

# BYGONE EMPIRES

ART FROM VANISHED CIVILISATIONS,

3000 BCE – 1500 CE

11 APRIL – 18 JUNE, 2019

BARAKAT LONDON



1

*One speech was heard from him showing a spirit not utterly degraded, when to the insults of a tribune he answered, "Yet I was your Emperor." Then he fell under a shower of blows, and the mob reviled the dead man with the same heartlessness with which they had flattered him when he was alive. –*

**Tacitus on the overthrowing of Emperor Vitellius**

*For as yourselves your empires fall, And every kingdom hath a grave.*

**–William Habington, from Nox Nocti Indicat Scientiam**

*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!*

**– Percy Bysshe Shelley**

**LONDON** – On the 11th of April as Britain persists with its tortuous attempts at Brexit, Barakat will open an exhibition that may also serve as a pointed *memento mori*. Drawing on the immense Barakat Collection of ancient art, 'Bygone Empires' assembles an extraordinary group of twelve objects – some grand, some modest – from vanished empires, sometimes revealing uncanny and unexpected refractions of political power, hubris and the fate of civilisations. Curated by the gallery's new directors Janis Lejins and Isobel Lister, the show aims to rediscover, re-engage and reactivate Barakat's diverse collection of ancient art for new audiences, young and old.

The star of the show is an alabaster bust of what is thought to be Gudea, ruler of Lagash. One of the earliest portraits in human history (c. 2144–2124 BCE). Gudea is one of the first rulers in the world to deal with climate change, when his Mesopotamian city state was grappling with the dire socio-economic effects of a protracted drought and over-farming their land in the Fertile Crescent. Other highlights of the show include a portrait bust of the ill-fated Roman emperor Vitellius (first century CE), a monumental head of a Chinese bureaucrat from the Tang Dynasty (619-907 CE), and a Bactrian axe head (1200 - 900 BCE) used by warriors in the region now known as Afghanistan and Pakistan. The most recent object in the show is a stone sculpture from the Taino (c. 1500 CE), an essentially vanished indigenous people of the Caribbean, 619-907 CE encountered by Columbus and decimated by Western colonisation and disease within a generation.

The show officially opens exactly (to the day) 1401 years since the death of Emperor Yang of Sui and the fall of the Sui Dynasty in China. Emperor Yang is generally considered by historians to be one of the worst tyrants in Chinese history and the reason for the Sui Dynasty's relatively short rule (581-618 CE). The emperor's hubristic and repeated failed military campaigns, coupled with increased taxation to finance these wars, caused civil unrest and ultimately led to the downfall of the dynasty.

As Barakat Gallery Directors Janis Lejins and Isobel Lister comment:

We are two 27-year-olds who think the new generation of art dealers should be looking at our time and how art of different periods connects to it. On 11 April – the day before the UK is scheduled to leave the EU – we are witnessing what are arguably the death throes of the British Empire, and we see the work in this exhibition as relevant to our present moment. Whether in antiquity or today, art has always been political. We are displaying pieces that portray the end of empire, the first ruler in history to deal with climate change, good and bad government, fallen heroes and utter tyrants. These pieces are able to speak to us across time and are activated by an appreciation of their nuanced contexts.

For a full press release detailing individual works in the show, [please click here](#).

For the imagery [please click here](#)

2

## **NOTES FOR EDITORS**

‘Bygone Empires’ contains twelve items, with the earliest piece dating from c.3000 BCE. All pieces exhibited in the show are able to be searched against the Art Loss Register. Barakat Gallery is a fifth-generation family business, founded in Jerusalem at the end of the 19th century. Barakat now operates galleries in London, Hong Kong, Seoul and Los Angeles.

