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how to spend it



THE NEW ROAR IN SINGAPORE

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Rodin, still collectable? One businessman's revelation begets a long and fruitful relationship with an adviser who shares his passion, says Claire Wrathall. Portrait by Charlie Hopkinson.

One afternoon on his way to the bank, Erbil Arkin's eye was caught by a sculpture in the window of Robert Bowman's London gallery. The bronze stuck in his mind and after his meeting the Cyprus-born founder and chairman of the Northern Cyprus-based Arkin Group, a leisure conglomerate that operates hotels and casinos in the eastern Mediterranean and UK, went into the gallery to take a closer look. "I was quite nervous because I'd never bought art before, and galleries can be intimidating," he remembers. "But I asked if I could look around, and Robert

was very welcoming. And then I noticed a Rodin, and thought, 'Wow!' I've loved his work since I was in my late teens and used to go to the Tate. I asked the price and realised I could afford it; it was a huge shock."

Bowman, meanwhile, who prior to establishing his own gallery spent 15 years at Sotheby's, latterly as director of the sculpture department, was struck by the way Arkin examined the exhibits. "He was looking very seriously at the form and line, and I sensed he was either a sculptor or someone really passionate about it, so we

Above: Robert Bowman (left) and Erbil Arkin with a 37.5cm bronze of Rodin's *The Thinker*.

got chatting. A few weeks later he came in again, and again, and the third or fourth time I remember him leaning back, and saying, 'You don't think I'm serious, do you?' He asked the price of a work. It was £25,000. 'If I bought it now,' he said, 'what would you sell it for?' I thought for a moment and said £22,000. And he pulled out his chequebook."

"I'm a businessman," stresses Arkin. "I won't buy anything for any price because there's always a limit, even to passion. I have no qualms about bargaining." But neither, he says, does he resent "paying

percentages or fees to Robert", who since that day six or seven years ago has both sold to Arkin and advised on his collection of Rodin sculptures. "I'm not an expert," says Arkin. "I haven't been doing this for 32 years as Robert has, so I'm happy to pay for his advice and respect the fact that he's trying to make a margin. It's a business,

after all, and I have a huge respect for business. In any case, I trust him."

The work in question was a bronze, *The Wrestlers*, by Augusto Rivalta. And its purchase was to lead not just to the acquisition of over 30 pieces by artists from Michael Ayrton to Ossip Zadkine, including a dozen works by Rodin, but to a friendship that now sees the two go shooting and salmon fishing together.

Rodin remains their chief shared interest. "He's a better sculptor than Michelangelo – or up there with him," says Arkin. "It was a revelation" that work by an artist of such magnitude was still possible to collect.

Bowman adds, "If someone came to me and said they

wanted to collect Michelangelo, I'd say great, but there aren't going to be any on the market. Even if you wanted to form an important collection of work by, say, Monet, it's impossible; a great Monet comes up for sale only every five to 10 years." In contrast, Rodin was prolific, using elements from his large-scale works

— heads, hands, figures — as standalone or scaled-down sculptures, mostly produced in multiple editions.

There are, for example, says Bowman "in excess of 400 authorised lifetime casts" in various sizes of his most famous work *The Kiss*, all, he emphasises, "perfectly genuine". Not that a work needs to have been cast during Rodin's lifetime to count as "genuine", which, in Bowman's words "means bronzes cast under Rodin's direction during his lifetime or under the authority of the Musée Rodin" in Paris, to which he left the majority of his plaster maquettes and the rights to make further casts from each.

Their comparative lack of scarcity doesn't, however, diminish their value. Last November, an 86.4cm "lifetime" cast of *The Kiss* sold at Christie's

New York for \$6.3545m, more than four times its lower estimate. Although the current record paid for a Rodin bronze is \$18.969m, for a 1.73m *Eve* sold last May, also at Christie's New York, not everything he made is so expensive. "You could start off with a small hand for £8,000 to £10,000," says Bowman.

Arkin's first Rodin was a bigger-than-life-size *Head of Lucrèce*, bought on Bowman's advice at auction in London, a work catalogued as cast posthumously but which, as Bowman suspected, turned out to have been made in 1917, the year of Rodin's death, so making it what Arkin calls "one of the best investments I've made". As Bowman adds, "Everything Erbil has bought has increased in value, some pieces by several hundred per cent."

But Bowman can equally urge caution. "He'll tell me not to go for something because the cast is bad or the patina's not that hot," says Arkin. "And he has had to hold my hand down at auctions, which I've thanked him for — after the adrenaline's subsided."

Arkin displays his entire collection at his home in Northern Cyprus. *Eve* and *Meditation* face each other across his living room, which also contains *Falling Man* (pictured left), a work of incredible tension taken from Rodin's uncast-in-his-lifetime *Gates of Hell*, depicting a figure from Dante's *Inferno* doomed to fall backwards for eternity. But as his collection of Rodin grows — he aspires to own "20, 30, 40 pieces" — he may consider opening a gallery. "I'd love it if he'd let me

have some of his early buys back," says Bowman. But Arkin insists that when it comes to Rodin, he is "not a trader".

As to *The Kiss*, it isn't a work Arkin aspires to acquire. "I like the powerful, passionate Impressionist pieces," he says. And this, though "a great image of Romantic love", says Bowman, doesn't really "look like the work of the father of Modernism, the man who changed the face of sculpture". Indeed, when a large bronze of *The Kiss* came up for sale in London recently, Arkin declined to bid. So Bowman bought it. "I could see the quality of the cast, but it had a horrible surface," he recalls. "There's something called bronze disease, where the copper in the alloy oxidises, so the girl had green splashes across her face and breasts." He had the piece restored and sold it on profitably. "When I saw it afterwards, I regretted not buying it," admits Arkin. But then regret is a fact of serious collecting. "There have been things I've been sorry to miss" — the torso *Je suis belle* and *Iris, Messenger of the Gods*, a still-shocking headless, genitally graphic female figure with splayed legs, both of which he's been outbid on, and both still high on his wish list. But he remains sanguine. As he says, collecting isn't only about ownership. At least part of the pleasure is the thrill of the chase. ♦



Below: Rodin's 23in-high *L'Homme Qui Tombe* bronze (conceived in 1882).

THE THINKER MAN'S CHOICE
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