



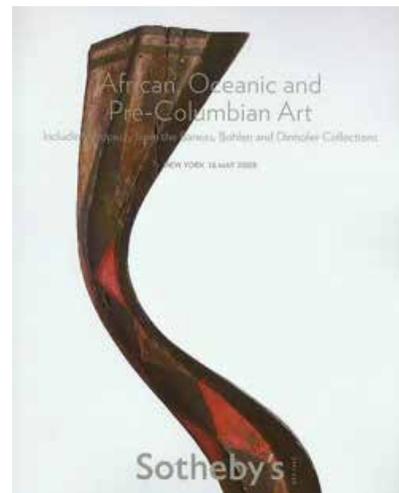
History and trends in the African art market

By Bryan Reeves

In this article, Bryan Reeves looks at the marketing and branding of African art and the consequential increase in value in the wider fine art collectors' market.

African art first raised eyebrows when it trickled onto the streets of Paris in the early part of the last century. European artists instantly recognised its unique sculptural qualities, power, beauty and form. As three dimensional pieces of art this, was something unseen before and the leading artists of the era such as Picasso, Matisse, Cezanne, Gauguin, Klee, etc. took huge inspiration and reflected this in their own work.

At that time European colonialists were still exploring many areas of Africa, and the colonialists' propagated view of the continent as dark and primitive influenced the perception of African art. Hence it is not surprising that the term 'primitive art' was used to describe the art from these cultures.

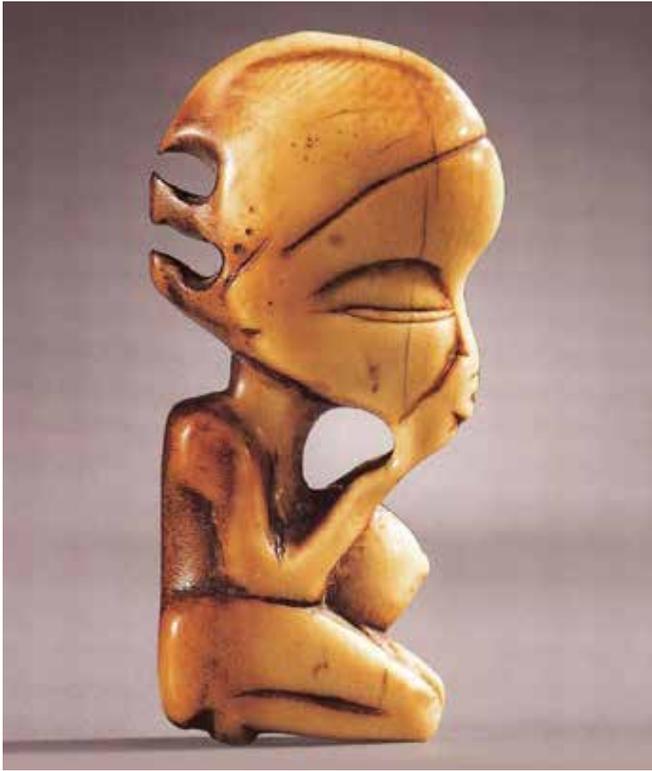


Front cover of Sotheby's 2008 catalogue featuring the Baga Serpent.

This perception has gradually changed over the past century. Amazing art forms – in the shape of masks and sculptures in particular – that had never been seen before were collected, documented and then published. The western world had awoken to something special: that the cultural diversity and richness of the African continent also produced a wealth and diversity of classical art.

A lot of pieces collected during the early to mid 20th century were collected at source. Few pieces had time to change hands. Most went into museum collections and some started to appear in galleries. At the time, specialist's dealers in the trade were few and far between.

As more pieces arrived, dealers became established and collectors and collections grew. Some of the most important collections in this field were born during that period. During the 1960's things started to change again which had a bearing on the market, in that the supply of the original artworks suddenly began to dry up. It then became clear that pieces that are now regarded as masterpieces were in fact limited and rare. These items were only made for ritual or ceremonial use and in that regard Africa was changing.



