

Great sale of the centuries

SOME of the finest Greek and Roman antiquities ever seen on the auction market will be offered for sale at New York's Park Lane Hotel next Tuesday.

They are coming to auction, rather than being sold privately to great museums or great collectors, because of the dissolution of a partnership between Jonathan Rosen, a New York real estate tycoon, and Robert Hecht, antiquities dealer extraordinary. They have to untie joint ownership deals as they close the New York gallery, Atlantis, which they have run for the last four years.

The most remarkable offering is a complete column krater, or vase, nearly two foot high, painted with a ferocious battle between the Greeks and the Amazons. Their armour and accoutrements are lovingly delineated while blood spurts from the dying. It is the work of one of the greatest vase painters, known as the Pan painter, and dates from 470-460 BC. A price around \$600,000 to \$700,000 is looked for.

Other highlights include a Roman marble of Menelaos holding the body of his dead companion Patroklos. It is a copy of a Greek sculpture greatly admired in antiquity — at least 12 Roman copies survive. The seventeenth-century sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini considered the copy that he knew in Rome to be the most beautiful sculpture that had survived from antiquity. Tuesday's example is estimated at \$250,000 to \$275,000.

There are plenty of wonderful lesser works in the two session sale, such as the Roman mosaic depicting a comic mask wreathed in flowers and berries (\$75,000 to \$85,000). The catalogue notes that it can be compared to the best mosaics from Pompeii in the Naples museum. Then there is a Roman silver eating kit; constructed like a penknife, it includes a knife, fork, two spoons and a toothpick (\$10,000 to \$12,000). Hecht bought it at Christie's in 1986 when it was described as unique; his catalogue points out that

Christie's had missed the report of a similar one found in Bulgaria.

It is the second time this year that Hecht's taste has come under the hammer and it is transforming the market. He provided most of the antiquities collection put together by Bunker Hunt and his brother William — the billionaires who tried to corner the silver market — which was auctioned at Sotheby's last summer for a record-breaking \$11m.

The sale was a landmark because of the superb quality of the objects. Fragmentary remains of a vase signed by Euphronios were bid to \$1.76m while a Roman bronze portrait head of around the first century made \$577,500. Sotheby's had estimated a fraction of these prices — they are not used to handling such material.

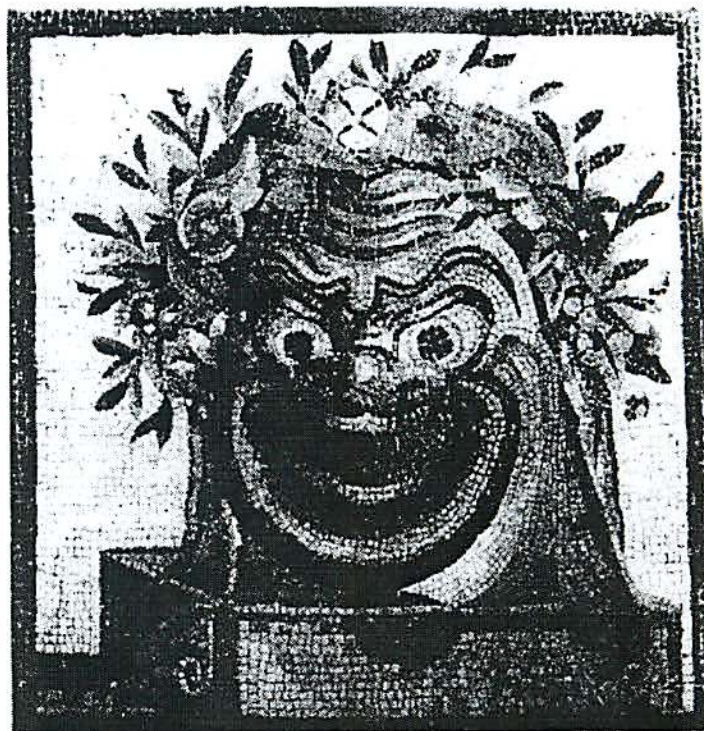
That is one reason Tuesday's auction has not gone their way. "They weren't prepared to estimate our material at its true value — we also wanted a higher standard of cataloguing," says Rosen. So he set up his own auction company for the occasion — the catalogue is a scholarly masterpiece and the estimates mind boggling.

Hesperia Arts Auction Ltd is

Eighty per cent of all antiquities that come on the market have been illegally excavated and smuggled

jointly owned by Rosen and California's most colourful antiquities dealer, Bruce McNall. He makes movies, trains racehorses — he won the Arc de Triomphe this year — and owns an ice hockey team, the LA Kings. It was he who persuaded the Hunt brothers to collect antiquities, bringing in Hecht as an advisor. Hesperia has taken in some material from other dealers, but most of the treasures on offer are owned in elaborate partnership deals between Rosen, McNall, Hecht and an investment fund called Athena II run by Merrill Lynch.

Museums, rich collectors and other dealers will, no doubt, be



Smile please: a first-century Roman mosaic depicting a comic mask

lining up to bid — antiquities are currently high fashion, especially in America. The fashion conveniently ignores the fact that 80 per cent of all antiquities coming on to the market have been illegally excavated and smuggled from their countries of origin. The treasures in Hesperia's sale are not likely to be exceptions to the rule.

The marvellous remains of the Greek and Roman civilisations — bronzes, marble sculptures, exqui-

and stress that trade in smuggled objects is legal once they have left their country of origin. These arguments ease their consciences.

As a result, smuggled antiquities fill the galleries of Madison Avenue and Mayfair, not to mention Sotheby's and Christie's auctions. But the very best usually end up in the hands of Robert Hecht, a scholar with a real passion for the material he handles.

Posters plastered around Paris this autumn, advertising an exhibition of the Greek vase painter Euphronios at the Louvre, provided a reminder of one of his greatest coups. The Louvre had a picture of a vase on their poster painted with the death of Sarpedon which Hecht sold to the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1972 for \$1m — a price level which at the time had only been achieved by one or two Impressionist paintings. The vase bears the signature of both Euphronios and the potter Euxitheos.

All hell broke loose after the Metropolitan's purchase. The Italian government claimed that the vase had been found at Cerveteri and smuggled to America. But no proof was forthcoming and it remains at the Met, accepted as one of the greatest painted vases to have survived from antiquity — and worthy of loan to the Louvre.

sitely painted vases, intricate jewellery and artefacts of every description — are teased out of the soil under cover of darkness in countries bordering the Mediterranean where treasure hunting is illegal or discovered accidentally by a farmer's plough and sold without alerting the authorities. They are then carried by smugglers to the markets of the West, surfacing first in Munich or Switzerland and moving on to London and New York.

Scholars and collectors admit that illegal excavations are culturally damaging, but blame the unrealistic heritage laws of the countries concerned for encouraging it