



Tribal art expert Doris Rootenberg

Headline News

A Shona headrest sold at a Suffolk auctioneers for £23,000 this summer confirming the strength of the tribal art sector. *Antique Collecting* asked New York expert Doris Rootenberg whether the market had come to a head

artists were more talented and skilled than others. Unfortunately, there has been little work in southern Africa identifying the specific artists/ateliers, like there has been for west and central African art.

Q. How can you age a headrest?

A. Most of the authentic headrests sold at auction date from the late 19th century to the first quarter of the 20th century. They are aged as follows: by carefully noting the style and the patina, or comparing to similar examples in books and museums that have documented collection dates. Occasionally, a headrest may actually have its own

collection date, or else we know who collected the headrest and when he/she was in southern Africa. A fine example of this is our headrest from the Rev. AA Jaques, a Swiss missionary who was in southern Africa during the 19th century.

Q. How did headrests come to the west?

A. Many of the headrests came from missionaries and colonialists. In addition, British soldiers serving in Zimbabwe and South Africa were a big source as they brought objects back home with them to the UK.

Q. What are the origins of Shona headrests; what geographical area are we referring to?

A. The Shona people are generally found in modern day Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia. Most southern African tribes used headrests, including the Zulu, Tsonga-Shangaan people etc. Due to wars, there was much migration. Also, many people were pastoralists or raised cattle, and moved regularly. Thus, it is not always easy to see a clear distinction between the different ethnic groups.

We do not know the exact origins of the headrests. However, it is assumed that sub-Saharan headrests followed the Egyptian tradition. Egyptian examples survived because they were made of stone, unlike African headrests, which were almost always made of wood. They were susceptible to the wetter sub-Saharan climate and the prevalence of termites.

Q. Is their main purpose functional or symbolic?

A. Their primary purpose was to protect the elaborate hairstyles of their owners. They were utilitarian objects imbued with spiritual meaning; they were believed to be the medium through which people communicated with their ancestors.

Q. Who were the carvers and how did they acquire such exceptional skills?

A. Woodcarving was exclusively the domain of men. The carvers worked alone or in 'ateliers'. They not only carved headrests, but also milk vessels, knobkerries, stools etc. They carved for local consumption and neighbouring tribes, as well as creating early souvenirs for Europeans. Obviously, some



The Shona headrest made £23,000 this summer

IDENTIFYING A SHONA HEADREST

Shona headrests (known as *mutsago*) come from Zimbabwe and a number of neighbouring areas. These (and those from southern Africa) are different in type from those of east and central Africa. Made from hard wood, they have lobed bases and include a number of structural and decorative elements.

Their main function would have been to protect the intricate hairstyles of the people who used them. They acquired their dark brown patina through continual handling and were often buried with their owners.

Headrests from the east of the region (eastern Zimbabwe into Mozambique) commonly feature a rectangular upper platform that is decorated on its upturned edges.

Rows of carved lozenges are often incorporated into their designs; other common decorative motifs on the edge include parallel or zigzag lines. The top surface of the platform invariably features at least two sets of small triangles arranged in a larger triangular pattern with the apexes pointing toward the centre of the headrest. The bases of these eastern-style headrests are usually figure-of-eight-shaped, and taper gently upward toward the central support.

The central support is composed of two pairs of upward

and downward pointing V-shaped motifs interrupted by two circular motifs in the middle. The downward-oriented V-motifs are hollow, as are the two lozenges formed by the pattern between the columns. The columns are further decorated with parallel lines, zigzags, and concentric circles.

SYMBOLISM

Shona headrests often feature geometric circular, triangular and rectangular designs. The concentric circles, which are common to many headrests, are thought to derive from white Conus shells, or 'ndoro', that were worn as signs of status by chiefs and diviners. Ndoro are associated with spirit mediums, with the suggestion that the sleeper could be communing with spirits or acquiring knowledge while sleeping.

Other decorative motifs echo female cicatrization (scarification) marks, known as 'myora'. The fact that myora feature so prominently on Shona headrests from all regions may mean that at least in part, they represented a guarantee of female fertility? According to this view, the designs are symbolic of a female who has reached puberty and received cicatrization marks, so is therefore capable of marrying. This is reinforced by the fact that only mature men slept with headrests.



Shona headrest, Zimbabwe, late 19th century



Late 19th century Shangaan headrest, South Africa

Q. What is the collector looking for in acquiring a headrest? What makes one worth, say, £2,000 while another will go for £23,000?

A. The most important factors are:

- Beauty
- Condition
- Patina – collectors like evidence of use
- Good provenance (although this is rare to have)
- Rarity (some types are more common than others)
- Figurative element – if the headrest incorporates an animal or human element, it can add value compared to a purely non-figurative example.



Late 19th century Tsonga headrest

Q. How can you spot a fake? What common cataloguing errors do auction houses make?

A. Fakes are becoming more common as values go up. Without having seen and handled many, a neophyte may have a hard time spotting a fake.

Common catalogue errors include the fact that auction houses are often unable to specify the region the headrest comes from, and they generally underestimate the price. There are many dealers and collectors online searching for headrests so it is unlikely to find a sleeper...no pun intended!

Q. Who are the current buyers?

A. The higher end of the tribal market is strong, with very wealthy buyers competing for the best pieces throughout all areas of



Shona headrest with knobkerrie handel, South Africa, late 19th century



Late 19th century Ngoni headrest from Malawi

tribal art: figures, neckrests, masks, weapons etc. Buyers include traditional African art collectors who are looking to add top pieces to their collections, museums, and contemporary art collectors who appreciate the aesthetics of African art. We have many clients who collect both contemporary paintings and sculptures alongside African art. Several African objects could be 'mistaken' for modern art due to their sophistication and form. Most people know that artists including Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, Modigliani, and others were greatly influenced by African art.

Q. What other areas of African tribal art, perhaps currently overlooked, should a would-be collector look at?

A. Tribal art from South Africa is still



relatively undervalued compared to art from central and West Africa. Great pieces can still be found in the UK, including weapons, staffs, headrests, beadwork etc, at very affordable prices. The greatest collection of southern African headrests was collected in the UK from the 1970s to the 1990s by Jonathan Lowen, a South African expat living in London.

Dori Rootenberg and her husband, Daniel Rootenberg, founded Jacaranda Tribal Art Gallery in 2005 after collecting traditional African art for 15 years. Jacaranda Tribal sells museum quality objects from Africa and Oceania to private collectors, museums, architects and designers, in the US and internationally.

WHAT THEY SOLD FOR:

With an estimate of £1,000-£1,500, the hammer finally fell on a Shona headrest at £23,000 at Stowmarket auctioneers Bishop and Miller's second ever sale.

The three-columned rest, on the back of a horned antelope, stands 15cm high and is notable for its superb patination. It attracted 11 phone bidders, several of whom were international, before it sold to a UK buyer.

Another Suffolk auction room, Diamond Mills in Felixstowe, saw another Shona headrest sell for £2,200 in its July sale.



This headrest sold for £2,200