

CHRISTIE'S

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AFRICAN AND OCEANIC ART

CHRISTIE'S PARIS – 11 DECEMBER 2012

A MASTERPIECE FROM THE MESTACH COLLECTION: THE ICONIC NKUNDU
RELIQUARY FIGURE

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EXCEPTIONAL NEW GUINEA WORKS OF ART FROM THE *JOLIKA COLLECTION* AT
THE FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO

Paris – On December 11, Christie's is pleased to present a magnificent selection of **African and Oceanic Art**, which is led by an icon of African art: a Nkundu reliquary measuring 8 feet tall. This masterpiece of Central African art formed one of the key sculptures from the famous collection of the Belgian painter Jean Willy Mestach for nearly 60 years. In addition, a superb collection of New Guinea unique miniature masterpieces from the Jolika Collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco will be offered at auction. Other rare pieces of exceptional provenances are also presented in this sale such as a Manyanga/Kongo nail figure and a newly discovered Baga snake. The entire sale is expected to realize €4 to €6 million.

"This sale represents one of the most highly curated sales in the market in many seasons. African and Oceanic Art masterpieces abound from the Mestach iconic reliquary, two recently discovered masterpieces – an important Baga snake and a magnificent Tabwa male figure, and the monumental miniatures from New Guinea from the Jolika Collection. Rich and superb provenance also surrounds this sale from historic works from the Dubouzet Collection to more modern collecting heros such as André Breton, John Hewett, Marie-Ange Ciolkowska, John Friede and Willy Mestach," stated **Susan Kloman**, International director of the department.



*Nkundu Reliquary
Democratic Republic of Congo
Estimate: €2,000,000-3,000,000*

The Nkundu Reliquary



Jean-Willy Mestach, nicknamed “the Eye of the Sablon” in Brussels, kept this treasure for nearly sixty years. Extremely rare, there are only three other known examples, which are now preserved in the museum of Tervuren and the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. It has also been published in numerous reference books and featured in major exhibitions, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the Musée Dapper (Paris) and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. This monumental sculpture represents all of the best elements of sophisticated African artistry and is the heart of this exceptional sale.

“Under a woolen hat, worn all year long, he maintains the sense of all things, at the Sablon and throughout the world, amongst the big Tribal art family. Jean Willy Mestach, dean of collectors and the last follower of the Primitivists, is at his post on the last floor of a Gothic house in the heart of the old Brussels district. There, for almost sixty years, one of the world’s most important collections of African art was slowly assembled side-by-side the works of a painter and sculptor who is singular in nature. Both are intrinsically united in their conception by Mestach’s avid curiosity and talent and knowledge; and fashioned without boundaries by attentive humor and patient accumulation,” adds **Pierre Amrouche, international consultant for Christie’s.**

In the schema of figure sculpture, the heroic male nude is the dominant form. Like the *Kourai* and classical Greek and Roman sculpture, the Mestach *Nkundu* figure is a timeless representation. The artist, though unknown to us today, was a celebrated and important member of his community who was commissioned by a high-ranking noble to capture his likeness. In the nomenclature for commemorative sculpture, the noble was captured in his youthful prime – he yields a weapon, his face reflects assertive determination and he towers over 8 feet tall.

The Mestach *Nkundu* reliquary in its reconfiguration of the human form is a type of sculpture that left a profound impression on the avant-garde of the early 20th century. The body is in metamorphoses between the naturalism of the head, the genitalia and the limbs, while cubism is literally at its core in the rectangular cavity serving as the torso, is painted in alternating layers of mineral pigment. It symbolizes a body in transition from the phenomenal world to the spiritual realm – from flesh and known reality to abstraction and memory – a consolidation from moving parts to monolith.





NEWLY DISCOVERED MASTERPIECE

A highly dynamic, abstract, exceptional and unique Baga snake (*illustrated left*, estimate: €200,000-300,000) is one of the exciting discoveries of this sale. Painted in bright colors, and sinuous in form reaching 6.3 feet tall, this masterpiece was found in an attic in France. It complements the important known corpus of this rare sculpture, which resided primarily in Museum collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the Barbier-Muller Museum, the Quai Branly Museum, The Menil Collection and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

