

Christian Levett - a museum of his own

Christian Levett, an Englishman who has lived in Paris and Monaco, is now based in London. One afternoon in 2003 while ticking off his annual auction catalogue subscriptions he noticed a category called 'antiquities' and, more out of curiosity than anything else, he put a check in that box, too. When the catalogues arrived he was stunned. "I had had no idea that you could buy ancient Roman busts, ancient Greek helmets, Roman mosaics," recalls Levett. "I had thought that these things existed only in museums like the Louvre and the Met. It blew me away."

Levett left bids on two lots: an Egyptian, Ptolemaic period cartonnage mask and a Greek helmet. He thought the estimates were so low that his mid-range bids had no chance of success and went off on holiday. When he returned he discovered that he owned both and panicked. "Oh my God," he thought, "this helmet is supposed to be two and half thousand years old and it only cost me £6000. You can't buy a piece of art work by anyone of any note whatsoever for £6000. It can't be real. I must have bought a copy." Levett did some research and was reassured when both pieces proved to be genuine. After a period when he only collected antiquities occasionally he then, as he puts it, "went berserk" and began buying prodigiously.



< The Crowe Hill Urn, 1st century AD,
Roman marble ornamental cinerary urn.

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Although Levett had been intending to visit TEFAF for years, work and travel kept him from getting to the Fair until 2010. Now it is firmly in his diary. "The Fair has a wow factor," he says. "Until you get there you don't really understand how awesome it is." He cites the "show stopper stands." Even dealers who specialize in works that he does not collect catch his eye although his interests range widely from contemporary and modern art to period furniture, ancient objects, medieval sculpture and Old Master paintings. But antiquities, especially militaria such as armour and weapons, are his passion.

On his first visit to the Fair he bought modestly. That turned out to be a warm-up for 2011 which, he says with a laugh, was "a bit of a splash." He arrived with no particular expectations and was overwhelmed by what he found. "In my area of interest there were so many things that were absolutely mind blowing must-haves," he explains. Before he left he had bought ten works at least half of which were major pieces. Most, but not all, were Egyptian, Roman and Greek antiquities. For reasons that will become apparent, Levett has begun buying works of art of all periods inspired by classical antiquity. His acquisitions at the 2011 Fair started with a Roman capriccio by Giovanni Parolo Panini exhibited by Galerie Eric Coatalem from Paris. The 18th-century painting depicts views of the Coliseum and Trajan's Column.

To his surprise, Levett saw the Crowe Hill Urn on the stand of Rupert Wace Ancient Art of London. He knew that the elaborately decorated, 1st-century Roman marble cinerary urn had been sold at auction several months previously and had assumed that it had disappeared into a private collection. Now it was evident that it had been bought by a dealer. In fact, as he quickly discovered, it had been purchased jointly by Wace and his fellow London exhibitor James Ede of Charles Ede Ltd. The vase was excavated in 1790 and from the early 20th century it was displayed at Crowe Hill, a stately home in Bath in the west of England. The story of its more recent fate is one of those English country house anecdotes that sound apocryphal but are curiously common - Ming dishes being used as dogs' bowls and that sort of thing. In this case, the heirs of the collector at Crowe Hill had wired the urn for electricity, topped it with a shade and were using it as a lamp. Once they discovered its real identity and value the decorative container for a distinguished person's ashes was promptly restored.



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The Brunswick armour, an etched composite North German, three-quarter field armour, made for the court of Julius, Duke of Brunswick, c1562-3.

The purchase of another Roman antiquity followed Levett's acquisition of the urn. At the stand of Cologne dealer Gordian Weber, Levett bought a 1st-century head of the Emperor Augustus, discovered in Rome during a church restoration about 1880. Levett still talks about it with the excitement he must have felt as he stood looking at it in Maastricht. "It is absolutely extraordinary to find a head of Augustus not in a museum," he says. "The fact that it is bronze is also unusual."

Newcomers to the Fair may initially find its size and layout confusing but, with experience, visitors get the hang of it. Floor plans and maps are helpful guides to getting around. Obsessed collectors, however, have their own private maps that guide them quickly to their special interests. "When you walk in all the antiquities dealers are on your far right," says Levett. "Peter Finer is on your far left." London-based Finer is a specialist in antique arms and armour and at his stand Levett found a suit of finely etched early 16th-century field armour made for a member of the Duke of Brunswick's court. The armour will be installed in a house Levett is currently renovating. Like many men who collect militaria (and most of those who buy it are male), he got hooked when still a boy. "I was fascinated, particularly with the medieval and the ancient world," he recalls. "Hand to hand fighting seemed so extraordinarily wild and vicious." His first acquisitions, however, were from a much later period. "I collected First World War campaign medals when I was a child because they were inexpensive," he explains. He bought Victorian and Edwardian coins for the same reason. In the late 1990s when Levett lived in Paris he often visited the Louvre and that is when his interest in antiquities took hold. Later in London he discovered how easy it was to acquire Roman coins, a nice dovetailing of earlier interests, and he set out to get a silver dinar of every Roman emperor and, whenever possible, their family members, too.

Later, with the arrival of those antiquities catalogues, Levett's collecting rocketed into another realm. He was soon buying marble busts and Apulian vases, Egyptian carvings and a great many Greek and Roman helmets and weapons. He wanted increasingly important pieces



and at the turn of the Millennium he had the chance to acquire quite a lot of them. The Axel Guttmann collection of ancient objects, famous above all for its militaria, was being dispersed. He approached the acquisition of what he could from it with such gusto that, he says, he built a collection in seven years that might otherwise have taken him 30.

Levett loaned pieces to exhibitions when asked but, with all his buying, works not only filled his house but were piling up in storage. As he wondered what to do with it all, he began to consider opening his own museum. "My wife thought I was nuts," he laughs but he was not deterred. Jerome Eisenberg of Royal-Athena Galleries in New York had advised Levett about acquisitions and also published the antiquities journal *Minerva*. The periodical was then edited by Dr. Mark Merrony. Levett told him that he was thinking about setting up a museum and Merrony said that the first step was to examine the collection. By this time there were hundreds of objects. When Merrony finished looking at everything he said that he believed that people would pay to see it, especially what he regarded as the greatest collection of Greek and Roman militaria in private hands. Levett promptly offered him the job of being the museum's curator and the project got underway. Soon afterwards Levett bought *Minerva* and Merrony is now its editor-in-chief.

Merrony suggested that the installation would benefit from interspersing ancient objects with works of art inspired by the classical past. Levett agreed and, although he did not think there would be many around, he was astonished and pleased to find he was wrong. In June 2011, when the Musée d'Art Classique opened in Mougins on the Cote d'Azur, the paintings on view included works by Peter Paul Rubens, Henri Matisse, Keith Haring and that Panini bought in Maastricht in 2011. "Mougins already gets a couple of hundred thousand visitors a year," says Levett, who has a house there. "It is right in the heart of what would have been the Roman Empire. It is only about a two and a half hours drive from Tuscany, the Etruscan area, and it is only about a six hour drive from Rome itself. Mougins has Roman settlements on the hills around it." And that is not all that makes him feel it is the perfect spot. "The town is about four or five kilometres from Antibes which was the Greek settlement of Antipolis; it is about 20 kilometres from Nice which was an ancient Greek settlement as well." For Levett it is not a flight of fancy to add: "It is almost like bringing the antiquities home."