

Collector shares love for American Indian art

BY TIM SHELLBERG

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It's easy for people to get spooked when they see scary Indian tribal masks.

Yet they serve their creators in a way most westerners wouldn't expect, according to area art collector Lawrence P. Kolton.

"It's all meant to drive away evil, not to attract people," he said. "The thought (with the tribe) is that the scarier that the mask is, the more it's meant to drive away evil, not to attract evil. A lot of people (outside the culture) think the masks are attracting evil spirits. But it's really all for good spirits."

With a collection of pieces from Africa and the south and northwest Pacific past the 10 thousand mark, the Beverly Shores art collector is bringing some of his favorite pieces to the John G. Blank Center for the Arts in Michigan City for display. About 200 of his pieces are expected to be on display when the exhibit opens on Saturday.

A graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago who has made a living doing everything from carpentry to commercial art, to owning a handful of antique stores in the Windy City, Kolton, 63, began collecting for nearly four decades now. He started out collecting American Indian art, but authentic pieces became few and far between, and were grossly expensive when they did come across.

He then turned his attention outside the country, collecting foreign tribal art pieces and Oceanic works, which are pieces created by people in the south and northwest Pacific. His collecting has taken him around the world, mostly to New Guinea and Africa, in search of authentic pieces.

"There's a big difference between real tribal pieces that they make for themselves to be used by their own people and pieces that they make that are meant to be sold to the white man," he said. "They put a lot of soul and a lot of magic into (authentic works).

"When you think of the primitive tools that they use to create this stuff, they don't have the fancy stuff that we have," he added. "A lot of love goes into these pieces. A lot of time goes into these pieces."

Kolton is touching on a variety of arts and subject matters for his exhibit at the John G. Blank Center, with everything from pottery to costumes to shrine figures to ceremonial masks on display.

"I hope people (who view the exhibit) find an appreciation of tribal pieces," Kolton said of his exhibit. "All the impressionists collected tribal art.

Picasso was a big collector of tribal pieces, and all your famous 20th century painters and sculptors were collectors."

In the near future, Kolton plans on making the remainder of his collection available for public viewing, as he is planning on converting a two-story pull barn on his property into an art gallery. A motorcycle accident sustained by Kolton early last fall put the plans of opening his barn to the public on the back burner.