



OLIVER'S HOARD

An exquisite selection of objects, mostly from the lands along the Silk Route, comes together in an exhibition curated by Oliver Hoare. From the first European depictions of Mecca to the Dalai Lama's double bass, the curiosities reflect many of the antique dealer's passions and carry histories that illuminate a person, event or place. Christopher Gibbs introduces rarities 'that sing, startle, make you smile and think'. Photography: Antony Crolla

Top: a painting of the Begum Samru (1820-1830) overlooks (from left) an Andalusian fountain spout, a tile from poet Rumi's shrine in Konya, a Dodo bone and Ottoman prayer beads. Right: below a costumed man on a silk carpet from Samarkand sits *Picasso's Guitar*, a modern Argentine artwork. Encircling it (from left) is a cast-brass 'mirror of the soul', a mastodon ivory phallus, a gazelle skull and a south Arabian figure









Left: ancient heads, from Celtic to south Arabian, face front on an ornately carved table, along with objects relating to alchemy, voodoo and magic. Below is Michael Cooper's alabaster dodo and optimistic egg. Top: Roman rings and a Ming foot-massager rest on a polished-porphry vessel, while a veiled lady of Constantinople (c1800) looks on. Above: a Near Eastern hound lies at the feet of a passenger pigeon



SOME ART DEALERS are merchants, purveyors of stuff that means as little to them as to their clients. Their number is legion and the lucky rich now even have a new breed, 'art advisers', to guide them through the maze of trash. Some though, God willing, are passionate beings with a thirst for beauty and a hunger for knowledge, here to learn and to teach. Oliver Hoare is of that small, select regiment, which numbers collectors, scholars and patrons, as well as dealers. They tend to know one another, to share information and to spark off their confrères.

Until 26 June Mr Hoare is showing at 33 Fitzroy Square an array of artworks chiefly from the lands along the Silk Route, objects that sing, startle, make you smile and think. Explorers are offered a slow-release banquet of beauty and wonder. Fitzroy Square was built by Robert Adam in the 1790s and, a century ago, number 33 was the headquarters of Roger Fry's Omega Workshops, where the first fruits of the Modern movement were displayed and marketed. Now its tall airy rooms overlooking the leafy square house *Every Object Tells a Story*, a wonderful garnering of treasures, reflecting Oliver's aesthetic and spiritual adventure.

To complement this display he's made a catalogue. I can't recall one of comparable beauty. It's presented as a block of porphyry, the fore-edges purple, the cover bearing a deep-cut gilded inscription. Within is a rich ramble around the pieces on show – an always clear and scholarly description, date, measurements, but often a story that enriches one's relish and appreciation of the object, at once anchoring it and setting it free for wonder and dreaming.

I've known Oliver for a long time: as a graceful youth employed by Christie's to be its first Islamic expert, as the ardent swain of a beautiful siren of those long-ago days, as the flatmate of Bruce Chatwin (then portering at Sotheby's) with a pile of well-chosen kilims for furniture. I recall him too with his friend Terence Stamp in the steam room of the long-vanished Jermyn Street Turkish baths. His Russian mother met his soldier father in Istanbul, and – whether on the floor, or on the walls – carpets were the backdrop wherever they lived. Both his parents were driven by a thirst for a life of the spirit, seekers after truth, disciples of the influential spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff, the mystical adventurer from Russia. At Eton, Oliver was keeper of boxing, and encouraged by the daring chaplain to expound Gurdjieff's ideas to his classmates. He was also a favoured pupil of Wilfrid Blunt, Islamophile botanist in the haven of the drawing school. Thence to the Sorbonne, singing in smoky *boîtes* in the evenings, tasting boho life for the first time, before his job at Christie's brought him to the heart of the art market, where he, never a shirker, danced into the unknown, learning along the way, grasping every opportunity for travel, meeting the handful of scholars and collectors who shaped that now so utterly transformed market.

