

'Compulsive' art collector builds French museum to display ancient treasures

British entrepreneur Christian Levett to house private collection of 700 works at newly opened Mougins Museum of Classical Art

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A Roman sculpture of the empress Domitia, posing in the guise of the goddess Demeter, is among the antiquities going on display.

A young British entrepreneur who has amassed a spectacular collection of art and antiquities, ranging from Egyptian reliefs to masterpieces by Rubens and Picasso, is to display the works in a new multi-million-pound museum in the south of France.

Christian Levett, the 41-year-old son of an Essex bookmaker, is to throw open the doors of the Mougins Museum of Classical Art next month for visitors to admire approximately 700 works spanning 5,000 years that he has acquired over the past seven years.

The publicity-shy businessman, who would rather people focus on the collection than the collector, is driven by what he calls his "slightly compulsive need to collect".

Speaking to the *Observer*, he was critical of collectors who keep rare and significant works to themselves. "Naturally people can put art or antiquities in their homes. But something of unique importance, like the Crosby Garrett helmet [the Roman helmet found in Cumbria and sold to an unknown buyer], I believe the owner should at least make available to museums," he said.

Most collectors keep their hoards in their homes or in bank vaults, so Levett's gesture to display his Greek and Roman sculptures, armour and other masterpieces is an unusual display of philanthropy. He does not expect the museum to make a profit, but hopes to recover the running costs from an expected 20,000 visitors in the first year and 50,000 later. The entrance fee will be €17 (£14.75).

"To walk around the museum and see other people enjoying the pieces, surreptitiously listening to their comments, will be tremendously exciting," said Levett.

Although he is based in the UK, Levett was inspired by the classical theme of his collection to build the museum near the Greco-Roman settlements of Nice and Antibes, which are visited by thousands of British tourists each year. Mougins has rich associations with the art world – Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, Jean Cocteau and Man Ray all lived there at some point in their lives, while Marc Chagall, Raoul Dufy, Henri Matisse and Amedeo Modigliani worked nearby. All have works in Levett's collection, alongside masterpieces by sculptors of the ancient world.

The display highlights the classical influences on artists from Peter Paul Rubens, with his 17th-century portraits of Roman emperors, to British sculptor Antony Gormley, who has two cast-iron male figures in the collection echoing the Greek myth of Narcissus.

Juxtapositions of ancient, modern and contemporary exhibits feature prominently. A Roman Venus stands next to Salvador Dalí's surrealist Venus de Milo with a giraffe neck, alongside a blue Venus cast by Yves Klein and *The Birth of Venus* by Andy Warhol. Egyptian tomb reliefs and a painted sarcophagus appear beside Alexander Calder's colourful pyramids and a sphinx by Cocteau.

Dr Mark Merrony, the museum's British director and a classical archaeologist, said: "It's showing how civilisations developed independently and influenced each other. The Roman art is very heavily influenced by Greek art, and there's an interplay between Greece and Egypt. Recognising the pervasive thread of classicism in art from the past to the present also provides a precious insight into the human psyche, arguably the most difficult aspect of culture to understand."

He pointed out jewels of the collection such as exquisite 1st-century Roman statues of Hadrian and the empress Domitia: "It's the quality of the carving, the drapery. It's the pinnacle of Roman artistic achievement." Rarities also include an ancient Greek shield. "I can't think of another museum that has one," said Merrony, emphasising that each piece is "chosen for its historic interest, beauty and good provenance".

Levett, who made his fortune in investment management, is a family man who drives a Mini, spending his money on art and antiquities. He says his "mania" for collecting began at the age of seven with Victorian coins, "which cost almost nothing". Later in life, he was astonished to find that he could buy antiquities: "I assumed they were only in museums." His interest in antiquities and their history led him to purchase an archaeology magazine called *Minerva*.

He is surprised that prices for antiquities are still so low compared with those for impressionist or contemporary art, although they have risen in the past 12 months. In 2008 he paid £600,000 for his Hadrian statue; today it would cost him a few million.

Commenting on Levett's philanthropy, Merrony noted that the concept was an important one for ancient Greeks. For them it was "the essence of civilisation – of benefit to humanity, according to Plato".