THE ART NEWSPAPER, n°233, Mars 2012,
« Finding new markets for pre-Columbian art » *par Riah PRYOR.*

Interview

Finding new markets for pre-Columbian art

Argentina, Mexico and Brazil could be the future for a field struggling with limited supply, says Santo Micali

ART DEALER Q&A

Santo Micali, the manager and founder of Galerie Mermoz in Paris, is one of the few dealers to specialise in pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican and South American art—a field that is, he says, experiencing a new lease of life, thanks to the expanding interests of fine art and antiquities collectors. Throughout his 40 years in the business, Micali has sourced a number of items for museums including the Janssen-Arts MAS collection, one of the most important pre-Columbian collections in Europe. He is also a member of the Syndicat National des Antiquaires (see p69), which promotes a common code of ethics, a topic of growing relevance given Mexico's increasingly hardline stance on trading in items without solid provenance. Micali presented a stand of Mayan objects at this year's Brussels Antiques and Fine Art Fair (Brafa, 21-29 January, see p72), where we spoke to him on the last day of the fair.

Display of Mayan objects on the Galerie Mermoz stand at the Brussels Antiques and Fine Art Fair. Terracotta lying dog, Veracruz, Mexico, 250-750AD. Santo Micali, below

***The Art Newspaper*: Why did you become interested in pre-Columbian art?**

Santo Micali: Mexican art is an art that delivers messages, it's powerful, symbolic. But you have to distinguish between passion and affinity. It is not passion that drives me—with passion you become blind, you are so in love you cannot see the object clearly. With affinity, you still have your judgement, which is important for an expert.

Why did you become an art dealer?

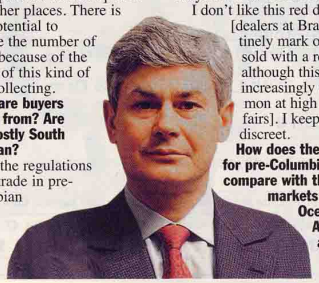
My motivation for opening the gallery in 1970 was simply the love of the objects. I realised very few dealers specialised in this field. When I opened, there was only one gallery in Belgium focusing on pre-Columbian art, some in New York and maybe three in Paris. Now there are even fewer; you have Merrin Gallery in New York, which presents very important pieces, and Stendahl Galleries in Los Angeles. There are other private galleries, but in total there are only about ten dealers in the world.

Are there many buyers in the field? The number of galleries would suggest not.

That's difficult to answer. Certainly the behaviour of buyers has evolved. When I began dealing, there were many collectors, meaning individuals who knew the speciality almost as well as the dealers. Now, that kind of collector is very rare. There are people interested in pre-Columbian objects, but they are not necessarily real experts. They often buy several pieces, up to a dozen at a time, but they are also buying paintings, tapestries and antiquities from other places. There is huge potential to increase the number of clients because of the growth of this kind of cross-collecting.

Where are buyers coming from? Are they mostly South American?

Before the regulations on the trade in pre-Columbian pieces were tightened, the most important dealers and collectors were Mexicans, who sold to international dealers. Now, all dealers are international and buy back objects sold before the second world war, or before the regulations were tightened. The next steps for the pre-Columbian market will be Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, which are developing rapidly economically and will become the markets of tomorrow. It should happen in about ten years. There is already an international interest in these objects.



When did you first participate at Brafa?

Seven years ago. It has changed a lot and the quality of the fair has improved; dealers are bringing better pieces. The décor and presentation of the event is also better than before. It's attracting more foreigners, a few Russians and Americans, but predominantly I'm seeing a wider spectrum of Europeans each year.

What have you brought with you this year?

I'm not someone who thinks about things like this a lot in advance. I brought Mayan objects, around 50, this year. I don't spend a lot of time preplanning how the stand will be presented: I focused my arrangement on three central objects, which were the most visually arresting, and the display just fell into place. I have had more than six confirmed sales, and maybe two or three more—but I don't like this red dot system [dealers at Brafa routinely mark objects as sold with a red dot, although this is increasingly uncommon at high end fairs]. I keep things discreet.

How does the market for pre-Columbian art compare with the markets for Oceanic and African art?

It's very different. There are only about five collectors who will buy across African, Oceanic and also pre-Columbian art. Most see these fields as too different, almost opposite to each other. People who like African art tend to be mesmerised by it, they can only see that type of art. The buyers I have for pre-Columbian pieces are more likely to also buy Asian art, Egyptian and Roman antiquities; there seems to be more of an affinity there.

So why do auction houses group these categories together?

Until about ten years ago, Sotheby's did separate pre-Columbian sales but now the number of objects in circulation is not high enough to warrant its own category. But mixing it with Oceanic and African art is an error because they don't go together. Pre-Columbian art would be better placed with Asian or classical pieces—it would sell better.

You mentioned that there are limited objects in circulation. Is supply a problem?

Before 1972 [during the 1960s, there was widespread looting of Mayan sites, which led to the introduction of the 1972 Pre-Columbian Monumental and Architectural Sculpture and Murals statute, which clamped down on the import and export of this art], the market was very open: everything could be sold and you could happily buy in the countries of origin. When the law came in, the market shut down completely. Now the market is not fuelled by Mexico, it is fed by objects that were sold before the law was passed. Enormous collections have been built up in the US, France and Belgium, with thousands of pieces, but this isn't a speculative market. When buyers acquire these objects they keep them for life, or for several generations. As a result, there is not a large number of objects in circulation.

Is there a black market in pre-Columbian art now?

The illicit trade has nearly disappeared. It would be almost impossible to move pre-Columbian items across borders now. After the 1972 law, there were many bodies set up to regulate the market. The specialists also know each other really well. If you don't have the paperwork, it's dangerous.

Last March, there was a scandal when the Mexican authorities claimed that 67 items due to be sold at Drouot, a Parisian auction house, were fake. What effect did this have on the market?

The Mexican government wanted to send a signal to the market. They have stopped pieces at auction before and sometimes they have the right to do so—if the seller is unable to prove the item was bought legally in the international market. But last March, the Mexican government couldn't stop the sale by saying the items were illegally traded, so it said they were all fake, which wasn't true. They have sold very well. It's another way of paralysing the market and a sign that the government is acting to protect its heritage. There have been many auctions before, particularly in New York, where there were no problems at all, so there must have been political motivations behind the Mexican government's actions. ■

Interview by Riah Pryor, with translation assistance from Bruno Nelis

> *"There is already an international interest in pre-Columbian objects"*

Biography

1970 Opens Galerie Mermoz in Rue Jean Mermoz in Paris
1986 First exhibition at the Biennale des Antiquaires, Paris
1994 The gallery space in Rue Jean Mermoz closes; Micali opens a new space on Rue du Cirque, Paris
2002 Opens second gallery in Rue des Beaux-Arts, Paris