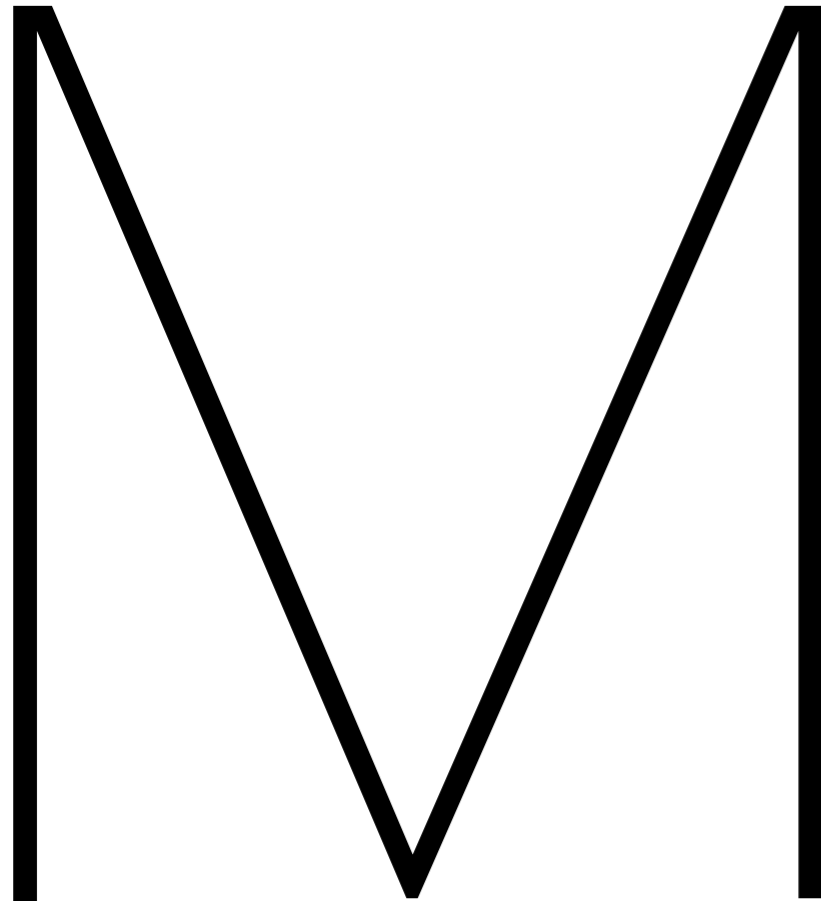


## THE ART GIVERS

COLLECTORS WHO  
FIND PLEASURE IN  
PUBLICLY SHARING  
THEIR WORKS

BY DALYA ALBERGE



Most collectors keep their hoards hidden in their homes, in bank vaults or in storage. Not Christian Levett, a British investment manager, who only wants to share his spectacular collection of art and antiquities with the public.

The 46-year-old philanthropist has a “compulsive need to collect”, he says, but not to hoard. He wants to let the public see his Greek and Roman sculptures, his Egyptian antiquities and his ancient armour — one of the world’s largest private holdings. He also wants them to see his art by Rubens and Picasso, as well as contemporary artists.

“The collecting frenzy got to the point where I was putting things into storage,” he says. “I thought that was a great shame.”

Most of his purchases go straight into the Mougins Museum of Classical Art, which he built five years ago in the hills above Cannes in the south of France. It is filled with more than 700 exhibits spanning 5,000 years, a collection worthy of international museums, which regularly borrow from him for their own displays. ➤

PHOTO: ANDREAS VON EINSIEDEL



Christian Levett satisfied his “need to collect” by creating the Mougins Museum of Classical Art in France



1.

Recent acquisitions include an important Thracian gladiator helmet, which the Metropolitan Museum in New York wishes to borrow next year, and he rattles off numerous other loans made in the past two years alone. They include loans to Germany of a 2nd-century Roman cavalry helmet to the Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum and a 1st-century bronze head of Augustus to the Romano-Germanic museum in Cologne. Among his contemporary works, Ai Weiwei's monumental Iron Tree is on loan to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

The collection has been built with an eye for quality. Its jewels include a colossal Roman depiction of the Emperor Hadrian, which shows off the extraordinary skills of its 2nd-century AD maker. The 216cm high marble statue has drapery that flows like real material over his left arm, revealing his fine muscular torso.

The "Crowe Hall" Roman urn of the 1st century is among other treasures. Despite its exquisite carving, it had been adapted for use as a lamp in the 1970s. But its importance was recognised when it sold for £445,250 at Christie's London in 2011 — more than 40 times its estimated price. It had come from Crowe Hall, one of the finest Regency villas near Bath. Levett bought it from a European dealer who acquired it at auction.

Levett, a softly spoken man, prefers people to focus attention on the collection rather than the collector. He is an Essex bookmaker's son who made his fortune from hedge fund management during the mid-1990s.

Other wealthy individuals splash out on fast cars and boats, but he is a divorcee with two children who drives a Mini and spends money on art and antiquities. He has

THE COLLECTION HAS  
BEEN BUILT WITH AN EYE  
FOR QUALITY.



2.

**Other fund managers who display their art:**

**Andrew Hall:** loaned more than 100 paintings, sculptures and drawings by Andy Warhol to a 2016 spring exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. They were from a collection boasting some 5,000 works by several hundred artists. In February, in a BBC interview about why he started collecting, British-born Hall said: "I turned 50 and then 9/11 happened and suddenly I thought, there has to be more to life than just trying to build up one's bank account." The Hall Art Foundation, founded in 2007, makes available post-war and contemporary art works from its own collection and that of Hall and his wife Christine "for the enjoyment and education of the public".

