

## THE EGYPTIAN COLLECTION OF THE FONDATION GANDUR POUR L'ART, GENÈVE, SWITZERLAND\*

By **ROBERT STEVEN BIANCHI**

Jean Claude Gandur, the founder and chairman of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, located in Geneva, Switzerland, is a successful businessman as well as a recognized philanthropist. He was born into a family that was sensitive to European, Oriental, and South American art, to which he was exposed at an early age when one of his grandparents presented him with a terracotta oil lamp. From that modest beginning over 40 years ago, he continues to build his own collection by concentrating on four areas, namely: Antiquities; Fine Art [primarily European Abstract Expressionism]; Decorative Arts [from the Medieval Period to the end of the XVIII century]; and Ethnology [primarily, Pre-Columbian] and Oceanic Art.

From the start, Jean Claude Gandur strove to showcase the diversity of the gods of the ancient world in order to understand the subtle links that tied them to human beings, by reflecting the creativity of those who crafted their images. These are the guiding principles that still lead Jean Claude Gandur in his quest to gather an extensive archaeological collection, which today comprises some 1,300 objects. The Egyptian objects remain at the heart of the collection and express the evolution of Egyptian art from its origin (4th millennium BCE, with ivory statues dated from the Predynastic Period) to the integration of Egypt into the Roman Empire. Throughout that period of time, whenever the deities would encounter one another, they would absorb each other, superimpose one another, or even blend together, in a pattern of interaction that reflects the capacity of the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians to accept and assimilate, typically keeping each other's cults intact. Three types of objects are at the forefront of this Egyptian collection. First, the bronze statuettes, universally admired for their excellent quality; second, the ancient Egyptian amulets, noteworthy for their diversity of types, media, and deities represented, all of which attest to the observation that these form one of the most complete collections in the world; and stone vases, dating from the Predynastic through the Roman Imperial Period.

Sculpture in the round is also represented by a reworked, large scale bust of Rameses II, a life-sized early Late Period bust of a nursing woman, and a painted, gilded, monumental head from a limestone sphinx. The collection of reliefs date from the Old Kingdom through the Ptolemaic Period, and include the one inscribed in hieroglyphs with the name and titles of Alexander the Great in which he is styled "the son of Amun." The collection is also characterized by a number of objects reflecting the Alexandrian school of Graeco-Roman Egypt and the Ptolemaic Period, specifically numerous images of Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, and marble portraits of Cleopatra VII and the deified Augustus. Some of the objects were formerly in the collections of such famous personalities as Pierre Loti and Yves Saint Laurent, both of whom were passionate collectors. Collecting these ancient Egyptian works of art continues to be a very personal pursuit, as Jean Claude Gandur himself explains:

From my earliest childhood, I have always been fascinated by the allure of Egypt. It is an enchanted land, anciently animated by the pulsating rhythms of the rising River Nile. These recurring cosmic cycles played on the imagination of anonymous theologians of the remote past and formed the unmovable foundations of a religion that was to last for millennia. The beasts of the farm and wilderness, the plants of the garden and marsh, the minerals of the desert and mountain were also incorporated into that elaborate theological system from which the deities of the land were to emerge. Those deities, whose number is infinite, were each associated with an animal, a plant, a mineral, and each were possessed of symbolic characteristics and represented almost invariably on walls of tombs and temples from Aswan to Alexandria for over four millennia. All foreign conquerors from the Assyrian and Persian kings to the Emperors of Rome who came into contact with this civilization of the Nile were overwhelmed by what they found there. So powerful was the attraction of this civilization that even after its fall when the last hieroglyphs were carved into a wall on the Temple of Philae the land of the pharaohs continued and continues to inspire painters, sculptors, architects, poets, playwrights, novelists, composers, choreographers, actors and actresses.

Jean Claude Gandur established his foundation as a not-for-profit organization, which was incorporated by the canton of Geneva in 2010, because he desired to share that passion for ancient Egypt like those individuals, just mentioned, with a wider audience. As he himself states, "I do so by collecting, continuing the example set by my grandfather and father. I do, however, insist that my collection represents aesthetically and technically accomplished works of art which present ancient Egypt in its best light so that these works may become outstanding ambassadors in public programs aimed at students and adults alike."

That insistence is clearly stated on the Fondation's web site, where one can note its mission statement: to preserve, document, enrich and exhibit its collections in museums and other prestigious venues in Switzerland and abroad. That mission is motivated, in part, by three driving forces, which have informed his pattern of collecting, namely:

The pleasure I derive from collecting and my desire to share my collections. This philosophy is at the heart of his Foundation. There is no greater prospect than to submit one's choices to the appreciation of others, to enable others to discover and admire unique works of art that are brought together in a continual aesthetic and intellectual quest. I have always maintained that art is not only the crystallization of an historic moment. It is also a vector of dialogue between civilizations and a testament to the genius of the human spirit. This universal language encourages tolerance and mutual understanding between peoples. If these collections make it possible for people of different origins to see themselves in each other's traditions and contribute to allowing them to live in harmony, then the quest will not have been in vain.

