

## National

# Bidders attend 'out of love'

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Peter Borg Olivier, Dr Borg Olivier's son and one of his four heirs, said he was extremely pleased that Dr Refalo had bought the desk because he knew he wanted it.

In all, the auction included 307 items, 250 of which belong to Dr Borg Olivier's family, who parted with possessions but kept all the family documents, personal items and photographs, as well as a silver collection. The family also took a last-minute decision to withdraw two portraits of Dr Borg Olivier from the auction.

Still, the items on sale made for a sumptuous array of figurines, bureaux and other fine furniture, china, vases and around 50 paintings, some signed by some of Malta's most renowned artists.

A piece of heat shield and mission patch flown on Apollo 13, which was presented to Dr Borg Olivier by three American astronauts, was sold for €2,200.

The auction lasted five hours and, although there were moments of heightened excitement over certain items, in general the mood was one of old friends coming together for the chance to get hold of a memento with which to remember a historic figure and respected man.

Mr Borg Olivier said he was "overwhelmed" by the turnout. "The auction was more successful than I ever thought it would be," he said, as he admitted that seeing most of his parents' possessions going under the hammer was also "heartbreaking". "It is a very difficult time for us - everything is linked to a memory of our parents."

Mr Borg Olivier had denied that the items were being sold because the family was cash-strapped, insisting that the heirs chose the items that were dearest to them and decided to let go of the rest.

In fact, members of the Borg Olivier family, including Peter, were bidding with the rest for some of the items.

Unobserved by most, experts from Heritage Malta were carefully watching proceedings to choose pieces which, invoking a law meant to protect national patrimony, would then be bought by the heritage agency at the hammer price, irrespective of who won the bid.

It is not yet clear which items were chosen but these will be included in the national collection.

The news that there would be an auction of the belongings of the former Nationalist Party leader



George Borg Olivier's personal desk was sold to Labour MP Anton Refalo. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

and architect of Malta's 1964 Independence created a debate on timesofmalta.com with many insisting the state should buy all items.

Historian and George Borg Olivier biographer Henry Frenco suggested in a letter to The Times that the 19th century house in Borg Olivier Street should be converted into a political history museum.

Mr Borg Olivier yesterday pointed out that the state could have stepped in to buy the items anytime it wanted to.

He was also comforted by the fact that the buyers were not "vultures". "I'm so pleased that all the people who came here to buy my father's belongings did so because they truly loved him and my mother (Alexandra)."

In fact, many bidders knew the Borg Olivier family and were warmly greeted. "I knew Dr Borg Olivier and I wanted to buy one of his paintings to keep at home out of respect," one bidder told The Times.

Another family friend said that one painting would remind her of Dr Borg Oliver and his family. "I wanted to have something to remember him by."

Two bidders pointed out that they had come to buy the items



A set of six china cups and saucers went for a modest €50. Photo: Matthew Mirabelli

to add to their collection and not because they wanted to make a profit.

"No one here seems to want to re-sell the items - they have

come here because there is love and friendship."

Most of the bidders were also very keen to preserve their anonymity and protested loudly

when press cameramen walked into the well-publicised auction. They settled down when they were reassured by Mr Grech Pillow that they would not be filmed.

# Students welcome 'temporary solution'

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This means the government will spend more than a quarter of a million euro on the scheme following mistakes made by the national authority and agency responsible for distributing EU funds, which led to the suspension of the programmes by the European Commission.

At the beginning of the month, three top officials were forced to resign over the matter and calls were

made for Education Minister Dolores Cristina to step down too, even though she has insisted she was not made aware of the maladministration within the offices that fell under her ministry.

Opposition spokesman for education Evarist Bartolo said he was happy that some students were not going to miss out but said there were many questions that remained unclear.

"It is very important for the government and the University to be

clear about how this will work, how much it will cost, where the money will come from, who will benefit and who will not... and whether this is a one-off simply not to lose face totally or a new long-term scheme," he said.

In his opinion this was clearly a damage limitation "patchwork" exercise in light of Labour's motion of no confidence in the minister which will be presented on Wednesday. "But I think this strengthens the call for her resig-

nation. It is clear that image is more important than substance for the government."

Mr Bartolo pointed out that both the University and the government were being very careful not to say this was a replacement of the EU funds, since "they know they cannot do that".

He was referring to the statement made by Malta's EU permanent representative Richard Cachia Caruana, who had said that the European Commission

would not allow Malta to use national funds as a replacement.

Meanwhile, the University Students' Council welcomed the "temporary solution", saying that the government funding would allow students to reap the benefits of programmes like Erasmus.

However, KSU urged the government to tackle with urgency the situation concerning the 100 students who have not yet been informed about whether they will be able to proceed with their plans.