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# The Sculptor's Eye

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Sotheby's to Offer African & Oceanic Art from the Collection of The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation



Interior View of the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation

**New York, New York** – On May 15, 2009, Sotheby's New York will offer African and Oceanic Art from the Collection of American sculptor Chaim Gross (1904-1991) and his wife Renee, who were among the earliest collectors of African and Oceanic Art in the United States. Assembled in the 1940s and 1950s, the collection has remained intact and largely unchanged since then – as if preserved in a time capsule for over sixty years. At the heart of The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation Collection is a group of important works acquired privately between 1940 and 1944 from the legendary *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield, whose famed collection of African Art was assembled by

Gross's close friend and fellow artist John Graham. Many of these iconic objects were exhibited in the 1937 Brooklyn Museum exhibition *African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield* – one of the first exhibitions of African Art in the United States in a major institution. With the acquisition of the Crowninshield group, Gross catapulted himself to become one of the most important collectors of African art in the United States. Highlights of the sale will include a **Ngbaka Male Ancestor Figure from the Ubangi region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo** (est. \$400/600,000\*), set on an Inagaki base and perhaps the best-known example of its kind, acquired directly from Frank Crowninshield; and a **Senufo Kneeling Female Figure from the Ivory Coast** (est. \$250/350,000), purchased in the 1950s from Merton D. Simpson.

### The Crowninshield Objects

Among Gross's closest artist friends was the painter John Graham, a passionate collector of African Art who had been commissioned by Frank Crowninshield to identify and acquire great examples of African Art for the Crowninshield Collection. A strong proponent of the avant-garde, Crowninshield spent over twenty years at the helm of *Vanity Fair* and co-founded The Museum of Modern Art in New York. He lent several important African sculptures from his collection to MoMA's groundbreaking 1935 show *African Negro Art*. Crowninshield first began to add African art to his own vast collection of Impressionist and Modern paintings in the 1920s. He hired Graham to direct that effort in the United States and in Paris, where he spent summers between 1925 and 1935 buying objects from major Parisian dealers such as Paul Guillaume, Charles Ratton and Louis Carré. Graham also worked to promote both African art and Crowninshield's collection, and he was instrumental in early exhibitions of African art in the United States.

### Highlights of the Gross Collection

Among the highlights of the collection to be offered is a **Senufo Kneeling Female Figure from the Ivory Coast**, which measures just eleven inches high (est. \$250/350,000). Having been widely exhibited and published, the figure's kneeling posture represents a unique iconography and makes it one of the best-known works from the Gross Collection. The encrusted patina is the result of numerous applications of ritual offerings and attests to the sculpture's great age. Gross purchased the figurine privately in the late 1950s from Merton D. Simpson, who would later in the 1960s and 1970s become one of the most prominent international dealers in the field.



**Senufo Kneeling Female Figure**, Ivory Coast (est. \$250/350,000)



**Ngbaka Male Ancestor Figure**, Ubangi region, Democratic Republic of the Congo (est. \$400/600,000)

Another great highlight is a **Ngbaka Male Ancestor Figure**, from the remote Ubangi region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (est. \$400/600,000), which Gross purchased directly from Frank Crowninshield and was first exhibited in the 1937 Brooklyn Museum exhibition *African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield*. The figure, which has been widely published and acclaimed as the best-known example of its kind, is set on a base crafted by Japanese woodworker Inagaki, who worked in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s; presumably Crowninshield or Graham purchased the piece in Paris during that time.



**Ngbaka Ancestor Figure**, Ubangi region, Democratic Republic of the Congo (est. \$100/150,000)

Two other rare works from the Ubangi region will be offered for sale. One of them, also from the Ngbaka tribe, is an **Ancestor Figure** of unknown gender (est. \$100/150,000). The figure is covered in a deep brown sacrificial patina, and retains both its feather necklace and belt, which are extremely rare to have survived,

Three bronze plaques from the Kingdom of Benin, cast in the *cire perdue* technique and dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, will also be offered for sale. The most important in the group portrays an Oba (King) of Benin, wearing his battle armor (est. \$200/300,000). Previously in the collection of the British Museum, it was purchased in 1957 from the Klejman Gallery in New York.



