A Southwest hide mask, probably Navajo, which was sold at auction yesterday for $13,200.

Buyer Vows to Return Masks to Indians

By RITA REIF

Three American Indian masks, two Hopi and one probably Navajo, that were auctioned yesterday at Sotheby's in New York despite protests by both tribes, were bought by a New York woman who said in an interview later that she would return them to the Indians.

"The whole point of coming here was to purchase these ritual objects and to return them to the Hopi and Navajo nations to whom they apparently belong," said Elizabeth Sackler shortly after paying a total of $39,000 for the masks. "It is clearly the right thing to do. I certainly want to make sure they are returned to the rightful owners."

Miss Sackler is a daughter of the late Arthur M. Sackler, who was a prominent collector of antiquities and Asian and Middle Eastern art. She is president of the foundation in New York that bears his name and organizes exhibitions of his collections. She said she had never bid at an auction before yesterday and was acting for herself, not the foundation.

"Period examples of Native American ritual objects should not be for trade, purchase or collecting," Miss Sackler said. "I am hoping that the $40,000 spent in this way will far exceed what $40,000 would do elsewhere. If it opens people's eyes and they act on it, it is a very great investment."

Some Indians say the masks are sacred and their use for anything except a religious ceremony is disrespectful of their religion.

Miss Sackler said she would get in touch with representatives of the Hopi and Navajo nations to return the masks and hoped other people would not buy such artifacts to keep. "If they have the heart and the pocketbook to purchase other ritual objects, they might do so and return them," she said.

"People shouldn't be paying enormous amounts of money for such objects for their personal enjoyment," she said. "Enlightenment can come in different forms. It doesn't have to come just through art collecting."

Miss Sackler paid $24,200 for one Hopi mask, $1,650 for another and $13,200 for one identified as probably Navajo. The total was nearly double Sotheby's presale estimate.

Bernard de Grumme, Sotheby's tribal art specialist, defended the decision of Sotheby's and the unidentified seller to auction the masks. "Basically Congress decided how to deal with this problem," Mr. de Grumme said. "We are just following that law."

The law to which Mr. de Grumme referred, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, became law in November. It calls for the repatriation of cultural property by museums but not by individuals unless they bought the material from a museum after Nov. 16, 1990. The seller of the masks in yesterday's auction acquired them in 1982, Mr. de Grumme said he was told.

Mr. de Grumme said Sotheby's would require sellers of such masks to provide proof of purchase or, if none exists, to sign an affidavit stating that the objects had not been bought from a museum.

Will Channing, a dealer in American Indian art in New York and Santa Fe, said he no longer handles masks. "There has been a real push in the last few years by tribal officials, especially the Hopi," he said, "to make the public more aware of the cultural significance of these pieces and their place in the ceremonial life of the Indian nations."