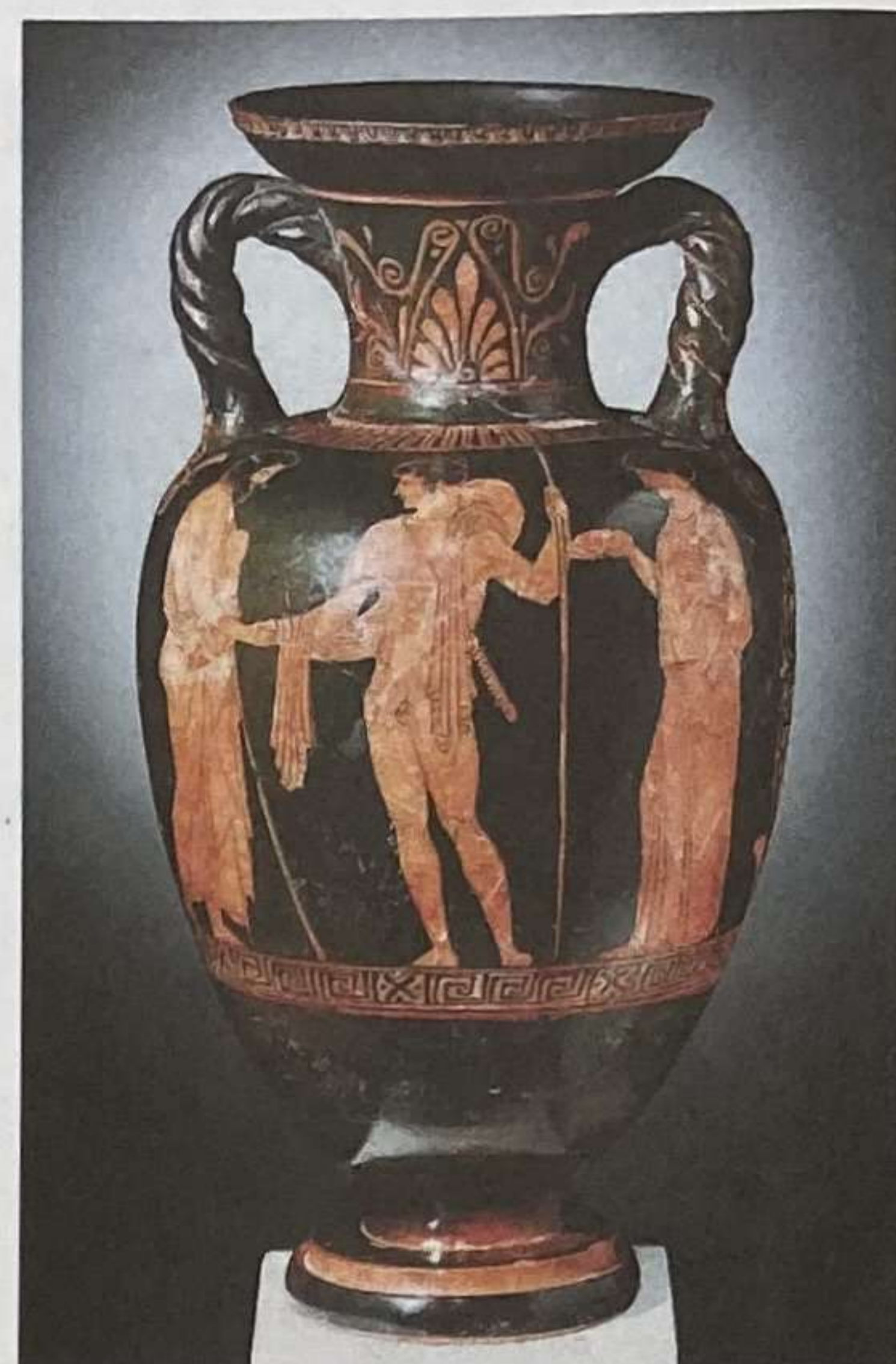


THE ART OF COLLECTING



STONE GALLERY



NIKLAUS BÜRGIN/GALERIE CAHN, BASEL

A fair of rare riches, vetted with care

At Treasure House, the objects on sale are 'responsibly provenanced'

BY LIZ ROBBINS

A pregnant fish lizard began its unlikely journey from southwest Germany to southwest London 180 million years ago.

