

New Museum School Podcast Transcript– 2019/2020

PODCAST TITLE: *How I made my Collection with Bertrand von Steelenborg*

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HOST INSTITUTION: *Culture&*

SCRIPT

BJ: *Barry Johnson – Presenter*

vS: *Bertrand von Steelenborg – Guest*

NMS INTRO STING

LINK 1

BJ: Good evening! I'm Barry Johnson and welcome to another edition of **How I Made My Collection**, where we invite collectors, curators and the curious to share their stories of acquisition. In last week's show, we had Phil from Stevenage and his interesting hoard of Cliff Richard memorabilia. My guest today is world-famous archaeologist, explorer, diplomat for the Regal Province and collector **Bertrand von Steelenborg**. He's just returned from a 13-year expedition and excavation in the village of *Xibibia*. It's been a bit tricky in the region - we're not too clear on the details, but I'm sure we'll get to some sort of conclusion by the end of the evening.

BJ: Bertrand, how are you?

vS: I'm wonderful, thank you

BJ: Can I call you Bert?

VS: ...

BJ: No? We'll just get straight into it then. So, you're back, fresh from *Xibibia*. Could you just give us a quick rundown of your career for those who aren't too familiar with your work?

vS: I grew up thousands of miles away in the East of Anphatalia. My parents were both herpetologists - they studied reptiles - and growing up I was obsessed with dinosaurs, finding the remains of deceased animals. (Chuckles.) In fact, my first dig was at the tender age of four years old. I unearthed the carcass of a rat and placed it in my father's display cabinet - he wasn't too pleased to say the least

This fascination carried on into my teens as I became older and trustworthy enough to observe my parent's work. While I had always been interested in animals, the thought of exploring, sharing objects of other civilisations from faraway lands and digging up relics from past human civilisations became more appealing: the history, the stories, the scale of the missions, the wealth, the wealth, the wealth (*echoes into distance*)...

vS: The wealth of mind - to enrich myself – with knowledge.

BJ: And what drew you to exploring *Xibibia*? A place that has such an unforgiving climate.

vS: *Xibibia* has a rich culture of craftsmanship. Sculpture is almost a second language to the natives. Traditionally they use wood, bronze, gold – a lot of gold - marble to create visual tableaux of major events, and also idols for religious ceremonies.

BJ: And you've bought an example with you.

[Von Steelenborg unveils a shiny, gold but damaged frieze]

vS: I have. This frieze here from the fallen Temple depicts the Chief Ourgon of *Xibibia* in the main square, surrounded by depictions of their ancestors and emblems of blessing at the moment they accepted their position on the throne.

BJ: Wow, that's incredible! So, this is from the Ourgon's Temple?

vS: Yes, this previously adorned the walls of the main hall.

BJ: And they just gave it to you?

vS: In some ways, it was a gift. A gift for providing work to over 500 citizens of *Xibibia*, they helped dig tunnels and help dispose of excavated materials. Over the past 13 years we've helped build a community and paid the locals handsomely for their efforts.

BJ: Sorry to interrupt - I'd love to carry on asking you questions but the 'phones are blowing up! We'll take our first caller, if that's okay...?

vS: Sure.

BJ: Clarice, how are you?

Clarice: I'm great, thanks. I just had a question for von Steelenborg.

BJ: Go ahead.

Clarice: Taking into consideration the civil war between the Royalists and Resistance, do you care to shed light and possibly dispel some of the rumours about the extent of the Regal Province's involvement with the conflict?

vS: I will take the opportunity to clear this up.

[Pause]

The Regal Province has never had any involvement with the politics of *Xibibia*. Period.

Clarice: Have you ever profited from the conflict?

vS: I'm pretty sure that counts as two questions. Can we move on?

BJ: Maybe you'll tolerate the next caller, an anonymous caller, who previously worked in the Regal Province administration with you. Her voice has been changed to conceal her identity. Hi there, what you have to say to Bertrand

vS: For the love of...

