

Collecting

‘My collection is an instrument of education’

Jean-Claude Gandur | The Swiss entrepreneur and collector tells *Georgina Adam* about his quest to find a museum to house his vast array of historic art

The collector is only a moment in the history of a collection! So says the Swiss entrepreneur, philanthropist and collector *par excellence*, Jean-Claude Gandur. For the last 40 years he has been amassing works of art in five fields – archaeology, the decorative arts, modern painting, ethnology and African contemporary art. In 2010 he put all 3,500 works into a foundation to ensure they remain available to the public even after he is no more. “I did not spend my life collecting, for the works to be dispersed after my death,” he explains. While a project to install them into a Swiss museum has floundered, he is actively seeking somewhere in France for their new home.

Gandur talks to me via Zoom from his Normandy manor, a magnificent house with its own chapel, surrounded by verdant gardens. He is simply dressed in an open-necked blue shirt. Behind him are small antiquities: a seated Egyptian figure, Middle Eastern statuettes and a pre-Columbian vase. He is affable and talkative, but very precise: he uses his phone to show me pictures of works from his collection. It’s clear he knows each piece well, talking to them on the screen using the French informal “tu”.

French is Gandur’s first language, but he also speaks English, Italian and Arabic, the latter an inheritance from his childhood in Egypt. He was born in France but his *haute bourgeois* family – Italian on his father’s side, Russian-Ukrainian on his mother’s – soon moved to Alexandria. Their life there, however, came to an end after President Nasser’s nationalisations which led to the family moving to Switzerland in 1961. Gandur is now a Swiss national, although currently domiciled in Malta.

He comes from a family of collectors – “I grew up surrounded by paintings. My grandparents had Impressionists, works by Vlaminck, Marquet, Derain, Dufy. They also had a pronounced taste for *chinoiserie*, Ming vases and so on – which I found, even young, completely insignificant!”

As a boy Gandur definitely had the collecting bug himself – at just six years old, he amassed Coca-Cola bottle tops. “Each time I opened a bottle I did it differently and then I classified the tops according to the way they were bent. That was my first collection,” he explains. Much later, he discovered and bought a work by César, an assemblage of bottle tops – and again, he pulls out

Below: works from the collection include ‘Transparence’ (1929-30) by Francis Picabia; statuette of Ganymede, Greece, 3rd-1st century BCE; ‘Piccola Estate’ (1956) by Afro

Sandra Pointet, courtesy Foundation Gandur



his phone to show it to me.

His first art purchase as an adult was a group of drawings by Francis Picabia. But the most important moment was when, newly married, he and his wife saw two pieces in an antiquity dealer’s window in Paris. “The owner, François Antonovich, came out. I said I didn’t have enough money to buy them. He said, ‘pay me back every month’. It took me seven months to do so.” They were Greek statuettes showing Ganymede carried off by Zeus, and that first step led to a 20-year collaboration with Antonovich which has resulted in a collection of some 1,250 pieces covering the whole Mediterranean area, notably Greece, Rome and Egypt as well as Eastern civilisations.

“I wanted to have a museum-quality ensemble, and to use the collection to explain the spiritual sources of Christianity and Judaism – how we inherited the Oriental tradition of deity. This has become almost an *idée fixe* with me – the link between antiquity and the creation of Europe, the recuperation of Oriental gods.”

Collecting, he explains, “is more than just buying beautiful objects, my collection is also an instrument of education.” Indeed, he organises numerous tours for school groups and has also created a

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separate foundation for children, aimed towards helping young migrants.

Antiquities is the most fraught of collecting fields today, and I ask about this. “When I started out 40 years ago, provenance, ethics, were not even mentioned. At the time, my greatest fear was buying a fake,” he says. “But in the 1990s people started worrying about provenance and countries started tightening up legislation. Then of course the biggest change came with Isis in 2013. The risk then was that you could be helping terrorism by buying an object.” He adds, “I haven’t bought anything from the Near East for ten years.” He is a founding member and chair of the ethics, governance and remunerations committee of the Geneva-based International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH).

Gandur established his own oil trading company in 1987, working in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, and this led to his now considerable wealth – and the opportunity to extend his collecting.

“Until about 1990 I couldn’t afford the paintings I wanted, then prices collapsed in about 1994 and . . .” he pauses for dramatic effect “ . . . that was the luck of my life. I started buying, buying, buying like a maniac! I had years to put together a collection before prices started going up again around 2002.”

This collection, of mainly French 20th-century painting, notably the Second School of Paris, now numbers around 1,000 works, notably focusing on abstraction, CoBrA and narrative figuration. “Most of the artists worked in Paris or were French,” he says. “But I also have the English artists Lanyon and Heron and Italians such as Manzoni, Fontana, Burri and Afro. My instincts are more in the lyrical Latin tradition, I have more difficulty judging, for example, German artists.” He recounts with pride that Bernard Blistène, director of the Pompidou Centre, rates his ensemble of paintings, in its field, as the best behind the Pompidou and Tate.

Gandur’s objective for the foundation is “museum quality”, both in the works he has collected and the way they are inventoried, displayed and lent. A thorough and detailed website gives details of each work of art, and the foundation lends extensively as well as having partnerships with the Reina Sofia in Madrid and various French museums.

I delicately ask him about the failed attempt to create an extension to Geneva’s Musée d’Art et d’Histoire. Designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, the extension would have cost CHF131m (about \$146m), to which Gandur would have contributed some CHF40m (about \$44m). The agreement included long-term loans of some of his antiquities and paintings, but by a narrow vote, the people of Geneva rejected the plan. It has been reported, erroneously, that he then gave up on the idea of having a museum.

Gandur is actually happy to talk about this. “The negative side of this is my regret that Geneva and its population did not understand what I was trying to do; there was an alliance between the far left and a certain bourgeoisie who were against the project, and I was perceived as a foreigner trying to get into ‘their’ museum,” he says.

“But,” he continues, “the positive side of this was that the model was not best for the museum – and it would have mutilated my collection, they would only have shown a tiny percentage of paintings and my archaeology would have been submerged in their own beautiful collection.”

The result is that he has been prospecting French municipalities, although these efforts have currently been halted by the pandemic. He knows what he wants: “The museum must have a beautiful garden where families can come

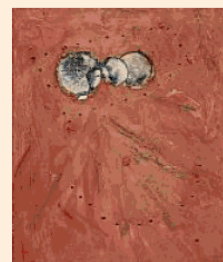


Clockwise from main: Art collector Jean-Claude Gandur with a selection of his ancient Egyptian art; ‘Umbria Vera’ (1952) by Alberto Burri; ‘Concetto spaziale’ (1956) by Lucio Fontana — Claudio Bader, Sandra Pointet, courtesy Foundation Gandur

have picnics . . . I told the then mayor of Bordeaux, [former prime minister Alain Juppé], that if I have to sell kebabs to bring people in, I will do so! I want to demystify art, I don’t want it just to be for the elite.”

As we finish – with a number of topics undiscussed, such as his collection of contemporary African art – he talks about the future of the foundation. “I am lucky to have a considerable fortune,” he says. “I have made a legal agreement with my son and his family, that the bulk of my fortune will go to support the foundation and continue its work.” We have a final exchange about his 14-year-old grandson, who already seems to have inherited the same collecting bug. “He’s just as systematic as I was at that age!” says Gandur proudly.

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