



Left: Christian Levett, next to a Roman marble torso of Hercules, with David Ghezlbash, at Levett's London home

Roman torso of Hercules in marble (pictured left) at the foot of his staircase. It's a passion he shares with David Ghezlbash (pictured far left), a French antiquities specialist whose background is curatorial (he has worked for the Louvre and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art), but who diversified into dealing in 2008 when he set up a gallery in Paris.

The two met in 2011 in Maastricht at Tefaf, the world's pre-eminent fine-art fair. It was here that Levett happened on Ghezlbash's stand in that year's "showcase" of new galleries. Impressed by what he found, he made three purchases: an Egyptian *ushabti* (funerary figure), c685-525 BC; a Lorestan bronze stag, c1000 BC – "It has a very contemporary feel," says Ghezlbash. "It could have been made yesterday. Its body looks practically alive" – and lastly, a finely carved Roman agate cameo of a dog.

It was an auspicious meeting – and a good day for Ghezlbash because the cameo, in particular, netted him a substantial profit. He had paid £31,200 for it at Bonhams two years earlier – his asking price at Tefaf was €65,000. The reason for the uplift in value was down to provenance. As he explains, "It just hadn't been well presented at the auction. But I'd done the research and knew it could be traced back to the late 18th century, when the Duke of Marlborough had it. 'Oh, wow,' I thought. 'This is more important than they think.'"

And so it proved. The fact is that, given the number of fakes and forgeries at large, provenance is what drives value in the antiquities market. As Levett explains, "If something has a history going back to 1995, it will be worth so much, but if there are records of the same piece going back to the 18th century, it would probably be worth double. I wouldn't say there was a formula as such, but a long-established, published provenance gives a big, big plus to the price."

That said, "sometimes you can make a weak provenance work in your favour", says Levett. "I bought a bust of Alexander the Great for practically nothing because the auction house missed its backstory. But we found that it had been published five times between 1870 and 1955."

He hasn't always been so lucky in finding things first, however. In 2011, he bought a first-century Roman marble cinerary ornament at Tefaf for, according to the fair's website, "a price in the region of €1m". "It's a really interesting piece, very finely carved. It was discovered in Rome in 1760 and drawn by Piranesi in 1778. There's also evidence that it was repaired around that time by Cavaceppi, a sculptor who used to recondition ancient antiquities." However, at some point between 1950 and 1975, it ended up in Crowe Hall, near Bath, where someone saw fit to drill a hole through it and turn it into a table lamp. When Christie's auctioned the contents of the house in 2010, the item's value was

FINDERS KEEPERS

antiquities

Fervour for ancient art and artefacts – and an eye for undervalued treasures – has given rise to an eclectic private museum, says Claire Wrathall. Portrait by Jude Edginton

Christian Levett has been a collector since he was a child. The son of an Essex bookmaker, at "seven or eight" he was spending his pocket money on old coins and campaign medals. "My mother used to take me to a shop in Southend that dealt in them," says Levett (pictured right).

With adulthood came a career as a commodity investor, most recently as

CEO of Clive Capital, one of the world's largest commodity hedge funds, which is currently being wound down. His interest graduated first to antique furniture, "though I never built a collection as such", and then to art. And here, his taste is as eclectic as his eye is discerning: displayed in his hall is the Frans Hals portrait that once hung above the fireplace in Elizabeth Taylor's Bel Air sitting room, and which sold, sensationally, for \$2.1m

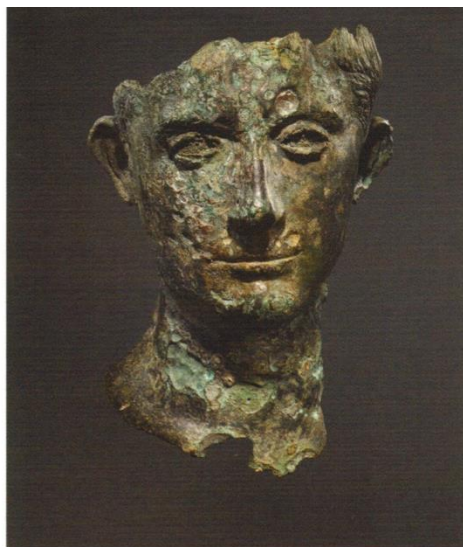
at Christie's New York in 2012. Next to it is a small Rubens. In the kitchen, a near-lifesize lacquered bronze of a youth, *Life Breathes the Breath (In)*, by Marc Quinn, lurks by a doorway. In the room in which we are talking, there is a striking Anselm Kiefer. Levett's last buy was a rare watercolour by Brancusi.