**Benin Bronze Plaque of an Oba**, Nigeria (est. \$200/300,000)

From the western Sudan region is the exceptional **Soninke Hermaphrodite Figure** from Mali, possibly 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Century (est. \$400/600,000). The figure is a striking image of a human form of both genders with an elongated body, and is one of a small group of works that can be attributed to one anonymous workshop active between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries that was first identified by the Belgian Bernard de Grunne. Other figures by the same workshop are in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the collection of Drs. Marian and Daniel Malcolm, New Jersey.



**Soninke Hermaphrodite Figure**, Mali (est. \$400/600,000)

Two Fang Male Reliquary Figures from Gabon, estimated at \$150/250,000 and \$250/350,000, will also be featured. Modern artists such as Picasso and his contemporaries were most fascinated with Fang figures, which incorporate a cubist deconstruction and abstraction prized among modernists. The Crowninshield provenance of both figures suggests that they were in Paris in the 1920s, and thus at the epicenter of the exchange between African Art and modern artists. The Bembe Seated Male Figure from the Democratic Republic of the Congo was also purchased directly from Crowninshield (est. \$50/70,000).



**Bembe Seated Male Figure,**  
Democratic Republic of the  
Congo (est. \$50/70,000)

Among the Oceanic art highlights is an unusual **Vanuatu (New Hebrides) Mask** estimated at \$30/50,000. Masks

of this type are believed to have been created from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The present lot from the Gross Collection is of a highly unusual style. The sale will also feature a **Sepik River latmul Openwork Hook** from Papua New Guinea (est. \$20/30,000). The hook depicts an ancestral head atop a body made of water, with the open areas perhaps representing islands. Such a hook would have been attached to the ceiling of the men's houses, possibly supporting a chest containing sacred foods.



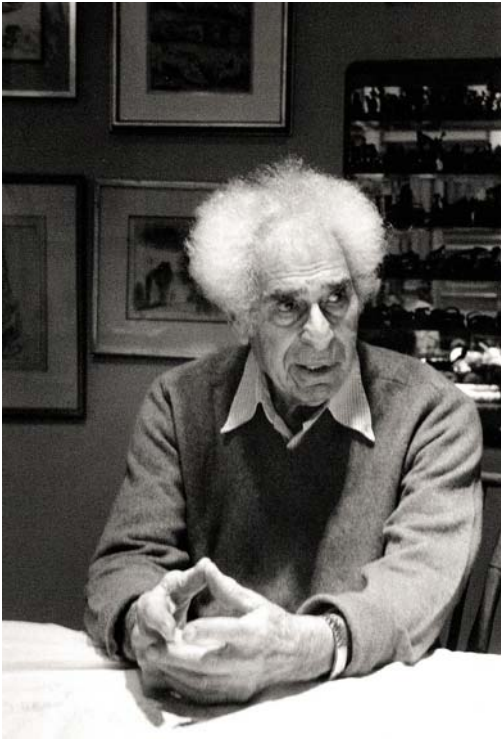
**Fang Male Reliquary Figure,**  
Gabon  
(est. \$250/350,000)

### About Chaim Gross

Chaim Gross (1904-1991) was a leading sculptor of early 20th Century American art. He was especially known for his direct carving technique, creating a world of playful acrobats, mothers and children from raw logs of wood and blocks of stone. He began drawing at an early age and throughout his life produced a prodigious number of graphic works, many of which were preparatory studies for his sculptures. Later in his career, he worked on sculptures modeled in clay or plaster for casting in bronze. While Gross worked with multiple media, his first passion lay in wood carving, often choosing the hardest woods available, such as lignum vitae and ebony. As a wood carver, the African forms and craftsmanship that Chaim Gross admired were integrated into the psyche of his own work, and like many of his African counterparts, Gross crafted each of his works from a single log of wood.



