



# Pieces of the *classical past*

**Christian Levett** talks to *Minerva* about how he came to develop his remarkable collection of art, antiquities and militaria

**Y**ou have assembled an extensive private collection of antiquities that will soon to go on public display in a new museum in the picturesque town of Mougins, in southern France. Have you always been a collector of antiquities?

I always had a fascination with history as a child and was always somewhat compulsive. I combined both of these attributes when, at around seven years old, I started visiting a local coins and medals shop. I found the shop absolutely fascinating and touching the items just

seemed to bring the history behind them life. This led to the start of my collecting mania and the first things that I started purchasing were First World War campaign medals and Victorian coins, largely because they were generally very inexpensive. I collected them for

years, but then stopped in my early teens as sports, school and eventually work occupied my time. However, work took me to Paris for 18 months aged 25, and my interest in historical items was rekindled when I used to visit either the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay every Sunday morning, to walk off my weekend hangovers. The collecting addiction resurrected itself shortly after this when I started collecting Georgian and Regency furniture and various forms of artwork to furnish an apartment in Monaco and then a house in London. I also became fascinated with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century hand-painted natural history books after a visit to a book store on the Fulham Road and very quickly began to assemble a collection. Then, following a visit to the British Museum, I wandered into one of the coin shops opposite the front gates and was amazed at the quantity and quality of early English and Roman coins that they had. So coin collection number two started and I quickly built-up a collection of Greek, Roman and English medieval silver and gold coins.

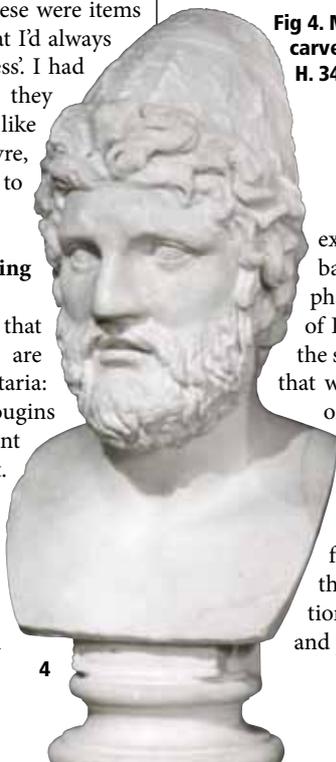
I'd been financially very successful from a young age and, by my early thirties, had established several homes, accumulating art and collectables for fun as well as decoration. Then I discovered the antiquities market, which hit me like a bolt from the blue. I'd been unaware of this area of collecting in the past, and I got so excited that I immediately started taking advice and embarked on building a large collection. Once I started, I couldn't stop and eventually accumulated several hundred items.

**You came relatively late to collecting antiquities. What was it that got you into this area?**

I'd always overlooked 'antiquities' when ordering auction catalogues, not even really knowing what the term covered. However, I decided to have a look through the Christie's and Bonhams catalogues, and my head nearly fell off when I discovered one could buy Graeco-Roman and Egyptian antiquities. This just seemed like 'the ultimate' in collecting to me. These were items so interesting and so ancient that I'd always thought they really were 'priceless'. I had also previously assumed that they were only to be found in places like the British Museum and the Louvre, where I had so regularly gone to visit them in the past.

