

Golden 581

Chapter 581 A Clash of Titans (Part 2)

The precious Chinese cultural relics displayed in foreign museums all have historical contexts, and most were donated by descendants of those who participated in the Eight-Nation Alliance invasion. The number of such relics is quite substantial.

The Guimet Museum in Paris alone houses more than 20,000 Chinese artworks, including Neolithic jade artifacts, bronzes from the Shang and Zhou dynasties, horse ornaments and chariot fittings, bronze mirrors, ancient coins, and lacquerware.

In the field of sculpture, the Guimet Museum not only possesses some large-scale works showcasing Buddhist art, but also has collections from the Han and Tang dynasties. In the field of decoration, it presents a complete historical picture, reflecting the technological innovations in the history of porcelain through more than 10,000 pieces of ceramics, coarse porcelain, celadon, and hard porcelain.

In addition, the Guimet Museum houses more than a thousand paintings from the Tang to the Qing dynasties. It can be said that, apart from some porcelain pieces, almost every work there would be considered a first-class cultural relic if it were brought to China.

As the saying goes, things are valued for their rarity. With the increase in the number of Chinese artworks, foreigners have not paid much attention to them.

For example, some of the Chinese Qing Dynasty court paintings and ceramics donated to the Guimet Museum by the French General Frey are stored in the museum's warehouse and have never been exhibited.

China has a long history and civilization spanning five thousand years. Due to well-known reasons, approximately 60% of its precious cultural relics have been lost overseas. This is an extremely large number, estimated to be in the millions.

However, the situation is different for artworks abroad. In foreign countries, it may take decades or even centuries for a genius artist to emerge, such as Mozart, Beethoven, Van Gogh, and Picasso.

Although the two mentioned above are musical masters, they are still within the realm of art. For example, Beethoven's handwritten sheet music once fetched an astronomical price at auction. Similarly, the violins used by Mozart are highly sought after by many collectors.

However, it's important to understand that Mozart only used a handful of violins, and Beethoven's original compositions are even rarer. Even though Picasso was a prolific painter, creating over 60,000 works in his lifetime, that's not a particularly large number considering the sheer number of collectors worldwide.

As the only person in art history to witness his own work being collected by the Louvre during his lifetime, Picasso's fame is self-evident. During his lifetime, tens of thousands of his works had already been acquired by others and rarely circulated on the market.

Therefore, it is easy to find Chinese artworks in the international art auction market, and they are frequently seen. However, it is extremely difficult to find works by Picasso, Van Gogh, and others. Auctions featuring their works often attract major collectors from all over the world.

This is not to say that Chinese antiques are inferior to foreign artworks; it's just a matter of quantity and the recognition among foreign collectors. The influence of artists like Picasso and Van Gogh is global; their names can be heard almost anywhere people live.

Because China was closed off from the world in its early years, and its calligraphy and painting style was mostly abstract and freehand, it was not appreciated and accepted by foreigners. Therefore, the influence of some great calligraphers and painters throughout history was obviously not as great as that of Leonardo da Vinci and Picasso.

However, everyone has their own preferences. In Zhuang Rui's eyes, the things left by his ancestors are naturally better. That's why Zhuang Rui had this idea: to use Picasso's works to exchange for Chinese cultural relics that were lost abroad.

"Brother Huangfu, what do you think of my idea?"

Zhuang Rui told Huangfu Yun his thoughts completely, because he didn't have any connections in the international art collecting circle, while Huangfu Yun had frequented various auctions over the years and knew many well-educated collectors and museum representatives.

Huangfu Yun clearly hadn't fully processed Zhuang Rui's words. He sat there pondering for a long while before finally speaking, "Brother, are you really willing to part with those Picasso works? You know, those are collectibles that everyone dreams of..."

"What I've always dreamed of?"

Zhuang Rui curled his lip in disdain and said, "Whoever brings me a bronze artifact on par with the Dingguang Sword, I'll trade all thirty-two sketches for it. I'm not into that kind of stuff; they're all sketches of naked old women, their flesh drooping, what's so interesting about them..."

"Couldn't you have put it more tactfully? It's all about art..."

Sitting next to him, Qin Xuanbing couldn't stand it anymore and pinched Zhuang Rui hard in annoyance. She knew that women's skin always sags as they get older, and Qin Xuanbing didn't want to hear such comments about herself later.

"Hehe, my dear wife, you're getting old, but you're still my precious darling..."

After arriving abroad, Zhuang Rui felt very relaxed. Perhaps influenced by the romantic city of Paris, he became much bolder in his speech, making Qin Xuanbing blush.

"Come on, you two should find somewhere else to flirt..."

Huangfu Yun rolled his eyes impatiently. Wasn't this just taking advantage of his lack of women? However, Zhuang Rui had really ignited Huangfu Yun's anger. If he didn't want to use his five fingers to relieve his lust tonight, it seemed he would have to go to a bar to "show off his national prestige" again.

"Brother Huangfu, do you think what I'm saying can be done? If not, I'll just take all those manuscripts back to China. Who's going to beg these foreigners for anything then..."

Seeing that Huangfu Yun was getting impatient, Zhuang Rui quickly changed the subject, thinking that he should at least consider the feelings of single, older men.

"It's not impossible to exchange collections with private individuals and museums abroad, but there's a prerequisite: your sketches must be genuine..."

As Huangfu Yun spoke, he suddenly became excited and continued, "If it's true, brother, then this deal is going to be a success. We won't be done until we've ripped the foreigner off..."

Zhuang Rui's actions were essentially a barter, similar to exchanges between domestic collectors, only elevated to an international level. Huangfu Yun's understanding of the value of Picasso's works far surpasses Zhuang Rui's.

Since Picasso's death, his works have only been auctioned once every three to five years. If all of Zhuang Rui's paintings are genuine, they will surely cause a huge stir in the international auction market.

"Oh? Brother Huangfu, how do we strike the right balance?"

Zhuang Rui understood that the Picasso paintings he owned were extremely rare and valuable, and certainly couldn't be exchanged for Chinese cultural relics of equal value. However, Zhuang Rui didn't understand the international auction market, and he was afraid that if he set the price too high, he would scare away those people.

Huangfu Yun laughed and said, "Thirty-odd sketches, if they were all really Picasso's, hehe, you think you can trade them for a single sword? Show them that, and they'd have to bring at least ten, begging us for a chance to trade..."

"Damn, that's too ruthless! Will they even switch?"

Zhuang Rui was startled by Huangfu Yun's words. These antiques all have prices. National treasures like the Dingguang Sword are extremely valuable in the international auction market. Although Picasso's works are rarely auctioned, they are still circulated among the people. Would anyone do a deal that is obviously a loss for them?

"Yes, someone will definitely replace it!"

Huangfu Yun nodded affirmatively and said, "The auction house will not change it; they are focused on maximizing profits. However, some private collectors who admire Picasso's works, as well as museums that hold Chinese art, will definitely be willing to change it."

For those people, the market value of the collection is not the most important thing; what they value is the reputation of the work. In the minds of some major collectors, 100 Chinese antiques may not be as valuable as a single Picasso work...

Zhuang Rui was not angry when he heard Huangfu Yun's words, because he knew that Huangfu Yun was telling the truth. In previous years, the prices of Chinese antiques on the international market were not high. It was only in recent years that some international speculators and auction houses have driven up the prices.

However, in the minds of many collectors in Europe and America, the value of Chinese antiques is still far from comparable to that of works by Van Gogh, Picasso, and others. This can be seen from the 10 most expensive paintings ever sold at auction, four of which are by Picasso, but none of which are ancient Chinese paintings.

"Brother Huangfu, I'm going to London in a few days, so you'd better hurry up and make the most of your time..."

After thinking for a moment, Zhuang Rui still told Huangfu Yun that it didn't matter whether he attended the Paris Chinese Art Auction or not, but his time was really tight, and he had to do what his mother-in-law had asked him to do.

"Don't worry, brother, this time we'll make those foreigners bleed a lot..."

Huangfu Yun was excited just thinking about it, and then said, "Alright, I'm not eating this meal anymore. I'm going to go find someone first. By the way, brother, you have to make sure that thing is real, otherwise I won't be able to make a living in this circle abroad..."

In the past few days, a considerable number of people have traveled from all over the world to attend this Paris auction, including some billionaire collectors. They are all Huangfuyun's target customers, and Huangfuyun also knows that these people have some precious cultural relics from China in their homes.

After Huangfu Yun left, Zhuang Rui immediately called Peng Fei. After hearing Huangfu Yun's words, Zhuang Rui felt uneasy and worried. If those sketches were stolen, he would be devastated. It would be better to let Peng Fei keep them safe.

...

"Brother Zhuang, where are you? In your hotel room? Good, get ready, I'm bringing an English friend over, we'll be there soon..."

Zhuang Rui had just returned to his hotel room when he received a call from Huangfu Yun.

Chapter 582 Professionalism

"Zhuang Rui, what's wrong?"

Qin Xuanbing's expression turned strange after seeing Zhuang Rui take the phone, and she couldn't help but ask a question.

"It's alright. Huangfu Yun said he'll bring people to see those Picasso sketches right away. Xuanbing, why don't you go inside and watch TV first? I'll entertain them in the living room..."

It hadn't even been an hour since Zhuang Rui parted ways with Huangfu Yun at the restaurant. He hadn't expected Huangfu Yun to be so efficient. Peng Fei had only just arrived; the guy had gone out to buy perfume for his girlfriend. French perfumes are world-renowned.

"Okay, Zhuang Rui, keep it up!"

Qin Xuanbing obediently waved her fist at Zhuang Rui and went into the room. They were staying in a deluxe suite, which had a living room outside where they could handle official business.

...

"Huangfu, you and I have known each other for several years. You wouldn't lie to me about something like this, would you? Are you sure that's a Picasso sketch?"

In a car heading towards Zhuang Rui's hotel, an Englishman in a tuxedo was chatting with Huangfu Yun in broken Chinese. Next to him sat a white man who looked to be around fifty years old.

