

Collecting

Behind the mask

Parcours des Mondes | Susan Moore on a series of illuminating exhibitions in Paris featuring objects from every continent, from rare tribal pieces to a carved neolithic stone unearthed in Scotland

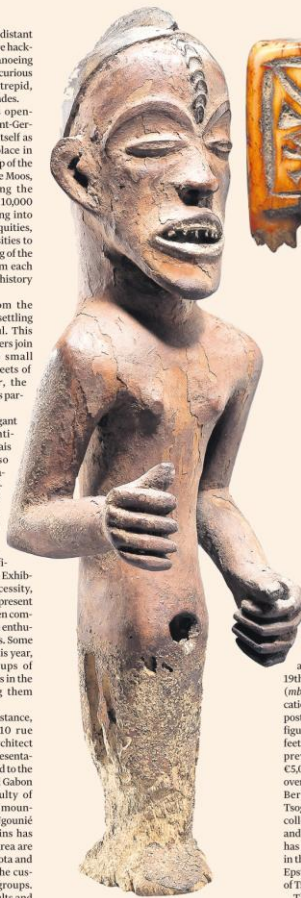
Journeys to the heart of distant cultures need not involve hacking through jungle or canoeing up the Amazon. For the curious but not necessarily intrepid, Paris offers the *Parcours des Mondes*. Over the past 15 years, this open-house event in the galleries of Saint-Germain-des-Près has established itself as the greatest tribal art marketplace in the world. Under the directorship of the businessman and collector Pierre Moos, it has succeeded in attracting the world's leading dealers and over 10,000 visitors each year. By expanding into new territory and adding antiquities, Asian art and cabinets of curiosities to the mix, it now boasts an offering of the material culture of peoples from each continent of the globe, from prehistory to the contemporary.

It embraces everything from the arcane and arresting to the unsettling and the astonishingly beautiful. This year some 40 international dealers join the home team of 32 in the small galleries lining the cobbled streets of this historic fine art *quartier*, the orange flags marking them out as participating exhibitors.

It may be a far cry from the elegant aisles of the Biennale des Antiquaires in the stately Grand Palais across the river (which also presents tribal art), but its agreeable lack of pretension is a necessity in a market where even the very best comes at staggeringly varied price points, and profits are not necessarily high.

Learning how to recognise the very best in this famously difficult field is the work of a lifetime. Exhibitors here make a virtue of necessity, using their often small spaces to present concise, focused exhibitions, often combining quality with a high-octane enthusiasm in illuminating encounters. Some 27 thematic shows are staged this year, many dealers displaying groups of objects that may have been years in the gathering, and accompanying them with scholarly catalogues.

Galerie Bernard Dulon, for instance, has redesigned its space at 10 rue Jacques Callot – courtesy of architect François Marq – around the presentation of the first exhibition devoted to the Tsogho statuaries of south-central Gabon (until October 8). The difficulty of access to the densely forested mountainous enclaves between the Ngounié River and the Chaillu Mountains has meant that the peoples of this area are far less known than the Fang, Kota and Punu, and has also preserved the customs and rituals of its ethnic groups. From here emerged the Bwiti cults and



Clockwise from left: 19th-century Attié comb at Yann Ferradin; 20th-century Lwalwa mask at Galerie Flak; pre-1798 Azera figure and Rai Coast mask (1773-1817), both at Michael Hanson; 19th-century Tsogho figure at Galerie Bernard Dulon

European art has ensured the familiarity of certain kinds of "primitive" sculpture. A perfect case in point is the Ivory Coast mask in *Beyond the Mask* at Galerie Schoffel de Fabry, where prices range from €3,000 to €100,000. This richly patinated Bété warrior mask from the Guéré-Wohé subgroup, constructed of bold "cubist" volumetric forms, was included by Charles Ratton in the pioneering 1956 exhibition, *L'Art de l'Afrique noire et l'époque nègre de quelques artistes contemporains*.

Far less familiar are the rare artefacts from the tiny Polynesian island of Niue, dubbed Savage Island by Captain Cook, who made three attempts to land there in 1774, but was repulsed each time by natives who appeared to be painted in

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blood. Michael Evans Tribal Art presents beautifully detailed Niuean barkcloth and long, elegantly formed clubs and spears.

In *Hair*, Yann Ferradin explores the not so humble hairpin in a sweeping show 10 years in the making that embraces examples from Africa, Oceania, Asia and North America, with a price range from €1,000-€100,000. It encompasses a rich variety of materials, from ivory and tortoise-shell to metal and leathers. Coiffure, often extraordinary, is an indicator of social status and cultural identity, and these 100 accessories, selected for their age, rarity and sculptural quality, transcend the functional. A miniature *tour de force* is a Zulu anthropomorphic pin in bone which doubles as a snuff spoon.

Monumentality has little to do with scale, as various shows demonstrate. There are archaic ivory sculptures from Alaska and Siberia at Galerie Flak, plus a lifetime's hoarding of Treasures miniatures by Thomas Murray. Perhaps most enigmatic of all is the Neolithic stone sphere or ball carved into six sections, just 7.5cm in diameter, found closer to home in Scotland and dating to around 5,000BC-2,500BC. Carved with ornamented spheres or platonic solids, such stones – around 400 are known – suggest a sophisticated understanding of geometry by an ancient people. It is on display at Finch & Co, priced at £25,000.

To September 11, parcours-des-mondes.com

initiation rites that spread throughout Gabon and beyond.

Some 25 pieces will be unveiled, many of them hitherto unknown – although the star turn, a powerful 19th-century wooden reliquary figure (*mbumbu*) with metal teeth and scarifications, featured on a Republic of Gabon postage stamp. Included alongside the figures are stools with human legs and feet, the likes of which Dulon had never previously seen. Prices range from €5,000-€10,000 for bells and stools to over €1m. In the associated publication, Bertrand Goy places all the major Tsogho pieces in museum and private collections in their historical context and within the canon of African art. He has also identified two pieces that were in the collection of Matisse, Picasso and Epstein were also among the collectors of Tsogho.

This interface between African and

