

Art: The Barakat Collection

There Are More Things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio ...

By Skip Press

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If Indiana Jones were a real person, one of his closest confidants would be Fayez Barakat, owner and proprietor of the Barakat Gallery in Beverly Hills. Barakat would be one of Indiana's best customers, for the antiquities featured in the Barakat collection are a dazzling display of eras, cultures, peoples and artists. Barakat belongs in an adventure film, with his finely trimmed beard and mustache and bemused smile. His eyes light up as he tells you, while you hold a simple terra-cotta drinking cup that is 5,000 years old, what a work of art the cup was for its time, and how it must have belonged to a wealthy man, perhaps a Bedouin chieftain, who treasured it and carried it on desert journeys. No piece found in the Barakat Collection is without such a story, and many of the tales are of the gallery's patrons.

"I have had customers form an instant bond with an artifact," Fayez relates, "or burst into tears of joy, saying that they have found something they've searched for their whole life."

The explanation may be a little mystical, like the small statuette of an Egyptian Goddess in whose eyes Barakat says you can feel the power of an ancient culture; but one reason why some customers react so strongly to an object, he thinks, is because they may have owned it before - in a former life.

Shades of reincarnation? A story line from Amazing Stories? Maybe. Or, possibly, just another scene in the ongoing dream of life. In any estimation, it is no ordinary gallery. The museum-quality pieces, many of which were featured in an exhibition at the Fisher Gallery entitled "Fusions of the Hellenistic World," are sold only to the "right person," and not necessarily the fattest purse. While the drinking cup mentioned earlier costs several hundred dollars, a marble bust of the Roman emperor Vitellius, or a bas-relief frieze of Socrates, is more expensive. Whatever the price, in some cases Fayez has actually given a piece to someone to whom it meant a great deal.

"On rare occasions, someone has come in and completely fallen in love with something," he says. "Like it was a part of them that was missing. I've lowered the price so that they can have it, and sometimes I've simply given it away, it meant so much to them."

Not the ordinary way of doing business in Beverly Hills, but Barakat is no ordinary merchant, and much too perceptive to be taken in by a trickster. The recipients of his generosity are always, like the pieces in his collection, the real thing. A fourth-generation collector with 20 years of personal involvement, the man has connections all over the art world. Workers plowing his grandfather's vineyards, near Jerusalem, unearthed ancient tombs yielding centuries-old artifacts, such as a hand-cut piece of glass dating to the time

of Moses (a piece in the collection). With interest in things ancient already a family trait, embarking on an archaeological career was simply following tradition.

Fayez's interest extended beyond biblical and classical cultures, however. In the Barakat Collection one finds a fish fossil 80 million years old, discovered along the Amazon. A stone jaguar god, and terra-cotta pre-Columbian figures represent Mayan and Aztec cultures. It is an international display. In the rear of the shop, in a

giant case, is a startling, glass-enclosed assembly of Egyptian scarabs, of all the colors of the rainbow, one that would impress any Egyptologist. Scattered along the wall, one finds medieval Russian icons, African masks and Hindu bronzes. Some objects not that ancient make up for their youth in sheer beauty. A woman's purse of pure gold-chain maille, for example, dated around the turn of the century. Or ancient Japanese erotic scrimshaw, carved into an ivory medallion.

The range of prices is as varied as the works themselves. Oil lamps, seals, amulets, coins and jewelry may be as low as \$50. A marble representation of Alexander the Great, sculpted 150 to 200 AD, fetches \$1 million, as does a pure-gold hairnet of the Hellenistic period (fourth-first centuries BC). Along the front wall are necklaces of all sorts, the most striking ones made of amber. Several necklaces are from before the time of Christ.

To document a collection so extensive and diverse, Fayez put together a full-color, hardbound catalog, at a cost of \$150 each. With gold-foil detail and 320 color plates, the book is for the benefit of customers and students of antiquities. What exudes from the book, the gallery, and the man is a love of art and an overriding enthusiasm for the pride of ancient artisans. In the catalog's introduction Fayez speaks of wanting to "touch the lives of others with a sense of beauty and truth of the ages," and to "bring to man my share of the contributions of his awesome heritage of beauty, wisdom and spiritual history." With that in mind, the collection features original Islamic documents that rival the Dead Sea Scrolls, and a set of silver coins ("shekels of Tyre") with the profile of Melqart (Hercules), the same currency paid to Judas. There is something even more interesting – the earliest copy of the Bible available in the world.

"A Gutenberg Bible?" I asked in innocence.

"Oh, no," replied Fayez. "Much earlier."

"In Greek, then?"

"No," he smiled, scratching at his mustache, amused by my naivete.

"In Coptic."

I saw many things that day, and spoke with Fayez of the types of energy emanating from each. A bowl with a stylized fetus, used in pre-Columbian fertility rites, brought chills. A small vase seemed older than my ancestors, and gave me images of a beautiful woman. A

carved golden Buddha, matching Grecian water jars with faces of women – hadn't I once...? I dismissed the thought, but I wondered.

Outside the Barakat Gallery, I looked out over the courtyard where the shop is located. For an instant, it seemed like a part of an ancient bazaar. Fayeze Barakat stood by a railing, smiling as he watched people milling about.

Here, I told myself, was a man not only interesting, but interested, secure in his present environment, with a mind focused, lovingly, on the splendor of ancient days.