This Englishman is named Ezkenazi, a very famous collector in London, England. The Ezkenazi family is a very influential collector of Chinese art worldwide. To date, three of the ten highest-priced Chinese porcelain auction records are from the Ezkenazi family collection.

The reason why the Ezkenazi family possessed so many Chinese artworks was, of course, inseparable from their ancestors. Like the Frenchman Frey, they had all participated in the looting of the Old Summer Palace.

To become a world-class collector, it is not enough to lack precious cultural relics from China, or to have only cultural relics from China; you also need Western art.

The Ezkenazi family has no shortage of Chinese antiques, but their collection of Western artifacts is relatively small. Therefore, after receiving Huangfu Yun's call, Ezkenazi abandoned a dinner party he was attending, immediately took his appraiser, picked up Huangfu Yun, and drove to the hotel where Zhuang Rui and the others were staying.

"Mr. Ezkenazi, with your discerning eye, you will surely be able to tell at a glance whether those sketches in my friend's hands are Picasso's works. Do you think I would use such a lame reason to make you appreciate some fake paintings?"

Although Huangfu Yun had not known Zhuang Rui for long and had not seen the Picasso works that Zhuang Rui claimed to have made, he believed that Zhuang Rui was not the kind of person who spoke carelessly.

"The whereabouts of Mr. Picasso's works have been largely verified, and we haven't heard of any being lost yet. Mr. Ezkenazi, I think we're wasting our time..."

The appraiser Sterling, sitting next to Ezkena, shrugged. For him, who was already off work, this was all his private time.

"Look, Easterners are a nation that excels at creating miracles. Perhaps that Zhuang guy really does have Picasso's works?"

For antique dealers, there is no chance to miss any opportunity. Even if the odds are slim, they always want to see for themselves. The stories of finding a bargain often happen in these seemingly low-probability events.

...

"Zhuang Rui, this is Mr. Ezkener from England. His family owns a large collection of Chinese art, but they are quite lacking in European art. They would like to see if your sketches are works by Picasso?"

After Huangfu Yun knocked on Zhuang Rui's door, he introduced Ezkena to Zhuang Rui while winking at him. The meaning was obvious: if the painting is real, then you can go all out with the knife later, buddy. They have plenty of good stuff from China.

"This is Mr. Sterling, a very experienced appraiser..." Huangfu Yun continued introducing him to Zhuang Rui.

"Oh, young man, it's a pleasure to meet you..."

Ezkena greeted Zhuang Rui in Chinese in a friendly manner. Due to his family background and his own collection, Ezkena was very knowledgeable about Chinese culture and knew that Chinese people especially value face. Therefore, he was very enthusiastic from the start and did not neglect Zhuang Rui because of his youth.

"Hello, Mr. Ezkener, please come in..."

Zhuang Rui calmly ushered the group into the room. What good was enthusiasm? If they wanted to trade for the Picasso sketches in his possession, they would have to offer Chinese antiques that would capture his heart. Otherwise, even if he had the money, he wouldn't sell them to them.

Just as Sterling and Zhuang Rui passed each other, the guy who looked more like a boxer than an appraiser whispered in Zhuang Rui's ear, "Young man, can you understand English?"

After Zhuang Rui nodded, Sterling continued, "That's good, young man. I can tell you, with me here, you don't need to think about trying to fool Mr. Ezkenner with some inferior fake paintings. If you know what's good for you, you'd better admit it now, and then I won't embarrass you later..."

"Huh? Damn it, so ill-mannered. He hasn't even looked at the stuff and he dares to spout nonsense here..."

Upon hearing Sterling's words, Zhuang Rui was furious and coldly replied in English, "If your eyes weren't blinded by lard, you could easily tell the difference between a real and a fake painting..."

Zhuang Rui knew that many people abroad looked down on Chinese people, but he never expected that even in his luxurious suite at this five-star hotel, there would still be people looking down on him. This made Zhuang Rui very unhappy.

Ezkenner, who was walking ahead, clearly heard the conversation between the two people behind him, but he just smiled slightly and did not try to persuade them. In his opinion, the worse the relationship between the seller and the appraiser, the less likely there would be any shady dealings.

It's important to understand that such "setting traps" and "scheming" are not only common in China, but also frequently seen abroad, with even more sophisticated methods. As for colluding with appraisers, those are just low-level tricks that can't be brought to the table.

"Peng Fei, bring out a few paintings and show them to this 'expert'..."

After sitting down in the living room, Zhuang Rui didn't offer the guest coffee or drinks. Instead, he went straight to the point and asked Peng Fei to bring out Picasso's sketches.

Before Ezkena and the others arrived, Zhuang Rui had already categorized the thirty-two sketches. The six sketches of nude women were divided into one group, the eighteen sketches of children were divided into three groups, and the sketches of still objects were divided into one group, for a total of five groups.

Among these five sketches, one of each has Picasso's own signature. It is believed that an expert who is truly familiar with Picasso's works will be able to distinguish the genuine from the fake.

Peng Fei had learned a lot from following Zhuang Rui these past few days. At the very least, he knew that gloves should be worn when handling antiques such as paintings and calligraphy. So now, he was wearing white gloves and picked up a stack of six figure paintings from the coffee table in front of him, placing them in front of Ezkena.

"Sterling, you should do it..."

Ezkenner shook his head slightly, got up and sat down to the side, making room for Sterling. He really didn't know much about European art, except for its astonishingly high prices.

"Wait..."

Just as Sterling was about to pick up the sketch in front of him, Zhuang Rui suddenly stopped him.

"What? You just said it was true, but now you won't even let us see it?"

Sterling glared at Zhuang Rui. He simply couldn't believe that this Asian man possessed Picasso's works, let alone dozens of them. It was like something out of an Andersen fairy tale—completely impossible.

"Mr. Sterling, I don't know if your teacher taught you when you were learning authentication that you must wear gloves when authenticating paintings and calligraphy, it's basic knowledge..."

Zhuang Rui looked at Sterling with disdain. After saying the above words, he turned to Ezkenner and said, "Mr. Ezkenner, I am very dissatisfied with the appraiser you have chosen. He does not possess the qualities of a professional appraiser at all."

I must remind you, Mr. Ezkener, that if there are any losses to my collection due to the authenticator's misconduct, you should be prepared to accept any claims I may make against you...

Zhuang Rui's words caused Ezkener and Sterling to change color simultaneously. They hadn't expected this young man to be so sharp-tongued. However, Zhuang Rui's words were not an exaggeration at all; Sterling had indeed failed to demonstrate the qualities that an appraiser should possess.

Ezkener nodded and first said in Chinese, "Mr. Zhuang, please rest assured, I will take responsibility for these works..."

Ezkener then looked at Sterling and said, "Mr. Sterling, please remember your professional ethics. You are appraising a painting that is very likely by Mr. Picasso, not a one-pound sketch drawn for you by some street artist..."

Sterling's arrogance had completely vanished. If his behavior today were to get out, it would certainly have a very bad impact on his reputation. You know, in any industry, personal professionalism is extremely important.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ezkener, I'm sorry, Mr. Zhuang, it was my oversight. I believe I am still capable of determining whether these sketches are by Mr. Picasso..."

Sterling quickly adjusted his mindset, stood up, and bowed respectfully to Zhuang Rui and Ezkener, displaying an extremely sincere attitude.

Zhuang Rui had no intention of arguing with Sterling about these matters. He waved his hand and said, "Alright, Mr. Sterling, I hope your performance is as you said. Let's not waste any more time. Please begin your assessment..."

Chapter 583 Crossing the River and Destroying the Bridge

Sterling opened his bag and took out a pair of white gloves and a magnifying glass. The tools used by these appraisers, both Chinese and foreign, were pretty much the same. After putting on the gloves, Sterling casually picked up the top sketch.

"Hmm, she's got some substance..."

When Zhuang Rui saw Sterling, he didn't first check what the sketch was about. Instead, he looked at the sketch paper, slightly folded it with his hand to check the paper's hardness and flexibility. This is a necessary procedure for appreciating calligraphy and paintings.

After examining the paper, Sterling's relaxed expression turned somewhat serious, because he discovered that the sketch paper in his hand was likely produced in Paris in the 1940s or 50s, a fact that did not escape Sterling's notice.

In other words, even if these sketches are forgeries, they are quite old forgeries, and the cost is not low. You know, buying sketch paper from half a century ago now would be too expensive for the average person.

Ezkenner's small eyes darted back and forth across the coffee table. As a seasoned antique collector and art dealer, he had a feeling that perhaps he would actually see an authentic Picasso today—of course, this was just a feeling.

"Jacqueline Locke?!"

Suddenly, Sterling, who was looking at the sketch, let out a gasp, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. Even the door to the suite moved slightly, as the curious Qin Xuanbing was eavesdropping inside.

"Mr. Sterling, have you received your test results yet?"

Zhuang Rui didn't recognize the woman in the painting at first, but when Sterling called out her name, he immediately understood that this was Picasso's sketch of his last wife.

In 1953, Picasso met Jacqueline Locke at the Madura pottery workshop. Although Picasso had mistresses for eight years, from then until their marriage in 1961, Jacqueline Locke endured it, and the two remained together for the rest of Picasso's life.

Jacqueline Roque was Picasso's second wife. This Spanish woman created a warm and peaceful world for Picasso in his later years. Picasso often saw the peasant women of Catalunya in her figure, and he painted a large number of portraits of her.

Unfortunately, 13 years after Picasso's death, Jacqueline Locke, perhaps unable to bear life without him, committed suicide in the 1980s.

After Jacqueline Rock's death, most of Picasso's drawings and paintings for her entered the auction market, and it was during this period that Picasso's paintings appreciated in value. It can be said that it was the Picasso paintings left behind by Jacqueline Rock that elevated Picasso's work to a new level.

