

Culture

ART BOOKS

Antiquarian fairs prove vital to dealers

PARIS

'Destination' events have become crucial for sellers in luring buyers

BY SCOTT REYBURN

It's become routine for art and antiques dealers to complain that their galleries no longer attract much business through old-fashioned foot traffic. As a result, the market has become increasingly event-driven, with dealers relying on fairs and collective gallery promotions to encourage people to see in person what they have to offer, rather than browse online 3,000 miles away.

Promotional activities, like the tribal art gallery-hop *Parcours des Mondes*, and a major art fair such as *La Biennale des Antiquaires et de la Haute Joaillerie*, both of which have been taking place in Paris over the past few days (the *Biennale* continues through Sunday), have taken on an almost existential importance for some participants. At a time when contemporary art commands an ever more dominant share of the market's spending and media coverage, dealers in less fashionable collecting fields need "destination" events to survive.

"It's crucial for collectors to see the pieces in person," said Ana Casanovas, the co-director of the high-end Madrid tribal art dealers *Arte y Ritual*, one of 67 participants in the 13th-annual edition of *Parcours*, which took place in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district of the French capital. "We want to be part of the international market, and this event attracts the best dealers and collectors in the world," she added.

Over the past couple of decades Paris has been competing with Brussels and its Non European Art Fair, held in June, to be Europe's prime trading center for tribal artifacts — one of the few historical categories that can attract crossover buying from collectors of modern and contemporary art. In the 1990s, Sotheby's and Christie's decided to hold high-end tribal auctions in Paris. That decision, together with the concentration of France's ethnographic collections in *Musée du Quai Branly*, which opened in 2006, has given the edge to Paris, where

Clockwise from right, the 2014 *Biennale des Antiquaires* at the Grand Palais in Paris; an A.D. 1300 Mixtec skull inlaid with mosaics at the *Parcours des Mondes*; a 19th-century wooden Ewa figure from the Korowori River, Papua New Guinea; a figure from the 2,000-year-old Okvik culture.



JULIO PIATTI

"primitive" art played a crucial role in influencing avant-garde artists such as Picasso, Modigliani and Brancusi during the early 20th century.

The gallery-lined *rue des Beaux-Arts* and the *rue de Seine* were bustling with international collectors, many American, at the opening of *Parcours* last Tuesday. There were several stand-out shows. The up-and-coming Paris and Brussels dealer Martin Doustar, 35, had taken four years to put together his collection of 49 human skull sculptures from various eras and civilizations. Aptly named "Golgotha," the exhibition included a macabre A.D. 1300 Mixtec mosaic-inlaid head, priced at 350,000 euros, or about \$452,300. Nearby, *Galerie Flak* was showing more than 20 Eskimo sculptures. Among the group, acquired from a collection in Aspen, Colorado, a small "grande figure" from the 2,000-year-old Okvik culture, as abstract as a Brancusi, was priced at €130,000. About eight of them quickly sold to collectors from the United States, France and Germany for more than €50,000 each.

Arte y Ritual was among around 30 non-French guest exhibitors at the *Parcours*. The Spanish dealers, who sell to contemporary art collectors such as

New York-based Adam Lindemann, held a 30th-anniversary show that mixed museum-quality items of former stock with works currently for sale, such as a 19th-century wooden Ewa figure from the Korowori River, Papua New Guinea, for sale at €450,000.

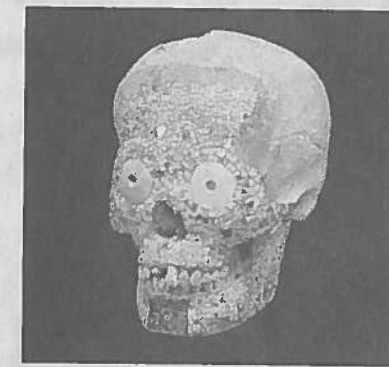
There were plenty of red stickers in the galleries, though dealers said collectors tended to wait until the weekend to commit to big-ticket purchases. A group of distinctive Kota reliquary figures from Gabon — types admired and collected by Picasso — attracted at least four sales in the €100,000 to €400,000 range at *Galerie Alain Bovis* during the early hours of the preview.

Parcours des Mondes, with its buzzy blend of international gallerists and serious-minded collectors, would seem to be a model for survival for dealers specializing in historic material. And yet, as was pointed out by the Paris-based exhibitor Anthony Meyer, the event still somehow struggles to attract the crossover buyers that are key to the market's growth. "It's a great success, but we don't see many contemporary art buyers," Mr. Meyer said during the *Parcours* preview. "I met more of those when I was exhibiting with the antiquities dealers at Maastricht."

The chance of making contact with a billionaire impulse buyer continues to lure dealers to exhibit at the *Biennale*. Now in its 27th edition, the alternate-year event, which has taken place in the spectacular Grand Palais since 2006, is the oldest and grandest of the traditional art and antiques fairs. It's also the most expensive for exhibitors, with a relatively small booth costing a basic €65,000. For all the magnificence of the setting — and the Jacques Grange-designed booths inspired by the gardens of Versailles — it remains a relatively small, dealer-organized fair with 89 participants, mostly French. In contrast, this year's *Tefaf Maastricht* featured 274 exhibitors. Unlike its Dutch rival, the *Biennale* doesn't have the critical masses of dealers in dedicated collecting areas that attract specialist international buyers.

In essence, the *Biennale* has become the grande dame of luxury lifestyle fairs, reflected in the popularity of its "High Jewelry" exhibitors and the difficulty other dealers have in selling more connoisseurial material.

"At Maastricht, the fair is the destination," said the exhibitor Marco Voena, a partner in the London- and Milan-based art dealership *Robilant & Voena*. "Here



MARTIN DOUSTAR, ANCIENT & TRIBAL ART



DAVID O. MARLOW/GALERIE FLAK



ARTE Y RITUAL

Russian-speaking clients. Representatives of these international companies were reluctant to quantify what was being spent at the preview. "We never talk about figures or money," said Sibylle Gallardo-Jammes, international communications director of *Van Cleef & Arpels*.

Some of the Paris *Biennale's* art exhibitors were, however, prepared to talk numbers. Following that V.I.P. dinner, *Robilant & Voena* were in negotiations with a collector over a rare 1962 Lucio Fontana natural canvas six-cut "Spatial Concept," priced at €6 million. Similar talks were being conducted by the Geneva- and New York-based antiquities dealers *Phoenix Ancient Art*, which had reserves on pieces with a value of more than €15 million. These included a Hellenistic-period ancient Greek bronze head of Dionysus at €5.5 million and a Roman-period Egyptian mummy portrait of a bearded man at €1.5 million.

"This fair works for us," said Hicham Aboutaam, president of *Phoenix Ancient Art*, who has been exhibiting at the *Biennale* since 2006. "It has a certain flair. It's less corporate than some of the others."

Or, to put it another way, it's more of an event.

at the *Biennale*, people are coming for Paris." But, he added, as Mick Jagger wandered past his booth at the preview Wednesday: "It is the best social fair for collectors."

The night before, 1,470 V.I.P.'s were treated to a sit-down gourmet dinner in the aisles of the fair, and dealers spotted the French megacollectors François Pinault and Bernard Arnault browsing the booths before the official vernissage.

Just as in 2012, the vast majority of the early sales were made by the fair's luxury jewelers, 14 of which were exhibiting this year. The booths of Cartier, Boucheron, Chanel, Bulgari and Van Cleef & Arpels were packed with east Asian and