

TIME'S TELESCOPE

On the millionaire's playground of the Côte d'Azur, one man's personal passion is now available to all

↓ Words Jean West

In an upstairs room in a little hilltop village, just inland from Cannes, lies a warrior's helmet, green tinged with verdigris, wings spread in mythical readiness for flight. It rests in a glass cabinet, beautifully lit, and it's not just the wings that suggest a moment frozen in time. To judge from the heavy dent in its side, it seems likely that its hapless owner saw all the stars of the firmament the day he took it into battle, at around the time of Christ. It's doubtful that he made it home.

Today the ornate headdress which so artfully but ineffectually protected the ancient soldier provides one key to the creative purpose of the Musée d'Art Classique in Mougins. Downstairs, another is suggested by the flamboyant Andy Warhol, whose screen-printed interpretation of Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus is infused with trademark kitsch and a blush of pop colour, while a third comes courtesy of a startling, vivid, bright blue torso of the same deity by the French nouveau réaliste Yves Klein.

The naked form of the goddess of love, philosophers felt, might elevate the beholder's thoughts to a more spiritual plane. And well she might, in this extraordinary museum.

The helmet is part of the world's largest private collection of ancient arms and armour, and the museum is a treasure trove of classical pieces that purvey tales of everyday life reaching back through the millennia. The Klein and Warhol artefacts are

Collector turned curator: English investment manager Christian Levett at his museum.



interpretations by two of its raft of modern and contemporary artists of the everyday themes excavated with these antiquities, which underpin and illustrate their influence down the ages.

A small but perfectly formed gem, nestled high above the millionaire's playground of the Côte D'Azur – a region that was once a magnet for artists of the Impressionist and Surrealist movements – the museum is now in its fifth year, and already has the air of a permanent landmark. It was established by a passionate, and by his own admission 'compulsive' collector, Christian Levett, an investment manager from Essex. The museum cleverly places the ancient and neoclassical alongside the modern and contemporary. Figures such as Dali, Rodin, Klein and Warhol, Rubens, Cézanne, Chagall and Matisse rub shoulders with living legends like Damien Hirst, Marc Quinn and Antony Gormley, and all of them inject a refreshing energy into the musings of classical art.

"We often forget that all art, from an Egyptian mummy to a Roman emperor's portrait, was once contemporary art," the British sculptor Mark Quinn told *Watermark*. Commenting on the juxtaposition of one his own pieces within the wider context of the museum's collection, he added: "This museum mixes ancient pieces and works from our own era and shows us that art is basically a continuous spectrum. No other museum I know does it as effectively as this."

Christian Levett, 46, the son of a bookmaker, traces his passion for collecting back to a childhood obsession with Roman coins, which was later reignited into a more sophisticated interest in art when he moved to Paris as an adult and sampled the wonders of the Louvre and Musée D'Orsay. When his collection became too big, the multi-millionaire businessman decided against keeping it in storage, and rather than lend it all to other museums, he opted to start his own.

"I had built this massive collection of antiquities and had ended up putting much of it into storage," the millionaire collector told *Watermark*. "I knew I needed somewhere to display it and initially I was open to loaning it to museums. I guess I had not realised how important it was."

It was clearly the right decision, as the succession of awards that followed the opening confirms. But as well as ensuring that the collections are displayed to their best advantage, Levett has taken a leaf out of every major modern museum's book and invested the maximum time and effort into marketing. The energy and outreach of a dedicated staff seem as inspired as



the exhibits they are paid to promote, and they have been as quick to identify opportunities as the slickest teams in Europe's art capitals. So whether it's drinks nights for locals and tourists, haunting Halloween trips for excited schoolchildren or evenings themed around such festivals as St Valentine's Day, the collection, its stories and the ancient myths it represents are always at the forefront. The interactive displays are magnificent.

Mougins has always been an auspicious location for artists, bathed in the exquisite light of the Alpes-Maritimes in south-eastern France. Picasso spent his twilight years here and other creative luminaries and celebrities, including Jean Cocteau, Fernand Leger, Elizabeth Taylor, Man Ray, Paul Eluard and even Winston Churchill holed up here for Bohemian summers.

The region can trace its history back to pre-Roman times, when Ligurian tribes claimed the land. Nearby Nice and Antibes became Roman strongholds and Cannes, venue of the annual film festival, is still a focus of the world's attention every spring. The museum aims to reflect and participate in this ever changing historical narrative.

