

All eyes on Borg Olivier auction

Ariadne Massa

Hawk-eyed specialists from Heritage Malta will be observing today's auction of former Prime Minister George Borg Olivier's belongings and buying items considered to be of national interest.

"We will be looking at value not price. We'll go for anything we believe enhances the national collection," said Heritage Malta chairman Joe Said.

While refusing to disclose what had caught the eye of the heritage specialists during the viewings at the Borg Olivier residence in Sliema, Mr Said insisted Heritage Malta would safeguard those items of national significance.

He explained that the law gave Heritage Malta pre-emption rights, which allowed the government agency to buy the items at any auction at the "hammer price". This meant if there was an item it wanted on sale, it moved in and bought it when adjudicated. This was done in an unobtrusive way.

Any items purchased would, depending on their historical value, be placed in different museums. For example, paintings will be held at the National Museum of Fine Arts, while ecclesiastical items will be put at the Inquisitor's Palace.

Mr Said added he was pleased that the auctioneers, Obelisk Auctions, had yesterday clearly identified between the belongings of the late Dr Borg Olivier and his wife, Alexandra née Mattei, from other items in the auction.

News that some 300 items owned by Dr Borg Olivier, revered for leading Malta to its independence from the British in 1964, were going under the hammer sparked a debate on *timesofmalta.com* with many questioning why the historical figure's belongings were not being bequeathed to the state.

"This is a very emotional moment for us. Auctioning our parents' belongings is not easy"

And in a letter published in yesterday's *The Times*, historian Henry Frendo said the former Prime Minister's residence in George Borg Olivier Street should be converted into a political history museum.

Online comments also criticised the family for putting these treasures up for auction, with some

going as far as to ask if they were so cash-strapped that they had no choice but to sell this national heritage.

However, when contacted, Peter Borg Olivier, one of four heirs, took offence to such comments and said this had been a very hard decision for all of them.

"When a family loses both parents decisions have to be taken. We are not doing this because we're cash-strapped. We chose to keep what is very dear to us and auction the rest," he said, adding that several items being sold off were actually things his father, an art collector, had bought at auctions.

"Why should we be deprived just because we're the heirs of a former prime minister? It's our private property. This is a very emotional moment for us. Auctioning our parents' belongings is not an easy thing to do. Our mother died last year and we hadn't touched a single thing.

"The good news is the people I saw at the viewing are genuinely interested in owning something of the Borg Olivier legacy, and not some businessman intent on buying and re-selling."

Mr Borg Olivier added that the family planned to eventually donate certain documentation to the state, but he questioned why it took an auction to arouse interest in his father's belongings.



Some have argued that the house should be turned into a museum. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

Archbishop apologises for abuse investigation delay

Kurt Sansone

The Archbishop has apologised for the length of time it has taken for the Church to conclude its investigation into allegations of child abuse by priests at a Church orphanage.

In an interview with *The Sunday Times*, Mgr Paul Cremona said the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had sent Mgr Charles Scicluna, the Promoter of Justice, to Malta to supplement the investigation by the Curia's Response Team.

The alleged victims of child abuse, who made international headlines

last April when they were received by the Pope during his Malta visit, were only interviewed for the second time this week, seven years after first going public with the allegations.

In the letter sent by the Vatican and seen by this newspaper, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said Mgr Scicluna's visit was a "means of support for an expeditious conclusion of the cases at hand". It also expressed gratitude for the sterling work done by the archdiocese in the protection of minors.

Mgr Cremona said the Church had to make sure that in future there will be no recurrence of a situation whereby investigations drag on for

years. Mgr Cremona also talked about his leadership and drew a distinction between his style and that of Gozo Bishop Mario Grech when asked whether the latter had taken the limelight away from him with various public statements.

Talking about his style, Mgr Cremona said he listened to people and would be ready to change his mind if convinced by the arguments being made.

"I am not authoritarian and it is a great challenge for me whenever I have to impose a decision. I prefer dialogue," he said.

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The Vatican's letter says Mgr Scicluna's visit was a "means of support for an expeditious conclusion of the cases at hand".

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