



# Birth of a museum

As the Mougins Museum of Classical Art prepares to open its doors to the public, its Director, **Mark Merrony**, gives *Minerva* an exclusive preview

The concept of establishing a new museum combining ancient art with that of the modern world – the two united through shared Classical styles and themes – was conceived in a Wimbledon restaurant on a balmy summer night in 2008. Almost three years later, and a thousand kilometers to the south, that dream is set to become reality as the Mougins Museum of Classical Art (MMoCA) is readied to receive visitors to its unique collection.

The location of the village of Mougins, just six kilometres north of Cannes, and within sight of the sparkling waters lapping against the Côte d'Azur, lends itself perfectly to the underlying concept of the museum's collection. Mougins lies in the former Roman province of *Gallia Narbonensis*, near the Graeco-Roman settlements of Nice (*Nicaea*), Cimiez (*Cemenelum*) and Antibes (*Antipolis*). The recent history of the village is also of great interest. Pablo Picasso spent the last 12 years of his life in Mougins while other prominent artists have also made their homes here – Fernand Leger, Francis Picabia and Man Ray all set paint to canvas while living in the village. It was

therefore envisaged that the museum would marry the rich artistic associations of Mougins with the art and artefacts of Classical culture that have had such an enduring influence on the artistic trends of the modern world (Figs 3, 4).

Once Mougins had been chosen as the new home for the remarkable collection of ancient and modern art built up over the last decade by Christian Levett, the next step was to acquire a building in the Old Village (Vieux Village de Mougins) capable of accommodating more than 650 artistic and archaeological treasures. The first possibility lay adjacent to the village church, but proved too small; the second building in the main square, though sufficiently large, was unsuitable for development; the third option was, however, just perfect. Located near the Office de Tourisme, and on the principal axis into the village, was a beautiful private house with four floors (Fig 1). It was swiftly purchased and work began on transforming the building into a world class museum in a manner that was sympathetic to the architectural character of the village.

While the overriding theme behind the collection was that of classicism



**Fig 1. Façade of MMoCA when still a private house in 2008.**

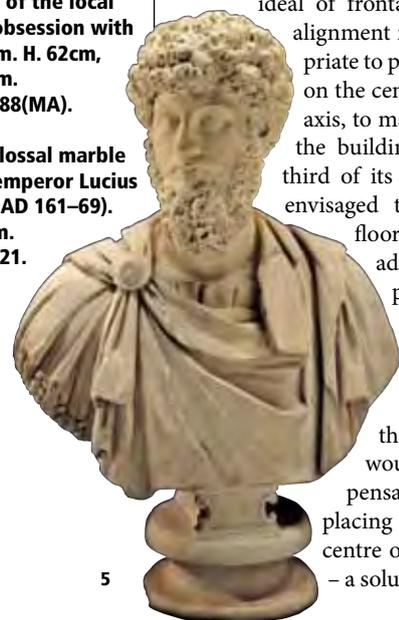
**Fig 2. Dr Richard Galy, Mayor of Mougins, and Dr Mark Merrony, Director of the MMoCA, unveiling the imposing Hadrian statue to the media.**



**Fig 3. Marble bust of emperor Caracalla (r. AD 209–217). H. 67cm MMoCA.488.**

**Fig 4. Academie, buste ancien, by Henri Matisse (1869–1954), charcoal on paper. The modern drawing is modelled on the ancient bust in Fig 3. It provides a striking example of the local artistic obsession with classicism. H. 62cm, W. 47.9cm. MMoCA.88(MA).**

**Fig 5. Colossal marble bust of emperor Lucius Verus (r. AD 161–69). H. 99.9cm. MMoCA.21.**



– both ancient and modern – the museum also had to house a large collection of ancient Egyptian art. It made sense to put the Egyptian gallery in the basement; this vaulted subterranean level was to prove the ideal setting in which to evoke the atmosphere and mystery of the afterlife. The Egyptian ideal of frontality and axial

alignment made it appropriate to place a coffin lid on the centre of the long axis, to mask the kink in the building on the last third of its length. It was envisaged that the three floors above would adopt the principles of Graeco-Roman symmetry: again the axial shift of the museum would be compensated for by placing objects on the centre of the long axis – a solution developed



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**Fig 6. Over life-size statue of Hadrian undergoing conservation in the expert hands of Darren Bradbury.**

by the Romans in Italy and provinces across the Empire.

