

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Knowing your worth

Vanessa Macdonald

IT IS every auctioneer's dream: To rummage around in a dark corner and unearth a forgotten treasure. For Pierre Grech Pillow, one of his best finds was a painting worth around 46,000.

"The varnish on the surface had become so dark with time that you could hardly see what the subject of the painting was. The painting was dirty and did not even have a frame and it was just stacked against the wall of the cellar," he said.

This is one of the most important benefits of entrusting your goods to someone qualified. Auctioneers in Malta must have a licence to operate, awarded following an exam. It helped a great deal that Mr Grech Pillow grew up surrounded by antiques. His father Winston's nickname is Benny – of Benny's Antiques.

"I have many interests overseas but I always had a passion for antiques. Helping my father, I used to work with all the local auctioneers but in 2006 I decided to open up my own company," the 31-year-old explained. Obelisk Auctions already has a team of 10 and is using temporary premises in Zebbug for its auctions, although auctions of estates are often held *in situ*.

The market for antiques shows no sign of slowing down. Mr Grech Pillow believes that taste never goes out of fashion.

"At first I was surprised by the number of young people who want to buy antiques but even modern flats have space for a wonderful piece of furniture or an impressive painting," he said.

It is no surprise that there will always be buyers; perhaps it is more significant that the amount of sellers does not flag. The most



obvious time for antiques to come onto the market is when an estate is being passed on to the next generation. In some cases, there might simply be too much for the heirs to absorb themselves. In some cases, very expensive pieces might have to be sold off as their value might make them impossible to split between numerous heirs. Of course, sometimes pieces need to be sold off to pay death dues.

But antiques also come onto the market as people move from one item to another, whether they are doing so for investment or aesthetic reasons.

Mr Grech Pillow does not only handle individual items but also

whole estates, including property. Auction fees in Malta are set by law: The buyer pays 5 per cent and the seller pays 10 per cent (excluding VAT), a fraction of what is paid overseas. The first step is to assess the items and to research their provenance, all of which has a major impact on their market value. A reserve price is set – in the case of Obelisk, this is guaranteed, meaning the owner can rest assured of a certain revenue. A free catalogue is published and viewing sessions can then be organised.

"These sessions are very important as it gives potential buyers the chance to browse and

to chat to me about the things that catch their eye," he said.

"This is a vast subject and no one could possibly know everything about everything. This is why it is important to build up a relationship with an auctioneer you trust."

Clients register and get bidding cards with numbers. This makes it easier for the auctioneer to control the flow of bids – and ensures client confidentiality should they so wish. Telephone bids can also be made – although most people prefer to be present as the excitement builds up.

"Standing at the rostrum, you really feel the tension. You have

to be very attentive to everything that is going on," he said.

Mr Grech Pillow stressed that on the whole items fetch as much in Malta as they would abroad but some pieces may appeal to a very limited amount of collectors. In such a case, he may recommend that the piece is placed with an overseas auction house like Sotheby's or Christie's. When a lot comes up that may be of particular interest, he does advertise it overseas.

"Of course, there are restrictions on what can be exported if items are of historical or heritage value," he said.

This does not deter foreigners from purchasing items that can be taken out of the country – and foreigners includes everyone from expatriates to well-known film stars. Pieces at auction often fetch more than they would if traded to a dealer as if you get more than one interested customer, the price gets ratcheted up. Although some items are sold to a sole bidder, most have more than one.

Of course, the thrill of realising that a piece is valuable is only half the story. The other is when rare pieces come on to the market. Two pieces stand out in his memory: An early 17th century Maltese chest of drawers, and the other is a master painting.

But he also comes across exquisite collections, like a recent find of 17th century maiolica, each of which was worth thousands of euros.

"Many people know that a piece is old and valuable but they often have no idea just how much they are worth," he said.

"And they do not always appreciate how much sought after Maltese goods are. A silver coffee pot was sold recently for a phenomenal price."

EU PROJECTS



MITTS: securing information

MALTA Information Technology and Training Services Ltd (MITTS Ltd) recently concluded a 28-month twinning agreement with the UK on capacity building in information security. The project implementation was entrusted to MITTS Ltd under the direction and guidance of the Ministry for Investment, Industry and Information Technology. The agreement was mainly financed by the European Union.

The UK twinning partner was the Northern Ireland Public Sector Enterprises (NI-CO) in conjunction with QinetiQ Ltd, an international defence and security company that develops cutting edge technology for the UK's Armed Forces and provides technological advice and services to the UK Ministry of Defence, other UK government departments, the US Department of Defense, and non-government customers.

Twinning agreements are one of the principal tools of institution building assistance. These agreements aim to help beneficiary countries in the development of effective and efficient administrations, with the structures, human resources and management skills needed to implement the EU *acquis communautaire*. They provide the framework for administrations and public sector organisations in the beneficiary countries to work with their counterparts within the EU. Together they develop and implement a targeted project aimed at supporting the transposition, enforcement and implementation of a specific part of the *acquis*.

The primary objective of the EU twinning agreement was to build capacity with regards to

Council of European Union requirements relating to information security and the protection of classified information within member state public administrations.

The purpose of this twinning agreement was to increase the understanding and facilitate the implementation of the EU Council Security Regulations of 2001 and to support information security measures in the public service to enable adherence to these regulations, which is a compulsory condition for all the member states.

The project saw to the basic, advanced and specialised training of officials in the public service, government agencies and entities in particular areas related to network security, wireless security and digital forensics. It also saw the provision of a half-day seminar on security awareness to IT service providers and government procurement personnel.

Throughout the duration of the twinning agreement a Resident Twinning Advisor (RTA) was posted locally to provide expertise, assistance and support to his Maltese counterparts. Several visits to Malta by Short-Term Experts were also conducted to complement the expertise of the RTA in particular subject matter areas. Study visits were organised for Maltese personnel to travel to various European countries to view operational security processes in practice with the aim of sharing good practices and acquire knowledge from other EU member states.

MITTS Ltd is the in-house ICT agency for the government of Malta, providing ICT services and professional project management and consulting services.