

Alice Minter

The Gilbert Collection: The Quest for the Best

ABSTRACT

This article provides a case study of a responsible approach to deaccessioning at the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection, one of the most comprehensive twentieth-century collections of decorative arts built by private collectors and on display at a public institution since 2008. Arthur Gilbert set up a UK Trust to look after his collection. He instructed the trustees to maintain the collection in this spirit: new objects should be acquired, and others sold. However, deaccessioning always represents a major challenge: it requires curators to remove objects

from a collection built over decades, pieces which were carefully selected by the collector. As a safeguard, there is a clear structure separating the endowment, dedicated to operations towards galleries, conservation and curation of the collection, and the acquisition fund. While no proceeds from sale can be used for operations, the Gilbert Trust for the Arts must sell to pursue acquisitions and that makes the Gilbert Collection radically different from the V&A and very unusual among European institutions.

The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection is one of the most comprehensive twentieth-century collections of decorative arts built by private collectors and on display at a public institution. Since 2008, the Gilbert Collection is indeed on long-term loan to the Victoria & Albert Museum¹, run by a UK trust, The Gilbert Trust for the Arts, and a board of trustees. Some challenges may arise from this setup, notably with regard to the collection's management: while the museum is the custodian of a national collection which cannot be deaccessioned, the Gilbert Trust has a power – and the directives from Late Arthur – to sell some artefacts from the collection and seek new acquisitions. But for

1 Prior to this, the Gilbert Collection was housed at Somerset House (2000-2007).

responsible curators such as myself, deaccessioning always represents a major challenge: It requires us to remove objects from a collection built over decades, pieces which were carefully selected by the collector. Is it the right choice? Will we come to regret this? Will this one day be seen as a lapse of judgment and will future generations condemn the decision? The pressure was high, especially in the UK environment where deaccessioning for financial gain is generally frowned upon or seen as a sign of desperation. This article provides a case study to show how this process works in practice. It is of course important to get to know the collection first. We will then turn to the legal status of the collection today before we consider the practical steps that needed to be taken.



Fig.1: View of The Rosalinde & Arthur Gilbert Galleries
© Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Arthur Gilbert, originally Abraham Bernstein, was born and raised in London, from Jewish Polish parents who were successful wholesale furriers in East London. Together with his wife Rosalinde, he started a fashion business in the 1930s which they sold in 1948 before moving to America. The art collection started only in the early 1960s, as the Gilberts wanted to furnish their newly designed villa in Beverly Hills. In fact, Arthur had already developed a taste and interest for antique works of art: he had first acquired a Tudor-style mansion which he had furnished with period (and period-style) stained glass and room paneling. He was then influenced by his eldest brother, William Bernstein, who had acquired a Tudor house in England and collected incunabula. But for the new villa, the Gilberts wanted a new style and started to look for more fashionable works of art, and silver, of which he “was told he needed some to furnish his house”². They visited the very few antique dealers on Rodeo Drive, as well as dealers in Europe and New York. Arthur liked to explain three key moments in the history of the collection: in 1962 their visit to Florence made them discover the stunning art of hardstone mosaics; in 1965, he acquired his first piece of eighteenth-century English silver. The same year, he acquired

2 Unpublished interview, 1997 © V&A Collection, Archive of Art and Design, GC/6/1/9.

two pictures from a local auction house in Los Angeles which he thought to be cracked paintings, only to realise they were made of glass mosaics. Each time, those first acquisitions triggered a genuine interest in learning more about such remarkable crafts and led to acquiring further examples.

As he liked reminding everyone, Arthur “did not wake up one day saying Arthur you are going to become a collector. It was something that evolved [...] And after [he]’d acquired a number of pieces of both silver and of mosaics, [he] decided that [he]’d begin collecting.”³ That is how, progressively, over three decades, the Gilberts built a collection of gold and silver treasures, spanning from the antiquity to the contemporary (the most recent pieces being a set of twelve gold Tiffany glasses dating circa 1940), from South American to Russian pieces. They also built one of the three largest collections of micro-mosaics, including small jewellery, buttons and a few centimeters wide plaques, to the more sizable formats of tables, clocks, vases etc. in fact, he contributed to the worldwide recognition of that technique of mosaics, developed specifically from the 1770s in Rome until the 1890s, and coined the word “micromosaic” for it. In 1971, he branched out to snuffboxes, and managed to gather five of the most expensive boxes ever made and ever sold on the art market. Carved in majority in hardstones (agate and chrysoprase especially) and richly embellished with coloured diamonds, gold and glass elements, these were commissioned and possibly designed by Frederick the Great (1712-1786), King of Saxony. At the same time, he also became interested in enamel portrait miniatures, of which he amassed a small but comprehensive collection.

