

## A career of 'educated gambling'

Peter Petrou looks back on five decades in the trade ahead of an auction of items from his collection

by Gabriel Berner

**Peter Petrou** is one of those dealers whose eye has always ranged widely.

Over five decades, he has bought across periods and disciplines, drawn to objects with character and a story to tell. He made his name testing unexpected combinations, long before it became fashionable: Egyptian antiquities alongside Black Forest carvings, Polynesian artefacts beside Roman fragments, and natural history objects set against modernist design.

With a selection of works from his stock and personal collection due to be offered at Essex auction house Sworders this month, *ATG* spoke to Petrou about his career, and the objects that have shaped it.

### Personal connection

The London-born dealer has handled thousands of pieces, yet the one that stands out cost just £5 – and he still owns it. The small Egyptian cosmetic pot, crudely formed from clay and bearing the thumbprint of its maker, holds a connection he finds more compelling than any high-value work.

"You've got the thumbprint of someone who lived 3000 years ago," he says. "That, for me, is a connection."

The piece encapsulates what Petrou looks for in an object. Beauty alone is rarely enough. What holds attention, he says, is narrative – the context and history behind an object, and the lives bound up in it.

That belief has informed not only what he buys, but how he sells. "If you can get somebody very rich to stop and do a double take then you're halfway to selling it. The next question they always ask is: what's the story?"

It explains his preference for the kind of stock that is visually striking yet historically rooted: an African Mende mask, for instance, the only type traditionally worn by women, or a 19th-century Anglo-Indian box whose abstract surface could easily be mistaken for a modern work of art.

Petrou's eye for such objects was shaped early. Born in Paddington in the 1950s to Greek parents, he spent long stretches as a boy in the



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shop of Charles Guillois, the French war veteran turned furniture dealer who would later take him on as an apprentice.

By his early teens, Petrou was already spending school holidays helping Guillois with house clearances from deceased estates – "a treasure hunt", as he puts it, for a 14-year-old. On one such occasion, Guillois opened a suitcase perched on top of a fitted wardrobe to find a small Constable inside, complete with a letter from the artist to his patron, apologising for "the smudge".

By the time Petrou ventured out on his own, following a brief detour into law – during which he quickly recognised it was not the profession for a "poorly connected, second-generation immigrant" – many of

his peers in the trade were moving decisively into specialist fields. "I'd educated myself to buying right across the board," he recalls, "so I started buying things that nobody else would buy."

At the time, it prompted more than a few raised eyebrows. But those overlooked objects found an audience among collectors, artists and others who were not looking for a conventional interior. "People who weren't after a traditional look," as he puts it.

Working across categories sharpened his eye and helped insulate him from the swings of fashion. By the 1980s, he was trading at Alfies and Camden Stables, and buying from Sotheby's on

Bond Street – at a time when guineas were still in use and the trade ran on "gentleman's agreements, alcohol and lunches".

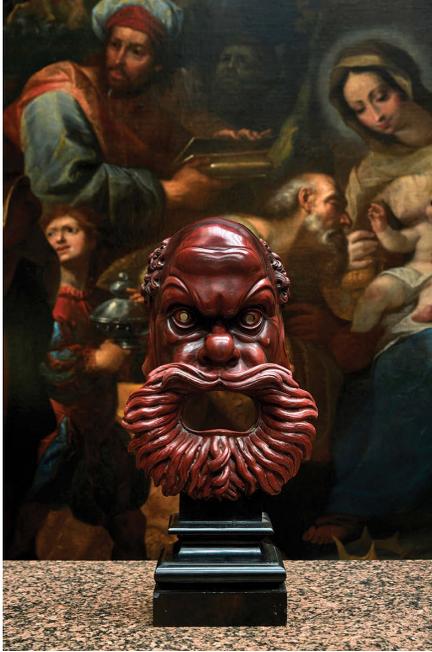
By the following decade, he had secured a shop on Westbourne Grove, then still known among dealers as 'Bankruptcy Row' for the number of failed businesses. It quickly became a crossroads of worlds – from Greek shipping magnates to rock and pop royalty. "You just met everybody there," Petrou recalls. "At one point, Cher would spend hours in my shop."

### Return of the mummy

Five decades in the trade have left him with no shortage of such stories. One of the stranger episodes involved an Egyptian mummy, acquired early on from Sotheby's, where it formed part of the dispersal of a 19th-century aristocratic collection. Bought for around £70,000, it was, on one memorable occasion, transported strapped to the roof rack of Petrou's trusty red



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1. Dealer Peter Petrou surrounded by works of art due to be offered in Outward Bound, his single-owner sale at Sworders on February 24. The collection is estimated at £350,000.

2. A monumental 17th-century limewood carving of *Orpheus Charming the Animals*, formerly owned by Yehudi Menuhin, with the head of a Black Forrest bear beneath. The 2ft 7in x 2ft 4in (80 x 71cm) panel, guided at **£7000-9000**, speaks to the use of mythological imagery as a symbol of harmony and order, with Orpheus shown as the civilising force of music. The facial features recall contemporary portraits of Louis XIV, a detail that may point to a French patron.