Yet for all this, and there is much more besides, Levett's real enthusiasm is antiquities – hence the magnificent

estimated at £7,000-£10,000. It sold for £445,250. “I missed it at auction,” says Levett ruefully, though he believes the price he paid a year later was fair. “I never like to feel that I’m overpaying.” He adds that while he has bought a lot at auction, “I very rarely go to them”, preferring “to leave absentee bids of what I feel is an appropriate price. I don’t want to be excited into paying more. You do have to be a bit careful.”

The urn now has pride of place in the Musée d’Art Classique de Mougins, in the southeast of France, which Levett established in 2011 to display the bulk of his collection (including a bronze head of Roman emperor Augustus, early first century AD, excavated in Rome in 1880, pictured right). Although he had been collecting for barely a decade, he’d acquired “probably about 1,000 pieces. I was buying absolutely fanatically when I started. I just thought the subject was so amazing. Sometimes I’d buy 20 things in one auction because I thought they were great, beautiful, spectacular... So I ended up with this absolutely mammoth number of things in storage. And then I realised that they had to be curated; the bronze works required the right humidity; everything needed looking after.”

The answer was a museum. He considered London as a location, but settled on Mougins, where he has a house, but also because the Romans had



Above: bronze head of the Roman emperor Augustus, first century AD, at the Musée d’Art Classique de Mougins

been there and it has impeccable art credentials. “Picasso, Man Ray, Picabia, Cocteau, Léger – all lived or stayed there. It’s associated with so many artists: Chagall, Dufy...” Hence his decision to create a museum of “classical art” in the broadest sense. Take the section devoted to Venus, for example: as well as three Roman depictions of the goddess of love, it also features Warhol’s *Birth of Venus*, Yves Klein’s *Blue Venus*, a Cézanne drawing of the Venus de Milo and a Dalí bronze, *Aphrodite as a Giraffe*. Elsewhere, there is work by Picasso, Calder, Chagall, Cocteau, Lichtenstein, Toulouse-Lautrec, even Damien Hirst,

“I would buy 20 things in one auction because they were spectacular”

in a series of startling but illuminating juxtapositions.

Listening to Levett describe works in his collection, he sounds like a scholar, for whom the research – the due diligence, if you will – is as much part of the pleasure as the ownership. To further not just his own but others’ knowledge of antiquities he owns *Minerva* magazine. And he is currently supporting an excavation by the British Museum of a swamp next to Hadrian’s Villa, near Rome, as

well as the excavation of a Roman fort and support village at the west end of Hadrian’s Wall in conjunction with the Hadrian’s Wall Trust (of which he is a trustee). “You do get to know people in the museums,” he says. “I have very good connections with the Greek and Roman departments at the British Museum, the Soane, the Ashmolean in Oxford and the Met in New York. That way, you get completely impartial advice. Also, before

you buy a piece from one dealer, it’s a good idea to get the advice of another.” Hence his friendship with Ghezlbash, whom he consults regularly – usually by email. “With David based in Paris, it’s not that easy for us to meet,” says Levett. “His gallery isn’t one that I can wander into whenever I’m passing.”

“In this field you have to be close to academics,” adds Ghezlbash. “Otherwise you can make big mistakes because, as Chris says, it is becoming harder to find quality pieces with detailed documented provenances.”

“In any case,” explains Levett, “I’ve lost the fanaticism I had for buying. I’m a lot more particular now about what I want. Something has to really inspire me.”

Not that Levett regrets anything that he has bought. On the contrary, he’s glad that he was able to establish his collection when he did. “I couldn’t do it now because the antiquity market has shrunk,” he says. “I caught it at a time when there was a lot of supply. These days, prices have peaked – and I wouldn’t want to chase the market.” ♦

Galerie David Ghezlbash, 12 Rue Jacob, Paris 75006 (+331-4633 6481; www.davidghezlbash.fr) will be exhibiting at PAD London, Berkeley Square, London W1 (www.pad-fairs.com), from October 16 to 20. Musée d’Art Classique de Mougins, 32 Rue Commandeur, 06250 Vieux Village de Mougins, Alpes-Maritimes (+334-9375 1865; www.mouginsmusee.com).