

A Passion for the Past

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In a world of unpredictable futures, I derive great pleasure from contemplating the past, the world of Antiquity, the foundations upon which modern civilizations rests. As a dealer in ancient art I am surrounded by proof of the endurance of human creativity, ingenuity, and spirituality. The artifacts in my Beverly Hills Gallery were made by people who could not have possibly imagined the brash and progressive world of today's Los Angeles. Yet, when I hold such treasures in my hands, they give me as much pleasure as they did their original owners thousands of years ago. A truly fine piece of ancient art is not merely a remnant of a vanished civilization, it is a definition of civilization itself, evidence of what we can attain and of how we can express ourselves with grace and imagination. It reminds one that whether it be Athens or Rome, Jerusalem, Baghdad, Paris, or New York that is the capital of its age, the world endures and men continue to dream of beauty.

The antiquities that I cherish most have an aura, a personality which transcends their obvious appearance or function and which I call energy. Like beauty, it is to be found in the eye or the touch of the individual. Energy is partly the result of reality and partly of imagination, and everyone perceives it differently. Take as an example a clay oil jug found in Hebron and dated to the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000 BC), the era of the biblical patriarchs. In appearance it is simple, of buff-colored terra cotta, nicely shaped but unadorned. It feels pleasant in the hand – cool, dry and light. Then one realizes that a craftsman formed this jug with his hands, someone bought it and held it in theirs. The piece has a history, not completely known, but an undeniable real history. In the Old Testament it says that Abraham anointed Isaac with oil. Could this be the jug he used? The imagination begins to spin and one feels the energy of the object, the link between one life and another. One realizes that the cycle of existence has been continuous. One is given a renewed hope that it will remain that way.

Of course, there are as many different types of energy as there are types of collectors. Even after many years in the business, just when I think I have seen it all, I am constantly discovering a new reason why somebody collects ancient art. There are institutional collectors, museums and corporations, who in this modern day and age tend to be extremely selective about their needs. One prominent curator laughingly told me that he wished he had a petty cash-fund, say in the \$5,000 range, for choice smaller items, because the board of trustees at his institution didn't like to consider any purchase less than \$50,000! There are collectors who make no secret of the fact that they acquire objects just as a hedge against inflation. I respect their straightforward attitude and am pleased to offer investment counseling, but I have almost always found that at the heart of their prudent collecting is a love of the art itself.

There are the intellectual collectors, those who build with a specific goal in mind, say, a complete set of Roman Imperial coinage, or objects related to the history of gaming and gambling. These people often wait years for a particular piece

to complete their holdings, and it is a challenge for me to locate artifacts with such clients in mind. I once negotiated for almost a decade to acquire an unobtrusive clay oil lamp from a European gentleman because it had been found in a specific site and another client needed to complete his collection. The purchase price was about \$100 and I sold it only for a small profit, though the new owner would have been willing to pay much more.

By far the largest group of collectors, and in many ways the easiest to please, are those who are guided by their aesthetic instinct. These are the people who choose what is beautiful regardless of its origin. Some of my favorite clients have living rooms in which a marble head of the goddess Aphrodite may share space with a Mayan cylindrical vase, and on the wall a painting by Picasso. The love of beauty seems to me one of the prime motivating forces behind civilization. It is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Without beauty to appreciate, what would be the purpose of existence? It is a very special kind of energy indeed when a collector falls in love with a piece at first sight. That the object very frequently happens to be historically important and a sound financial investment and is only a happy coincidence to him.

Akin to this group of collectors are the sentimentalists - people who buy things for deeply personal reasons, usually not directly dependent on an artifact's cultural origin. One woman purchased a vibrant pre-Columbian statue from me because she said it reminded her of her late husband. Another person bought a Roman glass tear bottle, into which the living usually wept tears for burial with the deceased, as a lover's gift.

Religious, ethnic and historical factors contribute to the other major form of collecting, that which is emotional. As my family has been acquiring antiquities in the Holy Land for over four generations, we have a wealth of objects which are important to three of the world's major faiths. Among these are a coin minted in the final hectic days of Shimon Bar Kochba's doomed revolt against Rome in the second century, the last independent Jewish coins struck until modern times; a Coptic papyrus codex that is perhaps the earliest version of the Christian bible; and early Islamic documents that rival the Dead Sea Scrolls in importance.

Naturally, it is an arbitrary matter to place a value on such treasures. Though they are all for sale, I will only let them go to the right owner, and at the right time.

Other emotional needs are more simply met. Artifacts relating to Alexander the great are much sought after, and I almost always have items dating to his lifetime available. One excited woman wanted something which had personally belonged to Cleopatra. After I had explained how difficult this would be to prove, I was able to satisfy her quest with a coin bearing the image of the last Ptolemaic queen of Egypt. In real life, Cleopatra was no great beauty, but the woman saw exactly the qualities she wanted in the tiny portrait..

I find the most fascinating collectors are those who are guided by spiritual energy. I have had people burst into tears while handling an artifact in the gallery and say that they recognize it as something they owned or created in a previous existence. Others thank me for bringing them together with items they feel they had misplaced centuries before. While I am happy to act as a catalyst for these surprisingly frequent reunions, reincarnation is a mystery I have yet to enlighten myself about. I am however a firm believer in destiny, and I understand absolutely that certain artifacts belong with certain owners, at least for the present.

To make a permanent record of the Barakat Collection as it was when I first came to Los Angeles, I published a 320 page, full-color catalog featuring an enormous variety of artifacts from different cultures. It has become a collector's item itself, largely because people respond to the unbroken span of human achievement it represents and to the mixture of humble and majestic history happily coexisting between its covers. People call or write from all over the world to say they saw something in my catalogue that they are compelled to acquire. I am surprised but delighted that the captivating spell these objects exert can be felt even through photographs. The power antiquities hold is unquestionably real and very seductive.

My most recent acquisition is a good example. At first glance it is merely an anonymous clay jar, unassuming in appearance. Yet this is no ordinary vessel, for until recently it held part of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is so easy to imagine the authors of those precious documents entrusting their safekeeping through the ages to this sturdy simple pot. Great thoughts can be held in plain containers, and through this association the containers become magical, wonderful and great too. The energy is there to be felt. It only takes a little imagination.