Arthur’s aim was to build the best collection of decorative arts and he liked to describe his collecting habits as “maniacal”, as he would apply the same work ethic as for his business in real estate: “very fast, very diligently, very hard.”⁴ He had developed a network of art dealers and auction specialists who advised him and sourced for him unpublished masterpieces – the hunt being almost as exciting as the treasure itself. Archives record how dealers sent him artefacts directly to his house, from which he could choose and return the unfavoured examples at free will. This was facilitated by ideal conditions: firstly, European aristocratic households struggled since WWII to maintain their heritage and many had to sell their heirloom. Notable examples include the Rothschild Family, who sold their Buckinghamshire House, Mentmore Towers, and its contents in 1977, or the German Princely family of Thurn und Taxis, in 1992. Secondly, a strong art market for decorative arts expanded to an international scene, with prestigious art fairs such as TEFAF in Maastricht or La Biennale in Paris and auctions in Geneva, New York, London, Monaco. Masterpieces of extraordinary quality and provenance were thus available and shipped to the best buyers, and it was often too late for nations to establish the export restrictions which are in place today: many collectors, including Arthur, managed to acquire national treasures which today would be prohibited from leaving their country of origin. Such a booming market also appealed to forgers, to the detriment of Arthur

3 Unpublished interview, 1997, V&A Collection, Archive of Art and Design, GC/6/1/9.

4 Unpublished interview, 1997, V&A Collection, Archive of Art and Design, GC/6/1/9.

himself, whose very first silver acquisition in 1962 turned out to be a fake. This upset him so much that a few years later, he decided to acquire the genuine, original version. That upsetting experience marked his method and from then on, he requested for almost every purchase a reliable confirmation of provenance, or a comparative study of similar examples recorded in public institutions. Once an object became his, he would also refuse to hear any different opinion than what he was told upon acquisition.



Fig. 3: An Italian Pietre Dure and tenere panel, Florence, by Mario Montelatici, 1983. Estimate 10,000-15,000GBP, sold for 47,500 GBP.

© Sotheby's

In his quest for the best, Arthur would not hesitate to sell what was deemed as unfit for the collection: "When I am not able to always attain that, I have had to settle for the next

best. And eventually one day we may be able to replace that with the best.”⁵ For that reason, Arthur also sent some objects to auction houses or dealers which he no longer wanted in his collection. In one instance, he posted some gold boxes to Gerard Hilliers, then head of the Russian and Objects of Vertu department at Sotheby’s New York, with the clear instructions to sell them so he could not lose too much money.⁶ This continued throughout his life, with a larger consignment in 1996 at Christie’s London, when the collection was moved to the UK and ready for the great opening at Somerset House.⁷

Arthur Gilbert set up a UK Trust to look after his collection.⁸ He instructed the trustees to maintain the collection in this spirit: new objects should be acquired, and others sold. The loan agreement between the Gilbert Trust for the Arts and the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was signed in 2008, is clear: “The [V&A] may, having gone, through its internal procedure for the disposal of material unsuitable for retention, return to the [Gilbert Trust] Items which in its opinion are unsuitable for retention by the [V&A]. Subject to the approval [...] the [Gilbert Trust], these collection Items will be sold and the funds used when required for the acquisition of material relating to the remaining Collection Items The proceeds raised from sales and the income earned from the investment of these proceeds may be used for no other purpose.”⁹ Alongside this statement, there is a clear structure separating the endowment, dedicated to operations towards galleries, conservation and curation of the collection, and the acquisition fund. While no proceeds from sale can be used for operations, the endowment cannot be used towards acquisitions. In other words, the Gilbert Trust for the Arts must sell to pursue acquisitions and that makes the Gilbert Collection radically different from the V&A.

While this is common practice for worldwide collectors, and necessary for some American museums, it is rather controversial for European public institutions, especially in England where national museums like the Victoria and Albert Museum are prevented by law from disposing of objects. The V&A’s Trustees are generally unable to deaccession items outside a set of narrowly defined circumstances. They can only remove items from the collections if they are, for example, duplicates or damaged beyond repair. Furthermore, the Code of Ethics from the Museum Association, which represents the UK’s museum sector, explicitly states that “it is unacceptable for a museum to select items for disposal with the principal aim of generating income”¹⁰, although extreme and exceptional circumstances can justify financially-motivated disposals. Moreover, the Gilbert

5 Unpublished interview, 1997, V&A Collection, Archive of Art and Design, GC/6/1/9.

6 V&A Collection, Archive of Art and Design, GC/9/3/316.

7 The Gilbert Collection was housed at Somerset House, with 17 dedicated Galleries, between 2000 and 2007.

8 A “trust” is a legal arrangement often used in common law territories like England for holding property. In a trust, property is given by a “settlor” to “trustees” who hold the property for the benefit of “beneficiaries”. In this case, Arthur Gilbert was the settlor and his trustees hold the collection for the benefit of the general public.

