

Global Art: Talismans, a Phantom and a King

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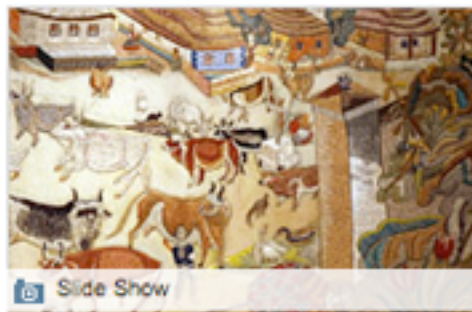
You think art fairs aren't sexy? The New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show is out to prove you wrong. Just inside the entrance to the Seventh Regiment Armory's drill hall you'll find a peppery display of Burmese pornographic drawings. And smack in the middle of the show, bristling like a cactus garden, is a cluster of carved-wood Thai phalluses.



Cary Conover for The New York Times

A sickness mask from Malawi at the New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show. [More Photos »](#)

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No need to call the vice squad. All this stuff is religious or folk-religious. The sculptures and drawings were created a century or so ago as talismans to ensure prosperity, fertility and supernatural protection. It is said that they can even perform miracles, like warding off bullets and turning ho-hum you and me into Ms. and Mr. Irresistible.

These forceful items are part of a special display organized by Chinalai Tribal Antiquities, a gallery in Shoreham, N.Y., for a fair that has more than a few irresistible features of its own. The wide-open space at the armory, suitable for tanks and tennis, imposes the same regimental format on every fair that appears there: booth beside booth, aisle after aisle. But this show has a look of its own, in part because it is the only tribal fair in town, which seems odd, given that New York is, among other things, an African-American city with a significant African population, a Latino city that grows more Latino by the day and an Asia outside Asia.

As for textiles, where else, even taking the Metropolitan Museum into account, can you lay eyes on the range you see here? Gail Martin's booth — with a checkerboard-patterned mantle from Togo, a psychedelic silk from Uzbekistan and an exquisite 19th-century Turkish embroidery with languid gold meanders — is effectively an illustrated seminar on weaving versus stitching.

Esther Fitzgerald digs into history with a pictorial embroidery by the English-born artist Alice Natare, who studied with Paul Klee in the 1920s and is now so little known that even her dates are lost. Judging by this piece, a fantasy scene part *Ballets Russes* and part cosmic Kandinsky, she was really something. Scholars should get on

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Add to the Ntare piece a small, ancient, abstract Peruvian weaving at Joan Barist that looks like an aerial view of fields with a teal-blue lake in the middle and a marvelously sculptural Moroccan pile carpet in black, white and brown at Gebhart Blazek, and the seminar turns into a global symposium in which we are all invited to participate as rapt students.

The Blazek display is a collaborative venture with Axis Gallery, which organized a Moroccan carpet exhibition of its own in Chelsea last year, and exemplifies another persuasive selling point of the Tribal and Textile show: the chance it affords to see objects you are unlikely to find elsewhere.

A decade ago Axis broke ground by specializing in traditional and contemporary material from South Africa when no one was looking twice at this art. Now museums are paying attention. This year the gallery has, along with a spectacular South African carved-wood ax, a concentration of art from East Africa, including a haunting white-faced sickness mask from Malawi. No doubt in a few years similar things will be de rigueur for public collections. But you saw them first here.

You'll also encounter some novelty items, like a Yoruba carving of George V of Britain looking rather papal, at Owen Hargreaves and Jasmine Dahl. And in the potency department it is hard to beat a warrior's shield from Papua New Guinea emblazoned with an image of that comic-book avenger the Phantom. It's at Cavin-Morris, which has just opened a show of traditional shields from the highlands of New Guinea at its Chelsea space.

Traditional is of course the fair's bread and butter, and it's easy to find. It's there in a gem of a two-tone Pende mask at J. Visser; in a Fang reliquary figure at Alain Lecomte; in a sculptured Baule couple from Ivory Coast at Serge Schoffel; in a sparkling shelf-full of African headrests at Amyas Naegele Fine Art Bases; and at Hurst Gallery, in a substantial but sprightly painted bowl by the Hopi potter Paqua Naha (1890-1955), who went by the artist's name of Frog Woman.

Not that everything is on such an exalted level. The "tribal art" category has a reputation for embracing some dubious retail, even when a fair is vetted by experts, as this one is. The night before the opening, one gallery packed up its booth and walked out when the vetting committee gave it a hard time in matters of authenticity.

A proceed-with-caution caveat is bound to cool acquisitive ardor. At the same time it can sharpen the eye, whet the appetite and establish standards for comparison. In the end, when something is hot at this art fair, the most beautiful one in New York, it's superhot.

The New York International Tribal & Textile Arts Show continues through tomorrow at the Seventh Regiment Armory, 643 Park Avenue at 67th Street; (212) 472-1180.