — half Congolese himself — offers a goat horn-charged Songye figure which, despite its

confrontational jutting chin, bared teeth and studded face, also seems to express a sorrowful compassion.



Songye figure © Galerie Didier Claes

New exhibitor but veteran German dealer Adrian Schlag brings a Vili figure that once belonged to the sculptor Arman, a passionate collector of African art. This figure had been recently bought-in at auction. “It is hard to understand the psychology of this market,” he explains. “This piece has everything. Before the sale, the owner had already refused an offer of €1m. It would not be the first time that a piece of African art has sold privately for more than its auction estimate.”



Kongo-Vili power figure (19th century)

The presence of tribal art on the international market has grown in the past decade. This niche market may still be small, but it has moved from tributary to mainstream: great pieces now command eight-figure sums, and specialist dealers no longer confine their activities to the traditional marketplaces of Paris, Brussels and New York, or to low-budget gallery initiatives, such as *Parcours des Mondes* or *Bruneaf* (Brussels Non European Art Fair). Now the market's key players join their peers at art and antiques fairs such as *Tefaf*.

The opening of Jean Nouvel's dramatic *Musée du Quai Branly* in 2006 to house the French national collections played a critical role in exposing tribal art to a wider audience, attracting 1.3m visitors in 2015. And Sotheby's and Christie's emphasised the influence of tribal art on the 20th-century avant-garde by exhibiting it in New York and Paris alongside works by Matisse, Picasso and Klee as well as Art Deco decorative arts. Changing collectors' perceptions also cannily involved dropping the word "tribal" from catalogues. What used to be seen as the preserve of the ethnographer, "art primitif" is at last simply art.



Hemba ancestor figure © Galerie Bernard Dulon

All of this was possible because of the sudden influx of great material on to the market. As Entwistle puts it: “The generation of American collectors who were active in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, [who held] a lot of the best material, began to pass on.” For many collectors the allure of sub-Saharan African art in particular — by far the broadest and biggest field — proved irresistible. When a Senufo female statue from the Ivory Coast fetched a record-breaking \$12m at the \$41.6m sale of the Myron Kunin collection at Sotheby’s New York in 2014, others sat up and took note. \$12m is a serious sum — but where else in the market can the best cost so little?

This rise of the trophy hunter has had its effects on the market. Buying based on aesthetics alone has produced some anomalous prices at auction. Entwistle notes that less knowledgeable buyers also tend to pay premium prices for works with a reassuringly long provenance and a good exhibition history. An attribution to a particular master or workshop is also preferred.

Although he acknowledges that these rich new buyers have become more sophisticated in the last five years and are looking for good advice, he believes that the tradition of connoisseur-collecting has all but disappeared in the US, where the number of good dealers has declined. Not so in those European countries with strong historical colonial or missionary links to Africa. “The French, Belgians, Dutch and Germans were all avid collectors of local cultures,” he smiles, “The British, making an exception for Benin art, were not.”



The Benin bronze (16th-17th century) © Entwistle

This is a market where masterpieces are still available — and, according to Entwistle, the supply is not about to dry up — but it is also one in which the best does not necessarily cost a great deal. Even with fairly modest means, anyone with great expertise and a good eye can form a collection of the highest quality. The problem of this intriguing, complex and fake-ridden market is that it can take a lifetime to work out how to do it.

Photographs: Entwistle; Galerie Bernard Dulong; Hughes Dubois; Galerie Lucas Ratton

March 10-19, tefaf.com (<http://tefaf.com>)