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Out of Africa

Tribal Art Week returns May 10-16 with an exhibition at the Arader Gallery (aradernyc.com) by Madison Ancient and Tribal Art, a coalition of 14 art dealers.

James Stephenson, one of the exhibition's organizers (and sibling of stylist Mary Alice Stephenson), tells us about some of the items up for sale.

—Jillian Anthony

What makes this exhibit special?

This group of art dealers represents Indonesian, Oceanic, Pacific Islands and African art. We have top-of-the-market objects and a range of pieces that might be more accessible to the beginning or middle-range collector. If someone wants to buy something that looks really interesting, will grow in value and has a fascinating story to it, this is the place to be.

What are some of the more interesting items that will be on display?

One of the dealers has a Lefem society figure, which is a Cameroon object, and it's pretty spectacular. I have a very nice knobkerrie, which is a weapon from the Zulu culture in South Africa.

How did you become interested in tribal art?

When I was in my mid-20s I spent a year living with the Hadzabe tribe [in Tanzania], who are the last hunter-gatherers that still hunt with bow and arrow in Africa. I wrote a nonfiction book about the experience.



FACE OFF A Kota reliquary figure made from Gabon wood and copper from the late 19th or early 20th century

While there I would be looking for art and selling it in order to fund my artistic pursuits.

How do you go about collecting these items?

I travel all over the world, going to collections and seeking out estate sales. Most objects have provenance and have been out of the various countries for a long time. A lot were collected by missionaries at the turn of the 20th century. Many African cultures have been converted to Christianity or Islam, so it's much harder than it used to be to find tribal pieces.

And is your sister Mary Alice a fan?

She loves it; she loves all the stories and she's always very supportive. I gave her a Dinka bracelet as a present once. Back when I was starving and starting out, she would buy African masks from me to keep me going.