Soon, it will arrive in the English capital in fossil form to join other rare objects for sale at the Treasure House Fair at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, which

runs from June 27 to July 2. How it got there reveals the thorny evolution of the antiquities market and the art world's current concerns over authenticity.

Charges of looted ancient art and lawsuits over repatriations have roiled museums and collectors over the last decade, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

But Thomas Woodham-Smith, the co-founder of Treasure House with Harry Van der Hoorn, said the fair meticulously vets the dealers and their wares. From fossils to Etruscan wine cups, from diamonds to Lichtensteins to oil

paintings of Queen Elizabeth II, such disparate items are checked by experts including the Art Loss Register to ensure they are not stolen, lost or looted. They carry the directors' pledge: "Responsibly sourced, responsibly provenanced, carefully cataloged, all legal," Woodham-Smith said in an interview in New York last month.

In particular, the giant fish lizard — a fossilized ichthyosaur from the Lower Jurassic period — illustrates how private dealers must navigate the rigorous laws prohibiting the export of some ancient art.

Roy Masin, the founder of Stone Gallery in the Netherlands, said he pur-

chased the unprepared fossil in 2018 from the family of an amateur archaeologist, which requested anonymity.

At the time, Masin said, the fossil was firmly lodged in segments of slate that his team had to carefully remove with fine tools and stabilizing fluids in order to reveal the bones.

The archaeologist had unearthed it near Holzmaden, Germany, some time between 1968 and 1972, Masin said — a time frame verified by the state museum. Pieced together, the fossil is 11 feet 6 inches long and weighs more than 350 pounds. Two embryos are plainly visible inside the ribs.

In order to remove the fossil from Germany, Masin needed to acquire certification from a local expert. In this case, that was Prof. Rainer Schoch, a curator of fossils at the Stuttgart State Museum of Natural History.

Schoch wrote that he was reluctant to part with an "extremely rare" fossil that was in "excellent preservation." He said in an email exchange that a 1971 German law ruled that it was illegal to remove "significant" fossils from the state of Baden-Württemberg since they were considered an important part of the area's cultural heritage. Within the state, Holzmaden is an additional protected zone because it is rich in ichthyosaur remains.

However, because this particular ichthyosaur was likely found before 1971 (Masin said the family did not have an exact date) and was also found outside the protected zone, Schoch wrote, "we had no choice but to let the fossil go." He added: "This does not mean that we are happy with the situation."

Schoch explained why: "We know from so many cases that once the owner of a valuable fossil passes away, those who inherit it usually do not have a clue what to do with it or have exorbitant expectations regarding its monetary value. Therefore, many such fossils will be lost eventually."

That concern over private collectors owning scientific items has arisen again and again, such as when Sotheby's announced that it would sell a recently unearthed stegosaurus fossil in July.

But Masin reassured Schoch that his gallery had devoted time and resources to protecting the fossil, taking better care of it than others might.

"I told him I know of 30 to 40 fossils laying in very bad conditions in warehouses that are falling apart all over Germany," Masin said in a telephone interview from the Netherlands. "We put in a lot of money, and we took care of this fossil, and we prepped it in a way that is good for generations to come. And so a lot of people all over the world can enjoy this fossil."

Masin named the fossil "Mutti" or "Mommy" in German, and she is just getting out in the world. Masin has shown her at art fairs in Palm Beach, Fla., and Amsterdam with a \$1.3 million price tag.

At the Treasure House Fair, Mutti will keep company with such eclectic items from Stone Gallery as an approximately 50,000-year-old woolly rhinoceros skull and an Uruguayan quartz geode. Masin noted that crystals were becoming increasingly popular with collectors.

