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THE ACQUISITIVE GENE

Christian Levett's fanaticism for collecting antiquities has led to him opening a museum for his collection in the South of France. He spoke to Apollo about his collecting and the museum's mission to reveal the thread of Classicism in Western art

Susan Moore, Wednesday, 1st February 2012

I guess there is a gene for collecting, a certain fanaticism that drives some people to collect – a similar trait might drive someone to gambling, I suppose,' muses Christian Levett. 'I have that gene.' This is something of an understatement, given that the 41-year-old founder of the world's largest commodities hedge fund, Clive Capital, found the time and energy to amass a collection of over 700 works of art, most of them classical antiquities, and open a public museum for them in the south of France within the space of just seven years. His Mougins Museum of Classical Art (MMoCA) was awarded Apollo's Museum Opening of the Year in 2011.

We meet at his office in St James', London, where the reception area offers visitors an unusual selection of reading material: neat piles of antiquities auction catalogues and recent editions of *Minerva*, the archaeology and ancient art magazine that Mr Levett took over two years ago. Presiding over the sleek, high-tech meeting room are a 5th-century BC bronze Chalcidian helmet and a marble lid fragment, carved in high relief to depict a lion savaging a bull, from a 2nd-century AD Roman sarcophagus. Do they amount to a threat – or promise? – of corporate aggression? It takes about two minutes in the company of the refreshingly open and enthusiastic Mr Levett to quash that idea.

The collecting began, as it so often does, in childhood, when a 'deep interest' in history prompted Mr Levett, then aged just seven, to amass Victorian coins and campaign medals from the First and Second World Wars. By his 20s he was buying fine art and furniture for two properties, and meanwhile 'launched' into collecting hand-painted natural history books. He also returned to coins, this time focusing on English silver pennies and groats and Roman silver denarii. 'I wanted to represent every Roman emperor from Julius Caesar onwards for the next 400 years,' he explains, 'which I did, except for about two. It took me a few years to get those collections together.'

It is no coincidence, perhaps, that Roman imperial coins should have laid the foundation stone of MMoCA. After all, they represent the consummate melding of art and history. As the great French numismatist Ernest Babelon put it in 1901: 'What a matchless gallery of portraits Roman Imperial coins present! Without them, how would we have been able to identify the statues in our museums? The reverse of each coin offers us a detailed chronology, recording the events of each reign; such information supplements historians' accounts, correcting them if need be, or helping us to interpret them to the fullest.' For Mr Levett, the two-dimensional portraits of imperial coins were to evolve into a pantheon – cast, carved and painted – of emperors, gods, poets and philosophers. Figurative art and, arguably, metalwork are at the core of his remarkable collection.

The shift from two- to three-dimensional antiquities was made impulsively. 'I was just ticking off my auction catalogue subscription lists at the beginning of the year and decided to tick the antiquities box, not really knowing what sort of things they might offer,' he explains. 'I have always spent a lot of time in museums, in London and Paris, and often walked around their antiquities galleries, but it never occurred to me that you could still buy things like Roman marbles, Egyptian sarcophagi or Greek military helmets.' He grins broadly and continues: 'So these antiquities catalogues turned up, and it absolutely blew me away that you could own an Egyptian cartonnage mask and have it on the side in the living room – I thought it was a bit of a strange idea at first. As I was going on holiday the next day, I left a couple of absentee bids anyway, for a cartonnage mask and a Greek battle helmet. In relation to fine art neither of these things was expensive – about £7,000 each, although £7,000 is not a small amount of money. When I got back from holiday I found that I had bought them. Then I went into a bit of a panic. How could you buy a 2,500-year-old Greek helmet for £7,000? Were they reproductions, or fakes?' He had them checked; needless to say, both were fine. 'I thought, "Wow, this is amazing!"

