

The Estate of the Late Lillian Hoffman: Tribal, Aboriginal art, Artefacts and Antiquities

By Jane Raffan, on 11-Jun-2010

In 1925, the year after American Lillian Hoffman was born, The Society of Woman Geographers was formed to bring together 'women explorers at heart' whose work involved 'extensive travel in the investigations of little-known or unique places, peoples or things in the world'. Ms Hoffman was not a member, but her adventurous travels evinced a similar ethos, and this was carried through to her collection, which reflects a passionate embrace of the material culture of places and peoples beyond the expected.



On 1 August, *The collection of Tribal, Aboriginal art, artefacts and Antiquities from the Estate of the Late Lillian Hoffman* will be presented to auction by Guy Earl-Smith's East Australian Trading Consolidated. Largely collected during her travels across the globe, Ms Hoffman's vast trove of over 3,000 pieces originate from places as far and wide as Europe, Russia and Greenland; the Sahara and Congo and other parts of West Africa; Nepal, India, China and Japan; the Americas, and the islands across the Pacific to New Guinea and Australia's Top End.

In 1883, Ms Hoffman's great grandfather, Edward K. Warren, patented turkey featherbone as a replacement for whalebone in corsetry and founded a business that amassed a fortune and lasted 125 years. Lillian's family wealth allowed her to indulge her lifelong passions and pursuits in a carefree and independent manner.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, an extensive array of bone and ivory objects form a large part of Ms Hoffman's extraordinary collection. With over 200 pieces of ivory alone, this material is a definite sale drawcard. Highlights include an 18th century parasol, several carved walrus tusks, carved antique African ivory staffs, Japanese netsuke, and a large selection of 19th Century American whalebone utensils. It also features several museum-quality ancestral skulls from Papua New Guinea, and a fossilised woolly mammoth tooth.

In 1917 Lillian's great grandfather established a philanthropic foundation, which continues today. This aspect of her heritage is also apparent in her collecting patterns and legacy. During her travels Lillian made it a habit to buy crafts directly from the local people, conscious that her efforts would help sustain their culture and traditions. Proceeds from the Estate auction, which carries a pre-sale value range of \$700-900,000 and is largely unreserved, are to be divided among two local charities.

Ms Hoffman's encounters were also sometimes coloured by her impetuous verve, which explains in some part the sheer volume of object groups within the collection. In certain cases this practice resulted in the acquisition of a cache of rare material culture, such as the items collected in situ from the nomadic Saharan Tuareg people, including a leather camel saddle, saddlebags and tribal jewellery.

Lillian Hoffman first came to Australia on one of many diving expeditions in the region, and her subsequent travels here were largely restricted to the Top End, where she developed relationships with many of the artists. Highlights amongst the Aboriginal art on offer include a group of *banumbirr* (Morning Star) poles by Elcho Island artists Peter Datjin Burarrwanga, Timothy Litta Litta Ganambarr, Gali Yalkarriwuy Gurruwiwi, Richard Dhaymutha Gurruwiwi and Henry Gambika Nupurra Dhamarandji.

For the last ten years of her life, Ms Hoffman was a Sydney resident in the formerly bohemian enclave of Potts Point. The collection also includes items purchased from local dealers, who quickly warmed to her colourful character and style. One story goes that Lillian acquired a group of 18th century carved timber Burmese temple elephants for \$60,000 only moments after seeing them; and moments later a Homo sapiens caravan bearing pachyderms was seen lumbering up Macleay Street to her apartment.

Additional items of note include communist propoganda material from Russia and China, art and artifacts from Papua New Guinea, African masks, Inuit carvings, and artifacts from the ancient West African civilisation of Nok, including a superb,

monumental baked clay zoo-anthropomorphic sculpture, circa 2000 BP, which, it is hoped, will realise around \$100,000.

The collection will be on view next month from 15 July at Galerie Finn, 23 Bay Street, Double Bay.

Selected Highlights (illustrated)

Benin Ivory Staff (left), Nigeria c.19th- 20th Century, elephant tusk, 105cm, \$5,000-7,000

Papuan Gulf Ancestor Skull (lower centre), c.19th-20th C, human bone, polychrome pigments, cane attachments, resin set shell and seed, PNG, 18cm, \$6,000-8,000

Tang Dynasty Cart and Bullock (lower left), c.618-907 AD, low fired clay, remnant pigments, with TL Test documentation, 20-16cm, \$3,000-5,000

Tuareg Saddle (right), c.20th century, polychrome leather, metal and fibre, attachments, 96x49cm, \$3,000-5,000

Not illustrated,

Collection of Netsuke, c.18-19th Century, ivory, Japan and China, \$500-700 each

Ching Dynasty Ivory head, c.19th Century, of exceptional quality, China, 37x33cm, \$3,000-5000

Burmese Temple Elephants, 18th Century, carved timber (4). Provenance: Arida, Macleay Street, Sydney, \$2,500-4,500 each

Superb Nok Sculpture, c. 2000 Years BP, classic zoo-anthropomorphic form, Nigeria, baked clay, 73x41cm, \$80,000-120,000

[1] 'Geographer' in its broadest sense included the allied disciplines of anthropology, geology, biology, archaeology, oceanography, and ecology. Notable members have included aviator Amelia Earhart, anthropologists Margaret Mead, Mary Douglas Leakey and Jane Goodall, and NASA astronaut Kathryn Sullivan.

About The Author

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