Sterling was jolted out of his shock by Zhuang Rui's voice. After carefully putting down the sketch, Sterling grabbed Zhuang Rui's arm and pleaded, "This is a portrait of Madame Picasso, yes, it must be, Mr. Zhuang. I want to know the origin of this painting. I hope you can tell me..."

"I'm sorry, all I can tell you is that these paintings were purchased through legitimate channels. As for anything else, you don't need to know. Your job is simply to tell Mr. Ezkener, after you've seen these paintings, whether they are genuine or fake, and that's all..."

Zhuang Rui could understand Sterling's feelings. Authenticating an antique is often countless times more difficult than determining its authenticity, but that's what makes collecting so appealing—it keeps people digging into and exploring unknown stories that happened tens, hundreds, or even thousands of years ago.

Even though the person in front of him was a fellow professional, Zhuang Rui had no intention of telling him the origin of his sketches. He was currently in Paris, not his own territory, and didn't want to cause any unnecessary trouble.

Who knows if that lovely Mr. Reno, if he knew that all thirty-two Picasso works he sold for thirty thousand pounds were genuine, would have gone to Zhuang Rui's hotel and made a scene, threatening suicide?

"I'm sorry, I was presumptuous..."

In the art market abroad, it's similar to the antique market in China. In private transactions, you only need to know if the item is genuine or not; its provenance isn't the most important thing. Moreover, personal privacy is given more weight abroad. After hearing Zhuang Rui's refusal, Sterling immediately apologized to him.

Zhuang Rui waved his hand casually and said, "It's alright, Mr. Sterling, please continue..."

The art market is different from traditional industries; it's a seller's market. As long as you have genuine, high-quality items, you won't have trouble selling them. Just let the word out, and plenty of people will be scrambling to buy from you.

So Zhuang Rui wasn't in a hurry. If all else failed, he would take these sketches back to Beijing and buy them from whoever wanted them. He could become an international collector for once.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Sterling did not pick up the sketch he had just looked at. Instead, he looked at Zhuang Rui and said, "Mr. Zhuang, I can confirm that this is indeed an original work by Mr. Picasso, created in the 1960s..."

"Wait, Mr. Sterling, how do you know when Picasso painted it?"

Zhuang Rui interrupted Sterling, saying that Picasso met Jacqueline Locke in 1953, so the painting might have been done around that time.

"Mr. Zhuang, you should know that although Picasso was a very energetic man, after the age of eighty, he was somewhat unable to have the energy for women, but he was unwilling to accept this."

Therefore, his painting style changed during this period, and voyeurs are present in all of his paintings from this time. I think that's his self-proclaimed identity?

When it came to professional knowledge, Sterling became a completely different person, quoting extensively from various sources, starting with Picasso's early personality and continuing to Picasso's psychological problems in his later years, giving Zhuang Rui and the others a good lesson.

Zhuang Rui had heard of this before, because Picasso once said something very famous: "When we get old, we have to quit smoking, but the desire to smoke is still there. The same goes for love."

After Picasso was unable to exercise his right to love women, he expressed this desire in his paintings, which is the so-called "right to look". In his style during this period, whether in oil paintings or drawings, there is always a faint shadow of a man looking at the women in the paintings.

"You're very good, Mr. Sterling. Please continue; there are five more sketches to come..."

Zhuang Rui nodded, indicating his agreement with Sterling's words. He was also deeply moved by Sterling's words. Both Chinese and foreign appraisals require understanding the author's psychological state. If Sterling had not been familiar with Picasso's style in each era, he would not have been able to say the things mentioned above.

"Thank you, Mr. Zhuang, you've given us a wonderful evening..."

At this moment, Sterling's attitude towards Zhuang Rui changed drastically. He stood up, bowed slightly to Zhuang Rui, and then sat down to re-examine the six sketches of women's bodies that Peng Fei had given him.

Although the women in these six sketches are all the same person, the backgrounds and clothing are not the same, and not all of them are naked. Two of the sketches show her wearing pajamas and lying on the bed with her breasts partially exposed.

As Sterling examined the sketches, his excitement grew with each one he looked at. After reviewing all six sketches, he nearly jumped off the sofa in excitement, grabbing Zhuang Rui and asking, "Dear Zhuang, you must have other works. Please bring them out..."

If it were a Picasso oil painting, there would likely only be one, but for drawings, each discovery usually involves at least one volume, typically around ten or slightly more. However, Zhuang Rui only produced six this time, which is why Sterling asked this question.

"Oh, Mr. Sterling, please don't rush. Let's first tell Mr. Ezkener whether these works attributed to Mr. Picasso are genuine or fake..."

Zhuang Rui gently pushed away Sterling's hand that was gripping his arm. What a joke! I've already put all that money on this thing, and you still want to see it? That's not impossible, but you two should at least show some sincerity, right?

"Really, of course it's real. I can assure God that these six works are absolutely genuine Picasso pieces, without a doubt..."

To be honest, Sterling's behavior at this moment resembled that of a passionate collector, rather than a calm appraiser. He only wanted to appreciate all of Zhuang Rui's Picasso works. After today, he probably wouldn't have this opportunity again, because it was uncertain whether these paintings would still belong to Zhuang Rui.

Sterling knew what kind of impact the news that Zhuang Rui owned these works would have on the entire European art market. It would definitely draw all the fans of Picasso's works to the city of Paris.

"Well, Mr. Sterling, you can take a break now. I think Mr. Ezkener must have something to say to me..."

After Zhuang Rui waited until Sterling confirmed the authenticity of the paintings, he immediately and unceremoniously abandoned him without even offering him a glass of water.

Sterling was just an appraiser, and there was no need for Zhuang Rui to waste time arguing with him. Besides, Zhuang Rui still harbored some resentment towards Sterling's arrogant attitude when he first entered the room.

Chapter 584, Rare Goods for Hoarding (Part 1 & 2)

"Of course, I think any collector in Paris right now would want to associate with Mr. Zhuang..."

Ezkener nodded. Owning six Picasso drawings already qualified Zhuang Rui as an international collector. If Zhuang Rui were to sell them, everyone who appreciates Picasso's work would surely be happy to befriend him.

Hearing his boss speak, Sterling, no matter how excited he was, could only suppress it. He had wanted to admire Picasso's works a little longer, but Peng Fei quickly put them away, looking at him like a thief. Frustrated, Sterling almost lost his temper.

However, Sterling doesn't have that qualification. In the seller-driven art market, especially in the high-end market for top-tier artworks, no one is short of money. If you want someone to sell your favorite artwork, then you have to see if you are sincere.

"Dear Zhuang, I'd like to know, did you call us here today to sell these Picasso works?"

After his small eyes darted around, Ezkena slowly moved toward the main point. He asked the question to gain the upper hand in the negotiation and make Zhuang Rui subconsciously think that he wanted to sell, not that he wanted to buy. This was a little negotiation tactic.

"sell?"

No, no, no, Mr. Ezkener, you misunderstand. I have never intended to sell these precious Picasso works, not now, and never in the future..."

Upon hearing Ezkena's words, Zhuang Rui smiled faintly, waved his hands repeatedly, and said "no" several times, firmly denying Ezkena's words.

Although Zhuang Rui's net worth shrank significantly after purchasing the private jet, he never considered selling Picasso's paintings, or even any of his own collections.

In today's international art market, Picasso's works, as well as his own collection, are absolutely priceless and unavailable. Unless someone is penniless and desperate, no one would be willing to exchange Picasso's works for money.

"Not for sale?"

Ezkenar paused for a moment, glanced at Huangfu Yun beside him, and then said to Zhuang Rui, "Dear Zhuang, what is the meaning of your calling us here today? Is it just to let us appreciate Mr. Picasso's works?"

Ezkenar is a very important figure in British art collecting circles. He doesn't think he would give up an important dinner just to see Picasso's work; he'd rather go to the Louvre.

"Mr. Ezkenar speaks Chinese very well..."

Zhuang Rui didn't respond to Ezkenar's words, but instead praised his Chinese proficiency. Ezkenar nodded politely, waiting for Zhuang Rui to continue.

"Mr. Ezkenar must be very familiar with our country's culture. In our country, collectors rarely use money to buy the items they like. Instead, they exchange their collections with each other. In this way, both parties can get the items they want. Mr. Ezkenar, I think you understand what I mean?"

In fact, bartering is not just a Chinese collector's practice; it is also very popular internationally. As soon as Ezkenar heard Zhuang Rui's words, he immediately understood and fully comprehended Zhuang Rui's idea.

However, Ezkenar's eyebrows furrowed tightly. Barter transactions usually occur when the party making the offer takes a fancy to something in the other party's possession and then offers their best item in exchange. Generally speaking, the party who makes the offer first will suffer a slight loss.

However, the current situation is that Zhuang Rui doesn't even know what collection he owns, yet he dares to propose a barter exchange. It's obvious that he's relying on the Picasso sketches he has. If he can't produce antiques that satisfy the other party, the deal will probably fall through.

However, Ezkenar genuinely cared about the Picasso sketches in Zhuang Rui's possession. For a collector to become a world-class collector, the presence of works by artists like Picasso or Van Gogh in their collection is a crucial indicator.

The Ezkenar family's wealth and heritage consisted mainly of the large number of antiques and artifacts they plundered from China. However, they did not collect many European and American artworks. If the

Ezkenazi family wanted to gain recognition from international collectors, simply possessing antiques from China was far from enough.

“Mr. Zhuang, I think I understand what you mean, but my collection is all in London, so I can't offer you any choices right now...”

Ezkenazi had the right mindset. In terms of the value of his collection, it was not necessarily lower than Picasso's works. It was just that things were valued for their rarity, and there were millions of Chinese cultural relics scattered abroad.

However, Picasso's works number only a few tens of thousands, and most of them have already been collected by private individuals and museums. Even if one of them occasionally appears on the auction market, it is quickly sold at a high price.

Ezkenazi knew that he was already lucky to have seen these six sketches, and their value should not be measured by their market price.

"Are all the things in London?"