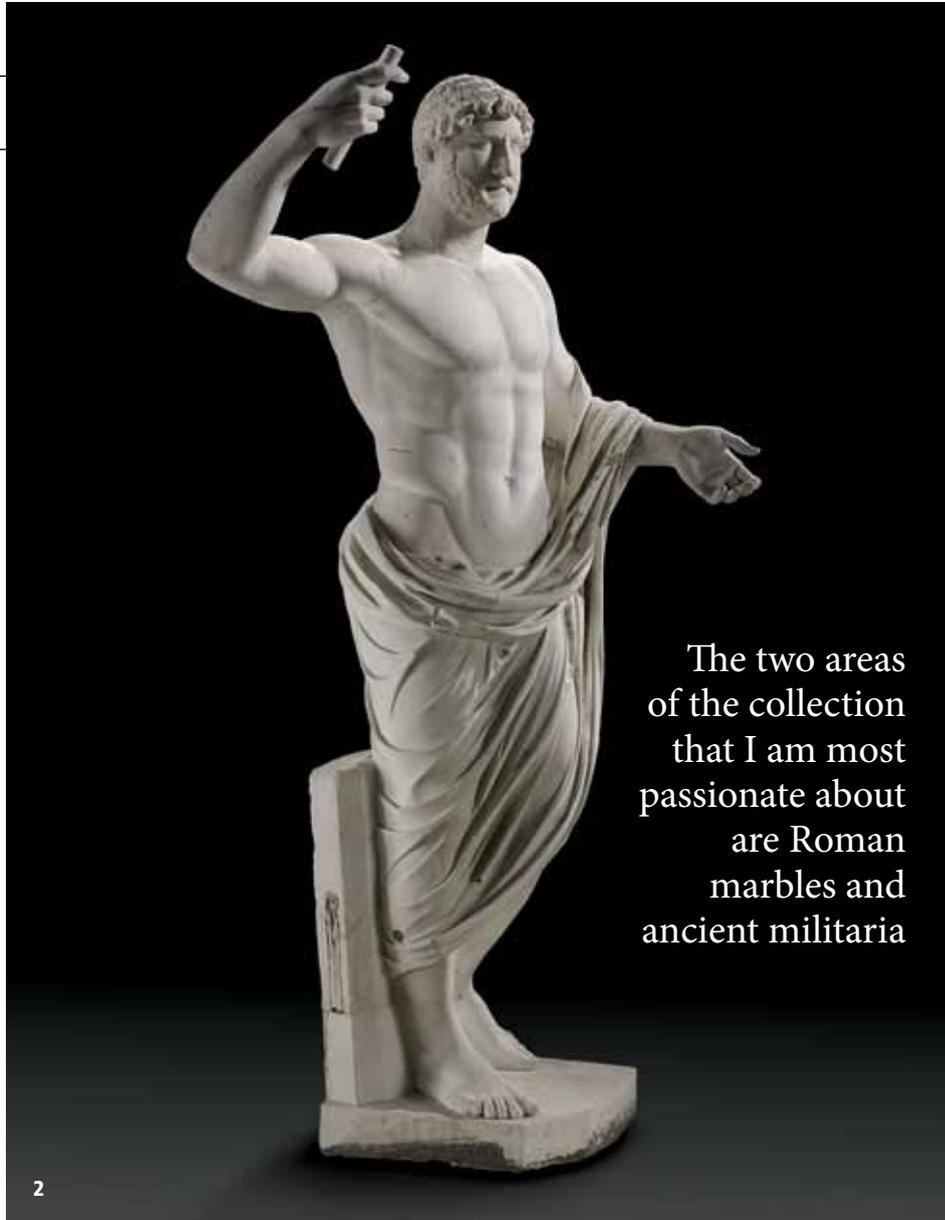
**What is the single most interesting antiquity you have purchased?**

The two areas of the collection that I am most passionate about are Roman marbles and ancient militaria: the entire top floor of the Mougins Museum is dedicated to ancient armour and military equipment. I think that all ancient armour provokes the imagination, raising such questions as who wore the items? Did the swords and helmets ever see action? What did the warriors wearing them



4

experience when preparing for battle in the middle of a Greek phalanx, or as a legionary in one of Rome's conquering armies? Of the several ancient Greek cuirasses that will be on display in Mougins, one large fragmented piece has an inscription on the front that reads 'To Athena loot from the enemy'. What's interesting about this piece, apart from being extremely rare, is that it's clear from the inscription that it has a highly intriguing and provocative history (Fig 8).



2

The two areas of the collection that I am most passionate about are Roman marbles and ancient militaria

**Fig 1. Monumental Roman marble double herm known as 'The Beth Shean Bust', c. 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. H. 47.5cm. MMoCA.20.**

**Fig 2. Roman marble over life-size statue of emperor Hadrian (r. AD 117-138). H. 216cm. MMoCA.214.**

**Fig 3. Aerial view of the Old Village of Mougins, looking south towards the Mediterranean.**

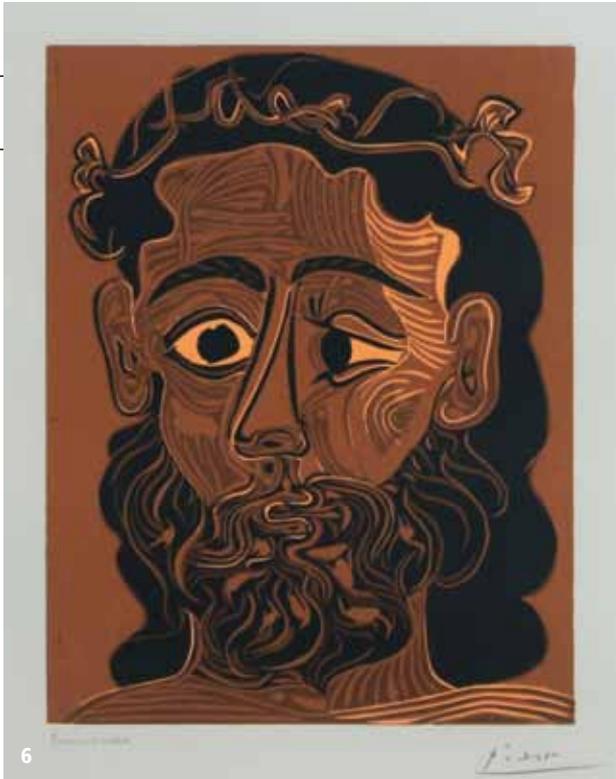
**Fig 4. Marble head of Odysseus, carved in the 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. H. 34.3cm. MMoCA.176.**