An additional idea – again in the classical tradition – was to pare down the interior space with the inclusion of wall niches and so gain additional gallery space. The ground and first floor were therefore set aside to accommodate the Greek and Roman art, which had to be displayed in such a way that it would harmonise with more recent art (neo-classical through to contemporary) which it had inspired (Fig 5). The museum would culminate on the second floor with a spectacular Armoury in which would be displayed the world's largest private collection of Greek militaria – armour, helmets and weapons – supplemented by an extraordinary assemblage of martial material from the Roman, Sasanian, and Migration periods.

The concepts outlined above were refined by a team of sceneographers, whose remit was to provide the definitive design and placement of all items in the Museum collection (Fig 9). This task has been orchestrated with a precise architectural scheme of drawings and planning. The latter entailed a comprehensive redevelopment of the interior of the house (Fig 7), and the commensurate involvement of air conditioning engineers, builders, carpenters, decorators, electricians, electronic technicians, plumbers, scaffolders, and showcase manufacturers. The latter are based in Milan and the end product is quality on an unprecedented scale (Fig 8).

Essentially, the greatest challenge of the project is bringing it to fruition on time and managing its complex and

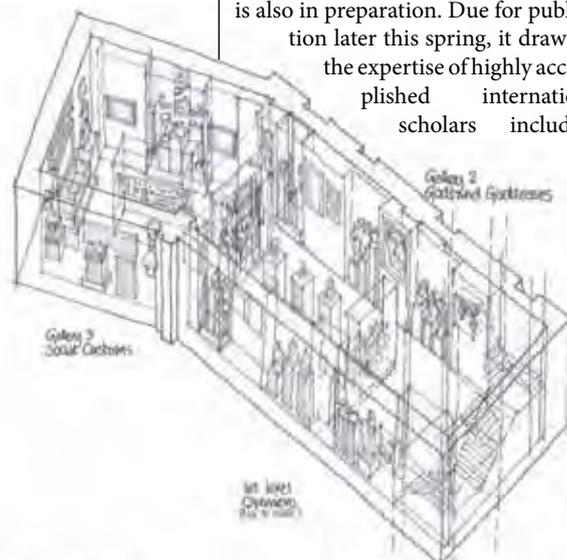


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**Fig 7. Strengthening the second floor of the museum to facilitate the immense weight-bearing requirements of the showcases (autumn 2009).**

**Fig 8. Showcases nearing completion in the Egypt Gallery prior to the installation of artistic objects.**

**Fig 9. Design for the placement of art and artefacts for the 'gods and goddesses' gallery and 'social customs' gallery, both located on the first floor of the museum.**



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multi-faceted nature. This has entailed hundreds of meetings to discuss architectural and sceneographic development, insurance, security (personnel and surveillance), policing, ticketing and merchandising. There have also been innumerable consultations with audio visual specialists, educational specialists, graphic designers, interactive designers and translators. Last, but by no means least, has been the need to deal with the growing interest of the media, which has increased dramatically in recent weeks as the opening of the museum gets ever closer (Fig 2).

A major aspect of the project is the conservation of the ancient art. This ranges from superficial cleaning of marble sculpture, through to the time-consuming process of restoring ancient artworks and archaeological artefacts that have suffered damage over the course of the centuries (Fig 6). There has also been the need to treat bronze disease, especially among exhibits destined for the Armoury. This intensive programme of preservation has been underway since May 2010. A uniform set of mounts for all the *objets d'art* have been manufactured specially for the museum collection. As this article goes to press, the entire collection is being carefully installed into its new home, a process that will be completed by the end of March.

A detailed catalogue for the museum is also in preparation. Due for publication later this spring, it draws on the expertise of highly accomplished international scholars including,



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amongst many others, Professors John Pollini, Jeffrey Spier, Sir John Boardman and Chris Howgego. Set out over 14 chapters, the catalogue will contain studies on every aspect of the collection: the wide range of Egyptian and Greek material culture; Roman bronzes, silver, jewellery, mosaics, glass, sculpture; Graeco-Roman militaria; neo-classical, modern and contemporary art.

From start to (almost) finish, the entire MMoCA Project has been blessed by the excellent work of many professionals, from artisans to world-renowned academics, and a great debt of thanks is owed to everyone involved. Indeed, this heart-felt appreciation is also extended to the villagers of Mougins who have been exceptionally patient in the face of so much activity – 'Rome ne s'est pas construit en un jour' is uttered frequently. As the spring opening day of rapidly approaches, the pressure has inevitably increased, and time has become even more precious: scheduling is now critical, the stakes are high, and there are 'daily resolvables'. Moreover, contrary to popular perception, it does rain in the South of France. In fact, between October and May the precipitation can be excessive and concentrated with flash floods, as was the case last winter. It is, however, fair to say that the sun does shine in between. Establishing a new museum is a tough job, but someone's got to do it! ■