

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### FINANCIAL TIMES A bold new image for antiquities

BY SUSAN MOORE

Jeff Koons talks about buying the art of past masters whose influences resonate through his own work



Jeff Koons in his studio

Artists have always collected the work of earlier masters. Some, such as Vasari, Lely, Rubens or Reynolds, ranked among the greatest collectors of their day. Earlier this month, at the impressive new specialist Old Master paintings fair, Paris Tableau, a loan exhibition unveiled three pictures from the hitherto rather private collection of Jeff Koons. And while Andy Warhol's dazzlingly successful spiritual heir is not the only contemporary artist to buy Old Master and 19th-century paintings, drawings or sculpture, the creator of floating basketballs, 43ft topiary puppies and gleaming steel bunnies may not seem the most likely among his peers to be haunting Neapolitan baroque churches or flicking through auction catalogues.

Yet Koons has long engaged with Old Master paintings and sculpture in his own work (there is a peerless artistic pedigree for that too). What is remarkable here is the extraordinary range of his magpie borrowings. Some are direct appropriations, like his marble double portrait "Bourgeois Bust: Jeff and Ilona" of 1991, a reworking of Houdon's celebrated pair of lovers, "The Kiss" of 1778. He chose it because the two heads on a single socle "made a perfect heart". Other references need a keener eye. In "Christ with Lamb" (1988), for example, passages from Leonardo's "Madonna and Child and St Anne" pop up in negative form within the gilded frame of a rococo-inspired mirror.

The occasion of Paris Tableau seemed the perfect time to talk to the artist about both his collecting and his continuing appropriation of the art of the past. We arrange to meet in his studio in Chelsea, New York. In one room, technicians – he employs some 120 assistants – work at computer screens, scanning and manipulating images of

what will become the colossal, precisely engineered and technically flawless steel, marble or granite sculptures for his new “Antiquities” series.

On the desks are plaster casts of a tiny prehistoric Venus of Willendorf, a Bernini group and a modern figurine of a frothily tutu-ed ballerina. In the middle of the room rest the life-size mock-ups – the intimate little Venus rendered alarmingly robotic by her translation into 14ft of highly polished pink steel.



Koons' 'Bourgeois Bust – Jeff and Ilona' (1991)

In the adjacent painting studio, others sit squeezing out oil paint onto pre-numbered cards or painstakingly copying digital images, window by window, to create his canvas “collages”. Here are Aphrodites galore alongside a generously priapic bronze satyr and the actress Gretchen Mol as 1950s siren Bettie Page riding a ready-made dolphin. Surreally truncated casts of these inflatable dolphins and rubber rings are being meticulously embellished and assembled next door.

Perhaps the most striking thing is the studio’s almost laboratory-like neatness and hushed sense of purpose. When Koons arrives, it seems appropriate that he too should be softly spoken and precisely engineered, from his closely clipped hair and clean-cut pleasant features to his immaculately laundered blue shirt. He is courteous and eager to please. It is hard to reconcile this apparently unassuming, regular all-American boy – and at 56, even with specs, he is still boyish – with some of the most sexually explicit self-portraiture ever created.

Sex is a recurring theme in his own – oddly unerotic – work and in his frequently erotically charged art collection. The three French paintings in Paris, for instance, range from the titillating to the blatantly carnal. An oval Fragonard of around 1770 depicts a young girl with puppies nuzzling her bare breasts. “I always enjoyed the Fragonard girl with the puppy between her legs in the Altepinakothek in Munich,” explains Koons, “so I was very happy to acquire this one with the suckling puppies.” It is the first of many instances where the artist seems to see more than most.

His no less delectable and fluently painted Poussin of “Jupiter and Antiope” or “Venus and Satyr” of around 1626, newly rediscovered at the time of its sale in 2008, shows a horned Satyr stumbling across the nude nymph stretched out asleep beneath a tree, the whole scene cast in rosy shadow save for the single ray of light that illuminates her opened legs. Koons was right to believe that something was wrong here, and 19th-century over-painting was removed to reveal the Satyr’s hand already in place.