9 Schedule 1; Paragraph 5 of the 2008 Gilbert Trust for Arts/V&A Loan Agreement.

10 www.museumsassociation.org.

Trust are bound to the policy of the V&A which, like any museum in England, is “to enrich people’s lives by promoting research, knowledge and enjoyment of the designed world to the widest possible audience”, and ensuring “that the objects are exhibited to the public”¹¹. Each object is important, has information to reveal and ought to be accessible to visitors. Therefore, Gilbert trustees cannot simply alienate objects arbitrarily and must follow the appropriate guidance provided in the United Kingdom, by the “disposal toolkit by the Museum Association”.



Fig.4: A pair of George III style specimen marble topped carved giltwood tables. Estimate 15,000-25,000GBP. Sold for 23,750GBP

© Sotheby's

Guidelines for financially motivated disposal comprise four steps: assessment and in-principle decision making, planning and investigation, consultation, advice and final decision, the sale, post-sale and record keeping. In 2013, my predecessor as Curator of the Gilbert Collection, Heike Zech had already carried out one disposal procedure, resulting in thirty-five objects offered through two auctions at Christie's London. The board was thus familiar with the procedure, they understood that a public auction was the most appropriate strategy – rather than a private sale through an art dealer – to demonstrate the willingness for transparency. As I joined in July 2018, the board requested a new disposal procedure, probably relying on my previous experience as an auction house specialist. Yet, in 2013 the choice was made to offer objects across the four categories, which were duplicates of an extensive number, such as silver plates from the Norfolk service (six were sold out of twelve), and twentieth-century *pietre dure* plaques of lesser value and artistic interest. Twentieth-century decorative objects which had been used as props in Arthur's recreated office at Somerset House were also added, for their very low

curatorial interest. This time, the selection was to be different since the evident candidates had already been alienated. Moreover, new opportunities to display more Gilbert objects arose as the V&A was about to open new sites in East London. The argument that too many objects were in storage and thus could be sold was about to be voided.

This presented a major challenge: there was no longer a need to free the collection from “material unsuitable for retention”, but to carefully choose objects which could be alienated without affecting the core values of the collection. Due to my previous experience in the art market, and the recent valuation of the collection completed by Christie’s in July 2018¹², I knew that hardstones and glass mosaics were desirable, and their value could make a significant contribution towards the acquisition funds and enable us to continue Arthur’s mission of acquiring important new pieces. We thus placed an emphasis on objects that were likely to attract high bids in the current art market and which would situate the Gilbert Collection as one of prestigious provenance for today’s collectors. The selection was discussed with both external specialists from Christie’s and Sotheby’s before being submitted to the Gilbert board of Trustees in May 2019.



Fig.5: An Italian Micromosaic, lapis Lazuli and black marble table top, Rome, circa 1875, attributed to the Barberi workshop. Estimate 50,000-80,000 GBP. Sold for 112,500 GBP.

© Sotheby’s

12 This was requested by the Trustees and is a mandatory requirement from the loan agreement.

The hardstone section has some iconic pieces, presented at worldwide exhibitions and published countless times, as well as others which are relatively common in the history of *pietre dure*, or of weaker techniques and styles. Further research in that category also brought to light some objects which had been altered in the twentieth century, before Arthur Gilbert acquired them. Though these alterations do not highlight any milestone in the history of design or craftsmanship, the objects can be still appealing to the market when described appropriately. The most striking example was a pair of “specimen” tables, dated as late nineteenth century, acquired from the antique dealer Crowther of Syon Lodge in 1971 and compared with similar eighteenth-century pairs in the Royal Collection (RCIN 2621). When inspected closely, these were revealed instead to be twentieth century copies. Catalogued as such, they sold for more than their estimate on the auction day. In total, ten objects made of hardstone were selected for auction.

The Gilbert collection of micromosaics was rather challenging. They undeniably added to the value of the consignment, and arguably made this process worthwhile to bring more money to the pot. They form, however, the most comprehensive collection in the world for the multiplicity of scenes made by different artists, allowing us then to compare and study this extraordinary craft in depth, resulting in further disagreement among the board. Ultimately, the majority agreed that the micromosaic collection could benefit from being carefully curated, and a few examples alienated from the collection, if considered to be duplicates of scenes or of an artist’s production, without highlighting enough the latter’s ingenuity and technical skills. In total, eight micromosaics were agreed for sale.

