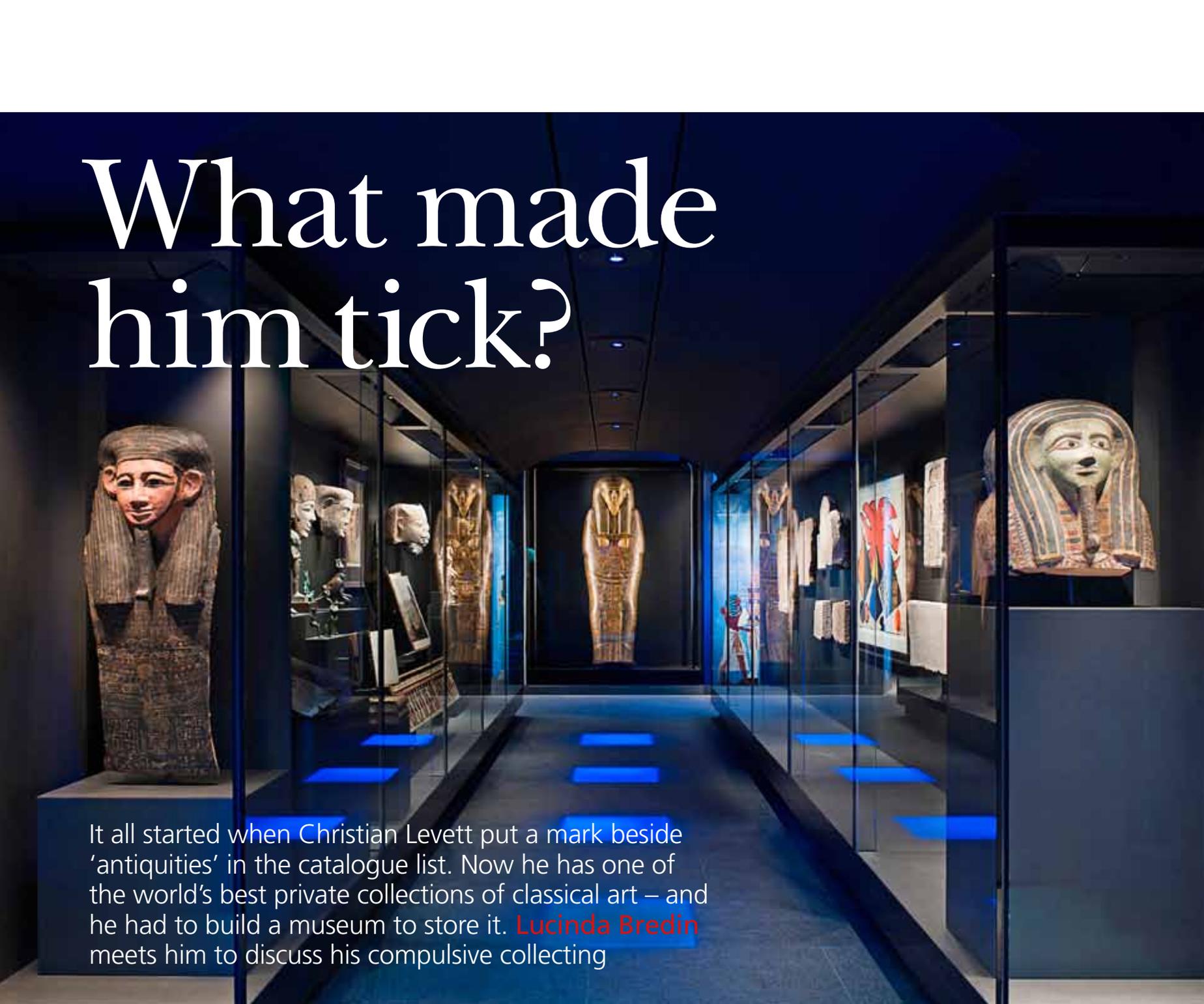


What made him tick?



