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MILAN, 8 SEPTEMBER 2022

## Christian Levett – about the art market, the aesthetic taste and financial logic

«The core of my collection is female Abstract Expressionist. The idea is not to sell any artworks, but to leave them in heritage to my children and grandchildren»

### The origins of Christian Levett collecting between London and Paris

«Growing up I used to visit many historical places with my parents: cathedrals, castles, churches, or museums with historical artifacts like British Museum. Never art galleries. We also had a huge collection of military medals because a number of our family members had been in the army, including my father, that inspired me in a way. I guess I had the collection addiction since I was a kid: I started to collect coins and medals from a shop close from where I lived. Then, when I was twenty-five I moved from London to Paris, a good place to self-learn more about art. Every weekend I was visiting the Louvre, Musée d'Orsay and exhibitions in contemporary art galleries. At the age of twenty-six I purchased my first two paintings. One was by a Dutch artist, Egbert van der Poel, dated around 1650, which I then gave to my grandson as a gift. Van der Poel was a master in painting fire scenes and the picture shows a blaze in Delft. The other was a nineteenth-century painting by Ignacio Escosura. Over the time, they did not turn out to be financially two good choices but they marked the beginning of my collection, although I don't collect old masters anymore.»

### The financial side of collecting

Mr Levett is a businessman, an expert in numbers and shares. It is interesting to explore how he relates to the art market and how his choices are balanced between aesthetic taste and financial logic.

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«In the last eight years I tended to restrict my purchases to oil paintings and museum quality pictures. The reason for that is not just strictly connected with

«In the last eight years I tended to restrict my purchases to oil paintings and museum quality pictures. The reason for that is not just strictly connected with making a good investment, but of course if an artwork was displayed previously in a museum or in an important collection there is a fair chance it holds its value. When you're paying significant money for a picture you probably want to feel that its value will be preserved in the future. I don't necessarily buy artworks with the aim to see their price going higher but I want to be fairly conscious that I am investing a reasonable sum of money to insert it in my collection. The core of my collection are female Abstract Expressionists and the idea is not to sell any artworks, but to leave them in heritage to my children and grandchildren, while continuing loans with museums around the world».

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## The Mougins Museum

Between Cannes and Nice there is a dynamic art district consisting of several foundations and museums, including the Fondation Maeght, the Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger Museum, Musée Picasso or Musée Matisse.

Since June 2011, Christian Levett has opened his museum in Mougins: an eclectic collection ranging from antiquities to contemporary art. The exhibition itinerary highlights how the influence of classical art has been crucial in even the most contemporary works.

Ancient statues of Venus are juxtaposed with Yves Klein's *Blue Venus* and Andy Warhol's *Birth of Venus*, and Salvador Dalí's sculpture of Venus as a giraffe; a Roman marble head of Emperor Caracalla with a drawing of the ancient bust by Henri Matisse; mythological scenes and character portraits recur in works by Renoir, Rubens, or Hirst.

«After Paris, I moved to Monaco, where I lived for five years. During that time I decided to buy a house in the village of Mougins, where I also owned a restaurant. In the meantime, I discovered the antiques market, buying works of art from Christie's and Sotheby's. I wanted to create a dialogue between ancient pieces, such as an Egyptian sarcophagus or a marble bust, and modern works of art. In 2009, I thought that instead of continuing to buy and put works in storage, it would be better to establish a museum, which opened its doors in 2011».

## The art scene on the French Riviera

«Picasso spent the last twelve years of his life here, Picabia and Léger lived there, as did Man Ray or Cocteau. Many important artists loved the French Riviera, and Mougins has a strong cultural history and atmosphere-Nice, Antibes, and Marseille were ancient Greek colonies, so there is also an influence from the classical age; in particular, Nice was part of Italy until the nineteenth century, so it is really where the ancient world meets modern art. The museum is always open, except on Christmas Day, and we have almost twenty thousand visitors every year. Going to Mougins is kind of a ritual, every year in July and August I am there. In the summer it's fun to walk around the museum rooms and hear what people think when they look at the works. No one knows I'm the owner».

