

Touching the Divine

A selection of Jean Claude Gandur's world-class collection of antiquities will go on long-term loan to Geneva's Musée d'art et d'histoire from 2015. He talks to Apollo about the importance of connecting with an object, and the historical significance of these unique pieces

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PHOTOGRAPHS CLAUDIO BADER

There can be few less auspicious settings for a remarkable collection than that housing – for the time being at least – the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art in Geneva. First comes an industrial estate, then a cavernous and empty depot, a lift, security keys, and a long concrete corridor. A hint that all might not be as it seems is offered by the machine that neatly dispenses covers for one's shoes. Then a door is flung open and a switch flicked. A different and dazzling world explodes into light and life. Crossing the threshold is not unlike walking, blinking all the while, through the looking glass. What this particular Alice found there included a very particular cast of eloquent and often fantastical creatures.

Greeting us to the left, for instance, was an extraordinary polished wood head of

a ram with staring inlaid eyes, dating from the 25th–26th dynasty (Fig. 4). Its curling, bronze horns identify him as the hypostasis of the god, Amun. To the right, displayed on steps alongside the ramp underfoot, bronze statuettes represent almost the entire pantheon of Egyptian gods in their various guises (Fig. 1).

At the back of the space, the scale changes as does the material, with the group of shimmering faience amulets of more animal-headed deities whose refined detail belies their diminutive scale (Fig. 8). Up the ramp and turn left and the miniature turns into the monumental with alabaster urns, stone busts, colossal heads and anthropoid sarcophagi (Fig. 2). It takes a while to shake off the shock of stepping out of a warehouse and into a museum, but that visual leap is an appropriate

metaphor for a collection of artefacts, the majority of which, after all, were created to fulfil a magical, transformative function.

This collection of some 1,300 objects was begun over 40 years ago by Jean Claude Gandur, and is one of three collections – of antiquities, modern art and predominantly 18th-century French decorative arts – now vested in the foundation he established in 2010. Its mission is to preserve, document and enrich these holdings and to exhibit them around the world, as well as to support related restoration and heritage preservation projects and to grant scholarships.

'Reflets du divin', a show at Geneva's Musée d'art et d'histoire in 2001–02, was drawn from M. Gandur's antiquities holdings, but the Pharaonic artefacts on display were lent anonymously. This most discreet of



1 Jean Claude Gandur photographed with his collection in Geneva in December 2012
Photo: Claudio Bader

2 View of a selection of M. Gandur's antiquities, arranged on a stepped display. Against the wall is the lid of an anthropoid sarcophagus inscribed for the god Hor-Em-Akhet, and dating from the 21st–25th dynasty
Photo: Claudio Bader

3 Female figure
Egyptian
Predynastic period
Ivory, 20×5.4cm
Collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art
© Sandra Pointet



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collectors only stepped out of the shadows to sign an agreement with the city of Geneva in March 2010 that laid the foundation of a public-private partnership.

M. Gandur had considered opening a private museum, but instead chose to support Jean Nouvel's dramatic expansion project for the Musée d'art et d'histoire, scheduled to open in 2015. The 99-year agreement ensures that part of his collection of post-war European art – mainly of Second School of Paris and CoBrA artists – will be on permanent display in a dedicated space, while at least half of the

antiquities will be blended into the permanent display of the museum's holdings.

In December last year, the foundation launched its website (www.fg-art.org) with the eventual aim of having all its holdings photographed, documented and available to access online. Its first publication is also underway. Featuring 100 Egyptian bronzes, and written by the curator of the antiquities collection, Professor Robert Steven Bianchi, it is the first of some 18 projected volumes.

When we meet, the works of art selected for one of the foundation's forthcoming loans

are laid out on display. These are destined for an exhibition on the religious and cultural melting pot that was the Alexandria of Ptolemy, at the Fondation Martin Bodmer in Geneva in 2014. There could hardly be a more appropriate backdrop for our interview. For cosmopolitan Alexandria was the city of M. Gandur's childhood and, one suspects, the country and its rich history was the inspiration for this collection of antiquities that embraces many of the ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean basin – Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Near Eastern.



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4 Head of a ram
Egyptian
25th–26th dynasty
Wood, bronze and stone
15.4×19.5×17.2cm
Collection of the Fondation
Gandur pour l'Art
© Sandra Pointet



4

5 Statuette of a goose
Egyptian
18th dynasty
Gessoed and painted wood
and bronze, length 33cm
Collection of the Fondation
Gandur pour l'Art
© Sandra Pointet



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‘I particularly like baboons. Why, I can’t tell you, though in Egyptian art they are nice-looking’

Of these collections, the lion’s share is Egyptian. This holding begins with a pair of extraordinary Predynastic ivory statuettes. Among the earliest known representations of a man and a woman (Fig. 3), they date from around 4000–3100 BC. At the other end of the timeline are pages written in sepia ink by Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832) explaining how to decipher hieroglyphs.