The Fondation accomplishes that mission by furthering cultural education and understanding through public access to its world-class art collections in close partnership with Geneva's Musées d'art et d'histoire de la Ville de Genève, and other institutions of

exceptional calibre worldwide. Its vision additionally demands that art should be made open and accessible, reflecting Jean Claude Gandur's conviction that culture creates bridges between peoples and facilitates social integration. What began as Jean Claude Gandur's intense passion for art at an early age has become one of the world's most prestigious private collections, providing a rare opportunity for the appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage. To that end, the Fondation has repeatedly shared its collections with museums and cultural institutions around the world through numerous loans and exhibitions that have been mounted in Arles, Caen, Daoulas, Paris, and Marseilles in France; Rome, Italy; Madrid, Spain; St. Petersburg, Florida; Monaco; Karlsruhe, Germany; Cologne, Geneva, and Pully, Switzerland; and Asahikawa, Fukui, Gunma, Osaka, and Tokyo, Japan.

At the present time, the Fondation does not maintain a brick-and-mortar facility, but it is possible to view the antiquities collection, aesthetically displayed, in a fine arts facility in neighboring Carouge, by scheduling a mutually convenient appointment. There, one may visit a suite of two combined rooms, electronically alarmed and equipped with their own independent climate control system.

The exhibition of the Egyptian collection in the facility at Carouge, highlights the ancient Egyptian bronzes. An additional shelving system has just recently been installed so that each antiquity is out in the open and can be easily examined because no object is placed behind glass. Additionally, there are no drawers, closets, or other closed storage units.

The Fondation has also established a philanthropic programme to grant financial support towards heritage restoration or preservation projects related to its collections. In order to apply, institutions interested in benefiting from this program will be required to submit a complete dossier, including a description of the project, its relevance, a financial budget, the team responsible for the project and their areas of expertise, as well as a mention of any funding already acquired or requested. Applications should also specify the number of years over which the project is expected to last, and, if applicable, the foreseen solutions to ensure that they are sustainable. Once the grant has been awarded, the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art reserves the right to suspend or cancel the payment of the grant if the heritage restoration or preservation activities have not been carried out within the stated time frame, or if the facts provided in the application are no longer met (for instance, in the case of a change in the political situation, a change of project manager, a war and so on).

The Fondation became a member of ICOM in 2013. It continues to collect aggressively but acquires only those antiquities which have legally documented provenance histories which meet or exceed ICOM's strict criteria for due diligence. Jean Claude Gandur's adherence to those criteria is not simply lip-service. His commitment is further demonstrated by his active, long-standing practice of voluntarily calling to the attention of the Egyptian authorities objects which have been improperly removed from that country. In 2013 he alerted the authorities to a royal relief then on the art market. That alert resulted in its successful repatriation to Egypt. On-going research on all objects in the collection revealed in March of 2016 that a travertine palette of the seven sacred oils of Old Kingdom date, acquired by the Fondation on the European market, was in fact a published, excavated object. M. Gandur contacted Swiss Federal authorities in Bern, voluntarily surrendered the object and

requested its return to Egypt without demanding any financial compensation. The return was the subject of articles in both the Swiss and Egyptian press.

As a result of his prominent stand, M. Gandur is one two prominent philanthropists who have joined with seven nation-states who have already pledged 77 million dollars to the Geneva-based International Alliance for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH). This organization works to mobilize resources to implement preventive and emergency protection programs for cultural goods at risk and for their post-conflict rehabilitation. For more, see this link [viewed on 5 October 2017] <http://icom.museum/media/icom-news-magazine/genevas-efforts-to-protect-global-cultural-heritage/L/4/>.



*Fig. 1: Jean Claude Gandur at the fine arts facility in Carouge © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: G. Maillot / Agence point-of-views.ch.*



Fig. 2: Overview of the fine arts facility in Carouge; author's photograph.



Fig. 3: Detail of the exhibition in the fine arts facility in Carouge © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: G. Maillot / Agence point-of-views.ch





*Fig. 4: Detail of the exhibition in the fine arts facility in Carouge; author's photograph.*



*Fig. 5: Detail of the exhibition in the fine arts facility in Carouge; author's photograph.*



*Fig. 6: Limestone statue of a sphinx FGA-ARCH-EG-0126 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Sandra Pointet.*



*Fig. 7: Granite bust of Rameses II FGA-ARCH-EG-0133 © Darwin Media Ltd.*



*Fig. 8: Donation stela of Rameses III FGA-ARCH-EG-0224 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève.  
Photographer: Sandra Pointet.*





*Fig. 9: Detail of the wooden, anthropoid sarcophagus formerly in the collection of Yves St. Laurent FGA-ARCH-EG-0315 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Sandra Pointet.*



*Fig. 10: Colossal limestone head of a sphinx, painted and gilded FGA-ARCH-EG-0355 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Lonchamp.*

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\* The present article is derived from a paper presented at the 2017 CIPEG Annual Meeting in Chicago