Collecting African Art: Part One – Authenticity



Epa festival mask used by the Yoruba people in Nigeria

Item #A0602-626

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Collecting art is an art form by itself. Whether you are collecting for fun, professionally, or for investment purposes, there is no set formula on how to properly collect art. Collectors of western art may weigh the values of a piece based on the artist, provenance, rarity, and aesthetic impression as well as current trends in the art world. Yet, in the case of African art, some of these considerations can be difficult to ascertain. For example, in most cases the artist of a piece remains unknown and details about its age and purpose can be somewhat misleading. A serious collection of African art is not merely an accumulation of things made or bought in Africa. In fact, many collectors of African art find it unnecessary to even set foot in Africa. What, then, is African art and what makes it so collectible?



Nkondi Figure collected in 1962 in what was then the Belgian Congo

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Generally speaking, what is commonly referred to as African art or traditional African art is artwork from sub Saharan countries produced by indigenous cultures free of Christian, Islamic or European influences. Art made by European people in southern Africa, for instance, would not be considered traditional African art; neither would artwork by renowned contemporary African artists such as Ibrahim El-Salahi and Chéri Samba. Collectors sometimes view traditional African art as art from a civilization lost and forgotten in time – when tribal members did not wear Nike sneakers or baseball caps – but this notion is simply not true. In truth, no place in Africa exists in a vacuum, and there is plenty of compelling traditional African art being produced today.

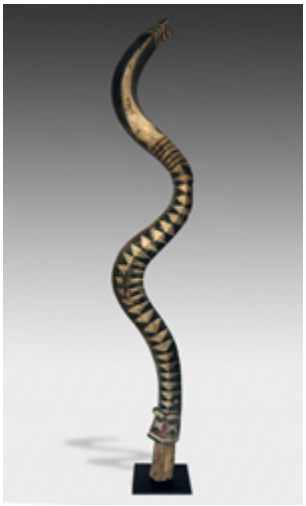
For most collectors, the most important consideration in collecting African art is *authenticity* . Among many African art collections this means individual pieces have to be used. It is not enough to say that a traditional African artist created a piece or that a piece emanated from a specific tribe or village. For example, if a master woodcarver created a ceremonial mask that was sold before it was used, the artwork may not be considered authentic by this standard. Worn surfaces and signs of repeated use help establish this aspect of authenticity; however, it should be noted, even signs of use can be faked. Generally speaking, objects used and treasured by each respective and culturally rich African tribe can be considered authentic and collectible. There is also one intangible element to the concept of authenticity: authentic objects have a heart, soul, and character altogether different than those made

purely for sale; and this persona, if you will, is usually evident to the experienced collector.



Above: An extremely rare and collectible Bansonyi, or 'Serpent Headdress,' danced by the Baga people (with detail)

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Bansonyi or Serpent Headdress · Baga people · Guinea, West Africa · Early / Mid 20th C. · Painted wood, based · 24 W x 24 D x 96 H inches

Item #A0211-671



Example of a traditional Bundu mask, used by the Mende people, with a plane as the crowning element
Item #A1400-100

One can see how contemporary tribal African artists, be they carver, weaver or blacksmith, are dangerously close to existing inside a vacuum – one that is created by the art market's demand for traditional art held to a specific time and place and conforming to the styles of each particular tribe; but in truth, African art does not exist in a vacuum. Present day African artists are exploring and breaking free from and expanding upon traditional tribal art forms. Over the past decades traditional artworks have started to incorporate modern elements. For example, there is a very unique *Bundu* mask from the Mende People in Sierra Leone found in PRIMITIVE 's collections. While every aspect of the piece incorporates traditional Mende elements, the top is crowned with a full twin engine airplane in flight! While some purist collectors might consider this inauthentic, would you? The mask was created by the people for their own use and actually used for the purpose it was intended. Authenticity is not dictated by time or place, but by the intent of the artist and the actual history of the artwork itself. Though the collection of traditional African art has become increasingly difficult in recent years, it has also increased the value of high quality, traditional pieces. Now more than ever, the collecting of African art is a true art form – one that might be considered "the art of seeking authenticity."