It all started when Christian Levett put a mark beside 'antiquities' in the catalogue list. Now he has one of the world's best private collections of classical art – and he had to build a museum to store it. **Lucinda Bredin** meets him to discuss his compulsive collecting

In the crypt of Mougins Museum of Classical Art, there is an Egyptian sarcophagus at the far end of the gallery, which, due to the dramatic lighting, appears to be almost levitating. It is an extraordinary sight, and just as I was thinking how privileged I was to be viewing this work by myself, rather than looking at the mummies in the crush at the British Museum, the silence was punctuated by an insistent English voice. "It's not real. No way is that real. It's a model. Why would there be something like that in Mougins?"

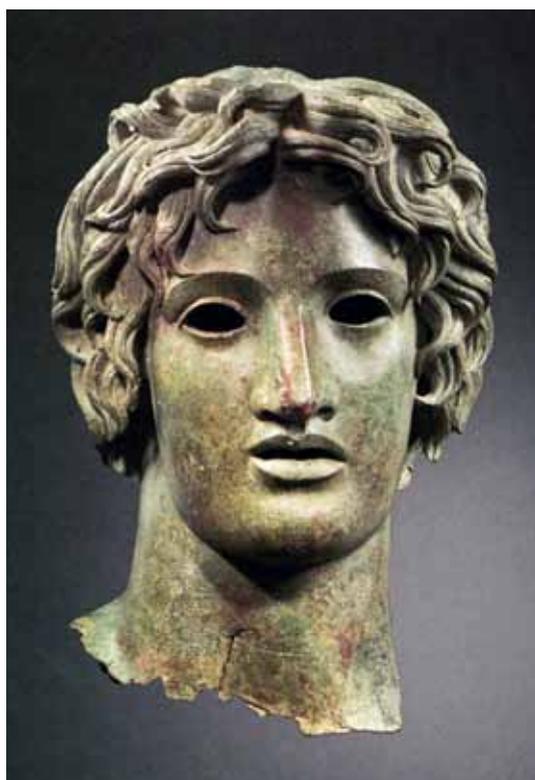
Well, there are two points here: first, it is your 100 per cent genuine sarcophagus, circa 1000 BC. Secondly, it's in Mougins because another Englishman called Christian Levett has assembled such a vast collection of art and antiquities that the only way he could properly store the works is to build his own custom-made museum.

But I can see the sceptic's point. Mougins – an out-of-the-way French village perched on a hillside above Cannes – is a slightly

odd place to find Egyptian sarcophagi. Even more remarkably, the museum also houses the world's largest private collection of Greco-Roman arms and armour, an extraordinary array of Roman bronzes and paintings of classical subjects by artists such as Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse and Toulouse-Lautrec.

Set on four floors of a medieval house, the museum opened in 2011 at the cost of £7m – there's even a state-of-the-art lift that more mainstream museums would kill for. And it is worth ascending to the top floor. There, you find Levett's collection of helmets that, apart from their historical significance – there is one that would have been used in the Peloponnesian Wars – have a haunting sculptural beauty.

There have been a lot of museums unveiled recently that are showcases not only for private collections, but also for the owner's ego. MMoCA (as it is known) does have a personalised touch. There are, for example, some idiosyncratic juxtapositions: a Damien Hirst skull really shouldn't be in



Opposite: 'The Crypt'
at Mougins Museum

Top: The hillside village of
Mougins

Above: Roman bronze
head of a man,
3rd century AD

Right: Christian Levett
beside Antony Gormley's
Reflection, 2001



the same company as an exquisite Roman head, but tellingly Levett's name is nowhere to be seen. That, it seems, is not what this exercise is about.

You could argue that Levett is famous enough – at least in the financial world. Now aged 42, he set up Clive Capital, the world's largest commodity hedge fund, seven years ago. It was rumoured that one year his take-home pay was £83.9 million. But when I meet Levett at his villa on other side of Mougins, he is looking low-key (shorts, polo shirt, hint of a chain around his neck). He bought the property seven years ago and he commutes with his wife, Gina, and their three children to and fro from Wimbledon.

We sit outside on facing sofas under the verandah and we begin to get to grips with his mania for collecting, he terms it "a compulsion to fill in the gaps". Clearly, we don't need consulting rooms in Vienna to trace it back to his Essex childhood. His earliest obsession, from the age of seven, was

with coins and campaign medals. His father, a bookmaker, didn't collect anything, it was his mother who had the acquisitive gene. But according to Christian, "she jumped around. Never made a decent collection of anything," he adds a bit sniffily. But his parents were very interested in history and took Christian round castles and cathedrals. From the sound of it, these trips were the most effective education he received (he says his bog-standard comprehensive was "pretty awful").

