Arts

Indulging his love of the Middle East

Islamic art

Colin Gleadell

Oliver Hoare, the Islamic art dealer best known as adviser to the late Sheikh Saud bin Mohammed bin Ali al-Thani of Qatar during an eight-year, $2.5 billion (£1.7 billion) shopping spree, is to hold an exhibition of objects he has either collected for himself or borrowed.

Entitled *Every Object tells a Story*, it promises to intrigue, stimulate and set tongues wagging again over his reputed relationship with Diana, Princess of Wales and alleged excessive invoicing of the Sheikh.

But these are not the stories Hoare wants to tell. His enthusiasm for the Middle East was first aroused as an art history student at the Sorbonne in the Sixties. This led to exploratory travels in the region before finding employment at Christie's in 1967. "For some reason they put me in charge of Russian art," he says. But one day, making his way through the basement storerooms, he spied a pile of artefacts that no one knew anything about. "I recognised them as ancient Islamic works of art because I had seen such things on my travels. So I was asked to assemble an auction." A successful sale was held and the Islamic art department at Christie's was born.

After seven years of auctioneering, Hoare set up the Ahuan Gallery in Pimlico. Among his principal clients was Sheikh Nasser al-Sabah of Kuwait, who was building a collection for the National Museum. Hoare helped him to acquire the majority of the collection of Islamic art formed in the late 19th century by the Comtesse de Behague. He was also adviser to the Nuhad Es-Said collection, the finest collection of Islamic metalwork in private hands, now in Qatar.

One of Hoare's triumphs as a private dealer was engineering an exchange in 1994 between the Iranian government and the Houghton Family Trust in Britain – of a valuable illuminated Persian manuscript with a Forties painting by Willem de Kooning in the Contemporary Art Museum of Tehran, which was then sold to the American collector David Geffen for $20 million.

But his most notorious achievement was the venture he embarked upon in 1997, advising Sheikh Saud, who had been appointed by his cousin, the Emir, to acquire works for the Qatar National Museum. Hoare was involved in the acquisition of an estimated 75 per cent of works now housed in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha.

One of his first purchases was a doe-shaped, 10th-century bronze fountain head from Spain, for which he paid a 20 times estimate, £3.4 million. As well as Islamic art, he bought, sometimes for himself, Greek and Roman antiquities (a Roman Venus cost £7.9 million); 19th-century decorative arts (a Fabergé egg cost $9.6 million in New York); vintage early and modern photography ($16 million for a collection of Man Ray and Alfred Steiglitz photographs); natural history and rare books ($8.8 million for Audubon's *Birds of America*); and contemporary art by the likes of Jeff Koons and Anish Kapoor.

Hippie rug-shop find: a 3rd-century AD Gandahara Buddha's head

In the catalogue to the show that opens in Fitzroy Square in May, Hoare pays a lengthy homage to the Sheikh under an entry for a rare Kakapo stuffed parrot. Besides art, he writes, the Sheikh was also interested in the natural world. Apart from antiquities such as a 3rd-century AD Gandhara Buddha's head he bought in the Sixties from the hippie rug shop, Oxus, in Chelsea, there will be an eclectic array of objects. Of intense interest to the Islamic market is a key that sold at auction in 2010 to the King of Saudi Arabia for £9.2 million, until declared a fake by Souren Melikian of the *International Herald Tribune* and returned. Hoare uses the story to settle other scores with Melikian, obviously a thorn in his flesh.

Among the many exotic string instruments is the 13th Dali Llama's double bass in its original, elaborately decorated case, which he bought at an auction in Essex. Nineteenth century nude photographs and erotically carved scrimshaws ask where art ends and pornography begins. A steel drill cog given to him by Man Ray, a special Dodo corner, and ancient Turkish, African, South American and Celtic objects of magical significance all help to give this exhibition the feel of a modern-day collector's "cabinet of curiosities".

Hoare won't discuss prices, calling them "the pornography of the art world; understandable, but unhealthy." The range, though, will be from £550 to £1 million, and the catalogue, with juicy stories, is free online.