Jean Claude Gandur grew up in the privileged, Francophile world of Alexandria’s haute bourgeoisie. His father’s family was Italian, his mother’s Ukrainian. His grand-

parents were collectors, not of antiquities but of 18th-century French furniture and decorative arts and paintings by the likes of Utrillo and Vlaminck. He has said that his passion for antiquities was sparked by a school trip to the vast ancient burial ground of Saqqara, the necropolis serving the ancient Egyptian capital of Memphis, made when he was eight. He found a broken oil lamp. Months later, his grandmother gave him a little Paleochristian terracotta oil lamp for his ninth birthday. ‘I was so fascinated by this object that I decided I wanted to make

a collection,’ he laughs. ‘Most kids collect things like Coca-Cola bottle caps.’

‘I lived in Egypt until I was 12,’ he explains, ‘and so my eyes were quite familiar with Pharaonic and Islamic art and architecture. In Cairo, in particular, you can feel the superimposition of strata, starting from 3000–4000 BC to the modern age, and how these layers have built up on top of one another to make history. I was always interested in history, and had planned to study it, but life does not always turn out the way you expect. I ended by studying law and political sciences, and began studying history in Paris, but then I started work and all my dreams of digging in the desert evaporated.’ At this point he shrugs and, still beaming, continues: ‘But at least the work I have chosen in life [oil exploration and fuel distribution] gave me the means to collect beautiful artefacts, and I have never really stopped.’

His first acquisitions were left behind in Egypt, as was everything else, when the family left Alexandria for Switzerland in the wake of President Nasser’s programme of nationalisation. ‘It is traumatic to leave the country where you grew up, to lose everything and have to start again. I had a real sense that I wanted to build up the kind of collection that my grandparents had, piece by piece,’ he states. At school, he began by creating a *musée imaginaire* with art postcards. He also resumed collecting antiquities. ‘From the age of 15, I started buying those very small amulets you see here,’ he says, gesturing at the wall behind him. ‘At that time they were cheap and extremely easy to find in antique shops, and every time my grandmother, or any other relative, asked me what I would like for my birthday, instead of asking for a toy I would ask for a little bit of money which would go towards the purchase of my next artefact.’

He is insistent, however, that he was not attempting to reclaim a link with the land that he had lost. ‘You don’t create a collection of this size out of nostalgia,’ he says. ‘I believe you go in the direction that you know best. I knew about Egyptian art and I felt comfortable with it. I could take an object in my hand

6 Many of the pieces in M. Gandur's collection have an illustrious provenance. The 2nd-century cartonnage mummy mask, pictured centre, once belonged to Pierre Loti. Photo: Claudio Bader

and recognise it immediately. Slowly, slowly, I moved on to the artefacts of Rome, Greece and the other civilisations that grew up around the Mediterranean basin as they are in a sense all from one place.'

His first serious purchase was made in Paris when he was 33. 'I was a newly married man and my wife and I entered the shop of a dealer, François Antonovich. He saw that we were looking at two statues of Ganymede, the divine hero who is taken by the god Zeus in the form of an eagle. He asked me if I liked them and I said yes, but I didn't have the money to buy them. He replied: "Take them and pay me when you can." It took me seven months. He became my dealer and mentor for 30 years. Most of the things you see here came through him.'

What are his criteria for selecting any piece from this potentially infinite pool? 'The material itself is of secondary importance, although I do have a small preference for bronze, especially Greek or Roman bronzes where you can feel the strength of a human or animal body. I am not a scholar or a museum curator, and have no need to have the 10th item of the series. I work through my eyes. Mine is an immediate, aesthetic response to an object, a *coup de foudre*.

'The objects here are also almost perfect. I am not interested in small fragments. I truly believe that people are more inclined to visit a museum if they are shown something beautiful – one great thing rather than an accumulation of things. You must allow people who have no knowledge of a subject an aesthetic response to an object, and not overwhelm them with too much. The ideal galleries for me are the antiquities galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. You walk into each as if you are walking into a temple and not a museum, and there is a direct confrontation between the spectator and the object. If you need more, there are display cases and galleries on the side. I do know about these things and even I am bored after three, four or perhaps five vitrines. I am fighting a crusade to convince museum people that this is what we customers prefer.'