There were, however, two things at which Levett really shone: Pro-Am snooker ("I played compulsively.") And numbers. The second skill led him into the City and by the 1990s, aged 25, he was working in Paris for an American hedge fund. On his own, and presumably flush with money, he says he walked off hangovers in the Louvre or d'Orsay. "It took me away from the other two activities that 20-year-olds do – getting plastered and chasing women. So there was always another side to me that required a bit of time being alone."

He went back to his first love, coins. “I tried to collect a silver penny from every English king from Alfred the Great all the way through to Queen Anne, but there’s one missing. It’s an early king in the 9th century – Egbert or Edred ... one of those that lasted only five years. Probably didn’t mint many coins. I’m still on the lookout for it.”

I suggest that the shift from coins to antiquities was wholly logical, given that coins are the bridge between history and the art of iconography and representation. Levett looks doubtful. “Yeah, well, I was looking through my catalogue list, and I decided to tick the antiquities box, which I had always overlooked. I didn’t really know what they meant by antiquities before – you know, anything old I thought. I had absolutely no idea that you could buy Roman marble busts, and Egyptian sarcophagi, and Etruscan bronzes. I thought it was all in museums. So once I started getting these catalogues in, I was absolutely amazed. I thought how could you possibly own anything more interesting than a Roman marble bust or an ancient Greek battle helmet or an Egyptian bronze? For me, this was the ultimate. It just blew me away.”

Levett’s breakthrough piece – “the thing that really sparked me off”, as he says – “was a 2,500-year-old Illyrian Greek helmet and a Egyptian cartonnage mask bought at Bonhams”. Before he knew it, he had bought almost a quarter of Axel Guttman’s

fabled collection of antique helmets that came up for auction in 2004. It was then that Levett began investigating the thorny issues of provenance.

As he says, “I had to get comfortable with provenance that was relatively limited and that put me off antiquities a bit. It was not so much that I was so worried about the looting side of things, since I didn’t know anything about that at first. It was more a case of wondering if I was buying something that might be fake because prices were so cheap. It didn’t seem to make

much sense.” This cautious attitude to the market has served Levett well. He now says, “Everything that we buy is pre-1970s provenance, has been exhibited and has been published before that.” So there have been no national delegations turning up at the museum demanding the return of certain items? “No, never happened.”

If his museum isn’t used as a monument on which to carve his name, what is it? Posh storage? Levett laughs. “Things were mounting up and some of them are world-class pieces. And they should be on display. But I wasn’t sure if the collection was important enough to put into a museum. So I took a lot of advice, and everyone said that it was. It was slightly surprising to me, as I had gone off on my addictive collecting spree. I hadn’t quite realized quite how important it all was. I just thought I had interesting stuff and people might want to see it.”

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“The more you live around the object, the more you get of the feeling of the people, what their life was like”

For all his self-deprecation, Levett clearly knows exactly what works he wants and how to go about getting them – it has been reported that he has a

circle of seven art advisors that seek to fill those gaps. He also has a wonderfully engaging curator at the museum, Dr Mark Merrony, and it is easy to see how the pair spark each other's enthusiasm. Both of them are particularly thrilled by having Yves Klein's *Aphrodite* next to a 2,000-year-old stature of Aphrodite, which is flanked by Dali's *Aphrodite as a Giraffe*. This mix of the ancient and modern at the museum is merely one of the pleasures that Levett gets from his collection.

And the timelessness of his antique artefacts never ceases to amaze him. “The more you live around the object, the more you get the feeling of the people at the time, and what their life was like. It doesn't seem so far away or intangible any more. You feel a bit closer to it all and it doesn't feel so remote.” He pauses. “It's supernatural almost.”

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Opposite: Mougins Museum has the largest private collection of Greco-Roman arms and armour

Above: *Transfiguration* by Carlo Maria Mariani, 1998

Left: A bronze winged helmet, 4th century BC

Below: Michel-Martin Drolling's *The Wrath of Achilles*, 1810



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