

MEETING

Jean-Claude Gandur a nostalgic collector

Jean-Claude Gandur was positively beaming – with that special smile when works are in the offing –, as Geneva's Musée d'Art et d'Histoire prepared to unveil the plans for its extension, designed by Jean Nouvel. He is something of a linchpin for the project, thanks to his contribution of 20 million Swiss francs (16.4 million euros), earmarked for implementing the museum's extension, suspended since 2001. At 64, Jean-Claude Gandur is undertaking if not one of his biggest projects, at least the one closest to his heart. With a fortune of

2.1 billion dollars, he is in 704th place in the Forbes list. Having gained experience in oil trading with top raw materials trader Philipp Brothers, the businessman invested in the oil industry, mainly in West Africa and Kurdistan. In 2009, he sold his subsidiary Addax Petroleum to the Chinese company Sinopec for 7.2 billion dollars. His Egyptian antiquities, which are another self, are redolent of a childhood spent in Alexandria, which he regretfully left for Switzerland. They remind us that Jean-Claude Gandur was a historian before his successful development of black gold. His works of art dating from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, and his great love of European abstract painting from the Fifties give us a considerable idea of the man and his refined family background, which made him into the aesthete he is today, as he readily admits. The very different groups represented by nearly three thousand items have always had a whiff of nostalgia and a family connection. As a sponsor, he would be putting less enthusiasm and generosity into his project with the Geneva museum if he didn't want to provide a long-term setting for the work of a lifetime and an ever-burning passion.

Female head, 3rd century BC, marble, Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva, Switzerland.



© ICG

Can you pinpoint your reasons for becoming a collector?

I've always wondered about the role played by my situation. I was lucky enough to be brought up in a milieu where culture was considered deeply important. We loved beautiful objects. When I was a teenager, my grandmother had the idea of giving me an antique oil lamp, without realising how much effect her action had on me: it undoubtedly triggered my desire to be a collector. Also, I think I was traumatised by the fact that

HD



Jean-Claude Gandur.

© Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva, Switzerland. © Alan Humeroose/Rezo.ch

TO SEE

Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva,
fg-art.org - Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva
www.ville-ge.ch/mah

W



W

Peter Klasen, "Le Dictionnaire du bonheur" (first part), 1964, acrylic on canvas, 146.3 x 114.2 cm.

© Sandra Pointet

when I was 12, I left Egypt - the world where I had been brought up, and which they said would no longer exist.

How do you explain the shift from liking to possession?

I think collecting stems from a compulsive need. If I draw a parallel with my career, I observe a personal attraction, a kind of Latino-Oriental mix, due to my mother's and father's Ukrainian and Georgian origins. My parents had lost everything – my mother during the Russian revolution, my father when he was dismissed by the Egyptian authorities. In a child's imagination, this certainly creates a sense of injustice and the desire to regain what is lost. Possession is reassuring; it reminds you of a particular moment in your life, and the world you have left behind.

Have you maintained any ties with Egypt?

We no longer have any possessions in Egypt because they were nationalised or sold compulsorily. Until the revolution a few months ago, I used to go every year, driven by a kind of existential need. I would never have imagined not being able to chat or laugh in a language I have the good fortune to know; not to breathe the smells and scents of the streets. I hope that the political climate will improve, and that I can go back there in complete peace of mind.

Your archaeology collection is probably the largest in private hands. How did you build up such a collection?

It represents forty years of work. I bought my first archaeological pieces from one dealer, François Antonovitch, who was my mentor. A collection needs two pairs of eyes. You may make a mistake, or have doubts, so you need another viewpoint, another kind of sensibility to refine your tastes and knowledge. Thanks to this man, I learned to look at objects with a professional eye. In archaeology, the very few enthusiasts were chiefly American, some from great families like the Rothschilds. This market was not very popular to begin with, but has become more competitive. A second market has emerged: that of the pure aesthetics I love so much, and where I find objects at ultra-competitive prices.

Why did you build up another collection of abstract art from the Paris of the Fifties?

I used to love doing things with my father, and I remember, when I was 13, going with him to an exhibition on Vieira da Silva. I stopped short in front of a red painting by the artist, and asked my father to give it to me. He replied; "I hope that when you want to, you will have enough money to buy it yourself." I took this to heart.

What do these works say about you?

When the archaeology pieces were exhibited for the first time in 2002, the curator saw a historian's approach in them, as though I had worked in a museum all my life. My collection is that of a curator who has missed his vocation. I'd love to have been a curator.

How have you managed to cope with saying goodbye to your collection?

I've learned to let things go. What good does a collection do if it isn't shared? You have to accept that art belongs to everybody. You give to your children; you can also give to people you don't know. Sharing also means recognition from other people. I have created two foundations. One provides bursaries to students; the other, dedicated to art, is designed to preserve my collections and exhibit them to as many people as possible. It has also helped to safeguard the Ottoman door in the Louvre's Islamic Arts department, and in the acquisition of a work by Lucas Cranach, also at the Louvre.

Did agreeing to a long-term loan to the museum change the focus of your acquisitions?

Completely. I am now looking for more monumental objects, which are harder to find. As I didn't have the means until recently, I had begun with bronzes. I also adopted the "out of season" approach (going against the general fashions and trends of the market: Ed.); so, as amulets were not very popular, I would buy them. The same applied to 13th and 14th century ivories, which no one was buying five years ago. Strategically, a businessman is never very far away from market appreciation. You need to move on to other things, and be open to broader spectrums. **Interview by Geneviève Nevejan**