



A herculean try for goddess

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THE SCENE: The competitive world of Greek and Roman antiques

THE QUEST: To secure a marble head of a Greek deity for Emory's Michael C. Carlos Museum at a Sotheby's auction

THE AGENT: Atlanta's Jasper Gaunt, curator for the museum. With a \$300,000 budget, does he have enough money to outbid the competition?

New York -- Jasper Gaunt is worried: The goddess he's been hoping to purchase is about to slip out of his hands.

He is authorized to bid up to \$300,000 for this prize, but that might not be enough. Just minutes into a Sotheby's auction of Greek and Roman antiquities, prices are trending toward Olympian heights.

For example, a tiny, ancient Greek figure -- a flat-faced man with a nose like a sundial -- goes on the block in the first 20 minutes, and bids quickly jump past the \$30,000 estimate. The 7-inch fellow ends up going for \$180,000.

Gaunt has his eye on something a bit larger: the oversize marble head of a Greek deity, a classic beauty up for sale within the next few minutes. He quickly retires to the lobby to make a phone call to the patron underwriting his quest.

"We're going to have to fight," he says.

It's holiday time in Manhattan, and antiquities dealers and fanciers from all over the world have come to town, trailing their shopping lists and hoping for bargains.

Two big auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's, are staging their bi-annual antiquities auctions, selling art from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Near East, coordinated so that out-of-towners can attend both.

And the out-of-towners are here. Wandering the streets of the Upper East side are dealers from Cologne, London, Geneva and Washington, museum curators from Missouri, Virginia and Canada, and collectors from around the globe. They all chat, lunch, attend each other's parties and act like the best of friends -- until they're out of earshot of each other.

"Be careful with this guy," one dealer warns about another. "Google this fellow and see the kind of stories you find about him."

Their likes are intense, their dislikes equally strong. They dislike collectors who can outbid museums, they have a distaste for the disembodied telephone bidders, and they curl their lips at "decorators" whose clients drive up prices by spending half a million dollars on a tacky Roman torso.

At home in this world, like a dolphin in the wine-dark sea, is Gaunt, curator of Greek and Roman art for Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum. A Briton raised in Rome, the diminutive Gaunt has the handsome elocution bespeaking Oxford schooling and the perspective that comes from a childhood spent playing among the ruins of the Forum.

He matches the ivied education with a stint working at Christie's in London, which makes him right for the antiquities game: half tweedy professor, half Texas Hold' Em card shark. After earning a Ph.D. in art history from New York's Institute of Fine Arts, Gaunt started at the Carlos in December 2001, and made his first major purchase that month.

This week, wherever he shows his face -- at Madison Avenue shops, at auction house previews, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art -- he runs into colleagues and friends, all of whom are curious about what has caught his eye. Gaunt is cagey, as they all are.

"We all play mind games," says Washington, D.C., dealer Sue McGovern. "What do you like? I don't know, what do you like?"

Privately, Gaunt will tell you that his goal is Empyrean. "My instructions," he confides, "are to look for not the best, but the very best."

There are good museums and great museums. There's The Frick -- the legendary collection of masterpieces housed on New York's Upper East Side -- and there's the tier below. "What I'm asked to do, is to do the Frick," he says, explaining his level of ambition for Carlos acquisitions. "It will never be as big, but it will have the same voltage."

That's a tall order for a vest-pocket outfit like Emory's Carlos Museum, which sports 15,000 square feet of display area (compared to 89,000 at the High Museum) and a small but distinguished collection. Gaunt plans to add to it one masterpiece at a time.

That first purchase was tiny -- a half-inch portrait of a Ptolemaic queen, Berenike II, carved in garnet. Others have been more substantial, such as a four-foot marble sculpture of the goddess Aphrodite from first-century Rome, purchased at a similar Sotheby's auction earlier this year.

His goal this time is even bigger: a monumental "cult-head" of Demeter or Aphrodite, carved perhaps a hundred years before Christ. Being Greek makes it rare, significant and more valuable. For every 50 handsome Roman marbles, there is one Greek, Gaunt says.

Obtaining it might seem simple enough: be the last bidder standing. But in the high-stakes, high-risk world of antiquities trading, nothing is as simple as it seems.

Won't it be grand?

That truism is on display during a visit to that temple of antiquity, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has just installed new galleries for its Greek and Roman collections that will officially open this spring.

The light on this clear winter day pours through the windows of the two-story vaulted wing, bouncing off the soft stone walls and washing over a magic garden of classic figures like a milk bath. "Look at the way sculpture looks in grand spaces," says Gaunt. "It just looks fabulous!"