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Rui tapped his fingers lightly on the table. To be honest, he didn't really want to do business with private individuals because merchants are profit-driven. When exchanging collectibles, they would definitely use market prices to measure the value of the two items, which wouldn't maximize their own profits.

Zhuang Rui's biggest wish is to exchange with museums. Many museums abroad have a collection of precious Chinese artifacts, but compared to Picasso's works, they would definitely prefer the latter.

On another note, including many private museums, most of the items in museums do not belong to private individuals. To donate or exchange museum items for sale, the museum's board of directors must agree. However, Zhuang Rui believes that those foreigners will definitely agree to exchange Chinese antiques for Picasso's works.

Since the items don't belong to him, there's no question of equivalent value. This gives him a lot more room to maneuver, allowing Zhuang Rui to get more of what he wants.

“Mr. Zhuang, if you have time to go to London, I think my collection will satisfy you...”

Ezkenner desperately wanted these Picasso sketches, and he didn't want them to end up in auction houses, because he knew that the prices of Picasso's works had skyrocketed in recent years, and these few sketches alone could fetch tens of millions of dollars.

Moreover, once these works are put up for auction, many things become beyond one's control, and Ezkenner will not be able to control the situation. If another major international collector comes to compete with him, he will probably have to spend more money than he imagined.

“Alright, Mr. Ezkenner, your sincerity has impressed me. Here's what we'll do: I'll be flying to London by private jet in three days. But before that, I'd like you to provide a list of your best collections so I can take a look and see if there's any possibility of a deal between us...”

Zhuang Rui thought for a moment. Since he was going to London anyway, and although bartering sounded simple, it was actually quite complicated to do. It definitely wouldn't be done in three to five days. In other words, this batch of Picasso's works would definitely stay in his hands for a while, so there was no harm in going to London to take a look.

Furthermore, Zhuang Rui proposed a condition: he needed to know what collections Ezkenner possessed. If there were none that satisfied him, then the deal would naturally fall through.

Anyway, Zhuang Rui isn't worried about these Picasso works not selling. As long as he spreads the word, not to mention private collectors, auction houses alone will probably wear out the hotel doorstep.

"Okay, dear Zhuang, I'll fax you the list as soon as I get back. I'm sure you'll be satisfied..."

When Ezkenner saw that Zhuang Rui had given him the order to leave, he stood up, shook hands with Zhuang Rui, handed him a business card, and then took his leave with the still-enthusiastic Mr. Sterling. He had said what he needed to say, and whether the deal would go through depended on whether what he offered could entice Zhuang Rui.

Ezkenar was quite confident about this; his collection consisted mostly of Chinese porcelain, and primarily of official kiln pieces from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties—extremely rare on the international market. If Zhuang Rui were a nationalist, he would certainly be interested in the items he presented.

...

"Brother Zhuang, are all these pencil drawings antiques?"

After Ezkenar, Huangfu Yun, and the others left, Peng Fei picked up a sketch and examined it. He could understand English and knew that the two foreigners had taken the drawing very seriously.

However, after examining it for a long time, Peng Fei couldn't see anything good about it. If he wanted to see naked women, there was an adult channel on French television, which was much better than this painting and even included adult films.

"Hey kid, that's a novel question. Aren't antiques supposed to be something people would throw money at you for?"

Zhuang Rui laughed upon hearing this. After carefully putting away the sketches, he said to Peng Fei, "Keep these things safe. You might be able to exchange them for some treasures like the 'Fixed Light Sword.' Be sure to keep them safe..."

"The Dingguang Sword?"

Peng Fei was startled by what Zhuang Rui said. He quickly took the sketches Zhuang Rui handed him with both hands, wondering to himself, "These drawings don't look much better than the ones drawn by the kids at my girlfriend's school."

"Zhuang Rui, the fax has arrived, come and get it..."

Suddenly, Qin Xuanbing's voice rang out in the room, startling Zhuang Rui. Ezkenar's efficiency was truly remarkable; only half an hour had passed, yet he had already compiled the antique catalog.

Chapter 585 A Rare Commodity to Hike For (Part 3)

"Zhuang Rui, this is Mr. Basil Guimet of the Guimet Museum in Paris. He is a descendant of Émile Guimet, the founder of the Guimet Museum, and is also the current director of the museum..."

The next morning, Zhuang Rui's hotel room welcomed a second group of guests, also brought by Huangfu Yun. This time, however, Qin Xuanbing didn't hide inside; instead, she stayed in the living room with Zhuang Rui.

Basjime was probably around fifty years old, with some gray hair and wearing gold-rimmed glasses. He looked very refined, like a university professor. After shaking hands with Zhuang Rui, he quietly sized up the young man in front of him.

Zhuang Rui's guess was correct. In addition to being the director of the Guimet Museum, Bath also taught at a university, making him a true professor.

Accompanying Bath was an appraiser. As the saying goes, everyone has their own expertise. Bath wasn't very familiar with Picasso's works, but there were so many people studying Picasso in Paris and Europe that finding an appraiser of Picasso's paintings was not an easy task.

"Mr. Bass, hello, please have a seat..."

Zhuang Rui wasn't particularly enthusiastic, but he wasn't cold either. However, Bass was treated much better than Ezkena the day before; at least Qin Xuanbing poured them both a cup of coffee.

Ezkena's ancestors were former French bandits, while Bass's ancestors were relatively innocent, which is why he was treated to coffee and tea at Zhuang Rui's place.

Zhuang Rui had researched the history of the Guimet Museum and learned that Émile Guimet, the founder of the Guimet Museum, was originally an industrialist from Lyon, France. In 1889, he officially established the Guimet Museum in the 16th arrondissement of Paris, mainly showcasing the religious culture of Egypt, ancient Rome, Greece, and Asian countries.

Most of the collection in the Guimet Museum was acquired by Émile Guimet during his early travels around the world, including to Egypt, Greece, Japan, China, and India.

Initially, the museum primarily showcased the religious cultures of Egypt, ancient Rome, Greece, and Asian countries. However, due to a series of expeditions and explorations in different regions of the Far East, the museum has become increasingly focused on Asia while preserving the ancient Egyptian religious section.

In 1927, the Guimet Museum came under the jurisdiction of the French Museums Headquarters, and thus received a large number of artworks acquired by explorers during their expeditions in Central Asia and China.

Later, the museum received original artifacts from the Indochina Museum and unearthed artifacts from a French expedition to Afghanistan, which helped establish the Guimet Museum's reputation for its rich art collection spanning the broader Indochina cultural sphere.

By 1945, the collections of French state museums underwent a large-scale reorganization. The Guimet Museum transferred its Egyptian section to the Louvre, which in return donated its Asian art section, making the Guimet Museum the premier museum of Asian art.

It is precisely for this reason that the Guimet Museum houses a large number of precious Chinese artifacts. Of course, among them are some valuable Chinese artworks donated to the Louvre by the descendants of the Eight-Nation Alliance. That is why Zhuang Rui asked Huangfu Yun to contact the Guimet Museum. However, Zhuang Rui was somewhat surprised that the Guimet Museum would come in person.

France has many museums, but the Guimet Museum is undoubtedly the best among them, as most of its exhibits are Asian or Chinese artifacts.

As a museum whose business focuses on Asia, Zhuang Rui originally did not have high hopes for the possibility of exchanging collections with them, but after meeting Basguime, Zhuang Rui felt that things seemed to be taking a turn for the better.

"Mr. Bass, if I may be so bold as to ask, your museum's main business focuses on Asian art. I wonder what your opinion is on Picasso's works?"

Zhuang Rui first needed to understand the significance of Picasso's works in Bass's mind before he could negotiate the price. He also knew that foreigners were generally straightforward, and if he tried to beat around the bush, Bass might not understand him by the afternoon. →

"Mr. Zhuang, although Mr. Picasso was Spanish, he spent most of his life in France, so he should also be considered French. His influence in France far exceeded that of any other French person, including President de Gaulle at the time..."

Basguime's undisguised praise of Picasso delighted Zhuang Rui. "You'd better treat Picasso like an ancestor," he thought, "then I can ask for an even higher price."

"As a museum with a history of over a hundred years, we should also develop through multiple channels. While managing Asian art well, we should also explore and collect masterpieces by European modern art masters. And the works of Mr. Picasso are something every museum dreams of..."

Zhuang Rui was unaware that although the Guimet Museum was nominally affiliated with the French Museums Headquarters, it was actually self-sufficient in terms of all its expenses and profits. In today's commercial society, for a museum to develop better, it undoubtedly needs to have something more eye-catching.

Compared to Chinese culture, Picasso's works will undoubtedly attract more attention from tourists from all over the world. This will also allow the Guimet Museum to develop a new profit-generating project and have more funds to carry out the museum's renovation and artifact preservation work.

Most importantly, the Guimet Museum has a lot of Chinese antiques that have been stored away in warehouses, some of which have not seen the light of day for decades. If those antiques could be used to exchange for Picasso's works, the Guimet Museum believes that this suggestion would be agreed upon by everyone.

Beating children on a rainy day is a waste of time, and being able to exchange some Chinese artworks that have no value for world-renowned Picasso works makes this a deal that Basguime feels he won't lose out no matter how you look at it.

"Of course, Mr. Zhuang, first of all, the Picasso work you have must be an original for us to have any possibility of cooperation..."

After seeing Zhuang Rui shake hands with him, Bass sat there in a daze, so he couldn't help but give Zhuang Rui a hint.

"Oh, of course, I'm sorry, Mr. Bass, I've thought of something else. Some of Mr. Picasso's works are right here, and you and your appraiser can begin the appraisal now..."

Zhuang Rui waved his hand, and Peng Fei took out the six still-life sketches, as well as six children's sketches. Zhuang Rui took out 12 works at once because he considered that the other party was a representative of a museum and the demand should be relatively large.

If Basguimay can provide corresponding Chinese antiques that Zhuang Rui also approves of, Zhuang Rui wouldn't mind bringing out all the remaining Picasso sketches.