Caller 3: *[Distorted voice.]* Hi. I was a member of the Regal Province Cabinet and can confirm that the frieze Mr von Steelenborg possesses was taken by force. I have with me a transcript of one of Bertrand's conversations with the President of the Regal Province where he states: "I have reason to hope that sufficient gold can be found in the King's House to pay the expenses in removing the King from his Stool". You also offered to have an entire row of houses torn down for their tiles.

vS: *[Pause]...*

BJ: Do you have anything to say in reply to this?

vS: ...

BJ: Do you care to expand on that?

vS: I can see you're trying to rush me for an answer, and y-you know I could expand and I could expand some more and keep on expanding until my body virtually fills this room *[laughs]*. But what's important is that this is a beautiful work – I mean, wow, just look this - this is something truly...

BJ: *(Interrupting.)* I'm going to need an answer. What does this mean?

vS: I don't know.

BJ: Well... I think it means that you had some part in the destruction of the Ourgon's palace, and this frieze is a spoil of said conflict. Mr von Steelenborg, I'll give you a chance to retort...

vS: I reject your hypothesis.

BJ: On what grounds?

vS: Finders, keepers.

BJ: Sorry?

vS: Finders. Keepers.

BJ: Finders? Keepers?

vS: Yes. We found it.

BJ: And by found you mean?

vS: It was just lying there on the palace floor so we picked it up and took it home.

BJ: It was just lying there?

vS: Just lying there - eventually.

BJ: So, you refuse to clarify whether you took part in the removal of the Chief Ourgon of *Xibibia*?

VS: Look – the dynamics between the natives and ex pats are incredibly strained and complex, and it's not completely black and white. Even if it had been stolen, we're far more equipped to take care of any item we find. We're saving this object from becoming a-a-a foot stool, target practice for arrows and spears or, God forbid, ANOTHER set of percussive instruments!

BJ: Well, maybe we can bring this back on track with another question about a different aspect of your travels.

Moving on - we have financial expert **Francesca Franz** on the line with a question about the financial structure set up in Tortuguana, the most populous country in the continent of Porua.

FF: Hello?

BJ: Hello, Francesca.

FF: Hi, Bertrand. There have been independent studies that show taxes had been stolen from the citizens in Tortuguana. What the Tortuguanans built and exported to the rest of the world does not seem to have impacted their economy fairly. We do understand that they were not directly in control of the distribution of wealth gathered. Could you please outline the plan implemented, in a few words - if you can?

vS: We simply collected taxes in Tortuguana and then used a portion of the revenues to fund the purchase of goods like marble for our own use.

- BJ:** So, in other words, instead of paying for the goods from your own pocket, you acquired them for free, by "buying" from peasants, using the money that had just been taken from them.
- vS:** Ahhh...that's...that's one way –albeit an incorrect way - of putting it. You're twisting my words.
- BJ:** Those are your words, Mr von Steelenborg!
- vS:** What are words, but phonemes and sounds formed from the weightless breath of humanity?
- BJ:** (*Interrupting*) Okay - that's very profound, Mr von Steelenborg, but it still doesn't answer the question. - I am receiving instruction that this will have to be the last question, which I'm sure you're really happy about! Victor, from Bow, do you care to wrap up this show?
- V:** While I don't agree with the work of von Steelenberg, I believe in forgiveness – I believe that people should always be given the chance to change their ways. Mr von Steelenberg – do you plan on making any efforts to repatriate the objects you've acquired?
- vS:** We will be giving back original marble ornaments to the people of Tortuguana... Well, replace 'giving' with 'selling', 'original' with 'replica' and 'people of Tortuguana' with 'customers in our gift shop'.
- BJ:** You'll be selling - replica marble ornaments - to customers in your gift shop! This is your idea of repatriation?
- vS:** This means that everyone – EVERYONE - is able to experience the beauty of their marble crafts. What about this do you not understand?
- BJ:** Wow, Mr von Steelenborg, you really are a piece of – work.
- Fortunately, we've run out of time. We only wanted to hear about Mr von Steelenborg's artefacts, but with the help of our callers, it seems we've

excavated and discovered more than we bargained for. You could say that Mr von Steelenborg seems to have lost his marbles...

BJ: Join us next week, if we're still on air, where Gavin from Thanet will be showing us his collection of World Cup football stickers.

NMS OUTRO STING

SCRIPT ENDS