He points out a Greek amphora, a highly decorated jar that, filled with olive oil, was presented as a prize to a winning Olympic athlete back in the 5th century B.C. "We have a tiny fragment of one of these," he says. "They have a whole gallery."

Nearby, in the Met's Bothmer Gallery, is perhaps the most astonishing -- and notorious -- pot in the museum: a 12-gallon jug known as the Euphronios krater, inscribed with a scene depicting a fallen Trojan warrior being carried off the field of battle. The Met acquired it in 1972 from dealer Robert Hecht for a then unheard of \$1 million.

Not long after, the Italian government contended the pot was illegally looted from a tomb and vigorously pursued its return. For 30 years the Met demurred, then reversed its position this year and agreed to return the krater, along with other artifacts.

That change of heart occurred after dealer Hecht and Marion True, a former curator from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, were charged by the Italian government with trading in looted artifacts. While prosecution of the two men continues, the Getty has agreed to return some artifacts to Greece but has stalled in its discussions with Italy. Italy also has asked for the return of antiquities by New York collector Shelby White, who with her late husband, Leon Levy, financed the new galleries at the Met and supplied many pieces in its collection.

Just a few months ago, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston agreed to return 13 treasures to Italy, including an amphora donated by White.

Obviously, for curators and dealers, the pressure is on. Italy and Greece are stepping up campaigns to pursue illegally excavated objects, many of which seem to turn up in the finest company. Even works that have been in museums for centuries are inciting debate, such as the carvings from the Parthenon spirited off from Athens to England by Lord Elgin in 1806.

Emory University is attentive to these issues. In 2003, it voluntarily returned to Egypt the **mummy** of King Rameses I, which was part of a cache of 145 items, including 10 coffins and **mummies**, that Emory had acquired legitimately in 2001 from a museum in Niagara Falls.

What makes the Greek goddess head Gaunt is after more valuable is a line of provenance, or documented origin and ownership, that stretches back to the early 20th century, adding to its pedigree.

Provenance, says Gaunt, is crucial. Nobody -- at least nobody reputable -- wants to buy stolen art.

Divergent views

A party during auction week demonstrates just how clubby the world of ancient art can be. At Fortuna Fine Arts Ltd., a gallery the size of a small diner, most of the world's leading **experts** on antiquities rub shoulders while sipping glasses of expensive champagne. Among them is Hecht, the dealer being prosecuted for selling looted artifacts.

Also at the party is McGovern, the D.C. dealer, who shows Gaunt a red leather wallet. Inside is an exquisite gold bas relief featuring an X-rated image of a couple caught in the act.

"From Mr. Hefner's collection," Gaunt deadpans, then adds, in a serious tone, "I think it's modern."

Which brings up another point: Nobody wants to buy a modern piece masquerading as ancient. That concern has been raised about some of the items up for auction this week.

At Phoenix Ancient Art, a Manhattan shop owned by two charismatic Lebanese brothers, such doubts are voiced bluntly. Whipping through one of the auction house's catalogs, Ali Aboutaam dismisses one object after another: "That's fake. That's fake. That's terrible! That's boring."

Such brutal critiques aren't unusual in this circle and, at times, appear to be expressed strategically, part of the haggling that goes on in this rarefied marketplace.

But disagreements abound; one man's litter is another's grail. Aboutaam praises a Roman bronze that Gaunt detests ("rubbery, flaccid, waxy"), but criticizes the condition of the Greek head that has smitten Gaunt.

As he strides from the shop, Gaunt is grumpy, and defensive: "Yes, it could be in better shape," he says, "but these things don't grow on bushes."

Competitive pursuit

Within walking distance of Phoenix is the headquarters of Sotheby's, a 10-story glass box near the East River. There is an auction preview today, so Gaunt is meeting Peter Lacovara, curator of Egyptian art at the Carlos, to inspect the items in person.

Lacovara has less money to spend, plus a racking chest cold, so this isn't the best shopping trip of his life. But he enjoys the antiquarian's traditional pastime of critiquing the merchandise. One piece, a rather unattractive granite carving of a seated pharaoh and his wife, Lacovara dubs "Mr. and Mrs. Frankenstein."

Soon they come to the object of Gaunt's desire: the larger-than-lifesize head of a goddess, carved from Grecian marble, an elegant deity who tilts her head slightly to one side.

As Gaunt examines her, a rival appears: Sidney Goldstein, a St. Louis curator with pink complexion and tie to match, peers over Gaunt's shoulder at his catalog. "I've [earmarked] that page too," says Goldstein.

"Do you have any money?" asks Gaunt.

"I could have," Goldstein replies with a smile. "I'm not going to show my hand."