Of course, Zhuang Rui still intended to leave the six Picasso sketches of women to Ezkena. After all, Zhuang Rui had been eyeing the two Yuan blue and white porcelain pieces in Ezkena and had long been determined to take one back with him.

After seeing Basguimay and the appraiser, and focusing their attention on Picasso's sketches, Zhuang Rui moved closer to Huangfu Yun and said, "Brother Huangfu, thank you for your help again this time. By the way, do these two speak Chinese?"

"No, Professor Bath teaches chemistry, not linguistics..."

Huangfu Yun shook his head, then said indignantly, "Brother Zhuang, stop with the empty promises. If you want to thank your brother, bring out something real. How about this: if the Guimet Museum has any ancient Chinese swords, can you get one for me? Of course, I'll pay for it, as long as it's not too expensive..."

Watching Zhuang Rui negotiate with others using Picasso's works as if they were rare commodities, Huangfu Yun felt as if he had been scratched by a cat. Unfortunately, he didn't have Zhuang Rui's luck, so he had the idea of Zhuang Rui getting the meat while he could just have some soup.

"Hehe, that's easy, that's easy. If all else fails, there's my Dingguang Sword..."

Zhuang Rui looked at Huangfu Yun and laughed, but when he mentioned the Dingguang Sword and saw Huangfu Yun's excited expression, Zhuang Rui said with a mischievous grin, "If all else fails, I can't give you the Dingguang Sword either..."

"Damn it, say something plausible..." Huangfu Yun interrupted Zhuang Rui, annoyed.

"Alright, as you said, Brother Huangfu, if Jimei has any good swords, I will definitely find one for you..."

Zhuang Rui nodded in agreement. If it weren't for Huangfu Yun, he would have been completely clueless when he arrived in Paris, not knowing a single person. Ezkenner and Bass were both introduced by Huangfu Yun. Even if Huangfu Yun wanted to buy antique swords, Zhuang Rui would be willing to give him one.

Of course, this is on the premise that the swords in the Guimet Museum are not of the same caliber as the Dingguang Sword. If they were, Huangfu Yun wouldn't be able to afford them even if he wanted to. Give them away? If it were you, would you give away something worth hundreds of millions to someone for free?

After settling things off with Huangfu Yun, Zhuang Rui glanced at Bass and the appraiser, lowered his voice, and said, "Brother Huangfu, I've heard that the Guimet Museum has more than 20,000 Chinese artifacts. What do you think we should exchange with them for?"

Zhuang Rui was really scratching his head about this. Yesterday, when he was at the Guimet Museum, he had his eye on the Western Han Dynasty jade carving, the "White Jade Tiger." However, the Chinese artifacts on display in the museum were only a very small part of the collection, and Zhuang Rui was afraid that he had missed some good items.

Huangfu Yun chuckled and said, "That's simple, brother. Let me tell you, in 1945, the Louvre's Asian Department transferred all its Asian artifacts to the Guimet Museum. All the good stuff is in there..."

Chapter 586 A Rare Commodity to Hike For (Part 4)

The Louvre Museum in Paris needs no introduction; it's one of the oldest, largest, and most famous museums in the world, comparable to the Forbidden City in China.

The Louvre's collection is unparalleled by any other museum in the world, including the Venus de Milo, the Mona Lisa, and the Winged Victory of Samothrace, which are considered the three greatest treasures of the world.

Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" needs no introduction; it has transcended the realm of art and become a household name. Even children as young as three or five have probably heard of the Mona Lisa. Her dreamlike and charming smile has been called the "mysterious smile" by many art historians.

The Venus de Milo is a world-renowned statue of a goddess. Since its discovery in February 1820 near an ancient tomb on the Greek island of Milos in the Aegean Sea, this marble full-body statue with missing arms has captivated the world with its unparalleled charm.

The statue is two meters tall, with a beautiful face and a well-proportioned figure. Its clothes have slipped down to its hips. Although its right arm is missing, it still shows the unique curves of a woman, appearing dignified and charming. After being purchased by France for a large sum of money, it was displayed in a special exhibition room in the Louvre. Since then, the "Venus de Milo" has become famous in the world and has become a symbol of love and beauty.

As for the Winged Victory of Samothrace, the French sculptor Rodin once exclaimed, "These are practically real muscles; you can feel their body temperature when you touch them!"

With these three world-renowned works of art, the Louvre's status is virtually unshakeable.

From ancient Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art to art from various Eastern countries, including sculptures from the Middle Ages to the modern era, as well as an astonishing number of royal treasures and masterpieces of painting, the Louvre has become a world-renowned art palace.

If we only consider the quantity of the collections, the Palace Museum can be compared to it. However, when it comes to the countries and regions represented by the collections, probably no museum in the world can compare to the Louvre.

According to statistics, the Louvre Palace currently houses more than 400,000 art treasures from around the world.

The French exhibited these art treasures in six main galleries according to their origin and type: the Oriental Art Gallery, the Ancient Greek and Roman Art Gallery, the Ancient Egyptian Art Gallery, the Treasure Gallery, the Painting Gallery, and the Sculpture Gallery.

In its early days, most of the Louvre's collection came from private donations.

Most of the Eastern artworks were donated by the French army during the invasion of China. Frey had donated Chinese antiques from the Yuanmingyuan to the Louvre and Guimet Museum on several occasions, which is why Huangfuyun reminded Zhuang Rui of that.

The Louvre once transferred all of its rare Asian artifacts to the Guimet Museum, so one can imagine how rich the Guimet Museum's collection must be.

"Mr. Zhuang, without a doubt, these twelve sketches of yours are all works by Mr. Picasso, and all of them are genuine..."

At this point, Bass and the appraiser had also completed their authentication of the sketches. In terms of both the age of the paper and the style of the painting, these works were undoubtedly the work of Picasso. Moreover, three of the sketches had Picasso's autograph on them.

"Huangfu once told me that Mr. Zhuang wanted to exchange these Picasso works for some of our museum's Chinese artifacts. I wonder if Mr. Zhuang has any pieces he's interested in and would like to bring them up so we can discuss it further..."

Bass continued, explaining that his Guimet Museum, unlike the Louvre, already possessed Picasso's works. Therefore, Bass had come with sincerity, genuinely wanting to exchange the Picasso sketches in Zhuang Rui's possession.

“Mr. Bass, I have not yet visited your museum, but I have long heard that your museum has the most extensive collection of Chinese artifacts. I think what is on display now is probably just the tip of the iceberg.”

Zhuang Rui told a lie here. He first praised Bass's collection, and then said, "Mr. Picasso's works are loved by people all over the world. It's not difficult for Mr. Bass to own these works, but he must produce corresponding artworks before we can cooperate..."

"The corresponding artworks? Mr. Zhuang, you know, the artifacts from Asia in our collection are all ancient and extremely precious. I think you can go and choose some first..."

Although Zhuang Rui was decades younger than Bass, Bass still used honorifics when speaking to him. This was understandable; in a seller's market for art, those with the goods held the power. 68L.K.

"Choose?"

Zhuang Rui hesitated for a moment before speaking, "Mr. Bass, if it's alright, I'd like to first see the catalog of the items your museum received in exchange with the Louvre in 1945, as well as some Chinese artifacts that Frey donated to the Guimet Museum back then. Would that be alright?"

In China more than 100 years ago, the most valuable antiques were hidden in the Yuanmingyuan by the emperors with queues. They were of higher value than the Chinese antiques donated by adventurers to the Guimet Museum, which is why Zhuang Rui brought it up directly.

"Sure, if Mr. Zhuang has time, we can go to the Guimet Museum this afternoon. I'll bring you the materials there..."

Bas Guimet hesitated for a moment before nodding in agreement. Since the decision was made to include these Picasso works in the Guimet Museum, there would certainly be a corresponding price to pay. Bas did not believe that Zhuang Rui could be fooled just because he was young.

"This afternoon, alright, this afternoon it is, Mr. Bass. May I invite you to lunch with me?"

Zhuang Rui nodded in agreement and extended an invitation to Basguima. Although French people usually drink red wine, a few drinks might bring them closer. Maybe the old man in front of him would be in a good mood and give him some extra treats.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Bass shrugged regretfully and said with a smile, "Zhuang, although I would love to have lunch with you and this beautiful lady, unfortunately, I have to go back and organize the documents now. You know, some of the files haven't been touched for decades..."

Perhaps the Chinese artworks donated by Frey and others were priceless in Zhuang Rui's eyes, but for the Bath and Guimet Museums, those items were not highly valued. The artworks displayed in the Guimet Museum's exhibition rooms were less than one-tenth of those in the warehouse.

Furthermore, Bass knew that many antiques from China had been kept hidden away in the Guimet Museum for a long time. Not to mention the antiques hidden deep in the warehouse, even the antique catalogues would probably take a long time to find.

"Very well, Mr. Bass, I will visit you promptly at 2 o'clock this afternoon..."

Zhuang Rui, hearing that it was important business, did not insist, stood up and saw Bass and the appraiser out the door.

Turning around, Zhuang Rui looked at Huangfu Yun and said, "Brother Huangfu, would you like to come with me this afternoon?"

"Nonsense, don't try to rip me off. I still want to see the Guimet Museum's collection..."

Huangfu Yun glared at Zhuang Rui with annoyance. In several European countries, apart from the British Museum and a few other museums, there are probably few places with more Chinese antiques than the Guimet Museum. Even if you can't buy them, it's still a good opportunity to go and see them.

After Zhuang Rui was treated to a French feast by Huangfu Yun at noon, he rested briefly at the hotel before getting into the car arranged by the hotel and heading towards the Guimet Museum with Qin Xuanbing and Huangfu Yun.

As for Peng Fei, he stayed obediently in his hotel room, guarding those priceless Picasso sketches. These were Zhuang Rui's trump cards in negotiations with foreign collectors, and he couldn't afford to let anything go wrong.

"Mr. Zhuang, welcome..."