3. A 19th-century bust of Tamati Tamaiwhakanehua, c.1860, carved from semi-fossilised resin. Estimated at **£10,000-15,000**, the life-sized

head bears a moko tattoo to the face and stylised mana dress. Tamati Tamaiwhakanehua was a rangatira (chief) of Ngāpuhi, active during a period of profound political and social change in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and was among the Māori leaders who signed the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. The bust reflects both his status within his community and the growing interest in recording Māori leaders in sculptural form during the mid-19th century.

4. Estimated at **£10,000-15,000**, this dramatic Greek theatrical mask, carved in richly veined rosso antico, demonstrates the work of Benedetto Boschetti, one of the leading Grand Tour carvers active in Rome in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Likely produced in his workshop on Via Condotti, it reflects Grand Tour taste for luxury classical

objects that combined antiquarian learning with accomplished carving. The oil painting behind is a large-scale *Adoration of the Kings*, catalogued as North Italian School, 17th century, with an estimate of **£8000-10,000**.

5. Petrou sitting in his red Volvo, a car with more than 400,000 miles on the clock – the equivalent of travelling 16 times around the globe – and once had an Egyptian mummy strapped to the roof.

6. This mid-20th-century anatomical model of a cockchafer (*Melolontha vulgaris*), carved and painted in wood with fabric wings and faux-fur detailing, features hinged wings, articulated legs and removable cranial and thoracic panels. Measuring 22in (56cm) long, it was intended as a teaching aid for biological or entomological study, and is guided at **£2000-3000**.

frameworks, particularly in relation to ethnographic works, ivory and other culturally sensitive material.

Such positions, he argues, risk ignoring how objects were actually made, used and traded, and reducing them to blunt moral categories. They also risk implying a lack of responsibility on the part of dealers – a charge he firmly rejects.

For Petrou, good dealing has always required knowledge, care and judgement. It also demands, at times, a willingness to walk away from a sale. He recalls more than one occasion when he has reversed a transaction after realising a client did not fully understand the responsibility involved. In one instance, delivering an object to a client’s mother’s house, the conditions were so unsuitable that he removed it immediately. “If someone doesn’t understand what they’re responsible for,” he says, “then they’re not the right person for it.”

Asked what advice he would offer those entering the trade, Petrou is pragmatic. He is blunt about the realities of the profession, noting that he did not earn any money for his first decade as a dealer and cautioning that anyone drawn by the prospect of quick returns would be better advised to look elsewhere.

Dealing, for him, is not a job but a vocation, one that demands patience, resilience and a high tolerance for uncertainty. “Dealing is a form of gambling,” he adds, “but it’s educated gambling.” Misjudgements are inevitable, though often painful enough to ensure they are not repeated.

### Showroom to saleroom

In recent years, many established dealers have turned to the saleroom as a straightforward way to sell surplus stock or collections, trimming their holdings and freeing up capital. The auction at Sworders, titled Outward Bound, follows Petrou’s well-received London dispersals at Christie’s in 2019 and Sotheby’s in 2021.

With a total estimate of £350,000 and comprising 260 lots, the auction takes place on February 24 in Stansted Mountfitchet.

Petrou’s personal highlights include a dramatic Greek theatrical mask in the manner of Benedetto Boschetti, formerly owned by fellow dealer Danny Katz (estimate £10,000–15,000), and a rare 19th-century kauri-gum bust of Tamati Tamaiwhakanehua, the Maori chief who signed the Treaty of Waitangi (estimate £10,000–15,000). ■

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Volvo estate – a car with more than 400,000 miles on the clock.

After failing to sell privately, it was held for years while Petrou invested in conservation work. This revealed the man had been a priest of Amun and had suffered from schistosomiasis, a river-borne disease – details that fascinated him.

With little apparent market interest and resigned to making a loss, he eventually consigned it to an antiquities auction at Christie’s South Kensington with modest expectations, and did not attend the sale. When he later rang to ask the result, Petrou assumed there had been a mistake: the hammer price was £850,000. The buyer, he says,

was Sheikh Saud Al Thani, the same collector to whom he had previously offered the piece unsuccessfully, and at a fraction of the price.

For Petrou, the episode was not evidence of clever dealing, but a reminder that value is shaped by time, context and appetite – often in ways that resist planning.

As is common in the trade, Petrou is dyslexic and learned early to trust his eye, developing a heightened visual memory that became a particular strength. Objects served as his reference points, with a single encounter often enough for them to lodge in memory.

That curiosity, and his thirst for knowledge, are reflected in his

formidable reference library, now housed in Brittany, where he has been unpacking some 20 tonnes of art books. France is where Petrou plans to live permanently, a move shaped as much by professional realities as personal choice, with most of his business now European-facing.

### Though a modern lens

The shift has coincided with wider changes in the trade. In addition to the implications of Brexit, it has become increasingly shaped, in Petrou’s view, by the politicisation of objects. He is sceptical of approaches that judge art and antiques solely through contemporary moral