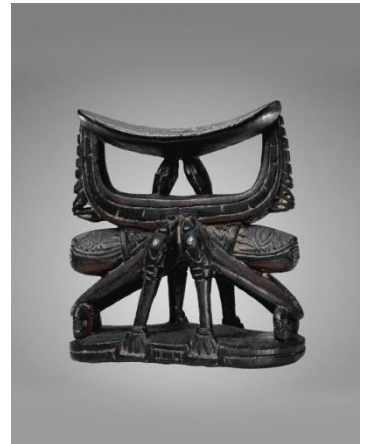
THE CONGO

The Art of Central Africa is a major highlight of the sale, as Christie's will present an Important Private European collection, estimated between 600,000 and 900,000 euros. Including an exceptional selection of works from this region – a superb Yombe “magico-religious” figure (estimate: €100,000-150,000) of highly rare iconography and excellent condition with all of its ‘magical’ accoutrements intact; a statuette Manyanga studded with nails (estimate: €100,000-150,000), and a beautiful Yoruba female figure (estimate: €30,000-50,000) from Nigeria. This collection also includes an important Pende mask also from the Democratic Republic of Congo (estimate: €40,000-60,000). Several works were featured in the exhibition *Utotombo*, held in 1988 at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, which is now famous and its rare catalogue a lexicon as it afforded one of the first significant public viewings of African art in the most important Belgian private collections.

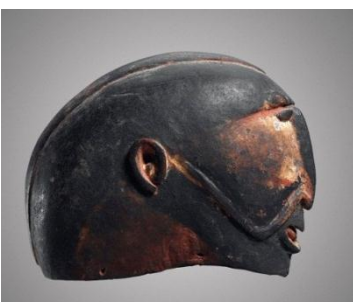
OCEANIC ART

The Jolika Collection

The department will also have the honor to present a group of miniature masterpieces of New Guinea from the Jolika Collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. These gems will be offered as a selection entitled *Micromégas* – in a nod to Voltaire's famous tale which cautions us to be wary of appearances. As Pierre Amrouche notes: *“Monumental or miniatures – or both at the same time as seen in Micromegas – the nine pieces presented here, from the Jolika Collection, confirm the excellence of John Friede's eye and the virtuosity of the artists of New Guinea.”*



From a photograph, these works of art can appear monumental in scale, in reality, they are enchanting sculptures which can be held in the palm of one's hand (left, Abelam Head, estimate: €20,000-30,000).



The Jolika Collection, named for the first letters of John and Marcia Friede's three children (John, Lisa and Karen), represents the hundreds of clans and art-producing villages throughout the island of New Guinea. Highlights of the selection in the December auction include a headrest from the Tami Islands in the Huon Gulf region of Papua New Guinea. The two highly stylized figures, realized as mirror images through the dynamic use of negative space and line,

demonstrate the love of Tami artists for visual puns, as different views reveal faces of animals and transformed anthropomorphic imagery (estimate: €100,000-150,000). This headrest was one of the earliest New Guinea works of art seen in Europe, and was collected by the Hungarian anthropologist Lajos Biró in 1898-1899.

Richard Benefield, deputy director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, states, "The sale of these works of art through Christie's will assure our ability, now and in the future, to preserve the Jolika Collection and to share it with the public."

NOTEWORTHY PROVENANCE



To close the section of Oceanic art, several documents and objects will be offered, which were brought back from the South Pacific by Eugène du Bouzet, lieutenant of the vessel *La Zélée*, during the expedition of Jules Dumont d'Urville to South Pole between 1837 and 1840. These objects were collected very early and come from all the visited islands from this historic journey, and have remained in the family for over 100 years.

A rare 'shark-man' figure, also from New-Guinea, once owned by surrealist André Breton, will complement this selection of exceptional works from the Pacific Islands (estimate: €150,000-250,000).

Notes to the editors:

Sale: Tuesday, December 11 at 4pm

Exhibition: December 7- 10 from 10 am to 6 pm.

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About Christie's

Christie's, the world's leading art business, had global auction and private sales in the first half of 2012 that totaled £2.2 billion/\$3.5 billion. Christie's is a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour. Founded in 1766 by James Christie, Christie's has since conducted the greatest and most celebrated auctions through the centuries providing a popular showcase for the unique and the beautiful. Christie's offers over 450 auctions annually in over 80 categories, including all areas of fine and decorative arts, jewellery, photographs, collectibles, wine, and more. Prices range from \$200 to over \$100 million. Christie's also has a long and successful history conducting private sales for its clients in all categories, with emphasis on Post-War and Contemporary, Impressionist and Modern, Old Masters and Jewellery. Private sales totaled £413.4 million/ \$661.5 million in the first half of 2012, an increase of 53% on the previous year.

Christie's has a global presence with 53 offices in 32 countries and 10 salerooms around the world including in London, New York, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Dubai, Zürich, and Hong Kong. More recently, Christie's has led the market with expanded initiatives in growth markets such as Russia, China, India and the United Arab Emirates, with successful sales and exhibitions in Beijing, Mumbai and Dubai.

**Estimates do not include buyer's premium. Sales totals are hammer price plus buyer's premium and do not reflect costs, financing fees or application of buyer's or seller's credits.*

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Images available on request

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