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Ralph T. Coe discusses his collection and how the market for American Indian material has changed over the years

A 200 strong collection of pieces by him are on view at, and promised to, the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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30 September 2003

Ralph T. “Ted” Coe (74) has collected American Indian art for half a century, and done so with an eye trained in the study and connoisseurship of European painting. This month about 200 pieces from his collection are on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in “The responsive eye: Ralph T. Coe and the collecting of American Indian art” (until 14 December). All the objects have been promised to the museum, which until now has owned only a handful of American Indian pieces.

Growing up in Cleveland, Ted Coe was surrounded by his father’s collection of French early modern painting, one of the earliest and finest in the Midwest, which included works by Cézanne, Monet, Matisse, Modigliani, Renoir, and Courbet. His interest in ethnology began as a

teenager when he spotted a totem pole model in a Manhattan shop, but his collecting and scholarship of Indian material began in 1956 when Richard Brilliant, a fellow graduate student at Yale, suggested he read a Native American art book by Miguel Covarrubias.

In the last 25 years Mr Coe has travelled widely, exploring and participating in Indian culture. He took a 1986 Chevy Blazer on a round trip from Santa Fe to the Arctic, and kept cash in a slit in the ceiling for use when good trading opportunities arose. They often did. The collection now includes 1,000 objects spanning North America from 3,000 BC almost to the present day-totem pole models, moccasins, leather shirts, tobacco pipes, baskets, pottery.

The Art Newspaper asked Mr Coe how he acquired his holdings and how the market for Indian material has changed over the years.

The Art Newspaper: How has the market changed over the years?

Ralph T. Coe: You could hardly call it a market when I started collecting in the late 50s. It had a different aura about it. Now it's become upscale and professionalised by dealers in America and Canada. It's become much more hard-edged and aggressive. I miss the old days. It was much more informal than it is today. I had warm relationships with traders and makers in Canada, continent-wide from Southwest to Maine. Collecting was a participatory thing. I ended up going out into the field and camping with Indians. One dealer called me "the last of the campfire boys." Part of the pleasure of working close to a culture that needed more recognition in the art world is gone. You're much more targeted by dealers today.

TAN: Is the American Indian market based in the US?

RTC: It was always a bit international. A lot of Indian art ended up in Britain because of Revolutionary soldiers. Once you could find things in the Fulham Road area of London, and you still can find things in the Portobello Road, Bermondsey or Camden markets. I drove 2,000 miles in 1997 through England just looking at Native American material. In a Devon shop I bought an early 19th-century round birchbark box by the MicMac Indians of Nova Scotia for less than \$10. Inside was a heart pin cushion.

TAN: What about prices?

RTC: Prices have skyrocketed. It's now become fashionable. A good price for a Hopi kachina doll 20 years ago might have been \$700; today it could be \$5,000. A totem pole model that I bought

for \$400 40 years ago would be \$7,000 to \$12,000 today.

JEK: What about dealers and auctions?

RTC: James Economos in Santa Fe was the first dealer in North America specialising in American Indian art and once had the market nearly to himself, as far as I know. Now there's a whole host of dealers, such as Donald Ellis in Canada, Ted Trotta-Bono in Shrub Oak, New York, and Morning Star Gallery in Santa Fe that feature very select pieces. Tad Dale in Santa Fe, who worked on the Portobello Road, deals in world ethnology and is one of the few general antiquarian dealers left.

I've bought very little at auction because I am a searcher. Sotheby's and Christie's used to have important general ethnology sales in London, but in the late 1990s they declined because there was so much more money to be made in other fields. Sotheby's had Indian sales in New York, but now American Indian material is again included in general ethnology sales. Bonhams, Skinner, and Butterfield are still important feeders into the market. But fewer really great quality American Indian pieces appear. The highest prices tend to be bid by Americans.

TAN: How else has the field changed?

RTC: It is so specialised now. Someone will know everything about a certain category of object, but can't look broadly on these things. That's gone. It's become techno-ised. It's more of a commodity than art anymore. These things have become trophy pieces to collectors. That's very different from what I ever knew. In my day it was not that at all. It was an act of respect to have American Indian works around you. I like it to be culture—to remind me of a fiddle festival 100 miles from the Arctic Ocean.

Originally appeared in The Art Newspaper as *'Ted Coe, the last of the campfire boys'*

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