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dealers' diary

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reports

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Robert the Rodin man on his way of thinking

Dealer is staging a show dedicated to the sculptor

"WHAT worries me about the market today is the prohibitive amount of capital required for a young dealer to get started, at least to deal in anything of any quality".

The words of sculpture dealer **Robert Bowman**, who left Sotheby's in 1992 to start dealing on his own and operated from his rented apartment on the King's Road with £70,000-80,000 in the bank.

"I don't whether the way that I started is possible now, there can't be too many subjects you can afford to do it in. Without financial backing or a big private income, I don't know how anyone does it" he added.

Like many fledgling dealers, his early deals were done within the trade, borrowing an item from one dealer and then showing it to another, trying to build capital a few thousand at a time.

It was also a time when dealers still acted as the middle men between the 'wholesale' environment of the auction houses and the private collectors: "The auctions were much less geared to private buyers then; they were full of swathes of dealers."

Robert was hardly wet behind the ears at this point – he left Sotheby's as director of 19th and 20th century sculpture after starting out at the company in 1977 as a temporary porter for the legendary Mentmore Towers sale of the Earl of Rosebery's estate.

At the time he was 21 and had abandoned his early career training to be an accountant – too dull, he decided.

He then started on the reception counter for the works of art department where, in the pre-email valuation age, items would come in every day, occasionally with queues of people down the hallway.

Sometimes there were real finds: "Once an elderly lady came in with a shoebox full mainly of tat which she emptied out on the counter. But inside there was a fantastic carved medieval ivory bible cover, which went on to sell for £70,000 or £80,000, which in the late 70s was a lot of money. She was looking to raise some money to visit her family in Australia before she died and I think she ended up flying out first class."

After an initial stint training to be a general valuer at Sotheby's Belgravia (there were fortnightly sales at the time, such was the amount of material on the market) he worked his way up through the works of art department.

Why the interest in sculpture? "It sounds opportunistic but if you join somewhere like Sotheby's and you want to join the Modern and Impressionist department for instance, you haven't a chance in hell. Put simply, the sculpture and works of art department was easier to get into."

Nepotism was still inherent in the large auction houses and – even trying to get a lowly job on the counter – Robert was quizzed about who he knew, who his parents were and whether they collected.

"Now, the market has contracted through lack of supply, so they've had to start combining departments into fewer sales. But 25 years ago, there was enough material on the market to have both pre- and post-1800 sales of sculpture. I would have five or six sales a year."

Robert's start as a dealer was set against the backdrop of the early '90s recession, when even the big auction houses were struggling, and while still dealing from home he started doing two fairs: Olympia, to establish a name in the domestic market and, more unusually, Singapore, as it was one of the very few economies that was booming at the time. By the mid 1990s, 70% of his annual turnover came from the Singapore market.

However, the later '90s saw the Singapore property market crash and the fair was cancelled, just at the time that the US began to recover, so Robert jumped ship, exhibiting at Palm Beach and across America, at one stage doing nine fairs a year. Although he still has American clients, he no longer does any US fairs.

The Rodin speciality had to wait a while: "Initially I was dealing in 19th century pieces because you could buy a great Barye or a good Carpeaux for £5000 or £20,000, but even in those days a good Rodin was still a multiple of that."

In 1998 he opened his first gallery at 8 Duke Street. Laying your hands on a property in Duke Street is a tricky business, a case of dead men's shoes, but Robert had a stroke of luck. The father of his secretary at the time, a tapestry dealer, had the lease on the gallery and, as the economy slowed on the cusp of the 2000 recession, he was worried about going out of business. So Robert took it on.

With the shop, he was able to get a bank loan and so the Rodin specialism began. But the bedfellows of expansion are expense and responsibility, and the cost of just staying in the game goes up each year.

The amount of money tied up in stock is a terrifying thought for most dealers, Robert among them. His own, he estimates (at cost), sits at around £5m-6m, which, although it is scary, he suspects is small fry compared to some: "I'm not a big paintings dealer; these are bronzes, multiples which are not hugely expensive, but imagine the figures involved for the Old Master or Impressionists paintings dealers."

Overheads run to over £1m a year – a combination of rent and rates for the gallery, the wages of six staff, in-house computer systems etc.

Robert says prices for Rodin's trophy

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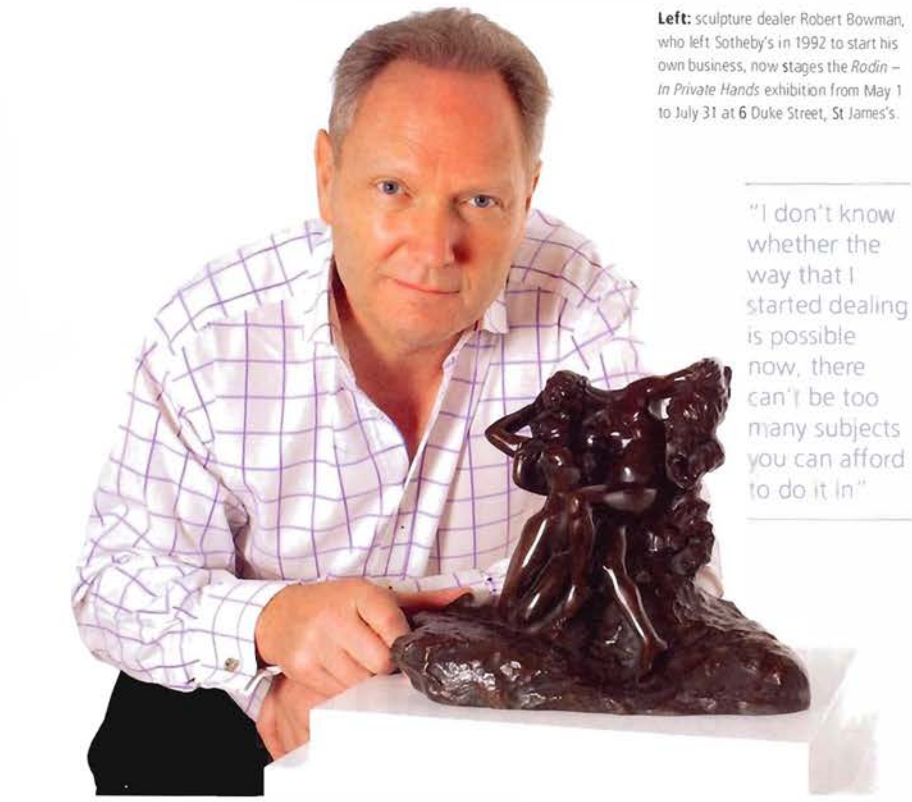

