



"A real Godsend for our town"

Patrick Middleton

So Richard Galy, Mayor of Mougins, has said of the Museum of Classical Art which opened on rue du Commandeur last summer. Director Mark Merrony talked to the Reporter.



I'm not much of a museum visitor, recalling from my childhood with little pleasure enforced marches through the dusty and ill-lit halls of the time. I felt a shock of recognition when I first came across Paul Valery's description of the French museums he knew – he died in 1945 – as *maisons de l'incohérence* (mansions of muddle). The first vague account I heard of the Mougins Museum of Classical Art (MACM) seemed to indicate it belonged in this category, offering anything from an ancient Greek tin hat to one of Damian Hirst's peculiar painted skulls. Well, I have to admit I was totally wrong. Museology has come a long way from what I remember and Mougins' new attraction is a signal example of

how seemingly disparate items can be integrated through a master concept to create an exhibition, which is at once intellectually stimulating and aesthetically satisfying.

Private pleasure to public display

We owe that major concept to Christian Levett, a man who made his money in financial services but had no taste for yachts. He found his pleasure in the ownership and study of the art of the ancient world – Egypt, Greece and Rome – and with antique armour as a sideline. Later he became interested in the influence of classical art on later generations – from Rubens to Warhol – in style and above all in theme. Unlike some wealthy collectors, Levett was not content to be a secret gloater. Three



years ago he finally made up his mind to turn his private treasure into a public display. Already with a house in Mougins, he bought a larger building in the old village and converted it into what is now MACM.

The man chosen to be director has an interesting background. "I suppose you could say that," agreed Mark Merrony. "I left school at sixteen and then for years did rather dreary jobs – I was an electrician, later I was a process worker in an oil refinery. But years earlier I'd been taken on a school visit to a Roman site at Fishbourne in Sussex. I was fascinated by it and I never really forgot that place. Anyway, one day – I was close on thirty – I decided to make a break with work that didn't really satisfy me and pursue that feeling I'd had about the Romans. I set off on a long academic voyage through the world of classical archaeology. A first degree at St David's College, Lampeter, then post-graduate work at Oxford, culminating in a D. Phil. at Somerville. These days jobs aren't easy to find in a field like mine. I was lucky to meet Christian Levett and got invited to implement his project for this museum."



So what does the visitor find on going through the doors at MACM? The house was gutted and has been converted into a stylish and distinctive setting for its exhibits. I was not surprised to learn that, against tough competition, *Apollo* magazine choose MACM as its museum opening in the year 2011. The displays are set out over four floors and after introducing the visitor to the heritage of the ancient world – with emphasis on

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figurative bronze and marble along with a wide range of artefacts – make clear how that heritage has found so many echoes in the art of later times. I hadn't fully appreciated this until I saw it spelled out so strikingly under one roof. The classical tradition, has never died, you realise, as you move from Chagall's *Bacchanalia* and Matisse's *Circe*, to Picasso's *Drinking Minotaur and Reclining Woman* and Yves Klein's *Vénus Bleue*. I was, by the way, pleased to come across another Minotaur, this time in bronze, by Michael Ayrton, a British artist – and a brilliant man – now rarely mentioned.

A happier carpenter

Mark Merrony (pictured) told me that traffic through the museum has been "very satisfactory for these early days". In fact, the opening seems to have come at a propitious time as 2011 was a boom year for museums in France with some 27 million visitors, local and foreign, passing through their now usually clean and well-lit halls.

What does he hope those coming to MACM will get out of their visit? "Very broadly you've got two sorts of people going to a museum. On one hand, those who've got some degree of knowledge and can readily appreciate what they see. They're always welcome. On the other, you've got those who are much less informed and will often look at things with a certain puzzlement. We want to help visitors like that to get as much as possible out of coming here. We offer regular guided tours and groups from associations are especially welcome. But you don't need to be a classical scholar to enjoy a slow walk round looking at these beautiful objects. I remember what Ruskin said once: 'I would take a carpenter to a museum not to turn him into an artist but to make him a happier carpenter. I like that idea.' "

To find out more visit <http://mouginsmusee.com/>

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