Having received a call in advance, Bass was already waiting at the museum entrance. This time, they could save the £8 entrance fee to the Guimet Museum. Led by Bass, Zhuang Rui and his group entered the museum's office on the second floor.

Bass's office is about 70 or 80 square meters. There is a small reception room at the entrance. Zhuang Rui and the others are sitting on the sofa in the reception room, looking at the furnishings in the curator's office.

"Damn, that's really extravagant..."

With Zhuang Rui's discerning eye, he could naturally tell that all the antiques on the shelves were genuine. Among them were Egyptian pharaoh wood carvings inlaid with gemstones, Thai bronze Buddha statues, precious Persian carpets, and of course, Chinese porcelain.

Zhuang Rui felt a surge of excitement looking at these things, wishing he could transform into Spider-Man that very night and collect them all.

"Mr. Bath, perhaps you could first take a look at what artworks in your collection might appeal to me..."

After a quick look at the office furnishings, a voluptuous female secretary came in and asked what they would like to drink. Zhuang Rui casually ordered a coffee and then made his request to Bass.

Thinking of the precious cultural relics that were looted a hundred years ago, Zhuang Rui felt somewhat excited.

The catastrophe a century ago was so devastating that it was impossible to count how many precious antiques were looted and taken abroad. Now, seeing those national treasures that only existed in collection records, Zhuang Rui and Huangfu Yun couldn't help but show excited expressions.

"Okay, Mr. Zhuang, this contains all the documents related to the donation from the French Frey family, including original documents such as the decree signed by the then French president accepting the donation on behalf of the nation..."

After hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Bass picked up a sealed kraft paper envelope from his desk.

Zhuang Rui noticed that there was another identical envelope on the desk, which must have been from the Louvre's Asian Department collection.

Chapter 587 A Rare Commodity to Hike For (Part 5)

Basil Guimet handed the thick manila envelope to Zhuang Rui, saying, "Mr. Zhuang, the lists of items that Mr. and Mrs. Frey donated to the Guimet Museum and the Louvre respectively are all in here. Please take a look..."

Bass had his people search for a long time at noon before finally finding the document in the archives. He hadn't even had a chance to look at it himself when Zhuang Rui and the others arrived.

Zhuang Rui took the kraft paper bag and could feel a thin layer of dust on its surface, indicating that the large bag of files had been sealed away for a long time.

Taking a deep breath, Zhuang Rui slowly opened the kraft paper bag. In that instant, Zhuang Rui felt as if he had opened a door, a door leading to the Yuanmingyuan, which had been burning fiercely a hundred years ago!

The burning of the Yuanmingyuan ruins has made many historical events unverifiable, and the lost Chinese antiques and cultural relics from various dynasties remain a mystery. How much was looted by the Eight-Nation Alliance is still a highly controversial topic in China.

However, Zhuang Rui now feels that he has touched upon the history of that time. Although it was only one country that invaded China at that time, the conclusions he draws from it are believed to be more accurate than the guesses of those experts in China.

Opening the sealed file, Zhuang Rui reached in and took out a thick stack of documents. In the light streaming through the bright glass window, Zhuang Rui could clearly see that the top document was a decree written in both English and French, and at the signature below was the famous General de Gaulle.

After carefully examining the contents of this decree, I found that it was the original archive of then-French President Charles de Gaulle accepting Chinese cultural relics donated by Frey, with the donated items spanning from 1914 to 1934.

However, the decree was signed during de Gaulle's rule, after 1945, possibly when the Louvre transferred the document to the Guimet Museum. It also bears the signature of Frey's widow.

Putting everything else aside, this slightly yellowed piece of paper alone can be considered an antique. These things, which once recorded a certain period of history, are of great research and collection value in the eyes of historians.

Just like imperial edicts in ancient China, those that have survived to this day are all priceless cultural relics.

Zhuang Rui carefully set aside the decree with de Gaulle's signature and continued reading. The next seven or eight pages were letters, including correspondence between Frey and the directors of the Louvre and the Guimet Museum at the time.

However, all of these letters were written in French. If Qin Xuanbing, who was beside him, hadn't been able to read French, Zhuang Rui really wouldn't have been able to understand what was written on them.

As Qin Xuanbing translated, Zhuang Rui and Huangfu Yun's expressions turned rather unpleasant, because in a letter from Frey to the then director of the Guimet Museum in 1914, he wrote: "These Oriental artworks I possess all come from the main hall of the Shouhuang Hall, one of the temples in BJ

dedicated to the ancestral emperors—the location of the headquarters of the French Expeditionary Force."

Looking at these letters from the parties involved a century ago, Zhuang Rui and Huangfu Yun were filled with mixed feelings. A strong country makes its people strong, and a weak country makes its people weak. In Zhuang Rui's eyes, these things were extremely dishonorable, but in the hearts of those invaders, they were probably things they were proud of and would boast about for the rest of their lives.

Shaking his head, Zhuang Rui skipped over the letter and let Qin Xuanbing continue her explanation.

After listening to Qin Xuanbing's explanation word by word, Zhuang Rui finally understood the whole story of the Frey family and their relatives donating some Chinese artworks. Some questions that had puzzled many experts in China were also answered in these letters.

Since the 1980s, the origins of oil portraits of Qing Dynasty emperors and concubines appearing at international auctions have remained shrouded in mystery, unknown to the world, and have been the subject of numerous speculations.

However, through these letters, it is clear that all the oil portraits were painted by the Frey family. In addition to those donated to the museum, more than 10 portraits of Qing emperors and concubines have entered the international auction market.

The Frey family donated a total of 18 Chinese artworks to the Guimet Museum and the Louvre, and among these 18 masterpieces, three are oil paintings by Giuseppe Castiglione: four scrolls of "Magnolia," "Kazakh Tribute Horses," and the first scroll of "Emperor Kangxi's Southern Inspection Tour."

In addition, there are nine other portrait oil paintings of Emperor Qianlong and his consorts painted in a Western style by several other court painters. These are rare Qing Dynasty imperial oil paintings in Beijing and the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. The Guimet Museum has as many as twelve of them.

Zhuang Rui sighed inwardly. Because so few Qing Dynasty oil paintings have survived, scholars and experts in China who study such works have almost no materials to refer to or compare with. If he could bring these paintings back, he would surely be able to fill a gap in the history of Chinese art.

The remaining artworks on the list are mostly ancient Chinese paintings, but the author's name is always written as "unknown". There are also twelve sets of jade seals from the "Peiwenzhai" collection used by Emperor Kangxi and a seal from Emperor Qianlong that reads "Treasure of the Supreme Emperor".

These things were also very precious to Zhuang Rui. Among the emperors of China's history, apart from Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, who was imprisoned by his son and served as the retired emperor for a few years, and Emperor Huizong of Song, who was a lively father and son, the only other emperor who served as the retired emperor was Emperor Qianlong. His seal should be of considerable collectible value.

After reviewing the list, Zhuang Rui looked up at Bass and said, "Mr. Bass, if I may be so bold as to ask, it seems that none of the works on this list are in your exhibition booth..."

Although Zhuang Rui has not yet seen the actual items, in his mind, these objects are all priceless treasures. Zhuang Rui doesn't know why the Guimet Museum doesn't exhibit them. If they had ever appeared in the museum, he believes that news of them would have spread throughout China long ago.

"Ahem, Mr. Zhuang, you must know that our museum has tens of thousands of artworks from the East, but we don't have enough display space... so many of our pieces never get the chance to appear in the museum..."

After hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Basguima coughed a few times awkwardly. In fact, he only told half the story. The Guima Museum does have a rich collection, but the main reason why these oil paintings and jade seals are not displayed in the museum is that the museum does not attach much importance to them.

Europeans have never appreciated ancient Chinese paintings. In their view, those abstract paintings are devoid of beauty, the figures are all the same with unclear facial expressions, and the landscapes are blurry and indistinct, making them far less pleasing to the eye than European realist paintings.

Therefore, in the early years, the prices of ancient Chinese paintings on the international market were not very high, and foreign collectors did not pay much attention to collecting Chinese paintings. Even if they did, they were mostly collected by overseas Chinese.

It wasn't until recent years, with the emergence of some Chinese oil painting masters, such as Chen Yifei, in the international market, that ancient paintings began to receive some recognition and were subject to price speculation by speculators in the international art market.

Conversely, Chinese bronzes, jade artifacts, and Buddhist sculptures have always been highly sought after by foreign collectors. As a result, these items have a much greater chance of being exhibited than calligraphy and paintings. Consequently, most of what Zhuang Rui saw at the Guimet Museum consisted of these items.

To put it bluntly, these Qing Dynasty collections donated by Frey have been stored in the Guimet Museum's warehouse for more than half a century. If it weren't for Zhuang Rui's request, it's possible that they would never see the light of day again in another half century.

Upon hearing Basguimae's words, Zhuang Rui and Huangfu Yun exchanged a glance, both understanding perfectly that the Guimae Museum's actions clearly demonstrated that these artifacts did not hold a particularly important place in their hearts.

After thinking for a moment, Zhuang Rui turned his gaze to Bass and said, "Mr. Bass, these paintings and calligraphy donated by Frey were looted from the Yuanmingyuan in our country. I think they can be part of this transaction. In addition, I would like to select a few pieces from the artworks exhibited in your museum. What do you think?"

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui offer his terms, Bass, who had been relaxed, sat up straight, but his brows furrowed as Zhuang Rui spoke.

"Mr. Zhuang, could you please provide a few Picasso works for this exchange of collections?"

Zhuang Rui immediately demanded to exchange all of Frey's donated items and even requested to select several pieces from the museum's collection of artworks. This was unacceptable to Bass. After all, the antiques displayed in the museum were the finest of the finest. Even if Bass were willing, there would likely be dissenting voices within the board of directors.

Five!

Zhuang Rui held up one hand and said, "I will offer five of Mr. Picasso's drawings in exchange for these 18 Chinese artworks donated by Frey. In addition, I will choose three more items from the museum..."