"We have people in our gallery, like crypto traders, and they're just looking for something cool in their house," Masin said.

For younger art collectors, tracing the provenance of an object is a priority, said Jean-David Cahn, whose namesake gallery, at more than 160 years old, is believed to be the oldest-running family operator of antiquities in the world.

"It's not just the art market or antiquities," Cahn said in a phone interview from Basel, Switzerland.

"It's with food, clothing, everything. You have a line to follow concerning responsibility, past cultures and even more towards living cultures, which is

the aspect of post-colonialism."

Cahn was one of the founders of the International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art in 1993, which adopted a code of ethics. And yet even he was entangled in controversy recently.

More than seven years ago, he had brokered the sale of two Greek vases on behalf of the Swiss canton of Basel-Stadt as it tried to recover money in the bankruptcy case of the art dealer Gianfranco Becchina, who was convicted in 2011 of illegally dealing in antiquities. When the new owner asked Cahn to exhibit the vases for resale at the 2017 Frieze Masters in London, they were confiscated by the authorities in London, who claimed that they were looted material.

Cahn said that reports at the time failed to make clear that he had first brokered the sale for the state. He also said that a Swiss legal art expert confirmed to him that the vases were "OK to sell."

Despite the risks in his industry, Cahn said he was passionate that art should not be reserved exclusively for museums. "People should be allowed to live with these things of the past, not just to watch them behind the showcase," Cahn said.

He is bringing more than 250 pieces to Treasure House, with each object telling a wider story of its time period. A twisted two-handled jug depicting a farewell scene of a warrior saying goodbye to his family is attributed to the Dinos Painter in Athens from 425-410 B.C., right around the time when plays by Sophocles and Euripides were performed.

Each of his gallery's items comes with a detailed provenance — or ownership history — some whose private owners date back three centuries, Cahn said.

The Treasure House Fair — and its name — has its own rich provenance. When the Grosvenor House Art and Antiques Fair closed in 2009 after a 75-year run in London, Woodham-Smith and Van der Hoorn started Masterpiece London the next year on the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea.

But a Swiss company, MCH Group, the owner of the renowned Art Basel fair, bought a controlling stake in Masterpiece in 2017, and Britain's departure from the European Union and the Covid pandemic soon intervened. In early 2023, MCH abruptly canceled the fair, saying that partly as a result of Brexit, the costs had escalated and the number of exhibitors had declined.

Because Van der Hoorn was established as the owner of a company that builds stands for art fairs, he and Woodham-Smith decided to reinvent Masterpiece on a smaller scale with a new name. Treasure House began cautiously with 55 dealers in 2023, before expanding by 15 galleries this year. (By comparison, Art Basel Miami Beach had 277 galleries last year.)

Adam Patrick of A La Vieille Russie in New York, a frequent Masterpiece vendor, cautiously sat out the first year of Treasure House. But he said he was encouraged by enthusiastic reports to try it this year.

Patrick is bringing about 300 unusual jewelry items, including an Art Deco diamond brooch of a World War II aircraft, a pink enamel Fabergé whistle and an antique witch's heart pendant.

A La Vieille Russie will fold into the rows of dealers featuring Impressionist art, modern sculpture, luscious gems, English furniture and royal portraits.

Asked whether the name Treasure House could, for some, evoke the idea of a cabinet of curiosities, Woodham-Smith dismissed any colonial connotation and emphasized London's position as a global trading hub.

While conceding that the name could be polarizing for some, he said that, for him, the name has beauty because it was without ambiguity.

"It tells you exactly what you're going to find," Woodham-Smith said. "Treasures. In a house."

Ancient art

Above from left, a fossilized ichthyosaur from the Lower Jurassic period, and a jug depicting a warrior saying goodbye to his family, attributed to the Dinos Painter in Athens. They will be on show alongside other rare objects at the Treasure House Fair at the Royal Hospital Chelsea in London from June 27 to July 2.

Georg Baselitz
at Art Basel 2024

Thaddaeus Ropac
London Paris Salzburg Seoul