**Steven A. Cohen:** one of the world's top collectors of Impressionist and modern art, he is a generous lender to institutions and exhibitions. Last year, the billionaire was revealed as the secret buyer of Alberto Giacometti's *L'Homme au doigt* (1947) for \$141.3m at Christie's, which became the most expensive sculpture ever sold at auction. His collection is said to include Vincent van Gogh's *Peasant Woman Against a Background of Wheat* (1890) and Paul Gauguin's *Bathers* (1902).

**Kenneth Griffin:** a billionaire hedge fund manager said to have an insatiable appetite for historic and expensive art. His purchases reportedly include \$80m paid for Jasper Johns's *False Start* and \$50m paid for Jackson Pollock's *Number 17A*. His loans to public exhibitions include the Art Institute of Chicago, to which he has also made multimillion-dollar donations.



3.

a house in Mougins, a medieval village, where he also owns two restaurants, including La Place de Mougins, frequented by Picasso under a previous management.

History and collecting have been passions since childhood. Levett's parents regularly took him to castles and cathedrals and he caught the "collecting mania" aged seven through Victorian coins, which cost "almost nothing" of his pocket money, he recalls. He has never forgotten the boyhood excitement of "touching items, which seemed to bring the history behind them to life".

As a young adult, his interest in history was rekindled with visits to museums and galleries, including the Louvre in Paris and the British Museum in London. He bought 18th- and 19th-century furniture and Georgian and Victorian hand-painted natural history books and recalls his excitement at discovering that he could actually buy Roman and Greek antiquities. He had long assumed that they were only in museums and he was astonished that the prices paled against those for the Impressionists or contemporary art.

Realising that these pieces needed to be looked after and kept in proper conditions, he hired Mark Merrony, an academic and archaeologist, with whom he established the museum. They converted a post-medieval four-storey building once owned by Siscercian monks into a 550 sq m museum in Mougins.

The site could not be more appropriate. It is close to the Graeco-Roman settlements of Nice (Nikaia), Cimiez (Cemenelum) and Antibes (Antipolis), but it also reconnects its ancient past with the modern art produced by its more recent former residents.

Picasso spent the last 12 years of his life in Mougins. Fernand Léger, Jean Cocteau, Francis Picabia and Man Ray also lived there, and Marc Chagall, Raoul Dufy, Henri Matisse and Amedeo Modigliani were nearby. All are represented in Levett's collection, alongside master sculptors of the ancient world.

His items reflect the classical world's influence on later artists, from Rubens (the 17th-century Flemish master's portraits of Roman emperors, for example) to contemporary ones such as Sir Antony Gormley (the British sculptor's two cast-iron male figures suggesting the Greek myth of Narcissus).

Ancient, modern and contemporary exhibits that

ANCIENT, MODERN AND  
CONTEMPORARY EXHIBITS  
WORK WELL TOGETHER AND  
CREATE DRAMATIC DISPLAYS

one might not think would work comfortably together to create dramatic displays: a Roman Venus is next to Salvador Dalí's eccentric Surrealist Venus de Milo with a giraffe neck, and the Blue Venus cast by Yves Klein is next to *The Birth of Venus* by Andy Warhol. There are also Roman depictions of the goddess of love and a Cézanne drawing of the Venus de Milo.

At last year's Masterpiece, the prestigious annual art fair in London, he bought a vase by Grayson Perry, the Turner prize-winning potter. He was drawn immediately to its design with the word "Antiquity" written across its front and he has placed it alongside 4th-century BC ancient Greek vases.

Levett speaks about each piece with scholarly knowledge and puts emphasis on the importance of a pre-1970s provenance. He notes, for example, that he bought the Thracian gladiator helmet from a French medieval arms dealer and that it had been sold at Christie's in 1933, having been found in Italy in the 19th century. "If you can't provide provenance on a... piece, it reduces the value to almost nothing," he says. "[Then] it comes down to the overall quality and workmanship incorporated in the piece and its natural beauty."

Although he keeps adding to the collection, the pace has slowed as prices for antiquities have risen dramatically. He bought an Egyptian sarcophagus for \$1.2m about seven years ago and a dealer recently offered him "five times what I paid for it".

"I'm not buying in the quantities that I was years ago," he says. "Financially, it's not really possible any more when things are trading at £7m instead of £500,000."

Does he keep certain artefacts for himself? "Not really," he says. "Most of the best stuff is in the museum."

Although he spends about 75 days a year in France, he is based in Britain. He works as a portfolio manager at Moore Capital, one of the longest-standing hedge funds. While talking to FT Wealth, he keeps an eye on the crude oil and gasoline markets, apologising beforehand that he may need to break off to trade.

He misses his collection when he is away from it: "I don't see it as much as I'd like." Initially, he did consider opening the museum in London, but he did not have the confidence.

"I was overly paranoid about what other museums would say about it and generally the academic approach to antiquity collecting. In fact, I got that completely wrong because other museums have been unbelievably supportive and the academic world has embraced it as well," he says.

The museum now attracts about 18,000 visitors a year, an impressive number for a tiny village.


"When I opened it, I really had no idea whether it would be tens of thousands or two men and a dog on a summer's day," he adds. 

PHOTO: NIGEL RODDIS/REUTERS



4.



5.

1. Bronze Phrygian style cavalry helmet, 2nd-3rd century AD

2. Marble statue of emperor Hadrian's head and a Baroque body, 17th century

3. Ai Weiwei's Iron Tree

4. Collector Christian Levett

5. Roman ornamental cinerary urn, 1st century AD