

The Power of Africa AMMA TRIBAL ART

◆ *Dan deangle mask*
Côte d'Ivoire
Early 20th century
Wood
24 cm
Ex private coll. Alain Bovis, Paris

Ann De Pauw: The mask is also from Côte d'Ivoire, but from the Dan this time. It's rather eroded, as you can see, but the serene, mysterious expression of an idealized young woman's face is still very evident: the finely modelled mouth, rounded forehead, narrowed eyes, full cheeks... The holes around the forehead show that this mask would have been adorned with a headdress. It's difficult to say exactly what function a Dan mask with a female face would have had: it may have been a guardian of a circumcision camp; it may have served a guiding and corrective purpose alongside the bearers of the malevolent masks; it may have played a part in festive masquerades... Often, we just don't know. But you can see it's been intensively used, not only from the erosion but also the dark patina on the inside and the edges.



We're finding that the appreciation of ethnographic art is growing. It's not without reason that new museums like the Quai Branly in Paris are giving it such a prominent place. African art deals with matters that touch the core of our human existence, however strange the rituals may seem to westerners and outsiders: family ties, living in a community, fear and hope, forces over which we have no control, life and death, life after death... That's all there. The fact that we sell to respected museums and knowledgeable individuals gives us enormous pleasure. Then you know that other people will also be touched by what you once collected. And yes, that they too will feel its power. We're very happy to pass it on.

Golden Paintings

ARENDS & TAMMES FINE ARTS

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It's a well known historical fact: it was often artists of Flemish origin who were all the rage in Amsterdam and elsewhere in Holland's Golden Age. Robert Arends and Henriette Tammes took the reverse route, moving some seven years ago from Amsterdam, where they'd had a gallery since 1993, to Antwerp. Here, at the moment, they're the only art dealers to specialize in Dutch and Flemish painters: old masters, but modern painters too. This year they've selected two exponents of the Golden Age.

For years Robert Arends has been a noted restorer for private collectors, auction houses and museums, and is therefore an expert on old master painting. He's even restored a Rembrandt. Recent decades have seen an enormous evolution in his field thanks to new technology, yet still nothing replaces the direct contact with the material and the hand of the painter. Robert Arends: There's a palpable intimacy about it. It makes working in this field a real privilege. For a while your mind is in tune with the painter, so to speak. A seventeenth-century painting also contains a wealth of information. You feel the spirit of the time in it. And the technique of the makers is unrivalled. I think that's also the result of concentration and a training in looking at things. The great seventeenth-century painters were enormously accomplished in that respect. They were much more concentrated than we are; we're flooded with images and information. Their mastery – of anatomy, for instance – is breathtaking: sometimes just a few lines are enough to catch the essence. That's simply – and literally – insight. It still astounds me every day.

Henriette Tammes, an art historian with years of experience in the art trade, immediately applies these 'insights' to *IJsgesicht (View of the Ice)* by Ludolf Bakhuizen (1631-1708), who moved with his family from the German town of Emden to Amsterdam, a magnet for artists at that time. Henriette Tammes: Bakhuizen is known mainly for his large seascapes. He was the leading marine painter of the Dutch Golden Age after Willem Van de Velde and his work hangs in many museums, including the Louvre. In his long career, which only started when he was twenty-seven, he also painted portraits, townscapes and allegorical works.



◆ *View of the Ice*
Ludolf Bakhuizen (Emden 1631 – 1708 Amsterdam)
Oil on canvas
51.4 x 66.3 cm
Signed bottom left
Lit. Hofstede de Groot no. 479

This painting is unique in his oeuvre. You can see at once that it's a Bakhuizen from the intense contrasts of light and dark that characterize his work. Dramatic skies with their soft transitions are typical of him. The painting has become a little darker over time, but it's still very subtle. You can clearly see the silhouette of a town on the horizon, for instance. Other areas are deliberately left very indistinct. Bakhuizen was obviously more concerned with rendering an atmosphere that representing a reality. Legend has it that in bad weather he'd put to sea in an open boat to observe the effect of the storm... You can see how cold it must have been. Just look at that snow-white strip in the foreground. This is not the kind of fun on the ice you find in Bruegel and later on in Avercamp; it's perishing cold.

