City by the Bay to Get a Trove of Oceanic Art

By HOLLAND COTTER

When the de Young Museum reopens in October in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, it will be showing off not only a brand-new, quake-resistant building but a sensational addition to its collection, too.

The museum is about to announce the pledged gift of a stunning collection of Oceanic art amassed over the last 40 years by John Friede, a New York-based entrepreneur in the health care field, and his wife, Marcia. The 350 pieces that will go on view at the beginning - including many of exceptional beauty and rarity and some of unsuspected antiquity - were drawn from some 3,000 objects from the South Pacific island of New Guinea that will come to the museum over time. The collection as a whole is estimated to be worth well over $100 million.

"It's the best collection of this art in private hands," Eric Kjellgren, an associate curator and Oceanic specialist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said of the carved figures, masks, shields and musical instruments that crowd the couple's Westchester home and made it an international magnet for scholars, curators and dealers.

Oceania is the collective name for the more than 25,000 South Pacific islands that divide ethnologically into Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Since the 19th century its art has attracted a passionate Western following. The experience of it transformed the life and work of Gauguin, inspired Matisse and contributed to Picasso's development of Cubism. Oceanic collections put together by André Breton and Paul Éluard in the 1920's shaped the shock-tactic aesthetics and the anticolonialist politics of French Surrealism, in ways fascinatingly detailed in Robert McNab's "Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle" (Yale, 2004).

Yet Oceanic material is little known to the average art museum visitor. With a few exceptions, the most substantial holdings are in ethnographic institutions like the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where "high art" status is in question. At the Met, Oceanic objects are isolated with other "primitive" art in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas.

The very term "Oceanic" lumps together numberless individual cultures only beginning to be defined by hard-pressed scholars in a seriously underpopulated academic field. And the art itself departs in fundamental ways from Western tastes and expectations, particularly those of the standard temple-of-beauty museum.

While unsurpassed in visual inventiveness and finesse, much Oceanic art is martial in purpose and sexual in content. Ritual efficacy rather than aesthetic contemplation is its goal. A cultural ethic of secrecy, combined with disruptions and suppression under colonial rule, can make the intended meanings of objects difficult to recover. The performance rituals, spoken narratives, body painting and tattooing that supplied an essential context for objects have disappeared.

The Friede (pronounced FREE-dee) collection represents only one area in Oceania, but a significant one.
New Guinea is the world's second-largest island after Greenland, the size of France and Spain combined. It is divided politically into two parts, independent Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya, a province of Indonesia, and is home to thousands of languages and cultures.

This diversity comes through with bewildering force in its art, which in the Friede collection ranges from a prehistoric stone sculpture of a bird, as abstract as a Brancusi, from around 3000 B.C., to a shield painted in the 1960's with the Pop-ish figure of the comic book character the Phantom. The bulk of the work, however, is made up of classic ceremonial and domestic objects, among them many of superlative quality.

High on any list is a large processional bark-cloth-and-rattan mask made by the Elema people in the Gulf of Papua. Its punchy designs in white and rust-brown pigment exemplify the curvilinear bent and subtle asymmetry of New Guinea design, which create an effect of optically disorienting movement. Masks of this type are thought to have been used only once, then destroyed. Perhaps the local presence of a European collector of artifacts in the late 19th century accounts for the survival of this one.

Similar circumstances surround a magnificent feathered headdress made by the Mekeo people on the island's southeast coast. An assemblage of bird of paradise and cockatoo plumage attached to a cane armature and ornamented with the preserved bodies of birds, along with tortoise shells, hornbill beaks and human hair, it was collected in the 1880's for a private museum in Britain but was never unpacked from its shipping case. As a result, its fragile, almost floral luxuriance is in near-pristine condition.

Certain pieces carry celebrity cachet, like a sculpture owned by the Dada artist Tristan Tzara and two owned by Breton. A bark-cloth painting of swordfish surrounded by tiny figures and suns belonged to the art historian Paul S. Wingert, a pioneer in Oceanic studies. Exquisite and fanciful, it would have entranced Paul Klee.

More than 500 Friede objects once formed the personal collection of the art historian Douglas Newton (1920-2001), the influential first curator of the Met galleries that were named for Nelson A. Rockefeller's son Michael, an anthropologist who disappeared in 1961 at the age of 23 while on an art-gathering expedition to New Guinea.

The Newton material is one reason the Met seemed a natural repository for the Friede collection, though there were others. "The Met's New Guinea collection has wonderful things, but it also has major gaps," Gillian Gillison, an anthropologist at the University of Toronto, said. "The Friede collection would have made it fabulous," she added. "Too bad for New York." (The Met's Oceanic galleries are closed until spring 2007 because of renovations in the building.)

"Museum gallery space is at a premium in New York," Mr. Friede said. "My collection just wouldn't be a fit for the Met."

The de Young, with a new building and with holdings that come nowhere near the Met's encyclopedic range, has greeted the gift with open arms and included Mr. Friede in every phase of planning its installation. "A clean blackboard is pretty appealing," the de Young's director, Harry S. Parker III, said. "In a museum as incomplete as ours, a collection can be given the kind of dominance it deserves."

Dominance in this case will mean a 5,000-square-foot permanent gallery named for the Friedes in a center-stage location in the new building. The museum will also co-publish a two-volume catalog of the collection written by Mr. Friede and other art historians. (The collection itself is named the Jolika Collection after the Friedes' three children: John, Lisa and Karen.) As part of the research for the book, Mr. Friede submitted 200 objects to the University of Arizona in Tucson for carbon-14 dating. Some of the results are startling and possibly history-changing.

For example, dates obtained from an impressive Sepik River mask, of a kind routinely assigned to the 19th and 20th centuries, ran from A.D. 660 to 890. Possible dates for a seated male figure from New
Guinea's northwest coast spanned the 13th to 15th centuries. A female figure, her raised arms suggesting a filigree of feathers or flames, falls somewhere between the 15th and 17th centuries.

To accept such dates could mean not only revising the chronology of an immense body of Oceanic art, but also possibly rethinking the notion, long an art-historical given, that much "primitive" art was based on a concept of planned obsolescence and that its preservation in museums is in direct violation of its makers' intentions.

Needless to say, these ideas, like so many others surrounding the art of Oceania, are intensely controversial. And so it is that many months before it officially arrives at its new perch on the Pacific Rim, a great collection of great Pacific art is already causing waves.