

The Incomparable Barakat Collection:

Treasures of Vanished Civilizations.

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Officials in Los Angeles considered it a major event the day Fayeze Barakat opened his gallery in that city. Mayor Tom Bradley said, "I am delighted to know that the Barakat Collection will be permanently on view in Los Angeles and accessible to all who may wish to enjoy its treasures." It was as if a major museum had come to town. But a museum with a difference – a museum in which irreplaceable antiquities can be purchased by private collectors.

As a young boy Fayeze Barakat worked beside the famous British archaeologist Kathleen, Dr. Kathleen Kenyon, sorting and identifying shards from her excavation in the ancient Jerusalem of King David's time. A fourth generation member of the Barakat family, which was well known for its collection of ancient Middle Eastern art, Fayeze showed brilliance as a historian and archaeologist at an early age. Throughout his life he continued to expand on his family's calling.

In 1967 Fayeze began to acquire artifacts sold by villagers who streamed into Jerusalem. Many of the items had originally been plundered from tombs in the hill country west of Hebron. He acquired numerous common household objects from periods extending from the Middle Bronze I (2100-1900 BC) through the Byzantine era (AD sixth century).

Today Fayeze Barakat stands at the pinnacle in a unique field. In the words of Gerald A. Larue, professor emeritus of biblical history and archaeology at the University of Southern California, "Fayeze is a connoisseur devoted to a dream. He believes he owes something to archaeologists and instructors who helped develop his expertise – and indeed, to all who prove the past and help us appreciate our rich human heritage. He has undertaken a duty to preserve the past and to save from possible damage and loss these exquisite artistic statements...Fayeze Barakat is salvaging art objects for future generation...His magnificent, ever expanding collection now includes objects from biblical lands, Africa, Europe and the Americas...Here is beauty from our distant past..." Meet Fayeze Barakat.

PSL: Describe how it feels to own a rare artifact.

BARAKAT: When I hold such a treasure in my hands, it gives me as much pleasure as it did its original owner thousands of years ago. A truly fine piece of Ancient art is not merely a remnant of vanished civilizations, it is a definition of civilization itself, evidence of what we can attain, and of how we can express ourselves with grace and imagination. Such objects seem to possess an infinite serenity – they are survivors, happy to be here.

They remind one that whether it is Athens or Rome, Jerusalem, Baghdad, Paris or New York that is the capital of their age, the world endures, and men and women continue to dream of beauty, not merely to subsist.

PSL: That sound almost metaphysical.

BARAKAT: The antiquities that I cherish most have an aura, a personality that transcends their obvious appearance or function. I call it energy, and, like beauty it is to be found in the eye or touch of the individual. Energy is partly the result of reality, partly of imagination, and everyone perceives it differently.

PSL: Give us an example.

BARAKAT: One instance might be a clay oil jug found in Hebron and dated to the Middle Bronze Age (circa 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 his. 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 he have used this jug that contained oil? 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.

PSL: Do you suppose that your customers feel the same way you do?

BARAKAT: 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. Antiquities, like all fine art, have been steadily escalating in value. 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.

PSL: What type of person collects art?

BARAKAT: All types. There are 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. 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 instincts. 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 best impulse collectors are those who fall in love with a piece at first sight. That is a very special kind of energy indeed! The object very frequently happens to be historically important and a sound financial investment and is only a happy coincidence to them. They love the artifacts they collect!

Related 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. I wisely did not ask if his tears were of sorrow or joy.

Religious, ethnic and historical factors contribute to the other major form of collecting, that which is emotional. My family has been acquiring antiquities in the Holy Land for over four generations, and 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.

PSL: How do you price such treasures?

BARAKAT: 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.

PSL: Which antiquities are most desirable?

BARAKAT: 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..

PSL: What group of collectors interest you most?

BARAKAT: The most fascinating category of collectors for me personally 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. The energy is there to be felt. It only takes a little imagination to experience it.