3

**Which artefacts have you succeeded in buying in recent years that you were most eager to acquire?**

I've been desperate to acquire so many pieces in the collection that it's hard to say, but given my passion for Roman marbles, I was very keen to buy the Beth Shean bust which I acquired at Bonhams in May 2008 (Fig 1), and the Cobham Hall Hadrian from Christies New York sale in December 2008 (Fig 2). Both have great overpowering scale, incorporate eminently classical subjects, and have excellent provenances. The Hadrian also demonstrates the spectacularly beautiful carving and artistic abilities of the craftsman of the period.



## Which artefacts have you not succeeded in buying that you were desperate to purchase?

I always have a fixed idea of the value of a piece when I try to buy it. Despite my passion and compulsive nature, one has to take a measured view of what the item is actually worth. There are times at auction when I really want a piece, but self-discipline allows me to let it go if the price rises above my limit. Many insatiable collectors have led themselves into financial problems by losing sight of this balance.

With regard to specific items which have been the hardest to let pass, I would say the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, decorated bronze Cretan helmet that sold at Christie's in New York early last year, and the Crosby Garrett helmet auctioned last October. In the case of the first piece, I met the eventual buyer, who is a very passionate collector himself, and he may well be interested in loaning the helmet for exhibitions, so all is not lost where that is concerned. Unfortunately, the Crosby Garrett helmet situation seems more final. I'd felt that any collector who bought the helmet would need to do so with the recognition of its rarity and national importance, and must be prepared to put it on public display. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this limited the value of the helmet in my opinion, I never felt it was a piece that could ever sit comfortably on a shelf at home; instead there was a responsibility to ensure that it was available for public display. I bid up to double the helmet's estimate before the price went into the stratosphere. The great shame is that I've heard on the grapevine that the owner seems to have little intention of allowing the helmet to be loaned.

**As a result of the sale of the Crosby Garrett helmet, it has been argued that antiquities should only be held by museums rather than allowed to disappear into private collections.**

Well, the Crosby Garrett helmet hasn't disappeared. Christie's knows exactly where it is and will be in constant contact with the owner as time moves on in the hope that either he, or one of his children, may sell it again one day,



**Fig 5. *Bacchanalia*, Marc Chagall, 1964, gouache, pen and India ink on paper. H 49.6cm. MMoCA.82MA. © ADAGP, Paris 2011chagall**

**Fig 6. *Homme barbu couronné de feuilles de vigne*, Pablo Picasso, 1962, printed linoleum cut. MMoCA 71A. © succession picasso 2011.**

**Fig 7. Bronze Phrygian-type helmet, c. 350-300 BC. MMoCA.550.**

**Fig 8. The 'Thetis Fragment'. Greek bronze armour back-plate depicting the heads of two warriors with a Greek inscription: 'To Athena – Loot from the Enemy', early 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. H. 37.5cm.**

**Fig 9. *Reflection*, Antony Gormley, 2001. Two cast iron body forms. H 191cm. MMoCA.187.**

at which point it may well end up in a museum. Given the high sale price, it is clear that the buyer fell in love with the helmet and is presumably now enjoying it, and looking after it with great care. Aside from a passion for history, the fact that the antiquities market exists may well have been what inspired the metal detectorist to spend years out in the elements, scouring farmers' fields for finds. Then, having found this helmet in fragments, it was only a matter of weeks before many thousands of pounds were spent on its reconstruction and the whole world made aware of its existence.

It's true that it will be a great shame if it's many years before such an important item as the Crosby Garrett helmet is seen again, but normally collectors are ecstatic to donate their



pieces to exhibitions and museums, often on a permanent basis. It's an honour to be able to do that and also adds greatly to the provenance of the piece. Also, countless museums around the world have been started by private collectors: The Ashmolean, The Frick, The Soane, no less than eight Guggenheim museums, The Wallace Collection and of course the Mougins Museum, to name but a few. Corporations have also built and conserved many important art collections, often for public display and academic reference.

