Vice President Jim on repatriation mission to Paris to retrieve sacred masks

The Navajo Nation Council’s Naa’bik’i’iyati’ Committee and its subcommittee, the Sacred Site Task Force, held several meetings with Navajo Historic Preservation Department to plan for the return of the masks.

On Dec. 10, the task force directed the NNHRC to plan a delegation to retrieve the masks before the close of the auction. Bidding for the items will close on Dec. 15. The vice president was selected to join the delegation because of his knowledge as a Navajo medicine man and ability to authenticate the items.

“The goal is the outright purchase of these items before they go on sale.”

Vice President Rex Lee Jim is traveling to Paris, France for the return of sacred masks used in the Tt’ee’ji Hátaał, or Night Way Chant. Eight masks are on the auction block after being put up for bid by a private collector. He is joined by the Washington Office and Legislative Branch. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

Window Rock, Ariz.—Navajo Nation Vice President Rex Lee Jim is on a mission. On Dec. 11, he left for Paris, France for the repatriation of Navajo ceremonial masks.

The vice president will attend a meeting with the U.S. Embassy-Paris officials on Dec. 13 at 2 p.m. to discuss strategy for the return of the eight Yei Bi Chei masks on the auction block.

The masks were used in the Tt’ee’ji Hátaał, also known as the Night Way Chant healing ceremony. The nine-day ceremony features the use of Yei Bi Chei masks, which represent the Navajo deities, Talking God and Black God.

A private collector put the items up for auction through the Paris auction house.

According to the Eve Company website, their business is operated by professionals recognized for their expertise and service in advising collectors on art, collectibles, furniture, jewelry, insurance estimates and mandatory tax returns. The company was founded in 2002.

The 140-page Eve American Indian and Columbian Art catalog features native masks, garments, sculptures, kachinas, jewelry, rugs, pottery, baskets and other items of cultural significance from tribes across the Americas. These items will be auctioned on Dec. 15.

Jared King from the Navajo Nation Washington Office will accompany Vice President Jim, along with Leonard Gorman and Rodney Tahe, from the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission.

The Legislative Branch funded the trip for the NNHRC.

Upon the successful return of the ceremonial items, the Office of the President and Vice President will host a forum to explain that the sale of sacred tribal items is unacceptable. The need for this international dialogue has been growing for years and the Navajo Nation will voice its strong opposition to any such future auctions.

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