In his time Bakhuizen was in great demand. He worked for the likes of Peter the Great, the King of Prussia and the Grand Duke of Tuscany. In those days you couldn't ask for a more impressive clientele. He also had a number of pupils, such as Jan Dubbels and Pieter Coopse, and he was hugely influential in his genre.



◆ *Interior with Tric-Trac Players*
Bartholomeus van Bassen (Antwerp 1590 – 1652 The Hague)
1625
Oil on panel
55.2 x 82.6 cm
Signed bottom right and dated 1625

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“It surprises me that in a city like Antwerp, with all its history and heritage, we’re the only gallery to specialize in the seventeenth century, also as valuers and intermediaries in art transactions.”

From Bakhuizen’s chilly exterior we move indoors and enter a magnificent Renaissance interior by Bartholomeus van Bassen (1590-1652), a painter born in Antwerp but active in The Hague. Henriette Tammes: Van Bassen was an architect as well as a painter. In Rhenen, near Utrecht, he built the winter palace known as the ‘Koningshuis’ for Frederick I, King of Bohemia, for instance, and he was the city architect of The Hague, where he also designed the Nieuwe Kerk (New Church). As a painter he specialized in imaginary views of architecture with a marked perspectival emphasis. Van Bassen was not just any painter: according to the National Gallery in London he was the most important architectural painter in the northern Netherlands during the early seventeenth-century. In his native Antwerp he had probably been a pupil of Pieter Neeffs and Hendrick van Steenwijck. We know that in 1613 he enrolled in the St Luke’s Guild in Delft.

Robert Arends: Van Bassen followed firmly in the tradition of Hendrik Vredeman de Vries and his perspectival works. You don’t have to look for much meaning in a panel like this, which is signed and dated, and there’s also little point in trying to identify the splendid room: it probably never existed. You see a couple with a dog and men playing tric-trac, a variant of backgammon. The figures and animals may be by another hand: we know that for the staffage Van Bassen collaborated with other painters. But of course it’s the impressive interior of this palatial chamber that commands all our attention.

Robert Arends concludes: It surprises me that in a city like Antwerp, with all its history and heritage, we’re the only gallery to specialize in the seventeenth century, also as valuers and intermediaries in art transactions. Our client base is very international, but you do see that a number of collectors show a preference for the art of their own country. And then it strikes us that the Flemings, with their innate appreciation for painting, still have a marked preference for the colourful. Now, as a buyer you can scarcely ever be disenchanted with an old master: it’s a very stable market compared to other sectors.

Emotions without Words

DAROUN

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“Did you know that centuries-old textiles from South America were still turning up here in the 1990s as packing material for vases? Fortunately that’s now a thing of the past and textiles are properly valued. Many cultures that had no writing system transmitted their traditions and norms via their textiles and thus via the women who made those textiles. They ensured that cultural continuity.” A textile engineer by training, Liban Pollet of Daroun has a strong affinity with textiles from all over the world, whether they’re a couple of thousand years old or date from the nineteenth century. “At the same time I think cultures are an entity in themselves, and that you should see objects in a context. I try to convey that idea to the people who come to Daroun. That’s why my collection offers much more than textiles.”

Liban Pollet: There are only three places in the world where two-thousand-year-old textiles survive: in the area inhabited by the ancient Egyptians and later the Copts, in the region around the Taklamakan Desert in China, and in Peru. That survival is due to the dry climate and, in Peru, to the low level of nitric acid in the soil, which meant that

organic material was preserved. The piece I’ve chosen is from the Nasca Valley in Peru. It was produced by one of the oldest cultures of that region and is dated around the third century BCE, a period generally referred to as ‘Proto-Nasca’ for lack of a better term, though lack of knowledge might be more exact.

“I love oral cultures that endeavour to express their essence in images, in textiles, in the material. When you do that it really has to be spot on, if you know what I mean.”