'I started picking up a piece here and there, and that gradually built up into a huge crescendo. I was particularly fascinated by armour – helmets, breastplates, backplates and swords – as I had always found military history fascinating.' Propitiously, the vast collection of Axel Guttmann (1944–2001), probably the world's largest private holding of ancient arms and armour, was then being gradually released onto the art market. The Berlin-based collector had bought virtually everything available from around 1982 until his death, and was reputed to own some 350 helmets alone. 'I bought most, but not all, of his best pieces,' says Mr Levett. Some came through the trade, others at auction, not least Hermann Historica of Munich. 'In some of the sales I bought 20 pieces – it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.' Now Mr Levett can lay claim to owning the world's largest private collection of Greco-Roman arms and armour. A particular favourite is the rare and ornate, 4th-century BC bronze-winged helmet of the Phrygian-Chalcidian type, its hinged cheek-pieces adorned with images of the goddesses Nike and Artemis (Fig. 2).

While the Guttman acquisitions included real rarities, they were not always in the best condition. What Mr Levett describes as the 'scientific side' of collecting militaria – the X-rays and analysis used to determine what condition a piece is in as well as how recently it might have come out of the ground – came to intrigue him too. Since those initial absentee purchases he has always been careful about authenticity, seeking out pieces with long provenances and consulting among a network of specialists before taking the plunge. The militaria, he concedes, is more interesting than beautiful, although 'even the relatively plain, like an Illyrian helmet, is enigmatic and provocative, provoking emotions of one kind or another.'

Clearly, his is a romantic response to these ancient and sometimes battered historical survivals. He is intrigued by where they might have travelled and what they might have seen. No piece is more eloquently enigmatic than the fragmentary bronze backplate of a Greek cuirass bearing the votive inscription: 'For Athena – spoils from the enemy'. As for his pieces of sculpture, he likes to picture the ancient rooms in which they resided some 2,000 years ago, and revels in the fact that some were formerly owned by popes and princes or are celebrated Grand Tour discoveries, such as the exquisitely carved Roman marble ornamental cinerary urn from the 1st century A.D. illustrated in Piranesi's *Vasi, Candelabri, Cippi...* of 1778 (Fig. 3).

Roman marbles proved to be Mr Levett's second great passion, and together with the militaria they remain closest to his heart.

As one might expect, there are busts or full-length statues of famous historical figures: emperors and their families; poets and philosophers. One of his most beloved pieces, for instance, is an 'absolutely amazing' over life-size statue of the Roman emperor Hadrian from around 117–138 AD (Fig. 4). 'When we bought the piece in 2008 we suspected that the torso was probably 17th-century or at the latest early 18th-century,' remarks Mr Levett. 'So we have been studying it – in fact, we have sponsored a post-doctoral student at Oxford to work on the collection for the next couple of years.' Research so far has revealed the statue was almost certainly produced by Alessandro Rondoni for the Villa Montalto around 1600, and originally depicted Jupiter. Another favourite is an over-life-size portrait bust of Lucius Verus, co-emperor of Rome with Marcus Aurelius, likewise from the 2nd century AD. Among Mr Levett's 50 to 60 marbles we can also find Alexander the Great, Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius and Caracalla. Yet as he insists, this is more than a collection of famous faces: 'The interesting thing is that it does not have to be the head that grabs me. I can get just as much pleasure from a torso that has very finely carved drapery or from intricate or life-like carving of the hair, a belt or even a sandal.'

Over time he also became interested in Roman bronzes, acquiring relatively recently the likes of the over life-size head of Apollo with its sharply defined, idealised features and exuberant, richly detailed curls (Fig. 5). Dating from the 2nd-century-AD, it is believed to be a Roman interpretation of a Greek prototype such as the severe-style Omphalos Apollo, usually attributed to the mid 5th-century BC sculptor Kalamis. He also bought a handful of Greek vases. 'I never got into vases in a big way – pottery just doesn't flick my switch – although I have got one or two nice black-figure vases with battles themes that work particularly well in the armoury gallery.

'My fanaticism for collecting had over-taken every practicality,' he recalls cheerily.

'I ended up going crazy and buying a lot of stuff and filling two houses with it and then found myself having to put a lot in storage.

I had bought some important pieces by then, and thought that people should be able to see them and study them. My initial idea was just to get them all together in one room.' Then, at a fateful dinner given in 2008 by the dealer and founder of *Minerva* Dr Jerome Eisenberg, he met the magazine's editor, Dr Mark Merrony, and they talked over his plans. 'Mark asked to see a copy of my inventory and was absolutely knocked out, as were other people I showed it to,' Mr Levett recalls. 'The consensus was that I should do a museum, rather than something ad hoc.'