Bidding time

When the day of the auction arrives, about 120 bidders squeeze into a small hall on the sixth floor at Sotheby's, where some of the items up for sale are on display. Gaunt's Greek head serves as a sort of centerpiece, positioned at the very front of the room next to auctioneer Hugh Hildsley. A scattering of pots, bottles and vases are quickly auctioned off before the bidding turns to statuary. Gaunt arrives 10 minutes into the auction, looking mildly mussed. As he settles in, a 2nd century Roman figure of Herakles is snapped up by a telephone bidder for \$550,000.

"Decorator," Gaunt grumbles under his breath.

But it's clear that prices today will be higher than he hoped. And earlier that day Gaunt received a bit of discouraging news. A collector he knows told him he was interested in the head, and, despite Gaunt's entreaties, will not make a deal. Gaunt will have serious competition from this fellow, who happens to have money.

Shortly before the head of the goddess comes on the block, Gaunt has that telephone conversation with his patron, Thalia Carlos, widow of Michael C. Carlos, and great benefactor to the museum.

She tells him to fight.

Starting at \$145,000, the price expands by increments of \$5,000. Standing at the rear of the room, Gaunt doesn't move a muscle, or make a bid. At \$210,000 he stands up straighter. At \$220,000 he raises his hand for the first time.

"A new bidder" notes auctioneer Hildsley.

Thereafter Gaunt nods, almost imperceptibly, when the ball is in his court. After \$300,000, the price begins going up \$20,000 a clip. The bids then climb past \$400,000, driven higher by a single telephone bidder.

Gaunt nods and bumps up the price to \$420,000. "Are we all through?" asks Hildsley. The telephone is silent. Hildsley brings the gavel down. The Greek goddess will be moving to Atlanta. Gaunt appears pale, shaken, exhausted. Carlos Museum director Bonnie Speed rushes up to congratulate him, and the two pose for photographs. "Smile" says the cameraman. Gaunt can't. Finally, after a few moments, he catches his breath and begins savoring his victory.

"It's a glorious statue, and we don't have [one like it]. Few people do," he says. "Greek sculpture of this scale in this condition is extremely rare.

"This was expensive," he says, pointing to the Roman piece that went earlier. "Ours was cheap. This is a moderately good Roman copy. Ours is a Greek original."

His prize will go on display at the Carlos ... Right now, though, Gaunt's thoughts are already turning to another Greek maiden in his life. In just three days, he will marry Maria Doiranlis at a Greek Orthodox church in Manhattan.

All in all, a big week -- for the Carlos, and for Jasper Gaunt, who already sounds eager to go after his next masterpiece.

"When I fight," he says, "I like to win."

THE GREEK HEAD

Called a "cult head" the larger than lifesize sculpture acquired by the Carlos has stylistic similarities to first century B.C. sculpture found on the Italian peninsula, and was auctioned once before as Roman, but it was probably carved by a Greek artist, and imported, said Jasper Gaunt. "It was sold at Christie's 20 years ago as Roman. They're just wrong. It's obviously Greek." Its Greek heritage makes it rarer and more significant. "For every 50 Aphrodites, you have one of these."

The back and top of the head are hollowed out, perhaps to save on shipping weight. The head would have fit into the body of a very large "draped cult statue" that would have been the centerpiece of a temple devoted to the goddess. The focus of attention for thousands of pilgrims visiting from around the region, that sculpture "would have been 200 years old when Peter and Paul came to Rome," said Gaunt.

Photo

SHIHO FUKADA / Special

First-century Greek "cult head" recently purchased by Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum.

Photo

SHIHO FUKADA / Special

Curator Peter Lacovara (left) of Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum laughs with art dealer Sue McGovern (center) and Bonnie Speed, also of the Carlos Museum, at a party hosted Dec. 6 by collector Lee Miller at her home in New York. Such settings can be cordial, even jovial, but it's serious business when the bidding starts.

Photo

SHIHO FUKADA / Special

Curator Jasper Gaunt (left) talks with antiquities dealer Rupert Wace at a Dec. 6 party in New York. Gaunt was on a mission to successfully bid on an ancient statue and bring it back to Atlanta.

Photo

SHIHO FUKADA / Special

Curators Jasper Gaunt (right) and Peter Lacovara of the Carlos Museum examine antiquities at the pre-sale exhibits at Sotheby's in New York. But it's a certain Greek goddess head that Gaunt's after.

Photo

SHIHO FUKADA / Special

Curator Jasper Gaunt of the Carlos Museum examines antiquities at the pre-sale exhibits at Sotheby's in New York on Dec. 4.