



SOTHEBY'S

Edmund de Unger compares collecting to sex. Because his desire is waning, he's selling his incomparable medieval enamels.

A passion for antiquity

By William Green

COLLECTING

AS A 14-year-old Boy Scout on a cycling trip, Edmund de Unger spotted a rare carpet in a Romanian church. His late father had collected carpets, and de Unger knew quality when he saw it. The carpet was in woeful shape. A local priest had recently hacked off part of it to bandage the leg of a parishioner. On the spot de Unger cut a deal: He bought the church a new carpet in exchange for the ragged one.

That 16th-century Turkish rug still adorns his bedroom floor 60 years later. It's worth \$50,000.

A retired property developer with homes in England and Switzerland, de Unger has been collecting antiquities ever since the day he bought

that tattered rug. His Islamic art collection—which includes manuscripts, ceramics and carpets—is so vast that it's cataloged in a five-volume book. He is also the principal owner of a 131-piece collection of medieval enamels, which Sotheby's will auction in New York on Nov. 20. Expected price: \$25 million to \$35 million.

Why sell his enamels? "I'm well over 70," says de Unger. "I want to sort out my estate." Good timing. The market for medieval enamels has never been hotter. Last year Sotheby's sold a 12th-century enamel candlestick base for \$6.8 million (*see table, p. 211*).

Most of the items in de Unger's collection were made in the 12th through the 14th centuries in Li-

This 800-year-old enamel plaque of angels belongs to Edmund de Unger, seated here at his home in London.



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moges, France. The artists chiseled designs onto copper plates, filled the grooves with glass powder and baked them to produce richly colored enamels.

It is not simply the beauty but the scarcity of these pieces that make them valuable. As few as 10,000 medieval enamels from Limoges have survived.

De Unger bought most of his enamels 27 years ago from a Swiss couple, Ernst and Martha Kofler-Truniger. De Unger then added about 15 pieces, including some splendid Mosan enamels, which are

The price of enamels auctioned in the past two decades

Item	Date sold	Price (\$mil)
Arm ornament, c. 1165	1979	\$2.03
Medallion, c. 1150	1979	\$2.22
Becket casket, c. 1195*	1979	\$1.08
Becket casket, c. 1195*	1996	\$6.52
Candlestick base, c. 1135	1996	\$6.86

*The Becket casket auctioned in 1979 was auctioned again in 1996.

Source: Sotheby's.

even rarer than those from Limoges. Like a lot of great collectors, de Unger says he has always viewed the enamels as a source of pleasure, not profit. "If you want to invest, you buy shares or property. I never invested in art."

De Unger was born in Budapest, the son of a Hungarian diplomat. When he was 10 his father died, leaving him with what he calls "a very large fortune" in real estate, paintings, jewels and carpets. He survived parlous times. In 1944 the Germans seized a hotel he owned, then used it to house the Gestapo. In 1948 the communists took power in Hungary; de Unger was thrown in prison three times and stripped of most of his assets, including the hotel.

Hungary's loss, England's gain. He fled to the U.K., became a lawyer and eventually replenished his fortune as a property developer.

Not everything in the collection is in the million-dollar class. There are some 13th-century plaques and medallions likely to go for less than \$10,000, and for less than \$50,000 you might be able to pick up a 700-year-old Tuscan belt decorated with snails, lions and birds.

But the main focus at the auction will be a handful of rare treasures. One is a sculpture of the Madonna seated on an enamel throne. Made in Limoges around 1225, it is expected to fetch \$3.5 million. Legend has it that a 13th-century Spanish warrior carried the sculpture into battle to protect him. It was later owned by a son

of King Louis-Philippe of France.

Another remarkable piece is the Madrid Chasse, made in Limoges 800 years ago. It is one of the most sumptuously ornate items in the collection. It was designed to hold relics of a saint, so it may once have contained human body parts.

De Unger is especially fond of a small Limoges plaque of two angels, which Sotheby's hopes to sell for \$2.5 million. The colors—from cobalt blue to iridescent green—have lost none of

A 13th-century sculpture and a 12th-century casket. Sotheby's expects each to fetch \$3.5 million on Nov. 20.



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their richness or delicacy in eight centuries, and the angels have a sweetly ethereal quality. "It's a very spiritual art," says de Unger. "There's nothing fleshy about it, nothing vulgar. . . . Religion gave medieval people the strength to live."

De Unger will miss his collection.

But at his age, he confesses, the collector's voracious will-to-possess begins to wane. "I compare collecting to a physical desire," he says. "And the desire is not that strong any more. It's rather like looking at a beautiful woman and just admiring her beauty—without wanting anything more."