Small Ivory Pendant from Democratic Republic of the Congo. Selling at Sotheby's New York for over one million dollars

Auction houses towards the mid to later part of the last century became well established in the 'African art' market. London was the powerhouse, the centre of activity. At the very top, prices reached tens of thousands of pounds. The stronger deals were with dealers who had more control of the market. Collectors worked with dealers. Dealers developed their sources of supply and the two were kept separate. Many galleries became well established in the streets of London, Paris, New York and Brussels. These were the locations where many pieces first arrived from Africa. Business was brisk and great reputations were being established.



Finely woven grass baskets, early 20th Century. Tutsi – Rwanda.

The biggest changes in this market have occurred in the past 10- 15 years. Firstly the market centres moved to New York and Paris with Paris in particular becoming very active. One of the biggest changes was the development and growth of the auctions houses in both these locations. Christies and Sotheby's dominate this field, with Bonhams

now a close runner up. What these players have successfully done is redefine the 'African Art' market. Their aim was to reach out to the broader 'fine art' market and to do this they realised that it was necessary to shift perception of the product. First the label 'tribal art' was dropped and the simple term 'African Art' was adopted. With that the art was presented and marketed with a completely fresh approach. Fortunately this was also at a time when large early collections started to resurface onto the market. Among these collections were many masterpieces, which were for the first time available for the public to view and buy.

A good example of this is the now famous 'Baga' figure. This is a large serpent shaped figure representing the spirit Kakilambe, a protective spirit that presides over young men's initiation camps. It appears in the village on ritual days to announce the return of the boys as men.

It was kept for many years by a New York family, as part of a private collection. In 2008 for personal reasons it was offered at auction with Sotheby's in New York. Its initial estimate was in the lower hundreds of thousands but because this abstract figure had great style and movement it also caught the eye of modern art collectors and attracted a lot of attention in this wider market. After strong bidding from various buyers it eventually sold for \$3,600,000, setting a new record for an African Art piece.

Another important piece sold recently on its 'universal appeal' to the wider art market was a small ivory pendant from the Congo. The sculpture greatly appealed to the western aesthetic; originally estimated at between 30,000 - 50,000 euros, it eventually sold for over one million dollars, an extraordinary price considering the size of the piece. Both these pieces transcended what was commonly referred to as 'tribal art' into the wider wealthier art market. Sotheby's was largely responsible for this shift.

Up till then, it was impossible to believe such levels could be reached. What had changed was not the style of the pieces themselves but more the wider public's view of the art and how it was being presented. This is not to say that all levels of the African art market have seen such huge increases in price. In comparison, the middle and lower levels have been quite flat. Prices have not gone down but, by-and- large, have not risen so steadily either.

For the keen investor and art lover in general this area is where a person, with a good eye, can enter the market without spending a small fortune. Other good areas in which to invest are items that up to recently have not been classified as 'fine art'; these are the pieces used in everyday 'traditional use'. These can range from basketry, furniture, containers, shields, adornment and costumes. Quality artefacts in these areas have seen very steady rises over the past ten years because of their accessibility in price.

I personally feel that the future remains strong for African art and the rise in prices will only continue. We needn't look far back to see that African art hasn't been a part of the world art market for very long, 50 - 70 years at best. Its quality and style is there for all to see. The more it is exposed and rightly accepted as been part of the wider 'fine art market' the brighter its future will be.

About the author:

Bryan Reeves has been dealing in African art for more than 25 years, progressing over 15 years from a market stall on Portobello Road, to a London based gallery, 'Tribal Gathering London'. During this time he has been constantly refining skills in sourcing and selecting particularly impactful pieces, referencing form, presence, and function with defining shape and design, the essential qualities that are sought when choosing a piece. Over the years Reeves has helped build private collections and has sold to leading museums around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum in New York.