

All the Finer Things

Loving what you do is important; making a career out of it is a blessing. Dana Bonello sits down with Pierre Grech Pillow who has pursued his passion along the years and is now reaping its rewards.

EDITOR'S NOTE *Pierre Grech Pillow has been in the Antiques and Fine Arts business from a very early age and has gained a wealth of experience in all aspects of sales, from single, high-value lots, to entire estates, including rare private collections. Mr. Grech Pillow is the owner of Obelisk Auctions which specialises in sales by public auction. It also holds a range of regular events, from Antiques and Fine Arts Auctions to auctioning of Property Estates as well as auctions at the request of clients.*

The world of antiques is one which has always fascinated me for a multitude of reasons. Each and every piece represents a fragment of history which has survived through the ages, and now has a tale to tell. The only problem is that the majority of us are not even sure what Century the Renaissance period represents, let alone single out fine art. Antiquing is an educational field in itself, and for this reason, I have chosen to speak to Pierre Grech Pillow, a seasoned auctioneer, who has taken his passion for the finer arts and turned it into a flourishing business enterprise.

Brought up in the antiques business, Pierre has fond memories of accompanying his father on auctions and international fairs as a young boy. "Opening my own auction house along the years only felt natural," he calmly remarks. Today, Mr. Grech Pillow runs a multifaceted business which ranges from auctioning Fine Arts and Militaria to an entire fleet of rental cars for example, as well as delves into the realms of insurance, private sales, valuations and consultations. "Having worked with practically all leading local auction houses in the past, I have had time to examine the market at large. Throughout the years I have felt the need for offering a reputable and professional service in this particular industry, this is what spurred me to branch off and establish Obelisk Auctions" Pierre confidently asserts.

"At Obelisk we have numerous contacts with foreign auction houses, and tend to look up to these industry giants and follow in their footsteps. There is this nonsense mentality, especially in Malta, which indicates that each auction gallery

should do their own thing irrespective of what is occurring in the outside world. I feel that by emulating the best, we are able to promote, educate as well as buy and sell antiques instead of sitting at our desks and waiting for business to knock at our doors."

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When asked about the structure of an auction itself, so to speak, Pierre is quick to reply, "an auction is not that hour-long job witnessed during the auction itself, it is a long process which starts even before we accept the items, be it on an individual basis or an entire estate for that matter. Preceding that is an intricate series of studies and research, as well as a detailed and thought-out valuation process. For this reason, we are very proud to have a specialised team of consultants on board who are able to offer their expertise and assistance whenever required. Each auction has a different but specific feeling to it which is very hard to describe, putting it in very simple words, it is almost as though the various histories and stories of these antiques become tangible at one point or other throughout the entire process."

Of course, at times antiques are not simply objects but retain a great deal of emotional value to their owners, "dealing with families is very hard sometimes," Pierre quietly explains, "there are several emotions involved, as well as the more delicate occasions, when we are bound to inform a family that their prized antique is worth much less than they had originally believed it was for example."

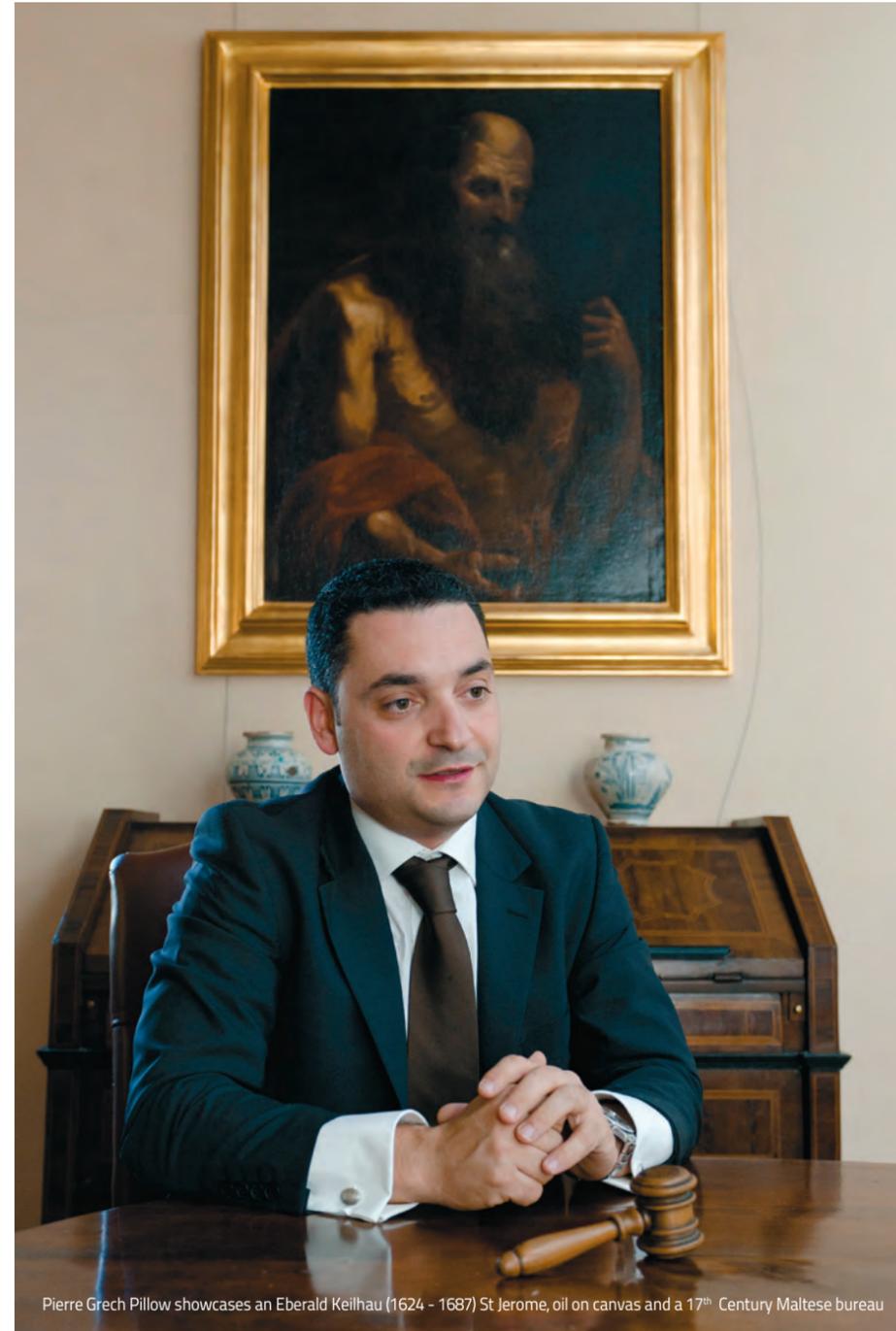
Emotions aside, Obelisk have been entrusted to handle some of the most prestigious family auctions in Malta such as the estate of the late Dr George Borg Olivier and our most recent auction at Villino Zammit to mention a few. "Both these auctions, as well as several others have been part

