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| 33 (0)1 53 05 53 66 | Sophie Dufresne | sophie.dufresne@sothebys.com
| 33 (0)1 53 05 52 32 | Claire Jehl | claire.jehl@sothebys.com

African and Oceanic Art



REMARKABLE FANG RELIQUARY HEAD

**From the former collection of Paul Guillaume **

EXTREMELY RARE *AKUA KA'AI* GOD STAFF, HAWAII

Masterpiece of Polynesian art

HISTORIC TABAR HEAD

The earliest *Malangan* work known to date

Paris, June 2018 – After last December's record results, crowning the success of a selective sale with its fair share of masterpieces, Sotheby's France is delighted to announce its first 2018 sale of African and Oceanic Art on 13 June. This session will feature several major pieces, including an extremely rare Lega figure and a remarkable Fang head. Oceania will also be in the spotlight with a superb Hawaiian sceptre and a magisterial Tabar head. This eclectic selection also includes the Leo and Karin Van Oosterom collection, offering works of high quality – including a splendid group from Sepik, Papua New Guinea – at more affordable estimates.

Paul Guillaume and the Fang reliquaries

This **Fang reliquary head (estimate: €1,000,000-1,500,000)** is remarkable for several reasons. Not only is it extremely rare and has an extraordinary sculptural quality, but its provenance also links it with a truly outstanding collection of African art, the one assembled by the famous art collector and dealer Paul Guillaume (1891-1934).



The Fang rendered a type of worship to their ancestors, the *byeri*, through carved representations of the deceased in the form of both full-length figures and individual heads. The rarity of these pieces bears witness to their privileged status. In Fang thinking, the head was a sign of vitality and social power. Unlike the full-length statues, which were unveiled during initiation rites, the heads remained hidden in the tribal chief's chamber, where they were carefully guarded. These heads began to reach Europe in the early 20th century, and were immediately celebrated by artists and aesthetes like Paul Guillaume.

Friend of Guillaume Apollinaire, he was a pioneer whose committed work dramatically changed attitudes towards African arts. Through his writings and the many exhibitions he staged in Paris and abroad, he helped to free them from the label of exoticism, so that they could be recognised for their true worth. He felt Fang reliquary heads to be particularly important and devoted several exhibitions to them, describing their creators as the "continent's most remarkable art studio".

"Sire many-heads" at the heart of the Bwami initiation rites

Living in the Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Lega form a society divided into tribes overseen by the Bwami: an initiatory society that structured and united the different Lega groups and secured the moral, political and legal powers. Its ethics are conveyed through sacred initiatory objects: each of these effigies expresses an essential concept of the Bwami.



As a major symbolic figure, Sakimatwematwe ("Sire many-heads") is central to the Bwami philosophy. Expressing the omniscience of its highest-ranking initiates, statues in his likeness are some of the rarest and most iconic in Lega art. We only know of around fifteen, now in museums. Their late discovery and rarity are explained by the sovereign importance of Sakimatwematwe as the ultimate symbol of the Bwami's unity.

The design of each figurine expresses the artist's highly personal vision. While nearly all of them tend towards geometric abstraction, here the artist decided to humanise the

legendary figure by including an astonishing arborescence of heads within an anthropomorphic figure. (Lega statue - DRC/estimate: €250,000-350,000).

An illustration of Polynesian artistic genes

This ***Akua ka'ai*** god staff (estimate: €400,000-600,000) transcends the rare figurative sculptures of Hawaii through its size and its archetypal force, tension and ferocity.

Among the sixty known God staffs listed, this one stands out for the monumentality of the figure on top. A subtle contrast between power and refinement, particularly in the elegant modelling of the staff, this masterpiece is a remarkable illustration of Polynesian artistic skill. It is a powerful example of the fascinating expressiveness of Hawaiian sculpture, and is clearly a major work in the artistic culture of this archipelago.

Possessing all the stylistic characteristics of large temple statues, god staffs as a corpus stand out for their technical perfection and extreme refinement. Personally-owned divine avatars carved on commission by artist priests (*kahuna*) for high-ranking dignitaries, these staffs tell us much about early Hawaiian society. While the meaning of these works is obscure, we know that they were ceremonial objects carried during important events, which accounts for their technical mastery and structural quality.



The earliest Malangan object known to date



Individual heads from Tabar Island (Bismarck Archipelago), long known as the cradle of *Malangan* ritual traditions, generally represent *Malagacak*, the archetypal warrior figure, confirmed here by the ferocious expression of the face. Belonging to a corpus of *malaganivis* heads which played the role of the principal symbol when ownership of a group of *malangan* was transferred from one generation to the next, these works were the most important creations in the group of sculptures.

Because of their ritual importance, the heads received meticulous attention in terms of both conception and preservation. Unlike the majority of *Malangan* works, which were destroyed at the end of each ceremony, the heads were kept and repainted before each fresh appearance.

This **work (estimate: €300,000-500,000)**, dating from the 17th century, is probably the earliest *Malangan* object to have survived. The sculpture consists of a man's head with the typical qualities of a 17th century Tabar figure. He wears a high crested headdress similar to other finery collected in the late 19th century, and his ears have a feather decoration signifying *Malangan* rights and deeper degrees of meaning, which were never revealed to strangers.

An extremely rare representation of a founding ancestor

This **Sepik figure (estimate: €200,000-300,000)**, called *bero kandimboag*, is extremely rare. Representing a founding ancestor who crossed the ocean in a canoe before founding the clan, it was probably central to an initiatory ritual.

Its sculptural power, refined engraved décor and the serenity of its expression illustrate the importance of the mythical hero it symbolises. All the finery, reflecting the world of tradition, bears witness to the unity between mankind and "the invisible", while enhancing the eloquent ancestral resonance of the statue.

The headdress and ornamental scarification are typical of Sepik figures, but the decoration dotting the back and flanks is extremely rare: only one other statue with similar patterns is known. Transcending traditional canons through his individual genius, the artist has created a work whose powerful presence pays timeless homage to the ancestor it invokes.



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Auction: 13 June

Exhibition: 9 to 13 June

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