Left: sculpture dealer Robert Bowman, who left Sotheby's in 1992 to start his own business, now stages the *Rodin – In Private Hands* exhibition from May 1 to July 31 at 6 Duke Street, St James's.

"I don't know whether the way that I started dealing is possible now, there can't be too many subjects you can afford to do it in"

Above left: *Prodigal Son, Large Model* by Auguste Rodin, signed *A. Rodin* with repeat raised interior signature inscribed *Alexis Rudier / Fondeur, PARIS*, bronze, 4ft 7in (1.39m) high. Priced at £1.5m. **Above right:** *Right Hand 27* by Rodin, signed *A. Rodin*, inscribed © *by Musée Rodin and G Rudier Fondeur Paris*, bronze, 6½in (16cm) high. Conceived between 1877-78, this example was cast in 1960. Priced at £68,000

RODIN EXHIBITION FROM ROBERT BOWMAN

IN 1914, Rodin brought 18 sculptures over to exhibit in the Victoria & Albert Museum. After six months, he was so impressed by the reception they received that he gave them to the museum in honour of the English and French soldiers who had so far died in the First World War.

A few years ago, Robert Bowman decided 2014 would be a fitting moment to hold an exhibition of his work. So, after three years of planning, *Rodin – In Private Hands*, runs from May 1 to July 31 at 6 Duke Street, St James's.

This is the largest group of Rodin bronzes exhibited in the UK since the Royal Academy's show in 2007. Sourcing his good work can be difficult – Robert tries to have first refusal to buy back items he sells but often they end up back at auction.

At almost 80 sculptures, some on loan having previously been sold by the gallery and others currently for sale, the exhibition includes casts of *The Kiss* and *The Thinker*, *The Eternal Spring*, the original maquette for *Monument to the Burghers of Calais*, *Man with a Broken Nose* and *Prodigal Son*.

The gallery has also teamed up with the V&A to do a lecture series on Rodin at the museum to coincide with the show.

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robert bowman interview

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images, *The Kiss* for example, have risen by around 400% in the last seven or eight years. This is driven largely, he thinks, by the introduction of the Comité Auguste Rodin run by Jérôme Le Blay, formerly of the Rodin Museum, largely to combat the problem of fakes.

"Everything we sell has a certificate from the Comite and everything is recorded in their archives and given an individual reference number, documenting its history. It's this certification that has really changed the nature of the market because it has brought a huge amount of security. In the past, you just had to trust the dealer."

So does Robert collect? "Like all dealers, I am an inveterate collector but I don't have the financial ability to actually keep pieces. But a guilty pleasure is to sometimes take pieces home and live with them for a while."

If money was no object, he has several 'holy grails' he would buy, foremost a pair of Rodin's *Vase of the Titans*, commissioned for a château and the only pair ever made: "I had them in my house for a while and my wife tried to persuade me not to sell them as I'd never find another pair. But I did, and I regret that.

"I don't have a burning passion to own those pieces produced in large editions, like *The Kiss* or *The Eternal Spring*, but rather some limited-edition works like the little Nijinsky in the show.

"I also love *She Who Was Once the Helmet-Maker's Beautiful Wife* because it shows Rodin's special ability to see not only beauty in the perfection of youth but also to see beauty in age."

THE complicated Rodin casting system is quite something to get your head around. So here's an idiot's guide, courtesy of Robert Bowman.

- Rodin was never directly involved in the casting process – when he was alive, a buyer would commission a cast of a certain work from him and he would write a letter to the foundry asking them to make a cast for that person. "When he is dying in 1916, Rodin sets up the Rodin Museum as an official body to carry on producing his work. The only difference between a cast made in 1917 and one made in 1918 is that in 1917 Rodin wrote the letter to the foundry and in 1918, the directors of the museum wrote the letter."

- So, in terms of value, what is the rough pecking order for a Rodin cast?

1. A lifetime cast – the best possible is ordered by Rodin for a friend.
2. A pre-War cast – "The casts made in the 1920s and '30s are better quality than many lifetime casts because casting techniques were more advanced. Some of the most beautiful casts come from this period."
3. Post-War casts (limited edition Rodin Museum authorised casts, from post-1952) – "By the 1950s, collectors started to want limited editions and in 1968 the French government passed a law saying that anything made in an edition of more than 12 is considered to be a commercial edition, not an art edition."

- In 1952, the contract given by Rodin in 1902 to the Alexis Rudier foundry to reproduce his works in unlimited amounts, under the Rodin Museum's authorisation, expired and the museum imposed limited editions of 12 for each work (plus one for the museum). Each is stamped and copyright of the museum.
- But there are some anomalies; plaster models that were never cast during Rodin's lifetime, such as that of Nijinsky. It wasn't until the 1950s that, due to public demand, the plaster model was cast so there are only 12 in the world and you cannot get a lifetime cast. Such pieces command a premium.