of a highly exciting journey," Pierre tells me, "through these auctions we have served both local and international buyers as well as the Museum of Fine Arts, to which we sold a pair of rare still life paintings by Antonio Tibaldi. These were originally discovered by our guest consultant, Dr Keith Sciberras, amongst other items."

Surely, with such a prestigious audience, emotions must run high throughout the entire sitting, "I feel that what makes a great auctioneer is the ability to relate very quickly to a large audience, almost like an orchestra leader," interjects Mr. Grech Pillow. "The key to understanding the mechanics of an auction is to be part of it, hold the room and understand the collection and buyer to truly understand how stressful it is. Nevertheless, all auctioneers are different," he adds. "I personally feel relieved when I stand in the rostrum, gavel in hand. The build-up before that point is incredible, so there is almost a feeling of peace and serenity at that stage."

Pierre goes on to explain how Obelisk is the only local auction house to conduct its auctions in a very specific manner, "We have created a unique system whereby every bidder is registered and allocated a numbered paddle which facilitates the process. The auction itself is extremely stressful, and we would hate it to get any more complicated due to some minor misunderstanding."

Of course, one can never underestimate the responsibility associated with selling such fine works of art, "selling a painting by Mattia Preti is not like selling chocolate," he quips, "these are not simple commodities and a great deal of research is involved in order for us to guarantee authenticity and realistic valuations. It is of essence for me, as an auctioneer, to build friendships and trusting relationships with both buyers and sellers, if I do not succeed in doing that, I can probably just pack up and go home," he jokes. This market however is not only concerned with valuable antiques and Old Master paintings but is also about the historical objects which, although they may only fetch between 200 and 650 euro, have their own intrinsic prestige.



Pierre Grech Pillow showcases an Eberald Keilhau (1624 - 1687) St Jerome, oil on canvas and a 17th Century Maltese bureau

I then turn my attention to Marika Azzopardi, a jewellery consultant at Obelisk, to enquire about the current 'gold rush' sale craze which seems to be increasing in popularity across our Islands, "Antique jewellery is extremely special for various reasons, although unfortunately, many people fail to appreciate it to the full," she muses. "The current sale hype risks the loss of unique old pieces should these land in the melting pot after falling in the

hands of indiscriminate buyers who just look at the gold content instead of its artistic, collectable or antique value. Many times, a very old gold item, even if slightly damaged, could fetch more from a collector than it would, if it were merely sold for its gold content. Sending it to the melting pot for a handful of euro would be doing it and its owner a great disservice. Having said that, many gold buyers do look carefully at old pieces and

the hope is that these pieces will eventually be appreciated for their intrinsic worth. My hope is that jewellery owners in Malta will not only look at old jewellery as something they inherited from their ancestors and is now inconveniently taking up space in their jewel box. We are confident that somewhere out there, the right buyer is waiting to pay for its true value," she concludes.

At this point, I can't help but wonder whether this delicate and highly specialised industry has had to face the unforgiving grasp of the current economic climate. Pierre smiles, "no matter what is going on out there, great works of art fetch great prices, which is comforting up to a certain extent. I would hate to see these grand masterpieces being undervalued in any way."

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What about your plans for the future, I conclude, "we have officially opened a department which caters for private sales last year, the response was tremendous and we look forward to working further on this venture. Additionally, we have plans to place Obelisk on the international platform next year in collaboration with foreign auction houses." Sounds like you'll be expecting a colourful year then, I remark. Pierre flashes a smile, "Yes of course, we are always looking for ways and means to improve and expand our services". In Alfred Taubman's words, God help us if we were ever to take the theatre out of the auction business. It would be an awfully boring world." ■

Obelisk Auction Gallery are proudly preparing themselves for their next auction being held on the 17th and 18th December. This auction will consist of an outstanding collection of private entries, including the Private Collection of the late artist and restorer Samuel Bugeja and an Important collection of 20th C. Maltese Art. Viewings will be held between the 10th - 16th December from 10:00 till 20:00 and on the morning of the auction from 10:00 till 12:00. www.obeliskauctions.com