

Confessions of a Private Collector

By Fayez Barakat

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One of the questions most frequently asked of me as a dealer in fine antiquities is, "What sort of art do you recommend collecting as a sound investment?"

"Buy what you love," I usually reply. "All art of fine quality is a good investment. Buy what delights your senses and stimulates your imagination. Fine art is like a good marriage – it should provide daily pleasure, be full of constant surprises and offer the thrill of rediscovering your initial attraction over and over again. The value of a work of art will be there no matter who owns it. The happiness it brings should be something very personal, a joy that is yours alone."

"That's all very well," my questioner persists, "but I'm a little uncertain of my tastes. It's like food. Sometimes I want French and other times I crave Chinese. I need guidance. What do you collect yourself these days?"

The answer to that question is Pre-Columbian art. It's a lively kind of art, very human, a vibrant mirror of the cultures that created it. Almost every Pre-Columbian artifact is endowed with a distinct personality, as if it were alive and could speak about where it had been and what it had seen. It is an art that evokes strong emotions. On the face of a ceramic tomb figure from West Mexico we might read laughter and joy, or perhaps grief, anger, even quiet contemplation. We feel a kinship with the sculpture because we have experienced such moods ourselves, and unlike certain great cities and civilizations, these feelings have not vanished from the earth with the passage of centuries. Pre-Columbian meets all my personal criteria for collecting: it is exciting to the eye, warm to the touch, and it sends the imagination traveling on exotic journeys of discovery.

I admit that Meso-American antiquities are a relatively new passion for me. For almost my entire life I have been fascinated by the beauty and mystery of the past, but until I opened my gallery in Beverly Hills four years ago, my attention was focused on the Old World of Biblical and Classical antiquities. I would become enthusiastic about a new facet of the past – coins, terra cottas, glass, bronzes – and would learn everything I possibly could about it. Enthusiasm would become passion, passion obsession, and I would strive to build the most perfect collection possible. Once I was satisfied that I had done my best, I would move on to explore another aspect of antiquity. When I came to Beverly Hills, however, the art of the New World was exactly that for me – new. Perhaps it was inevitable that I should fall under its powerful spell. West Coast collectors had been assembling important holdings of Pre-Columbian art for decades, so there was great potential to build a truly remarkable collection from what was still in private hands.

Following my own rule, "Buy What You Love," I have acquired some magnificent touchstones of ancient American culture. Some of these I have kept and others I have

sold to clients and collectors, but only when I know that they will love an object as much as I have. If the pleasure they derive from it is a little different from my own, that is only as it should be.

The Catalogue of Pre-Columbian Art in the Barakat Collection is the result of four years of scholarship, acquisition and appreciation that documents over 300 treasures from throughout the New World.

Accompanying each photographed artifact is information about where and when it was made and a short paragraph – an expression, a musing – about how each piece strikes me personally. These few lines are statements about the impression an artwork inspires, reflections on the mood it evokes; they in no way attempt to be the last word on an objects history or presence. They are merely a means of sharing the pleasure I take in these magnificent creations, of offering each reader the chance to view an object in a new light. For that too is part of being a good collector; the joy should be personal, but not necessarily secretive. When you take pride in an artwork, when you truly love it, be prepared to share its beauty.

As I have gathered together these superb works, I have become aware that this is perhaps the last golden age for collecting Pre-Columbian art. Legitimate sources for such artifacts are now limited to mostly existing collectors in North America and Europe, and reputable dealers (who I believe have always been motivated by a desire to see that beauty is passed to future generations) do their best to discourage illegal traffic in antiquities from South America. Still, from the 16th century through the middle years of our own, certain visionary collectors have acquired and in many cases preserved from destruction splendid examples of Pre-Columbian art. Many of these pieces are now coming on the market, perhaps for the final time before they pass into public collections. While I wholeheartedly support the egalitarian approach of museums, which make art available to everyone, I know of no museum that is open at the odd hours when I sometimes stand among my private treasures and delight in the wonderful swirl of emotions that engulfs me. It is this that is perhaps the ultimate pleasure of being a private collector – the doors never close.

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