



Bill Simmons (left) and Bryan Reeves at Simmons' collection warehouse in Brooklyn.

When a New York-based investment specialist resolved to expand his collection of tribal art, he sought a dealer prepared to travel into the heart of Africa. By Katrina Burroughs. Photograph by Grant Delin.

Forming a world-class collection of Songye pots, Tutsi basketware and Iraqw beadwork depends on buying from obscure sources in Africa rather than through galleries or at auction. To establish the right contacts, the collector must be supremely patient as well as passionate, since some 20th-century artefacts from countries such as Rwanda and Tanzania are vanishingly scarce. What the serious player needs above all, while he attends to the day job that pays for his habit, is an equally enthusiastic partner – preferably someone living in or regularly travelling to

his chosen area – to help locate and acquire the elusive objects of his desire.

Bill Simmons, who runs a New York agency that markets alternative investment strategies, met the dealer Bryan Reeves at New York's annual tribal art fair seven years ago, where he was looking to add to his already renowned collection of clay pots from sub-Saharan Africa. "Bryan's material stood out and set him apart from other dealers," says Simmons.

Reeves, a peripatetic Australian, was living in Tanzania at the time, so as to better truffle out the rarest artefacts for his clients. Before that, he had spent 10

years "yo-yoing: travelling from London to Africa five times a year, visiting 10 to 15 countries each time, working my way east to west with a pocketful of dollars".

And Reeves' first impressions augured well. "Bill was serious about building up a collection and very methodical. I liked that," he says. "We teed off right away because he was trying to find a dealer who wanted to go into Africa to collect, rather than stay at home and buy from old collections. He wanted the sort of pieces that weren't coming onto the market. East Africa was a fresh area where the pieces were neither so available nor well documented." Simmons



repertoire of other tribal collectors: "Bill was very keen to unearth something that had almost disappeared off the radar."

So the duo decided to target 20th-century Tutsi basketware – the coil-sewn grass baskets made by the wealthier members of the Tutsi tribe of Rwanda. These delicate little structures, some no more than 15cm high, are made of pale gold grass and decorated with black or red spiral and zig-zag patterns. They are rare, mainly due to the violent displacement of the population, and breathtakingly pretty. For months Reeves was frustrated in his efforts to secure specimens – "I tried to find them myself in Rwanda, but I couldn't."

Then he tried a different tack, searching outside the country for people with family contacts within. "Eventually, I managed to find a contact through a refugee Tutsi family, and she was able to find baskets for us," he says. "It's not easy finding sources. You have to build up trust and the price you pay has to be right – at a level where everyone is benefiting."

Though the Rwandan basketware was a treasured find, the stars of Simmons' collection are skirts made by the girls of the Iraqw tribe in northern Tanzania. The moment Simmons encountered the beadwork garments, he was smitten. "My collecting has been based on my visceral response to objects, on whether something strikes or moves me," he says. And the charming beadwork – decorative, fanciful patterns incorporating anything from

geometric shapes to aeroplanes – provoked an immediate, ardent response: "I love the variety and free form of some of the beadwork. Certain of the Iraqw skirts are just wild and out there. They're outside the lines." Though the Tutsi baskets can be had for under \$1,000, the best Iraqw skirts cost \$6,000 to \$8,000, and both are, Reeves reckons, still seriously undervalued considering their extreme scarcity.

"Before I started looking for the skirts," remembers Reeves, "the only examples

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I'd ever seen were in museums." He adds, "The story behind them is fascinating. When they reached 13 or 14, the girls spent six to 12 months in isolation from the village, on a special diet of oil and fat. They were given the leather and glass beads to work, and when they came out of seclusion wearing them it was a sort of rebirth. The tradition of making the skirts died out under Colonial rule in the 1920s and 1930s." Reeves travelled around Tanzania until he located a handful of skirts preserved in old family collections, and he hasn't found any more in over two years.

Today, additions to the collection have slowed. "I have more than I need," says Simmons. "And because of the economic environment, everything has slowed down and fewer pieces are available. There's not a lot being offered – particularly of the quality that would interest me." So he's more likely to lend or donate to

museums – single pieces have gone to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum, and he has made gifts to university museums where there are African art or ceramics programmes.

Simmons is also starting to put together a catalogue raisonné of around 450 pots – "It's a huge job, but it's my vocation" – and hopes to introduce his beloved Iraqw beadwork to a wider audience. Though he and Reeves have happily conducted a two-man fan club for these startlingly original works of art for

seven years, Simmons thinks the time has come to welcome a few more individuals into the appreciation society. "They are so little known," he says. "I'd really like to work on a public show of the skirts." +

TRIBAL ASSEMBLY

Bryan Reeves, Tribal Gathering London, 1 Westbourne Grove Mews, London W11 (020-7221 6650; www.tribalgatheringlondon.com). **Clive Lovell**, by appointment, 54 Saint Quentin Avenue, London W30 (020-8969 5831). **The New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show**, 69th Regiment Armory, 68 Lexington Avenue, New York 10010 (+1310-455 2886; www.caskeylees.com); May 14-18. **Parcours des Mondes**, various galleries, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris (www.parcours-des-mondes.com); September 9-13. **Sotheby's**, 1334 York Avenue, New York 10021 (+1541-312 5682; www.sothebys.com); African, Oceanic & Pre-Columbian Art, May 15. **Tana-Sachau Collection**, +496-571 5263; www.tana-sachau.com.

Above: Tanzanian beaded leather skirt, pre-1930s, and Rwandan mid-20th-century wine vessel.

adds, "It's been a very rewarding relationship for me – both in finding the material and being able to appreciate it together. It's always fun to show and tell with someone who shares your enthusiasm for objects." Reeves began by expanding Simmons' pot collection, which he began in 1990 and which by 2002 included significant examples of west African clays from Nigeria and Cameroon, Songye pieces from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zulu pots from southern Africa. Reeves began to add in east African examples: 1930s to 1960s ceremonial and domestic pots from Rwanda and Uganda, southern Tanzania and Malawi. But, he says, Simmons' real ambition lay in extending his collection far beyond the