**Vanuatu (New Hebrides) Mask**  
(est. \$30/50,000)



Chaim Gross, © Allen Ginsberg Estate, 1988

Born in a small village in the Carpathian Mountains of Galicia (now Ukraine) to a Jewish family, he survived Cossak attacks, great poverty and the turmoil of World War I. He studied art in Budapest and in Vienna before immigrating to New York in 1921. In New York, he befriended many artists and began a career teaching art at the Educational Alliance that would span more than fifty years. Today Gross's work is found in many prestigious institutions such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Smithsonian Institution, and has been exhibited worldwide. The Chaim Gross Studio, housed in the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, displays works by Gross in the collection of the Foundation and preserves his studio, where he lived and worked until his death. The Foundation continues to loan his work generously to other institutions; currently, a carved relief by Chaim Gross is included in an exhibition titled *A Common Canvas:*

*Pennsylvania's New Deal Post Office Murals* at The State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg (exhibition dates: November 22, 2008 – May 17, 2009). Gross is perhaps best known to New Yorkers for his work *The Family* (1979), which is permanently on public display in Greenwich Village on Bleecker Street.

Gross became interested in African Art as a frequent visitor to the city's many museums, especially the Museum of Natural History. He was one of the earliest collectors in the United States, and among the most fervent promoters of African Art. Gross was one of the founders of the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., now part of the Smithsonian Institution, which in 1976-77 held an exhibition titled *The Sculptor's Eye: The African Art Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Chaim Gross*, which subsequently traveled to the Worcester Art Museum, the Cincinnati Museum of Art and the University of Georgia Museum. Gross had a contagious enthusiasm for the works with which he surrounded himself in his Greenwich Village studio and home, located at 526 LaGuardia Place, which today houses the Chaim Gross Studio.



The Chaim Gross Studio

Buyers of his own sculpture were frequently encouraged to explore African art, as were Gross's artist friends. Paintings by many members of his community of artists such as Max Ernst, John Graham, Arshile Gorky, Adolphe Gottlieb, Milton Avery, Raphael Soyer, Mané Katz and Willem de Kooning cover the walls of the Foundation, hanging side-by-side with photographs by his close friends Arnold Newman and Elliot Elisofon. Many of the paintings found throughout the Foundation's building are inscribed with personal dedications such as "To Dear Chaim."

### **The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation**

Conceived by close friends in honor of Gross's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1974, and established as a nonprofit organization in 1988, The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation is dedicated to documenting, archiving, researching, protecting, sharing, and furthering the understanding of the life and work of Chaim Gross. Using as a guide the values of Chaim Gross and his wife, Renee, the Foundation intends to undertake other projects and initiatives that relate to art and art history. The Foundation's headquarters, located in the artist's historic Greenwich Village townhouse and studio space, houses an extensive collection of Chaim Gross's artwork featuring hundreds of sculptures executed in a wide range of media – including wood, stone and bronze – and spanning every period of the artist's career. The Foundation also holds thousands of the artist's drawings, sketchbooks and prints, and houses an extensive archive relating to the artist, including photographs, correspondence, books and newspaper and magazine articles. Proceeds from the sale of the African and Oceanic art will be used to support the mission of The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation and expand the activities of the Chaim Gross Studio housed at the Foundation. For more information please visit [www.rcgrossfoundation.org](http://www.rcgrossfoundation.org).

### **Exhibition Information**

Works from the sale will be on exhibition at Sotheby's New York galleries from May 9-14, 2009. Additionally, a special exhibition of works by Chaim Gross and his contemporaries as well as sale highlights will be held at Sotheby's New York from February 17 through March 1, 2009. An exhibition of highlights from the auction will be on view at Sotheby's Paris April 6-9, 2009.

\*Estimates do not include buyer's premium.