

Great Books for the Holidays (Tribal Art, Archaeology & Anthropology)

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The holidays are close at hand with their gift-giving traditions so what better time to offer a list of some of the best available books in our areas of interest. This is especially true as I have never known a dealer or collector to shy away from a good book, which, as we all know, is the gift that keeps on giving!

This past August I flew to Indianapolis and saw the much lauded and controversial Nigerian bronze, terracotta and stone exhibition. The works were stunning and are revelatory, I think, to most of us steeped, as we are, in the African tradition of wood artifacts. The bronzes possess a serenity I have seen before only in Buddhist religious works. The catalogue is *Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria*. All the works were loaned by Nigerian museums and the show has been a sell-out at its previous venues in Spain, London and Richmond, VA. It is bound to please that someone special for Kwanzaa. (The controversy, by the by, springs from the 'protective' coating given to the bronzes while they were in Spain. For more see *The Art Newspaper's* article, available here: www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Euro-pean-treatment-harms-African-works/?/23487)

Two recent U.S. exhibitions have focused on the material and spiritual world of the Arctic. This is an area of developing scholarship and both shows produced

excellent catalogues that will find their way into the 'necessary reading' stacks of those interested in the far north of our planet. The first book, from a Princeton exhibit, is *Gifts From the Ancestors. Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*. It includes Russian material not often, if ever, seen by Americans. The second show was an arresting re-do of a 2007 exhibition that originally took place at the Musée du quai Branley in Paris. This reprise, *Upside Down: Arctic Realities*, mounted in Houston at the Menil Foundation Collection. The show was a decidedly experimental affair with a light and space centered set-up by artist Doug Wheeler that privileged experience over materiality (using conditions akin to a polar white-out.) Arresting, in fact, inadequately describes the display. Curated by old Arctic hand Edmund Carpenter, the catalogue is a beautiful and important addition to the oeuvre. These catalogues prove, if anyone needed proof, that in the work of Arctic craftsmen there is a naturalness and direct authenticity, coupled with emotional intensity, that literally cascades from their creations and handiwork.

As I wrote the above descriptions I began to wonder what books our diverse ATADA membership, collectors and tribal art show attendees might bring to light. So, herewith, a sampling!

Earl Kessler, a collector who has lived with his family in Colombia, India and Thailand, recommends the sumptuously illustrated *Sinaunang Habi. Philippine Ancestral Weave* by Marian Pastor-Roces, now in its second edition. The images of the diverse textiles and clothes in the islands, many shown being worn, are without equal as a reference. The book, apparently, is being used by Filipinos around the world who wish to preserve their own heritage.

He also recommends *Asmat Myth and Ritual. The Inspiration of Art* edited by Gunter & Ursula Konrad and published in Venice as a “thorough, illustrated text that captures the Asmat and their culture in its variety of expression from initiation to gender relations. The authors collected not only cultural material but images and anecdotes only those engaged with the Asmat over years could capture. As a culture now under stress from ‘modernization’ this book is an outstanding record and source.”

I managed to catch up with American Indian art dealer **John Molloy** the morning after he arrived in Paris and he told me his current travel reading is *Blood and Thunder* by Hampton Sides, widely acknowledged as a great read. It's the story of Kit Carson and the conquest of the American West with a special emphasis on Carson and how he rounded up the Navajo for their removal and encampment at Bosque Redondo in the 1860's. John says it is beautifully written and makes the whole era come alive in a way that's not been done for him before. Highly recommended!

John recently finished *Material Journeys: Collecting African and Oceanic Art, 1945–2000. Selections from the Geneviève McMillan Collection* by Christraud M. Geary and Stephanie Xatart. “Even though it is outside my area ~ or perhaps because it is outside my area, I found it illuminates a lot of the problems we encounter with African art vis à vis authenticity and tribal use. It was an eye-opener.”

Mona Gavigan, an African art dealer in Washington, D.C., writes that she is “reluctant to consider giving ethnographic art books as gifts because collectors with specific interests are likely to already have the titles. I’m also reluctant to inflict oversized space-consuming “coffee-table” books. I favor the concise elegant format of the *Vision* series. Each covers a major African art style region with fine photographs of choice examples. Up to date bibliographies help with research, perhaps leading to titles that may be in one’s own library; and each is only \$20!”

Mona did have one specific recommendation, however, *African Goldweights: Miniature Sculptures from Ghana 1400-1900* by Tom Phillips. “It’s hardback; has a lovely cover; it’s not oversized and the list price is \$45.00. I rarely read more than photo captions, but I read this book from cover to cover.... Tom Phillips has an eye, a way with words, and a sense of humor. His descriptions often made me smile or laugh out loud (that can’t be said of many other ethnographic books!)”

“Phillips’ text reads like passionate art lovers talk. He includes asides and tales

of longing and searching for specific examples; he expresses his delight in finding objects as well as joy and appreciation in having them; he leads us to details of these tiny objects, each shown in its actual size, pulling us close to look, see, and to understand his enthusiasm.” Phillips also wrote the 600 page catalogue for the ground breaking 1995 exhibition *Africa, The Art of a Continent* at the Royal Academy, London and the Guggenheim, NY. “That catalog is an example of an appropriate and necessarily large format containing hundreds of images with informative text. I’d also recommend it, but it is out of print!”

Steve Kalminson, a dealer in Guatemalan material recommends Ian Graham’s *The Road to Ruins*, as a well-written autobiography of a Mayan explorer, archaeologist and epigrapher - an "Indiana Jones" with class! He also enjoyed Jim Pieper’s *Guatemala's Masks & Drama* and *Guatemala's Folk Saints*, both distributed by the University of New Mexico Press. They are “well illustrated coffee table books offering an empathetic study and analysis of two key aspects of modern Mayan culture.” As a fun ‘stocking stuffer’ he added John Major Jenkins *The 2012 Story*, as a serious analysis of the 2012

pop phenomenon, well grounded in actual Mayan cosmology and culture.

I could not end this survey without mentioning a book that has withstood the test of academic and scholarly time and, at 500 plus pages, will carry one through the entire Festival of Lights season - A.L. Basham’s *The Wonder That Was India*. Published in 1954 and revised a couple times, I believe it is still in print. I first read this book an eon ago as an undergraduate at the prodding of my Bengali academic advisor and the book was a revelation; it is not hyperbole to describe it as a literary confection brimming with lapidary detail.

As an American we tend to get a very myopic, jaundiced view of the subcontinent. Through this book I learned that contrary to our popular view, India was not as Dolf Hartsuiker has reminded us, a land of lethargic gloom populated primarily by ethereal, visionary mystics. It was a place uncommonly humanistic with a people uncommonly passionate about the things of the senses as well as the spirit. It is a land that highly values art, literature and poetry as well as commerce; a land that made higher mathematics infinitely easier with the invention of Indian numerals. A land that is a wonder.

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