

For Immediate Release

March 11, 2003

Contact: Bendetta Roux

212.636.2680

broux@christies.com

**CHRISTIE'S NEW YORK TO OFFER TRIBAL ART COLLECTION
FROM RENOWNED PHILANTHROPIST AND CONNOISSEUR**

*The Russell B. Aitken Collection of African, American Indian and Oceanic Art
April 3, 2003*

New York – On April 3, Christie's New York will offer the outstanding collection of African, American Indian and Oceanic art, collected mainly in the 1930's by the famous American philanthropist, artist, big game hunter, expert marksman and adventure writer Russell B. Aitken. The sale comprises more than 100 objects, most of which have not been seen in public since 1954 when 17 major pieces were loaned to the Brooklyn Museum for the exhibition Masterpieces of African Art.

The Aitken collection can safely be described as a collection of masterpieces. Not only did Russell B. Aitken and his first wife and fellow collector Annie Laurie Crawford have the discerning eye and the passionate heart that mark the true connoisseur, they were fortunate to be collecting at a time when major private collections were being dispersed, notably the collection of the New York magazine editor Frank Crowninshield. The superb quality of this collection was largely due to the involvement of the painter John Graham who traveled to Paris in search of major acquisitions and knew all the best dealers in town. His zest and the great sources he used resulted in a superb group of tribal art with a strong focus on art from the former French colonies.

From the Crowninshield collection, Mr. Aitken and his wife acquired no fewer than 25 pieces either directly or through the agency of renowned New York dealers such as Knoedler, Jacques Seligman and Sachs. An avid traveler, who spoke several African languages and dialects, Russell Aitken also bought many pieces during his numerous safari trips.

The seminal show African Negro Art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1935 almost certainly sparked the young Mr. Aitken's interest in African art. The discovery of an entirely new universe, profiled by the strong forms and piercing expressions of the many reliquary figures and masks, might well have evoked a burning fascination, not unlike what happened to Picasso when visiting the Trocadero Museum decades before. During the following five years, Russell Aitken acquired his finest objects. Among these were a superb Bambara antelope dance headdress, Chi'wara (estimate: \$40,000–60,000), an extremely elegant figure with a slender triangular head and a 19th century figure of a Yoruba horse and rider (estimate: \$60,000–80,000), showing a rider with the coiffure dressed as a long interlaced pigtail which falls to the horse's rump. Interestingly, both these pieces had been part of the MOMA exhibition.

Among the most remarkable objects carrying the Crowninshield provenance are Fang and Kota figures from Equatorial Africa. Both types of figures were created to gain access to the world of death and the spirits but whereas the Fang developed a remarkable three-dimensional sculptural style, the Kota chose to flatten their images in a two-dimensional, dream-like space. One of the most important objects in the sale is a magnificent Fang male reliquary figure, eyema byeri, Northern Fang, Ntoumou (estimate: \$250,000–350,000), showing an oozing patina of oil. Also offered is a superb Fang male reliquary figure, eyema byeri, Mvai area, Ntem region (estimate: \$100,000–150,000).

Several impressive masks were also acquired from the Crowninshield collection. A highlight is the beautiful and rare Baule mask representing the moon (estimate: \$60,000–80,000), acquired from the most famous of all tribal art dealers, Charles Ratton in Paris. A Dan mask (estimate: \$30,000–50,000) and a Bete or Guro mask by the Masters of Gonate (estimate: \$8,000–12,000) are also offered.

Formerly in the collection of General Pitt-Rivers, Dorset, England is an important 16th century Benin bronze plaque (estimate: \$180,000–220,000). The plaque depicts the figure of an Oba cast in high relief standing with a bird staff in the left hand. The story goes that the great Oba Esigie, fifth of the warrior kings, set out to confront the Atah of Idah on the eastern front of the Benin Empire. A bird fluttered overhead and uttered cries announcing imminent disaster. Esigie had the bird killed and went on to win the war. Subsequently the bird became immortalized on the top of a staff that was carried during rites commemorating Esigie's wars. Almost identical to the Oba represented on a plaque in the British Museum, the Oba represented on the offered plaque could well be the great warrior king Esigie.

The sale further includes ornaments, drums, utensils, shields and other artifacts. Although the emphasis of the Russell B. Aitken collection is on African art, the sale also offers a select group of Oceanic and American Indian art.

*Auction: The Russell B. Aitken Collection of
African, American Indian and Oceanic Art April 3 at 10 a.m.*

Viewing: Christie's Galleries at Rockefeller Plaza March 29-31, April 1-2

Additional information about Christie's sale of The Russell B. Aitken Collection of African, American Indian and Oceanic Art can be found on www.christies.com closer to the sale date. All lots from the sale can be viewed online along with full catalogue descriptions on Lotfinder®, which also allows clients to leave absentee bids. www.christies.com provides information on more than 80 sale categories, buying and selling at auction, complete auction results and Christie's international auction calendar.

Images available on request

Visit Christie's Web site at www.christies.com

###