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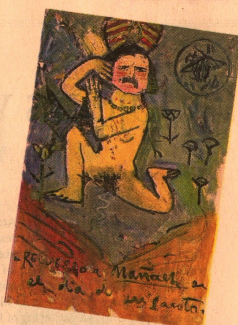


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Objects with attitude

Collections | A distinguished
curator turns his expert eye on
acquisitions. By Rachel Spence

It's bottomless, like music, like literature. You can never know enough. There are discoveries to be made everywhere."

Although he has been working in the art world for half a century, Sir Norman Rosenthal's passion for art and its history shines out as brightly as his scarlet socks.

That enthusiasm, allied to expertise

garnered during a career that saw him reach the pinnacle of the British art world as exhibitions secretary at London's Royal Academy, makes Sir Norman the perfect curator for Frieze Masters' new "Collections" section, comprising eight galleries drawn from London, Geneva, Brussels, Paris and Munich.

What will set this gathering of work apart from other stands at the fair?

"Most dealers tend to bring what they have," replies Sir Norman, adding that this can result in a stall of "what I would call more or less sundry objects within an area".

By contrast, he has asked his chosen few to curate their stand as if it were "the germ of a show at the Victoria and

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Objects with attitude

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Albert or the British Museum, or the National Gallery or the Royal Academy". As a result, he has snared presentations that even Frieze Masters, renowned for the eclecticism of its wares, has never witnessed before. From the Munich gallery Daniel Blau, for example, comes a gathering of fish hooks crafted by the people of the Pacific Islands, on sale as a collection of 150 for "less than £1m". London dealer Sydney L Moss is bringing netsuke, the miniature Japanese ivory or wooden figures that were the subject of Edmund De Waal's memoir, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, ranging from £8,000-£40,000. They also plan to keep in a drawer a wider selection of netsuke, valued in the region of £1,000.

Coloured Roman marbles, so much rarer than their white counterparts, will be on display at Galerie Chenel from Paris, while ancient Egyptian wooden sculpture is the offering of Geneva-based Sycomore Ancient Art.

Sir Norman's excitement about these treasures is palpable. "I have asked Sycomore gallery, for example, which has Greek, Roman and Egyptian works from antiquity, to concentrate exclusively on Egyptian dynastic wooden sculpture. Usually, when we think of Egyptian sculpture, if we don't think of mummies, we think of stone or alabaster, not wood, of which not so much survives. But Egyptian wooden sculpture can be as beautiful, more beautiful, than Giacometti."

Sir Norman is best known for his captaincy of public institutions. Before the Royal Academy, where he was exhibitions secretary from 1977-2008, he was director of exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and exhibitions officer at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery.

Over the course of his colourful and sometimes controversial career he has been responsible for a clutch of significant shows. Most renowned perhaps was *Sensation* at the Royal Academy in 1997. A showcase for Charles Saatchi's collection of works by Young British Artists, it caused outrage in London due



From top: an Egyptian wooden statue (c2550BC); Masanao of Kyoto's ivory rat (c1700); Sir Norman Rosenthal. Right: a marble panther table leg (cAD 150)

André Longchamp; Ken Adlard; Alan Davidson/ The Picture Library; Galerie Chenel

to the inclusion of Marcus Harvey's portrait of the child-murderer Myra Hindley made using casts of a child's handprints. When I ask him now how he feels about the outcry, he dismisses it as a "silly season story".

Events were no less turbulent at the ICA, where he was beaten up by the British actor Keith Allen — father of Lily — and his friends. A spatter of his blood is still preserved under Plexiglas on the wall of the office at the ICA.

Nevertheless, few doubted his achievements in making art both illuminating and accessible. At the Royal Academy he pulled off landmark exhibitions on subjects as diverse as the Aztecs and the Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna. Yet he also took risks. At the ICA his championship of Joseph Beuys' radical vision inspired a generation of British artists. Never will I forget the impact of the paintings of Charlotte Salomon, the German-Jewish artist who died in Auschwitz and who, when Sir Norman exhibited her work in 1998, was all but unknown.

Notwithstanding his illustrious curatorial history, Sir Norman's foray into the world of the fair is less a departure than a return to his commercial roots. "My very first job was at Agnew's," he recalls, referring to the renowned West End Old Masters gallery.

"The world of the dealer has a bad reputation, but it is a huge repository of knowledge," he says. "Dealers know a lot because they have to put their money where their mouth is. And they enjoy it. They are not gloomy scholars! Their eyes are their most important tool, whereas scholars tend to prefer documents and photographs to the real thing."

In a world where the fate of our heritage has never been more precarious, Sir Norman also perceives that the market acts to keep works safe. "Although one can have two views on the price of art, value is a great mechanism of preservation," he says, adding that whether it is a painting worth millions or "some interesting trifle from Portobello Road Market, the fact that it's worth £60 — or £60m — is the mechanism that prevents it being put in the dustbin."

Sir Norman's outspoken intensity

has the innocence of a bygone age. He recalls the moment he was congratulated by Ernst Gombrich on his appointment to the Royal Academy. "He said: 'You will learn so much'" — the casual allusion to the titanic 20th-century art historian conjuring the very different era in which Sir Norman grew to maturity.

Collecting too is "an opportunity to learn," he says. "There is nothing like touching works of art. Feeling them. Whether in museums or the Portobello or in galleries. Whatever your area — contemporary, 19th century, Old Master prints — you've got to be it. Live it."

He believes collectors have a responsibility, too. In 2012, he resigned from the board of Madrid's Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in fury at the decision by Baroness Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza to sell Constable's 1824 masterpiece "The Lock".

When I mention the case, he bristles. "It was outrageous!" That he has never

'Although one can have two views on the price of art, value is a great mechanism for preservation'

lost his childlike sense of awe in the face of a masterpiece may stem from his decision not to study art history as an undergraduate. Instead, he studied history, only turning to art as a post-graduate student in Berlin.

I tell him that as a critic tussling with questions over the worth of art in the non-material sense, I was soothed to read an interview in which he stated that it was necessary to believe in art because it was so easy to make fun out of it.

Does he still believe that art is inherently ridiculous? "Yes, in the same way that life is ridiculous. Being on this planet is ridiculous. There's no way of explaining it. God doesn't really explain it at all. Art is a very good way of forgetting those absurdities at one level and also understanding them."

'Collections' is at Frieze Masters, London, October 14-18. friezemasters.com