His own response to art, and what he borrows from the art of the past, he describes as entirely intuitive. “I don’t think about things in an analytical way.” When I ask him about the choices he has made, he replies simply: “It is in the genes. I respond to things that tend to be very sexual, and things that tend to embrace aspects of spirituality.”



‘Young Girl Holding Two Puppies’ (c1770) by Jean-Honoré Fragonard

Revealingly, Koons owns a number of powerfully spiritual works of art. The first time I became aware of Koons the collector was when he bought a sublime early 16th-century limewood carving of St Catherine of Alexandria by the great Tilman Riemenschneider, at Sotheby’s in 2008 (he bought heavily in 2007-2008, and always buys at auction). It is currently on loan to the Met while he is refurbishing a new townhouse on Manhattan’s conservative Upper East Side, as is Quentin Massys’s affecting and very human head of Christ of around 1529. It was his son Blake’s favourite painting when he was two. “That is another reason I collect,” he adds, “I wanted my children to realise that art was something bigger than just their father and their mother, Justine.”

Another family favourite is on loan at the Met too, Cornelis van Haarlem’s “Hercules and Achelous” of 1590. Downstairs in the galleries of Egyptian antiquities is his powerful colossal quartzite head of Nectanebo I or II.

Koons is elliptical to the point of impenetrability: interviewing him is like having a parallel conversation in which someone else seems to be asking the questions. Even so, there is clearly an intimate relationship between what Koons creates and what he collects. With something like his Bouguereau nude who seems suspended in mid-air, he makes the self-evident connection with his Equilibrium or flotation pieces. A recent acquisition, Picasso’s “The Kiss” of 1965, is another neat fit.

Elsewhere, the connection is far from obvious. The explicit images of his “Banality” series, he says, came out of visiting German and Italian baroque and rococo churches and how they made him feel. He enjoys the sensual quality of the baroque, and the spiritual quality of wood. (One of the things that he likes about porcelain is its “sexual energy, because it shrinks 19 per cent during firing”.)

His current “Antiquities” series was similarly inspired in part by the extraordinary sculpture in Santa Maria dell Pietà dei Sangro in Naples, the pierced stone of his Aphrodites inspired by the fishing nets of Queirolo and the veiling and garlanding of Corradini.



'Femme Nue' (1865-1866) by Gustave Courbet

As a young artist he collected and traded the work of other artists as a way of “reaching out and connecting”. When working at MoMA, and later as a commodities broker on Wall Street, he bought Richard Prince, Roy Lichtenstein and German photography. That collection was sold to finance his attempts to retrieve the son abducted by his first wife, the Italian porn star and politician known as La Cicciolina, after their divorce in 1994. When he was able to begin rebuilding his life, the first thing he acquired was another Lichtenstein sculpture, “The Large Glass”.

Since then, the ever more successful Koons has been stretching ever further back to feel what he describes as “a biological connection to other artists and other times”. His current series embraces everyone from Praxiteles to Rubens and Dalí, Superman and Mohammed Ali. As ever, there is an appropriately pop democracy about his broad sweeping brush, with no qualitative distinction drawn between these sources or, one suspects, drawn between the works in his collection (he owns what he describes as around 50 “significant” pieces). Here his favourite may well be the “Venus and Cupid” by the little known 17th-century painter Nicolas Knupfer. “She is not a young woman; she has birthed quite a few times,” says Koons the family man and father of seven: “I find her very, very beautiful.”

Koons may reference some of the greatest surviving classical antiquities but no lesser place is accorded to the unthreateningly familiar, like the ballerina figurine that appears to him as a modern Aphrodite “lifting her skirts to display her femininity and fertility”. There is also a place for the anonymous and abandoned, like the early Christian fertility symbol unearthed near Raglan Castle in Wales and bought online, or the little painting on masonite he picked up off the street and has been hoping to use for the last 30 years. Koons has an instinctive and unconventional way of looking at – and producing – art and an unerring ability to manipulate it in order to tap into the *Zeitgeist*.