The theme of his current illuminating exhibition mirrors many of his passions. There's music, chiefly the sounds of Islam, with elegant instruments of ivory and tortoiseshell, the astounding double bass of the 13th Dalai Lama, the mighty *zikr* drum that called a group of dervishes to thunder together the name of God. There are antiquities from Rome,

Top left: a selection of musical instruments hangs on the wall, overlooking the jazz-loving 13th Dalai Lama's double bass (1920s), which is housed in a huge wooden case lined with different gold-embroidered silks. Top right: a Hellenistic earring dangles between Bektrashi dervish talismans



Greece, Egypt, Syria and China – a third- or fourth-century stone hound from the Eastern empire, a tall jade shard on its wooden stand from the Ming dynasty. This comes from the collection of Jean-Claude Ciancimino, the innovative and well-loved London dealer who died last year and to whom the exhibition is dedicated. There are objects that stir the loins as well as the heart, a fascinating assembly of scrimshaw, erotic etching and carving on the teeth of sperm whales, helping to temper the solitude of lovelorn Victorian sailors. There are glass negatives of 19th-century Parisian lovelies. There are phalluses from Africa, from Tibet and ancient Rome. There are many objects of Sufi origin: dervish *kashkuls*, intricately carved halves of the coco-de-mer from the Seychelles forming begging bowls for the mendicant thirsters after truth, whose *barakat*, or blessing, is believed to be somehow subsumed into these venerated vessels. There's a sculpted key to a Tibetan monastery. Then there are two treasures of extraordinary Islamic interest. There's the first European attempt at a plan of Mecca, drawn by Sir John Chardin, a French protestant traveller in the Near East, and jeweller to Charles II. A pilgrim, remembering his haj, described and Chardin drew. There are errors in his plan, but much is accurate. This treasure came from the lamentable dispersal of the library of the diarist John Evelyn, scattered in the 1970s. Evelyn met Chardin in company with Christopher Wren, describing him as 'very handsome in his eastern habit, seeming not above 36 years of age'. Then there is the 12th-century key to the Kaaba, sold at Sotheby's in 2008 for £9.2 million, and later denounced as a fake by

Souren Melikian, in the *International Herald Tribune*, causing the sale to the king of Saudi Arabia to be annulled. Hoare roasts Melikian, a long-time sparring partner. Laboratories consulted came up with conflicting evidences. Perhaps it's a 12th-century object embellished later?

Then there are objects from the natural world – the bone of a dodo in its little shrine, a bronze cast and an alabaster sculpture of the lost bird, extinguished by Dutch sailors in 17th-century Mauritius. There's a smooth pebble from the Jade river in Khotan, China, gathered by a young blind hafiz (one who knows the Koran by heart), who uses his bare feet to discover and harvest the pale-green treasure. A stuffed kakapo parrot from New Zealand introduces us to Sheikh Saud al-Thani of Qatar, whose death last year at 48 was widely mourned. He was the bravest, most brilliant and inspired collector of modern times, and, although gathering Islamic treasures chiefly for his country (as well as himself), also collected furniture by Robert Adam, the most exceptional group of photographs, motorbikes, botanical books, gazelles, palm trees, Amazonian parrots, fossils and minerals. He was never a mere shopper, always boldly attempting to further scholarship and understanding, an elegant and extraordinary being, inspirational and regretted.

Come to Fitzroy Square, treat yourself to the enthralling catalogue, and open your eyes and your senses to this cornucopia of delights ■

'Every Object Tells a Story: Oliver Hoare's Cabinet of Curiosities' runs at 33 Fitzroy Square, London W1, until 26 June. For more information, ring 07703 686966, or visit everyobjecttellsastory.com

Top left: dervish begging bowls stand in a row below two ink drawings on paper, the first European representations of Mecca (1664-1680), by Sir John Chardin. Top right: more musical instruments, from Turkey and the Deccan plateau, hang above a 17th-century lute-like ivory sarrinda (right)