## What are you most careful about when buying antiquities?

The two main things are provenance, and whether the item is actually real or not. Without both of these being proven the item really isn't



9

worth very much and could be more of a liability than an asset. Once these are established, then the next question is whether or not it's been renovated and to what extent, and whether or not that's reflected in the price. Once one is comfortable with that, it comes down to the quality and workmanship incorporated in the piece, and its natural beauty. Rarity will then start to dictate the price. Once everything else is in place it's a case of affordability and desire.

**What was your motivation for creating a museum collection?**

Antiquities were the first area where my collecting habits had become so extreme that I'd purchased a large number of items with no particular place to put them. Once the collection got so large, some of the larger items had to be placed in storage, which was obviously a great shame. I had bought a number of items that were clearly of public interest and I was always happy to loan them, as was the case with a Roman bust of Odysseus which recently went on a tour of US museums in the 'Heroes: Mortals and Myths in Ancient Greece' exhibition (see *Minerva*, November/December 2009, pp. 22–25. Fig 4). It therefore occurred to me

that it might be a good idea to put the collection on display. Nevertheless, I wasn't really sure whether the whole collection was of enough interest that the public would want to see it. However, around three years ago, I was chatting to Mark Merrony of *Minerva* and discussed the possibility of putting the collection on public view, and whether it was an absurd idea, or if it was important enough that people would be interested in coming to look at the artefacts. When I told Mark that I'd bought several hundred items, and explained the quality of some of them, he was amazed and agreed that the idea of establishing a museum was an excellent one. Shortly after, I offered Mark the job of museum curator, and that proved to be the beginning of the Mougins Museum of Classical Art.

**Why did you settle on Mougins as the location for the new museum?**

Family members have lived in the South of France since 1995 and so I have a close association with the region and own a house in Mougins. Mougins is a beautiful medieval village on a hill, just 5km behind Cannes, and was at the heart of the Roman Empire and close to several towns such as Nice and Antibes, which

were originally established as Greek colonies. In fact, many Roman artefacts have been discovered on the hill in Mougins, so it's clear there was a Roman settlement in the village at some point. Mougins also has a long history of famous artists having lived and worked in the village, including Fernand Leger, Jean Cocteau, Francis Picabia and Man Ray. Importantly, Pablo Picasso spent the last 12 years of his life in Mougins and died in the village (Fig 3).

**Do you really feel there is an artistic tradition running from antiquity through to recent generations of artists, such as Picasso?**

Absolutely, and more than one would ever imagine. For example, we have artworks in the museum with directly classical subjects by masters such as Picasso (Fig 6), Degas, Chagall (Fig 5), De Chirico, Yves Klein, Matisse, Dali and Modigliani. We also have classically-inspired artworks by more contemporary artists such as Andy Warhol, Arman, Michael Ayrton and even Keith Haring! The museum also has a small number of paintings dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> through to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to demonstrate how classicism in art has existed now for nearly 500 years. These include two portraits of the Emperors Vespasian and Vitellius by Rubens. In addition, several modern artists such as Marc Quinn and Cy Twombly are active collectors of antiquities. There was also a recent exhibition of modern art at the British Museum that had pieces by Marc Quinn and Damien Hirst on display. In recognition of this, we have works by both these artists in the museum.

**What kinds of antiquities do you think will interest the public when they visit?**

I think different people will be fascinated by different things depending on their own personal tastes. The armoury will clearly be the high point for any fans of the films *Gladiator* or *Troy*, which probably includes most men and virtually all boys (Figs 7). Many of the marbles on display clearly demonstrate the skill of ancient sculptors and allow us to catch a glimpse of the appearance and beauty of figures from the ancient and mythological past. The coins, glasswork, Greek vases, and the bronze sculptures on display all demonstrate the levels of craftsmanship incorporated in these items, and which always inspire me to think of the people who made and used them so many centuries ago.

**What role do you see the Mougins Museum playing in the future?**

Aside from giving the public pleasure and the ability to see a large array of interesting objects in one place, we'd really like it to be a resource for education and research. The armoury in particular will lend itself well to the latter as I believe that it will contain the largest private collection of ancient armour in the world with around one hundred helmets alone on display. ■

For information on the Mougins Museum of Classical Art, see: [www.mouginsmusee.com](http://www.mouginsmusee.com)