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SMITHSONIAN AGREES TO PURCHASE 'LEGENDARY' COLLECTION OF PERSIAN ART

The Smithsonian Institution has agreed to purchase for \$7 million what has been described as one of the finest collections of Persian art ever assembled - a collection whose very existence was a mystery for decades but that actually sat undisturbed in packing crates in New York for 40 years.

It is the collection of **Henri Vever**, a jeweler in Paris, whose work was widely praised in the first half of this century and who also was a very acquisitive connoisseur of all manner of art. The Vever collection, which the museum says consists of "39 full volumes, 291 miniatures, 98 calligraphies and illuminations, 29 bookbindings, 4 textiles and examples of almost all of the classical Persian texts known, as well as several important Arabic ones," is expected to be acquired some time this week.

The Smithsonian's regents agreed to the \$7 million price at their meeting last Sept. 16. These meetings are closed to the public and press, and the Smithsonian issues public reports later summarizing the proceedings in order to counter criticism that the Smithsonian conducts its business in private. In this case, the name of the collection and the price were expurgated from the summary, but an unabridged report of the meeting provided details. Mr. Vever, who died of natural causes in German-occupied France in 1943 at the age of 89, was a leading Parisian jeweler, according to Jack Hillier, author of the three-volume "Japanese Prints and Drawings From the Vever Collection." Mr. Vever was the author of several technical books, including "French Jewelry Shops of the 19th Century." The secretary of the Smithsonian, Robert McC. Adams, declined to comment today on the impending deal, but the report of the regents meeting relates that the Vever collection disappeared with the outbreak of World War II and that "its survival has been an issue of continual discussion among scholars and collectors."

The collection of Persian art, it turned out, was crated at least as early as 1945 and shipped to New York City. Lawrence Brinn, a New York lawyer handling the negotiations for the Vever heirs, said he could not discuss the collection at length today. He said that Mr. Vever was "one of the greatest collectors of our time" and that his heirs packed up the collection to ship it out as soon as they could. "This was a German-occupied area," he said. "Anyone would want to get out anything he could as soon as possible." The art was sent to New York, he said, by way of London and arrived in New York in 1945. The crates remained unopened until last February, when the Smithsonian became aware of the collection and had it examined by two experts, Milo Beach, assistant director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, and Glenn Lowry, curator of Near Eastern Art for the Center for Asian Art.

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The Sackler and Asian galleries are to be part of the Smithsonian's Quadrangle project, which is now under construction and is to be the Vever collection's new home. "The Vever collection fully lives up to its legendary reputation," Mr. Adams told the regents in relating the experts' findings. "It is a dazzling selection of one of the greatest artistic traditions known and would be impossible to duplicate today at any price. Works in abundance of this quality have not been available on the art market since the first decades of this century." It was not immediately clear where in New York the works had been stored, why they had remained crated for 40 years and how they came to finally be put up for sale. Of Mr. Vever, Mr. Hillier wrote, "From the time he bought his first Rembrandt etching at the age of 17, he became an avid collector - of Western prints of all periods, paintings, including the Impressionists, Persian miniatures, early printed books, modern illustrated books (many in bindings commissioned by him, often by Chadel), Greek coins, as well as Japanese and Chinese prints and other objects." Little has been published in the United States on Mr. Vever. Mr. Hillier's work was a 1976 limited edition of 800 copies based on the catalogues prepared for 1974 and 1975 sales of Mr. Vever's Japanese works.

People at the Smithsonian have taken to Anglicizing the pronunciation of his name to VAY-ver. A researcher at the Library of Congress said that Vay-vay probably was preferred, and an official at the French Embassy agreed. Mr. Brinn pronounced it as Vey-VAIR.

In his presentation to the regents last September, Mr. Adams said: "The collection, which is as varied as it is rich, contains many hitherto unknown manuscripts and paintings from all of the major artistic centers of the Near Eastern world. With the controversy and doubt about origins which otherwise act to prevent the acquisition of works of art from Asian countries, the unquestionable provenance of the Vever collection takes on additional significance. "The collection was assembled in Paris during the first half of this century and has been in storage, unopened, in New York since 1945. The Vever collection is the only remaining collection still intact assembled during the heyday of the availability of this material. The Rothschild, Cartier and Goloubev collections, for example, have all been dispersed. More importantly, Henri Vever was the greatest of all these collectors." The Vever heirs at first asked for \$11 million, but agreed to reduce it to \$7 million, the regents were told, because the Smithsonian could not afford the higher figure and the heirs wanted the collection to remain intact at the Smithsonian. Officials at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has many Islamic artifacts, said they knew about the collection but did not bid on it. Stuart Cary Welch, special consultant to the Metropolitan Museum's Islamic Department, is on vacation, but a spokesman who had talked with him said Mr. Welch believed the collection was bought at a "sensible" price and that he was "delighted" to see that it had been "kept intact and would remain in good hands."