"Oh no... impossible, my God, Mr. Zhuang, your proposal is practically robbery, it's absolutely impossible..."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Basjime suddenly stood up from the sofa with an incredulous expression on his face. Although he was willing to give up those donated items from Frey, he never expected that Zhuang Rui would only be willing to give up five Picasso sketches.

This is quite different from what Basjime expected.

Chapter 588 A Rare Commodity to Hike For (Part 6)

"Mr. Bass, please calm down, sit down and let's talk..."

Zhuang Rui's demeanor at this moment was hardly that of a young man in his twenties. It was as if he and the indignant Basjime had confused their ages. He gently waved his hand, inviting Basjime to sit down.

"Mr. Zhuang, I am very sincere in discussing the exchange of these artworks with you, but unfortunately, I don't hear much sincerity in your words. Could you please explain why?"

Basjime's actions just now were half genuine, and the other half were merely an act.

Bass is in charge of the museum's operations and sometimes participates in auctions to acquire items, so he is no stranger to commercial activities. He was simply expressing his dissatisfaction through his actions to put some psychological pressure on the young man sitting opposite him.

"Heh, does Bassmore intend to exchange a Picasso sketch for an ancient Chinese painting?"

Zhuang Rui let out a laugh, and the disdain in his laughter clearly reached Bass's ears.

Before Bass could answer, Zhuang Rui continued, "Mr. Bass, do you know the auction price of Picasso's most expensive oil painting?"

Bass paused for a moment upon hearing this, then subconsciously replied, "Of course I know. Picasso's 'Boy with a Pipe' sold for \$104.16 million, a world record for a painting at auction, and it's also the most expensive painting in the world!"

Not to mention Bass, who is the curator of a museum, anyone with a little knowledge of art would know this common knowledge. Bass answered very smoothly, but after he finished speaking, he vaguely felt that something was wrong.

"That's right, Mr. Bass, you are absolutely correct..."

Zhuang Rui snapped his fingers with a smile, making Bass feel as if he were being led by the nose, which made Bass very uncomfortable.

"But Mr. Bass, you may not know that the highest price ever paid for a Chinese oil painting at auction was only a little over 4 million US dollars. That was Chen Yifei's 'Ode to the Yellow River' (Xu Beihong's painting that sold for 72 million RMB was sold in 2007, so the date doesn't match, and we'll use Chen Yifei's). I don't need to compare the prices of Chinese oil paintings with those of Picasso, do I?"

Zhuang Rui's words left Bass speechless. The price difference was outrageous; on the surface, the price of a Chinese painting was not even a fraction of Picasso's.

"Furthermore, I would like to tell you that you should not assume that Chinese artworks are very expensive. Excluding calligraphy and paintings, the highest price ever paid for a Chinese artwork at auction on the international market was HK\$41.5 million. This happened at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong in 2003."

That Qing Dynasty Yongzheng period "Famille Rose Bat and Peach Olive Vase," valued at over HK\$40 million, already represents the highest artistic achievement in China. Mr. Bass, is it possible that you believe your museum's collection is even better than that exquisite porcelain piece?

Before Bass could react, Zhuang Rui added fuel to the fire, making Bass a little dizzy. If Zhuang Rui's calculations were correct, it seemed that Bass had gotten a great deal by exchanging five Picasso sketches for more than ten Chinese artworks.

However, Bass always felt something was off, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Suddenly, a thought struck him, and he interrupted Zhuang Rui, saying, "Mr. Zhuang, you can't calculate it like that. Every work of art has its unique aspects, and the Picasso work you own is just a sketch, not an oil painting by Picasso..."

"No...no, Mr. Bass, have you forgotten? Mr. Picasso's works, whether oil paintings, drawings or prints, are all unique."

And on this planet, the number of people who appreciate Picasso's works far exceeds the number who like those old paintings you've had stored away in your warehouse for decades.

"Well, in terms of value alone, the oil paintings in your collection are worth at most a few hundred thousand dollars each, but these drawings by Mr. Picasso are worth at least three million dollars each. And these drawings are from a single project, with the child model being the same person; their value must be even higher, right?"

Zhuang Rui did not intend to belittle the works of Chinese artists in order to raise his own prices, but what he said was true. The hype surrounding Chinese court paintings began at the end of 2006, while it was only 2005 now. The prices of Qing court paintings were still relatively low in the international market.

Zhuang Rui's analysis silenced Basguimay. Zhuang Rui was right. In terms of influence alone, his ancient Chinese paintings stored in the warehouse were indeed no match for Picasso's works; the two were simply not in the same league.

In terms of the future benefits that both will generate, Bass certainly has a positive view of Picasso's works. He would never believe that exhibiting those oil paintings of Qing court officials dressed in strange clothes in the museum would attract tourists to spend 9 euros to enter the museum more than Picasso's drawings.

“Mr. Zhuang, I admit that what you said makes a lot of sense, but the Guimet Museum is a semi-private museum with half of its ownership belonging to the state.”

If you want to exchange your collection with outsiders, you must go through the National Art Appraisal Association to assess the value of the items to be traded. Since you want to exchange too many items, I'm afraid the appraisal association will not agree and will not approve it...”

From Bass's perspective, he has now basically accepted the deal. However, as a business transaction, Bass still needs to make an effort to secure the best possible benefits for his side.

“Oh, Mr. Bass, isn't this the problem you've been looking for? I don't know who would be willing to exchange some of their stock of Oriental art for a piece by Mr. Picasso...”

Zhuang Rui laughed and passed the buck back to his country. "What does your National Art Appraisal Association's business have to do with me? Whether you can resolve it or not is your own problem."

Moreover, Zhuang Rui insisted on the word "inventory," constantly implying to Bass, both verbally and psychologically, that the things Bass collected were worthless and far inferior to the Picasso sketches in his possession, which could generate profits immediately.

"I see..."

Bass lowered his head and began to calculate in his mind.

Zhuang Rui wasn't in a hurry. He was drinking coffee and chatting with Huangfu Yun and Qin Xuanbing. He now understood how sought-after Picasso's works were in the international market. As long as he had the goods, he wasn't afraid that others wouldn't rush to trade with him.

Although Zhuang Rui only offered to exchange 21 Chinese cultural relics, he was actually guaranteed to make a profit. For example, the "Mulan Painting" from the Kangxi period is a large-scale painting and calligraphy work that is more than one meter wide and more than 10 meters long. Even in the history of world painting, it is extremely rare.

Even Zhuang Rui himself was unaware that a year or two later, a group of international antique dealers and auction houses began to speculate on Chinese artworks. They used a trick called "rolling balls on a plate" to first drive up prices in the international market and then sell them to domestic collectors at high prices.

This behavior by international speculators kept the prices of Chinese artworks high in the international market from 2006 to 2010.

If Zhuang Rui had brought Picasso's works to Bass to negotiate a deal back then, let alone exchanging one for five or six Chinese antiques, even if it were one for two, Bass might not have paid him any attention.

"Mr. Zhuang, how about this? You can first tell me what three other Eastern artworks you would like to receive besides the items donated by Frey. I will then submit your suggestions to the board of directors for discussion. The exchange of collections involves a series of procedures, and it will probably take at least a month to complete..."

Since Picasso's works have appeared so rarely in recent years, they are too tempting for Bass. After pondering for a while, Bass made up his mind, raised his head and told Zhuang Rui his thoughts.

"One month? Exchange of collections? Mr. Bass, what's going on?"

Zhuang Rui didn't quite understand the meaning of Bass's words. In his mind, if he sketched the other party's portrait and the other party gave him the Chinese antiques he needed, wouldn't the transaction be completed?

"Zhuang Rui, the items in these semi-private museums are absolutely not allowed to enter the market for circulation, auction, or trading. They can only be traded as donations to other museums. It's not as simple as you think..."

The person who answered Zhuang Rui was Huangfu Yun, who was extremely knowledgeable about museums and auction houses in Europe and America. Private museums did not have these restrictions, but for the Guimet Museum, which was integrated into the French museums in 1945, there were many restrictions.

Even if the Guimet Museum agrees to exchange the Zhuang Rui collection, the details still need to be reported to the French government for official approval. Of course, at that point, it will just be a formality.

"Damn it, where do I have a museum? Mr. Bass, if you do this... if you do this, we can't talk at all..."

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Rui immediately became anxious. With his current collection, he was still a long way from meeting the requirements for opening a museum. Wasn't this asking too much of him?

"Hey bro, what's all the excitement about? Opening a museum isn't that hard. China opened it up back in 1996. Just go back and apply for one, and you're all set..."

Huangfu Yun patted Zhuang Rui on the shoulder to reassure him. Based on Huangfu Yun's own understanding, there are at least 50 private museums in China. With Zhuang Rui's financial resources, it shouldn't be a problem.

Chapter 589 An Exorbitant Demand

Is it as simple as you say?

Zhuang Rui rolled his eyes. Although he'd considered opening a museum before, it was just a thought. In Zhuang Rui's view, opening a private museum would be an absolutely remarkable achievement.

In fact, it has only been a little over a year since Zhuang Rui's eyes began to change last year. At times, his consciousness is still stuck in the perspective of an ordinary person, or rather, Zhuang Rui longs to live an ordinary life. He does not realize that he can now change many people and things.

Moreover, this change is actually happening. From the auto repair shop in Pengcheng to the 4S dealership, from the mastiff farm to "Xuanrui Zhai" in Beijing, as well as the jade mine in XJ and the jadeite mine in Myanmar, Zhuang Rui's status and position have been quietly changing without him realizing it.

Buying an airplane is something that can be done with money, but opening a museum requires approval and various procedures. Zhuang Rui's main concern is that he doesn't have enough connections and his collection is too small.

Subconsciously, Zhuang Rui was somewhat reluctant to ask the Ouyang family for help. Call him hypocritical or a fake gentleman, Zhuang Rui really felt a bit resistant to this kind of thing—pulling strings and asking for favors.

If something can be settled with money, Zhuang Rui would never be willing to ask for help.

