

[Home](#) > [Features](#) > [Museum Opening Of The Year](#)



MUSEUM OPENING OF THE YEAR

The display of a remarkable private collection at the Mougins Museum of Classical Art highlights the intriguing relationships in Western art from antiquity to the present day

Sir John Boardman, Thursday, 1st December 2011

The Mougins Museum of Classical Art Mougins, France

Mougins is a picturesque old hill town in the Alpes Maritimes, just 15 minutes from Cannes and with spectacular views all around. It was here that Picasso decided to live in 1961 and where he died in 1973, and where other 20th-century French artists and savants often stayed or visited. Now it is home to a stunning new museum of Classical art, established in a completely renovated medieval house by Christian Levett (a British investment manager and self-confessed 'compulsive' collector) together with museum director Mark Merrony, (editor of the archaeological journal *Minerva*). The Mougins Museum of Classical Art enjoyed a very festive opening in May this year, while its catalogue, edited by Dr Merrony and featuring commentaries and essays by a number of internationally recognised scholars, appeared in the autumn.

The contents of the museum reflect, naturally enough, the tastes of its owner, yet they are also a singularly appropriate range for the place and times. Classical and Egyptian antiquities have been the prime inspiration of European arts for centuries, down to Picasso and beyond, therefore the display in Mougins reflects well the cultural history of both the South of France and of the Western world. The antiquities are displayed beside choice examples of more recent painting, by artists as diverse as Rubens and Picasso, in juxtapositions that wordlessly elucidate historical and aesthetic relationships. A Picasso drawing of the ancient sculptor in the company of his models and of an ancient demon seems to say it all.

Externally the museum has an aspect in tune with its *vieux-village* surrounds, but within it is laid out and equipped in the modern manner, with each item individually lit and not at the mercy of architectural convenience. The Crypt is devoted – appropriately, given the funerary content – to Egypt. The ground-floor People and Personalities gallery is given to ancient portraits (Fig. 1); these are set against works by artists including Cézanne and Damien Hirst. The first floor has the theme of Gods and Goddesses echoed in works by Rubens, Rodin and many more (Fig. 3). Upstairs is the Armoury, which boasts a quite remarkable assemblage of ancient decorated armour that would be difficult to match elsewhere in the world (Fig. 2).

The Egyptian display ranges from fully painted mummy coffins to the finest bronze animal statuettes. The Greek display offers not only the best of vase-painting styles from the 6th to 3rd centuries BC, but also silver plate and jewellery. Roman sculpture is richly represented by a series of portrait heads, in bronze and marble, as well as the full figures that have been a major inspiration for artists since the Renaissance to today – sculpture by Antony Gormley, for example, is also on display in Mougins. The realm of portraiture in antiquity is much dependent on coin portraits, hence the museum's rich collection of Greek and Roman gold and silver coins, most featuring portraits, spanning the 5th century BC to the end of antiquity. Silverware and jewellery, both Greek and Roman, are represented by more than just the few earrings that tend to appear in comparable collections, while silver plate is unusually well represented – such work has seldom survived well since antiquity, given its intrinsic value. Armour may seem an usual prospect for the collector, but in both form and decoration it is no less a demonstration of the ancient artist's acumen and 'eye' as are more traditional, less practical works of art.

The antiquities of this collection generally have no provenance other than that given, as reliably as possible, by modern scholarship. Some scholars, generally with little claim to 'an eye' for antiquity, might deplore this. But the collector's eye need be no less acute than the scholar's. So much of importance from antiquity has survived without revealing its home or original find-place that it would be folly to criticise the diligence, expertise and zeal of a modern collector such as Mr Levett, who has saved and displayed so much so well. He has, moreover, succeeded in the task of placing it all within the context of the 'modern' arts, sparked as they were by the Renaissance's discovery of antiquity – a discovery that continues to inspire so many of today's artists, even those decidedly unconventional. The Mougins Museum of Classical Art is a triumphant demonstration of a proper understanding of the relevance and history of Western arts, as well as a splendid display of them in context. o

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