## Christian Levett – Living in Florence

«Before living here, I had been to Florence many times. I visited museums, exhibitions, and churches. The percentage of art here is outstanding. There are not so many modern buildings so it's easy to step back in time. When you walk around the city it is like being on a movie set. It is a town where you can walk a lot and you don't need to be stuck in a car all the time. Florence is also close to Chianti, and tuscan food is amazing. I moved here just three years ago and I have

to say it's easy to meet people. I recently became part of Palazzo Strozzi Scientific Committee».

### Christian Levett's art collection in Florence

The house of Christian Levett in Florence is in front of the Arno river, close to Ponte Vecchio. Two floors full of works of art, mainly by British or American painters. A characteristic aspect of this collection is that every painting in Mr Levett's Florentine home is by a female artist. The works range from around the 1940s to the 1970s, with some more recent exceptions.

A niche to be rediscovered through a series of women artists including Lee Krasner, Mercedes Matter, Perle Fine, Amaranth Ehrenhalt, Sonia Gechtoff, Elaine de Kooning and Helen Frankenthaler (one of her artworks from the 1970s, part of the Levett Collection, is now in Museo Barberini Potsdam for the exhibition *The Shape of Freedom. International Abstraction after 1945*).

«During the lockdown I started to build a female Abstract Expressionism collection. I researched which artists of that period, even the lesser known ones.

Many artworks, which have also been exhibited in the same museums, were available on the market (auction houses, other collections) and I started to put (https://www.lamphoonmagazine.com/)

Expressionist artwork, except for a few modern pieces by Tracy Emin, Cecily Brown, Louise Bourgeois».

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### The primacy of female artists

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Abstract Expressionism was the first American movement to influence the rest of the world and helped to radically shift artistic capital from Paris to New YORK CITY STORE (https://www.prototipo.store/)

«When one looks at Abstract Expressionism one thinks of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning. Many of them were married to famous artists, not that the women followed the men. In fact, their works were exhibited in the same galleries, they talked to the same curators, met in the same bars and were interviewed by the same journalists of the time. A singular circle. It does not seem strange that some of them started dating. Frankenthaler was married to Robert Motherwell, Pollock to Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning to Willem de Kooning, sculptor Dorothy Dehner was married to David Smith».

On the walls of Mr. Levett's studio hung large format pictures by Elaine de Kooning, «she also did great abstract portraits. The last artwork that I punched is The Loft Dwellers, an Expressionist oil on canvas painting created by Elaine de Kooning in 1961. She had a retrospective exhibition at Washington National Portrait Gallery in 2015 and that picture was in the show. It represents two young men, probably her assistants, almost life-size».

### Christian Levett

A former British investment manager, now full-time art collector. In 2009 he decided to form a museum to place his antiquity and classical art collection on public display, and the Mougins Museum opened to the public in June 2011. Since then the museum has gone from strength to strength, winning international awards and loaning dozens of objects to other museums and university exhibitions all over the world.

The writer does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article.  
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The land of freedom is where black people were oppressed. Rahim Fortune is 2022 Arles photo festival winner

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I can't stand to see you cry exhibition shows «history has also made it more difficult for men and women to love each other» – in conversation with Arles prix Roederer winner

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Florence Mann: dissolving gender and subverting the wearability of clothes as we know it (<https://www.lamponmagazine.com/article/2022/09/05/florence-mann-dissolving-gender/>)

Inspired by the work of Rei Kawakubo, Sarah Lucas and Barbara Hepworth, Florence Mann and Veronica Blagoeva study a different view on the connection between human form and clothing



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LAMPOONMAGAZINE.COM is an independent online magazine, properly listed at the Milan Court Register of Press, number 407 / 19 December 2014

The magazine is released by LAMPOON PUBLISHING HOUSE S.r.L.

Italian VAT number 08934300966

Milan R.E.A. (Economic and Administrative Index) number 2057081

Italian R.O.C. (Register of Operators in the Communication Field) number 26800 / 8 November 2016

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