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HOW SMITHSONIAN BOUGHT LONG-LOST PERSIAN ART

At a dinner party in Paris last winter, Laure Lowry of Williamstown, Mass., mentioned to another guest that her son was the curator of Middle Eastern art at the Smithsonian Institution. The other diner replied that he owned some Islamic art he was sure Mrs. Lowry's son would find interesting. He said he had inherited the collection from a man named **Henri Vever**. 'She didn't remember the name,' the curator, Dr. Glenn D. Lowry, said today about his mother and the original collector. "But she got close enough that I went through the roof." **The Vever** collection of Persian art had not been seen since World War II. Many people even wondered if it still existed. That dinner in Paris set in motion a chain of events that led today to the purchase for \$7 million of the Vever collection by the Smithsonian Institution, which called it "the finest existing private collection of Islamic and Persian painting and manuscripts." It was purchased from the man Mrs. Lowry had met in Paris, a man who seeks anonymity so much that neither he nor the Smithsonian would disclose his identity.

The only clues to about the mysterious seller emerged as Dr. Lowry and Dr. Milo C. Beach, another Smithsonian authority on Asian art, told in an interview as much as they were permitted about the man and the collection, which had been shipped from Paris to New York around 1945 and had since lain undisturbed in a New York warehouse for 40 years. The seller is an American, possibly a New Yorker, who spends part of the year in Paris and who has wealth and a desire for privacy. "He is a person who does not want to lead a complicated life," Dr. Lowry said. "One can best describe him as a very quiet, distinguished gentleman who has spent his life trying to maintain his solitude." Dr. Beach said, "You can add that he has a great interest in sports." Henri Vever, who died in 1943, was an art collector who had been one of France's leading jewelers in the first half of the century. Since he died almost 43 years ago, his heir, the seller, cannot be a young man. "He has been the owner at least since it's been in New York, since 1945," Dr. Lowry said.

In the interview, Dr. Lowry and Dr. Beach spoke with great excitement of the find that had come their way through a stroke of luck. "This was a collection known to everyone in the field of Asian art," Dr. Beach said. "It was shown in Paris in 1911 and the last time that any part of it was on public view was in 1931 in Paris. Since then, nothing was known of it. When I started out in the 1950's, no one knew whether it was still in existence or possibly destroyed by bombs in the war. "If we hadn't contacted him, it wouldn't have come on the market," Dr. Beach said. Once the Smithsonian told the owner of its interest, officials decided to act quickly because word of the collection's existence started getting out, leading to the expectation that bids would be received from other potential buyers.

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It was here that Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, the New York collector, research psychiatrist and medical publisher, played a pivotal role. Dr. Sackler is the primary benefactor of the Smithsonian's museum of Asian art, which will bear his name. It is now under construction and will be part of the Quadrangle project being built by the Smithsonian to house African, Middle Eastern and Asian art. The owner was amenable to a direct sale to the Smithsonian, even going so far as to lower the asking price from \$11 million, to ensure that the collection would remain intact. "The owner did not want a public auction that would draw attention to himself," Dr. Beach said, "and he wanted the collection in the United States because he is an American himself." It was Dr. Sackler, according to Dr. Beach, who recognized the worth of the Vever collection and the need to acquire it quickly before it was divided up into small lots and sold piecemeal.

Dr. Sackler raised money for the purchase and, after examining it personally, convinced the Smithsonian regents that it belonged in the museum that would carry his name. Part of the artistic and academic worth of the Vever collection comes from its completeness as a segment of the history of the Persian Empire, which comprised what today is Iran and parts of Iraq and Pakistan, but whose art influence extended beyond that, into Turkey and India. The Vever collection, therefore, is not limited to the borders of today's Iran, but includes, for example, paintings and calligraphy once owned by the Mogul ruler of India, Shah Jahan, the builder of the Taj Mahal.

The Vever collection includes 39 full volumes, 291 miniatures, 98 calligraphies and illuminations, 29 bookbindings and 4 textiles. Its completeness becomes more important when it is compared to the fate of the other works of that area. "Many collectors and dealers from the 18th century on, realizing the value of lavishly executed Persian manuscripts, found it profitable to disassemble the bound manuscripts and sell each page separately," the Smithsonian said today. "In this way most of the masterpieces of Persian miniature painting have been long dispersed. "Works of quality and importance in such abundance are rarely available for sale, and the discovery of a collection such as this newly acquired group is extraordinary." The collection includes eight illustrated pages - said to be the largest number extant - from the "Shah Namah," the book of Persia's kings, circa 1330, ; five illustrated pages from the "Fal Namah," the book of omens, circa 1550, which are said to be unique among Persian illustrations, and an illustration that provides a history of Shah Jahan's reign. The entire collection is to be put on display by the Smithsonian in 1988.

Dr. Lowry recalled that some time ago, he and Dr. Beach had been daydreaming over lunch how nice it would be if the long-missing Vever collection could ever be found. "Imagine our surprise," he said, "when we learned that what we were seeking was, practically speaking, under our nose, just 250 miles away in New York."

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