

2 Disputed Indian Wampum Belts Pulled From Auction

By JAMES BARRON

Sotheby's has removed two ceremonial Indian wampum belts from an auction scheduled for Wednesday following complaints by the Onondaga nation that the belts were part of their cultural heritage and should be returned.

Sotheby's issued a statement on Monday saying that the estate of a collector that had consigned the belts had decided to withdraw them "in order to review the information presented" by the Onondaga.

The statement also said the decision to take the belts out of the Wednesday sale had been made "pending further discussion with the Haudenosaunee Standing Committee." The Haudenosaunee is a confederacy that includes the Onondaga and five other nations.

Sotheby's had estimated that one of the belts would sell for \$15,000 to \$20,000 and the other would go for \$20,000 to \$30,000.

Onondaga leaders had threatened to attend the auction and stand silently in protest as the bidding progressed.

They had sent Sotheby's a package of letters from Indian leaders and scholars last week

describing the two items and outlining their objections to the sale. One expert said the two belts were probably made between 1760 and 1820.

Wampum belts "represent our sacred history, the founding principles of our laws and life-ways and the importance of agreements that we have made between nations," Christine G. Abrams, a member of the Haudenosaunee Standing Committee, said in a letter to Sotheby's. "Wampum belts are our legal documents and records, which also combine sacred knowledge, forming the basis of our identity today."

Shannon Keller O'Loughlin, a lawyer for the Onondaga nation, said the Onondaga considered the belts community property that were never owned by any one person, and that no Onondaga had ever had the authority to sell or transfer them. "Therefore," she wrote in a letter to Sotheby's last week, "these belts were originally taken out of these communities without proper 'title.'"

How that happened remains a mystery, according to the letters the Haudenosaunee sent Sothe-



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One of two wampum belts pulled from a sale; it may have fetched \$15,000 or more.

by's.

"It is not clear how or why these two wampum belts were removed from native ownership," wrote Margaret M. Bruchac, the coordinator of Native American studies at the University of Connecticut's Avery Point campus in Groton.

Both belts were once in the collection of the Museum of the American Indian, a forerunner of the National Museum of the American Indian in Lower Manhattan, and Ms. O'Loughlin said

the Museum of the American Indian had "deaccessioned" them. Deaccession is a term used by museums to describe the process of taking items out of their collections and make them available for sale or exchange.

Sotheby's said the belts had come from a collection belonging to Herbert G. Wellington Jr., the chairman of an old-line stock brokerage firm before his death in 2005.

Mr. Wellington's collection included objects from a number of North American tribes and was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1983.

Sotheby's said the representatives of the estate declined to talk about the dispute.

Ms. O'Loughlin also questioned whether the deaccessioning had been done properly. That issue was investigated in the 1970s by the state attorney general at the time, Louis J. Lefkowitz.

A trustee of the Museum of the American Indian, the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, had complained that art dealers were permitted to "go shopping" for American Indian rarities at a museum warehouse in the Bronx.