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By now he has warmed to his subject, and has become even more animated. 'I am a monomaniac,' he laughs, eyes twinkling, 'but even I am not the kind of monomaniac who is only interested in having representations of the god Thoth standing, seated, lying down, undressed...I have put a lot of effort in representing almost the entire Egyptian pantheon, and I want to have the largest collection of amulets, but they are all different. I particularly like baboons, for instance. Why, I can't tell you, although in Egyptian art they are nice-looking.' At this point, he jumps up from his chair and rushes to the shelf behind him returning with two trophies. 'This one is unique. You can see how it was made to fit into the hand so that it can be offered to the gods,' he says, delighting in the way that the little faience creature rocks in his palm. 'It is very rare to find such a piece with its original base.' He pauses: 'When I see something like this I lose my mind. I am like a child who did not get his ice cream. I am only happy the day it is in the collection.'

'I never set out to form a comprehensive collection, but it has turned out to offer a good overview of ancient Egyptian art. It has a lot of texts, gods, steles...but this was all done by instinct. The one thing that it took me a while to buy was a sarcophagus, until someone pointed out to me that everything in Egyptian art is, after all, connected with death.'

Is rarity of particular importance? 'You only discover something is unique after you have bought it,' he replies. He cites the wooden head of a ram that we passed on the way in (Fig. 4). This extraordinary piece was most likely attached to the prow or stern of a sacred bark of the Nile, so that people could identify the deity whose shrine was placed on its deck when it was carried by priests in procession. 'I had this piece 20 years before a curator from the Louvre visited me and told me that it was unique.'

A comparable rarity is the gessoed and painted wood statuette of a goose with bronze legs, neck, head and beady eyes that is probably also a hypostasis of Amun (18th dynasty; Fig.

5). Two similar statuettes have been discovered in tombs in the Valley of the Kings, suggesting that this too came from a royal tomb. This striding goose illustrates just how well ancient Egyptian artisans could capture the essence of the animal depicted. The use of secondary materials is one of the characteristics of ancient Egyptian art, which imbued objects with the symbolic properties inherent in its materials.

What about historical importance? 'Well, this is of the first importance,' says M. Gandur, turning to face the Roman marble relief beside us destined for the Alexandria show (Fig. 7). 'And again, its importance was only revealed after we began to research the piece. What we see here is a priest, a sacrificial bull and, between them on the pagan altar, the Menorah which had been taken to Rome after the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. You only have this image twice – the other is on the [1st-century] Arch of Titus in Rome. To have an object like this is unbelievable. It is unique in its imagery and represents a unique moment in history. Maybe it even represents the starting point of anti-Semitism.'

A romantic provenance, he believes, 'gives an aura to a piece'. A Late period bronze statuette of a ram, for instance, belonged to the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, discoverer of Troy. The elaborately painted and gilded cartonnage mummy mask seen at the entrance (Fig. 6) was owned by the French writer Pierre Loti, while a Roman marble sarcophagus panel with Dionysiac decoration was part of the collection formed by his great rival, Émile Zola. 'It belonged to a great European writer – it had no place in the US,' M. Gandur asserts passionately. 'I fought to get it – and I paid a premium because it belonged to him.' The panel sold at auction for 10 times its estimate. Another recent auction purchase was the great sculptural anthropoid sarcophagus lid inscribed for the god Hor-Em-Akhet that previously belonged to Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé (Fig. 2).

As for the thornier issues of provenance, M. Gandur is perfectly clear. The provenances



7 Relief depicting a sacrifice, 1st century Roman, imperial period Marble, height 45cm Collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art © Sandra Pointet

8 Amulet of a ram-headed deity Egyptian 26th dynasty, Ptolemaic period Faience, 3.9×1×1.6cm Collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art © Sandra Pointet

of all potential acquisitions are verified following the recommendations of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). As for existing material, two curators from the museum are slowly working their way through the entire collection to check the authenticity of each object and to exercise due diligence on provenance. 'We will expurgate anything from the collection which is problematic,' says M. Gandur. Only then will each piece be photographed and placed on the website. The foundation has given itself two years to complete this task.

'When I was thinking about what to do with all of this, it was quite clear to me that I could never sell these pieces. They carry so much history and that history becomes part of your life,' he says. 'I also realised that the collection had to be available to the public. I created the foundation to ensure that it cannot be sold by my estate, and that it is on show and not kept in store.' I ask what happens after the 99-year contract with Geneva expires. 'The trustees will decide whether they want to renew the loan to Geneva, or come to an agreement with another museum in Europe or in the US. If my trust provides enough dividends to create a private museum, they may decide to do that. The Deed of Trust is left quite open and flexible because if you control too many things it becomes very difficult for the second, and particularly the third, generation to do what is best.' He pauses: 'You have to be able to adapt to the realities of the world.' **A**

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