Part of the consultation process was also to process a tender between appropriate auction houses. Financial terms were even but the proposed format of auction differed: while Christie’s suggested to scatter the consignments across regular Furniture & Decorative Arts auctions depending on object type, as they did in 2013, Sotheby’s suggested a newly branded auction dedicated to objects made of decorative hardstones and marbles. The Sotheby’s auction “Stone” was chosen as the best format for this disposal (fig.2). Benefiting from my past experience, I knew that themed sales attract more collectors than regular auctions, which can quickly lose their interest.

The next challenge was to communicate this disposal project without risking any misunderstanding in the role played by the V&A, a major concern for our V&A Communication team. The collection has been on loan to the museum since 2008 with its dedicated galleries, board of trustees, budget and curatorial team. This can, however, be easily missed when one looks at such a high-profile institution. Our strategy was to be extremely open and pro-active in communication. A series of adverts highlighting the Gilbert Consignment was decided upon, clearly stating: “Property from the Late Sir Arthur and Rosalinde Gilbert – to benefit exclusively the acquisitions fund of the Gilbert Collection.” The consignment benefited from a couple of dedicated spreads in the catalogue, including an introduction to the collection and the Gilberts as collectors. Finally, public events were organised around the sale, such as guided tours for targeted clients. I participated in a panel discussion at Sotheby’s around the subject: “Building a Collection: Motivations and Methods.” To my surprise, the discussion and questions revolved around Gilbert as a

collector; the topic of the deaccession itself, which I suspected would stir controversy, did not ever come up.

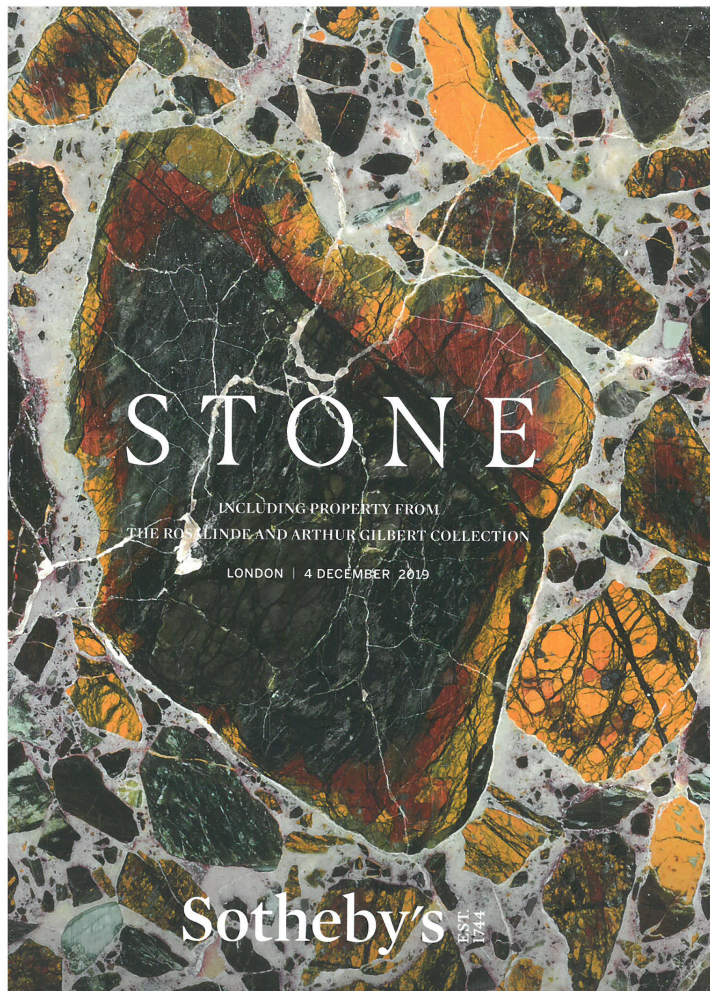


Fig.2: Catalogue Cover of the Sotheby's sale: Stone, London, 4 December 2019
© Sotheby's

On 4 December, seventeen out of eighteen objects sold, the majority above the high estimate, and bringing much to the Gilbert acquisition fund (figs. 3,4 & 5).¹³ I was, however, worried about these good results and almost panicked. “Have I made the wrong choice?”. Instead, it was proof of the great selection offered to the art market: I had worked on this disposal for a year, benefited from external advice by experts in the fields, as well as sound judgment from the board of trustees. These excellent results were justified by the quality of the objects, which responded to a strong demand on the art market, reinforced by the great provenance associated to the Gilbert Collection. Buyers appreciated this rarer acquisition opportunity and the bidding fever took on. Mean-

while, we are now in an extremely privileged position to start hunting for new objects and present them to our visitors for many years to come. We could have not expected a better outcome and that is precisely what Arthur Gilbert would have wanted.

Alice Minter is senior curator of the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

13 See also: www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2019/stone.