



ASSOCIATION ON AMERICAN INDIAN AFFAIRS

Protecting Sovereignty ◦ Preserving Culture
Educating Youth ◦ Building Capacity
SINCE 1922

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AUCTION HOUSES AND DEALERS SHOULD WORK WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES BEFORE PLACING ITEMS FOR SALE

WASHINGTON, D.C., November 1, 2019, 11:00 am E.S.T. – The Association on American Indian Affairs is urging potential purchasers interested in indigenous peoples’ “artifacts” and “antiquities” to exercise cautious due diligence as items may not be appropriate for sale. Purchasers should instead focus their investment on contemporary indigenous artists and their creations made for the art market and forego purchasing sensitive cultural items that may have been stolen or looted.

There is a long history of looting human remains and burial items and stealing cultural and sacred patrimony from indigenous peoples. In the United States alone, indigenous peoples and their sovereign Tribal governments were considered vanishing, and federal policies were designed to outlaw Tribal religions, languages and cultural practices. Assimilation policies stole Tribal children and put them in boarding schools to “kill the Indian and save the man.” This history of genocide has created a boon for “antiquities” and “artifacts” dealers. As a result, important religious and cultural patrimony, including human remains and burial objects, have ended up in private collections, auction houses and institutions all over the world. In many cases possession of these sensitive items contravenes Tribal laws, and can run afoul of federal and state laws. Yet, the “antiquities” industry often ignores this history and relies on information about where the item came from that may be conveniently created to ignore any tainted origin.

Once a sensitive item is in an auction, it is extremely difficult to stop the auction and allow an investigation to take place. From now until the end of the year there are at least thirteen large auctions containing potentially sensitive indigenous peoples’ funerary objects, religious and cultural patrimony. For the auction houses that have released public information about items for auction, including the North American Auction Company, William A. Smith Inc., Christies Auctions, Hindman Auctions, Heritage Auctions, and Skinner Auctions, **there are 575 items of a potentially sensitive nature for sale affecting at least 47 Tribes. Since January, there have been 3,653 potentially sensitive items for sale at auction affecting approximately 140 Tribes.** The following auction houses have upcoming auctions, though they have yet to make their sales catalogues public as of today: Eve Auctions (Paris), Allard’s Auctions, 68 Auctions, and Bonham’s Auctions.

Auctioneers, consignors, and dealers have legal, professional and ethical responsibilities to deal honestly with the public and validate the ownership of any item for sale. Often, the only way to determine whether an item of Native American cultural heritage is legitimate for the market is to work with affiliated Tribal Nations and their appropriate governmental representatives, as Tribes themselves are the experts in their cultural heritage. Working with Tribal governments is the best industry practice to confirm whether an item is legitimately in the market. The Association on American Indian Affairs is working with dealers and auction houses to increase their due diligence to prevent the sale of sensitive Native American heritage – before these items are placed for auction.

Buyers and collectors interested in indigenous peoples' "antiquities" and "artifacts" should do their own careful due diligence and consideration as to whether these sensitive items are proper investment. Perceptions – and laws – on collecting indigenous antiquities that have been taken due to colonization and genocidal governmental policies are changing to favor the protection and repatriation of indigenous items. **Purchasers should instead focus their investment on contemporary indigenous artists whose stories and creations are accessible and created to share with the world.**

The Association on American Indian Affairs is a 501(c)(3) organization and the oldest non-profit serving Indian Country protecting sovereignty, preserving culture, educating youth and building capacity. The Association was formed in 1922 to change the destructive path of federal policy from assimilation, termination and allotment, to sovereignty, self-determination and self-sufficiency. Throughout its 97-year history, the Association has provided national advocacy on watershed issues that support sovereignty and culture, while working at a grassroots level with Tribes to support the implementation of programs that affect real lives on the ground. Go to www.Indian-affairs.org.