Thinking about what kind of building he would like and where he might like it to be, he quickly ruled out London, not only because of the cost of the premises but because he would be competing with the British Museum, the Sir John Soane's Museum and hundreds of other cultural institutions. 'That seemed a little ridiculous,' he smiles. 'I did not want us to look like the poor cousin.' And so his mind turned to Mougins, where he already owned a property and had plans of retiring one day.

It seemed an ideal location, not least because of the region's Greek and Roman history. More crucially, the picturesque *vieux village* is close to Cannes, Nice and Grasse and already had a significant tourist footfall thanks to Picasso having spent the last 12 years of his life there, in the fortress-like refuge of the *Mas Notre-Dame-de-Vie*. Indeed, the town's charm, light and climate drew an array of 20th-century talents including Léger, Cocteau and Man Ray.

Christian Levett had already begun to buy fine art with a classical theme, including four oval, bust-length paintings from two series of the 'Twelve Caesars' executed by another passionate antiquities collector, Peter Paul Rubens. With Dr Merrony, now the collection's curator, he developed the idea of 'telling a story' by adding modern art to the museum, 'partly because of the Mougins connection but also because I like Old Master paintings and drawings, and modern and contemporary art too.' The idea was to illustrate the pervasive thread of Classicism in art from the dawn of civilisation to the present day. That thread is followed at MMoCA as it meanders between the likes of Alessandro Turchi's *Diana and Actaeon* (c. 1600), an architectural capriccio by Giovanni Paolo Panini (1691–1765) stuffed with Rome's most famous antiquities and Antony Gormley's *Reflection* (2001), comprising two iron casts of the artist's body stood opposite each other in contemplation – an echo of the Greek myth of Narcissus. Appropriately enough, the prevailing modern genius is Picasso, who was entranced by the mythology of the Mediterranean world and who is represented at the museum through etchings, ceramics and linocuts (A Bearded Man Crowned with Vine-leaves, executed in Mougins in 1962, has been effectively repatriated; Fig. 6).

Mr Levett talks of the 'amazing synergy' in the displays where old and new collide, citing the case devoted to representations of Venus, among them a Roman bronze statuette, a Roman marble torso, Yves Klein's *Vénus Bleue*, Salvador Dali's *Vénus a la Giraffe* and an Andy Warhol screenprint of Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (Fig. 7). He also enjoys the juxtaposition of Keith Haring's 1984 felt-pen on terracotta amphora alongside the kind of ancient Greek red-figure vases that inspired it.

Deciding to build the museum also involved 'filling the gaps and making the collection less lop-sided', and so Mr Levett's remit extended to ancient glass, jewellery, Greek coins, Roman mosaics and Roman silver. Thus ensued another flurry of acquisitions, but even before the museum opened Christian Levett had become increasingly selective, and more confident about paying high – but not the highest – prices. 'I am very strict on setting a limit when I buy,' he explains. 'I have an idea of what the item is worth and to what extent it will hold its value, and how much I am prepared to allocate to it.'

But to imagine that buying had slowed to a trickle or that his obsession waned is to misunderstand Christian Levett. Toward the end of 2011 he bought in Paris a rare, 21cm-high Gallo-Roman gilded bronze figure of the god Mercury – it was thought

to have been underbid by the Louvre – along with a half dozen works, from Roman earrings to a substantial marble cuirassed torso, at the New York sales. He is meanwhile busily expanding his holdings of bronze animals and erotica, with a view to bringing out small publications on both and possibly exhibiting them in another historic building in Mougins in 2013. Back at home, he is decorating a dining room around the theme of ‘100 years of warfare, 1350–1450’, collecting swords, shields, crossbows, daggers and wooden coats-of-arms. There will be English and Continental gold coins too: ‘grander versions of my English medieval groats and pennies – I have got more money now, so it is nobles and angels,’ he laughs. He is not only putting funds into his collecting but also supporting various museums, including the Ashmolean, as well as a doctoral archaeology course at Oxford. He is even sponsoring archaeological digs, the first of these at the end of Hadrian’s Wall in Maryport, Cumbria. ‘I would really like to get my hands dirty and join in,’ he smiles.

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For information on visiting the Mougins Museum of Classical Art, France, go to www.mouginsmusee.com

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