Barakat London directors Isobel Lister, formerly of Hauser & Wirth, and Janis Lejins, a graduate of the Royal College of Art, share the aim of making the gallery’s rich collections accessible to new audiences, young and old, and connecting ancient art with contemporary culture. Over the course of 2019, they will be re-launching Barakat London and renovating its Mayfair townhouse, with the aim of creating a project space on the ground floor to present a changing programme of exhibitions, as well as spaces on the upper floors housing the gallery’s extensive collection of ancient art. One floor will focus purely on Chinese antiquities. Another will be dedicated to Faye Barakat’s paintings.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL**

Barakat is owned by Faye Barakat. Born in 1949 into an old farming family, Barakat was exposed to ancient art at a very young age. The family owned vineyards in the Hebron Hills in Palestine and villagers ploughing the fields would often unearth tombs. Rather than discarding the artefacts, as was often the case at the time, his grandfather preserved pieces and intermittently took some to the marketplace, along with the family’s produce, selling them to foreign tourists. Barakat, meanwhile, spent his formative years working alongside British archeologist Kathleen Kenyon, developing skills in the basic principles of field archeology, and he would later apply his passion to studying under renowned Middle Eastern scholars and archaeologists Nelson Glueck and William Dever. His interest, in particular, was in ancient coinage, though he would become a fervent student of whatever new period of art took his interest.

“For me to be able to connect to Emperor Constantine at the age of seven, after being told a coin I found was about 1,700 years old, simply blew my mind,” he says in a 2010 interview of finding his first coin, by accident, on the way to school. “I became

such an avid lover of history at an early age.” He turned down an opportunity to study medicine and joined the family business, helping to build it up across multiple locations in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. For the past 50 years Barakat has presided over the meteoric expansion of the gallery from a small shop in a Jerusalem Souq to a unique world-class collection and dealership with a global reach.

Barakat’s early collections were classical, biblical, Egyptian and Mesoamerican, or pre-Columbian, art. The latter, in what emerges as a theme in his life story, was influenced by a chance meeting with the late American film director, screenwriter and actor John Huston, who would come to be a good friend and ultimately influence Barakat’s decision to set up his first overseas gallery in Beverly Hills in 1983. Barakat had already opened in Amman, Jordan, in 1973, while galleries in London (2003) and at the Emirates Palace (2008), Seoul (2016) and Hong Kong (2017) would come much later.

“California’s proximity to Mexico, its closeness to South and Central America and the availability of the material in Los Angeles that I was able to purchase and to trade in and to learn about,” are among the reasons listed by Barakat for the move to the US. However, in Jerusalem, Barakat had already begun to amass an impressive clientele list that included notable 20th-century artists such as Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol. It was a chance meeting with Picasso that Barakat has credited with his interest in African art, following their first encounter when Barakat was in his teens and Picasso was visiting the family gallery with the mayor of Jerusalem.

Barakat, has also experienced his own share of tragic events with cancer robbing him of his first wife in 2009 just under two years after it claimed his son. When his wife first became ill, he would often retreat to a studio where he would paint into the early hours of the morning. It was the first time he had sat in front of a blank canvas since his teenage years, when that first chance meeting with Picasso had inspired him to paint regularly. Today, irrespective of where he is in the world, he paints nightly. As the galleries become increasingly self-reliant, Barakat is winding back on a gruelling schedule that has seen him travel every month between homes and galleries around the world and focusing on his paintings. As a personal gesture toward the continuum of art as part of human experience, Barakat hangs one of his works in every show at the gallery.

3

#### **Barakat Gallery**

58 Brook Street Mayfair London W1K 5DT

Opening hours: 10 am – 6pm, Monday - Saturday

#### **Gallery Contact**

Janis Lejins: [janis@barakatgallery.eu](mailto:janis@barakatgallery.eu)

Isobel Lister: [isobel@barakatgallery.eu](mailto:isobel@barakatgallery.eu)

Tel: +44 (0)20 7493 7778

Social media: [@barakat\\_london](https://www.instagram.com/barakat_london)

#### **Press Enquiries**

For more information, interviews and images, please contact:

Sarah Greenberg

Evergreen Arts, London

+44 (0)7866543242

[sgreenberg@evergreen-arts.com](mailto:sgreenberg@evergreen-arts.com)

[www.evergreen-arts.com](http://www.evergreen-arts.com)