Among the 800 works on display is Marc Quinn's 'Nicholas Grogan – Insulin (Diabetes)', a male nude waxwork infused with the drug, resting peacefully like a flawless GQ model alongside one entrance. Two of Antony Gormley's spectacular body casts, tanned by rust, naked and staring unnervingly at each other on the sun-bleached terrace compel you to stop and look.

A paint-splattered skull by Damien Hirst, its eye sockets yawning, gawks from its display case – Levett

also hangs a Hurst 'spot' painting in his London home. Graeco-Roman busts and colossal statues including Emperor Hadrian and Empress Domitia, along with a Roman bronze cast of Hercules, put a regal stamp on the arena.

Small exhibits like a Roman military diploma and engraved bronze plaques, full of ancient hope, contrast with larger pieces like the colourful sarcophagi of the Egyptian collection and the detailed histories and letters from Howard Carter, the archaeologist who discovered Tutankhamen's tomb. Picasso works include a linocut, etchings and a ceramic that references his fascination for the ancient world. Some of the pieces have been recovered from the bottom of the sea, or from archaeological oblivion, others have been bought from prize collections – but all have a fascinating provenance.

The museum opened with Hollywood-style fanfare in 2011 when the whole village – where Picasso, according to folklore, was once ordered to paint white the walls of a hotel room he had covered with graffiti – was turned into a rather credible Roman forum. No expense was spared, and Levett, who also owns L'Amandier and the Place de Mougins restaurants nearby, drew on the village's excellent gastronomic reputation to stage a feast for all the senses. After all, this was the realisation of a dream.

"It seemed like a nutty idea to open your own museum for your own collection," Levett remembers. "But that's what I ended up doing. It was critical to display it to the public, publish everything and make everything easily viewed and accessible for loans. We loan constantly to other museums and exhibitions."

He adds: "I chose Mougins because it was already



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associated with art and artists. I also felt that it would allow the wider public easy access to a rich and varied collection, and academics the chance to study it under one roof.”

The museum is housed on four floors in a medieval building which has been totally refurbished, and its original façade restored. It is compact but so diverse you feel you have a microcosmic Louvre in your grasp. “People say to me that what the museum lacks in size is made up for by the ability to be close to the objects without it feeling cluttered,” says Levett. “They like the intimacy of it.”

Levett is something of a hero in these parts. In the winter he runs what some commentators have dubbed the most opulent chalet in the world for winter travellers, in the French Alpine village of Courchevel. It is also chock full of art. Credited with breathing life and economic vitality into picturesque but sleepy Mougins, locals say he has resuscitated its fortunes post-recession with unequivocal style. His family have lived in the south of France since 1995 and since 2005 he has owned a house set back from the little town’s winding, cobbled streets.

“Mougins was definitely lacking something,” he says. “It had this amazing connection with some of the biggest artists of the 20th century, and yet there was no real sign that any of them had actually been here. People used to come here to eat in the great restaurants and walk around the pretty streets but they were lacking an artistic experience. Now the museum can give them that.”

There seems little doubt that Levett is an astute operator. But has he ever been caught out in the antiquities market? Has he ever bought a fake? “I only deal with very reputable dealers and auction houses,” he says, “and if still unsure, I will ask an expert or curator who is specialist in that niche. I’ve X-rayed bronze helmets, tested silver and gold and even dated the encrustations on marble when there’s been doubt.”

He adds: “Out of nearly a thousand antiquities I’ve bought over the years, I’ve been caught out only five



times. Every time the dealer and auction house has immediately returned the money on definitively proving that it was fake.”

What about a favourite piece? “I have so many,” he concedes. “I love the bronze head of Apollo on the ground floor. The workmanship, condition, expression are just stunning. It’s a super-high quality piece of the period, and extraordinarily rare because of that. The expression is also quite haunting as well as beautiful.”

Guide books, glossy magazines and fellow collectors have united in singing the praises of Levett’s unique Musée d’Art Classique. The superlatives continue to flow in. Museum president Leisa Paoli sums up the experience: “To me, one of the most rewarding comments from our visitors is, ‘I’m not usually a museum person, but I absolutely loved this one!’ The unique and dynamic concept reaches out to people of all ages, from all walks of life.”

To see a Roy Lichtenstein strategically positioned between Roman funerary urns, vases by Keith Haring and Grayson Perry sitting harmoniously among ancient Greek amphorae, or three sphinxes by Cocteau, Rubens and Robert watching over a 3,000-year-old Egyptian sarcophagus – these are extraordinary experiences granted by an extraordinary place.

The Musée d’Art Classique de Mougins is open daily except Christmas Day from 10am to 8pm in summer and 10am to 6pm in winter. www.mouginsmusee.com