"Hey buddy, what's there to worry about? If all else fails, I'll just mail all these antique swords and knives I got overseas back to China to give you some face..."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's concerns, Huangfu Yun couldn't help but laugh. He had long harbored the idea of opening an antique sword and knife museum, but he hadn't been able to put it into action due to insufficient funds. Now that such a good opportunity had presented itself, Huangfu Yun was eager to encourage Zhuang Rui to set it up.

"Is it really as simple as you say?" Zhuang Rui was a little incredulous.

"Is it that new? I'm just teasing you."

Huangfu Yun was quite puzzled by Zhuang Rui's attitude. How did this guy manage to build such a large business? In China, as long as you have connections, you can open a museum right across from the Palace Museum, and nobody will care. Of course, probably nobody will even go there.

"Mr. Zhuang, is there a problem?"

Seeing Zhuang Rui speaking continuously in Chinese with Huangfu Yun, and occasionally showing hesitation on his face, Basjimei assumed that Zhuang Rui was unsure of his attitude towards her. She then said, "Mr. Zhuang, regarding the Frey family's donation, I can assure you that the exchange isn't a major issue. You only need to provide a few more items from the exhibition hall's collection, and I can submit it to the board for discussion..."

To be honest, the Guimet Museum has tens of thousands of Chinese artworks, so losing a hundred or so wouldn't be a big problem. However, the Guimet Museum doesn't have a single Picasso work. It's easy to tell which is more important.

Moreover, none of the items in the Guimet Museum belong to private individuals and cannot be traded on the market. The Guimet Museum has no right to engage in corrupt practices. What he seeks is to have more works of art by famous artists in the museum.

With these considerations in mind, the Guimet Museum was willing to make some concessions within its capabilities to keep Picasso's works in the museum.

Upon hearing Bass's words, Huangfu Yun coughed loudly, covering his mouth with his hand while gesturing with his fingers across his neck. Zhuang Rui saw this clearly and understood perfectly that this guy wanted him to kill someone.

"Ahem... Mr. Bass, since you are so sincere, then I will make my suggestion. I personally really like the Han Dynasty jade tiger carving currently on display in your museum. In addition, the bronze elephant-shaped vessel, as well as the three Buddhist paintings, namely 'Amitabha's Western Pure Land Transformation,' 'Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Riding an Elephant,' and 'Portrait of a Traveling Monk,' can all be included in this transaction..."

After receiving a hint from Huangfu Yun, Zhuang Rui went all out and asked for five items instead of the three he had initially mentioned, all of which were masterpieces from the Guimet Museum's collection. Old Bass, sitting opposite him, was so astonished his jaw dropped.

"Mr. Zhuang... Mr. Zhuang, there's a saying in your country, 'The lion has opened its mouth wide.' I'm afraid I can't meet your conditions..."

Bass stammered as he described the Chinese idiom "a lion asking for a lot of money" in English, genuinely frightened by the price Zhuang Rui had offered.

The white jade tiger and those Buddhist paintings from the Sui and Tang dynasties are one thing, but bronzes have always been in high demand abroad, and their prices have remained high.

The bronze vessel "Elephant Zun" proposed by Zhuang Rui is 96 cm long, 64 cm high, and 45 cm wide. The opening on the back is 26 cm long and 21 cm wide. The outer side of the belly and the head are engraved with animal face patterns, and the ears, nose, and feet are decorated with scale patterns. It should belong to the late Shang Dynasty or the early Western Zhou Dynasty.

This bronze vessel is largely the same as the "Double Ram Zun" in the collections of the British Museum in London and the Nezu Museum in Tokyo. Although the lid is missing and most of the elephant trunk is destroyed, it is still the largest known animal-shaped zun in the world.

In the spring of 2001, Christie's New York auctioned Chinese porcelain and ancient works of art, featuring five Chinese bronzes. One of them, a Shang Dynasty bronze vessel called "Min Tian Quan," fetched a record-breaking \$9.24 million, the highest price ever paid for an Oriental artwork at auction (there was a slight error in the previous chapter; that porcelain piece was the second highest-priced).

Sotheby's New York has a history of auctioning Chinese bronzes since around 2000. In the spring auction of 2003, Lot 6, a bronze ding from the late Shang Dynasty, and Lot 117, a bronze jia, both sold for \$70,000 in the fall auction of 2004.

These two auctions demonstrate the popularity of Chinese bronzes in the international market. While Zhuang Rui's five Picasso sketches are indeed rare and valuable, their value is likely to be around 12 million euros at most. If the Guimet Museum were to agree to Zhuang Rui's exchange terms, it would be suffering a significant loss.

Because this bronze artifact is almost as valuable as a Picasso work, and it also needs to be paired with more than twenty items donated by the Frey family, a white jade tiger, and ancient paintings from the Sui and Tang dynasties, the conditions are... a bit too much of a rip-off.

Therefore, Bass looked troubled after hearing Zhuang Rui's words. He was not confident that he could persuade the board of directors to approve the transaction. After all, the items to be exchanged should at least be similar in current market price. The museum also has professional appraisers. If the prices are too different, it will be difficult to pass the board's resolution.

"Mr. Bass, instead of having these worthless artworks displayed here, wouldn't it be better to replace them with items of corresponding value? This would also enhance your museum's reputation..."

Zhuang Rui knew he had gone a bit too far with his demands, so he quickly added fuel to the fire, saying, "If your esteemed establishment can agree to my conditions above, I can consider gifting you three more of Mr. Picasso's finest sketches free of charge. In that case, your establishment could set up a special counter dedicated to the master Picasso. What do you think?"

Zhuang Rui has a total of thirty-two Picasso sketches. He showed six to Ezkener, leaving twenty-six. Even if he gave eight more to the Guimet Museum, he would still have 16 left.

Zhuang Rui also had his own little scheme. Although he didn't know how to appreciate world-famous paintings, he still wanted to keep a few. That way, when he went out and said he was a world-class collector, he would have some confidence.

After appealing to his emotions, he then tried to entice him with benefits. The three Picasso sketches that Zhuang Rui presented immediately shook Bass's confidence. There have been very few Picasso works in recent years, and if he missed this opportunity, it would be difficult to find another opportunity like Zhuang Rui's.

Bass's attention was now completely drawn to the other three Picasso works that Zhuang Rui had mentioned, but Huangfu Yun, who had been listening closely, couldn't help but roll his eyes at Zhuang Rui.

This guy is really shameless. He copied all the treasures from someone else's collection and then claimed that his own items were given away for free. Shameless!

“Mr. Zhuang, I cannot answer your request right now, but I can submit it to the board of directors for discussion. In addition, I hope to acquire the eight Picasso works you mentioned, so that I can better persuade the board members to agree to this exchange...”

After considering for more than 10 minutes, Basjime finally made up his mind. In fact, the only thing he found hard to give up was the bronze artifact. As for the Frey family's donation, it had been stored in the warehouse for fifty or sixty years, and he didn't care much about it.

"Taking photos is no problem at all, Mr. Bass. I hope your board of directors will make the wisest choice. You know, Picasso's works are now extremely rare..."

Zhuang Rui told a blatant lie, adding to Old Bass's psychological pressure.

In fact, Picasso's surviving works are far more numerous than anyone imagines; it's just that none of the collectors of Picasso's works are willing to part with them.

"I will seriously consider your suggestion, Mr. Zhuang. I hope that in the near future, your museum can display these artworks, and similarly, the Guimet Museum can also have Mr. Picasso's works..."

Old Bass stood up and shook hands with Zhuang Rui formally. The secretary who had been sitting next to him had also finished organizing the notes of Zhuang Rui's conversation. After Bass had Zhuang Rui confirm them, he saw them out of the office.

"Damn it, my museum???"

After leaving the curator's office, Zhuang Rui silently cursed in his heart, realizing that his museum still only existed in his imagination.

However, if the Guimet Museum really agrees to this exchange of cultural relics, it can still be carried out even if Zhuang Rui doesn't have a museum. At worst, he can just find a domestic museum to sign an agreement. I believe that the Chinese people would like to see the return of national treasures.

Chapter 590 Private Museum (Part 1)

"Hey, Brother Huangfu, something's not right..."

After leaving the Guimet Museum, Zhuang Rui suddenly slapped his forehead and turned to walk back.

Huangfu Yun grabbed Zhuang Rui and asked, "What's wrong? What's the rush? No one owes you any money..."

"That's not it. They did look at our Picasso works this morning, but we only looked at the list. I didn't see a single one of the antiques that Frey transferred to the Louvre and the Guimet Museum..."

Zhuang Rui didn't mention the items displayed in the exhibition hall, because he had already seen those few and they were undoubtedly genuine. However, he had doubts about the other eighteen items. What if the other party agreed to his conditions but brought out some fakes?

"Hey, you're worrying about nothing. If they agree to the exchange, they'll definitely need to appraise and evaluate the items later. Why are you in such a hurry?"

Huangfu Yun was completely baffled. The exchange and gifting of items between museums required a series of complicated procedures, unlike private transactions where both parties could simply agree on something and proceed with the deal.

"That's good, that's good..."

Zhuang Rui chuckled awkwardly. He knew he had been judging Huangfu Yun by his own standards, and after a couple of embarrassed laughs, he said to Huangfu Yun, "Brother Huangfu, I couldn't get you any antique swords this time, but once we get back to China, I'll definitely find you a good one..."

Zhuang Rui felt a little embarrassed. Since arriving in Paris, Huangfu Yun had been running around taking care of everything, and he had benefited a lot from it, while everyone else had been doing all the work for free.

Huangfu Yun waved his hand and said, "Alright, we're kindred spirits, let's not waste time on this nonsense. If you're really planning to open a museum, just put a separate exhibition room for my swords..."

Huangfu Yun had long harbored the idea of establishing his own antique swords museum, and with his collection of swords, obtaining the necessary permits shouldn't be a problem. However, lacking sufficient funds, he had been delaying it. Now, with Zhuang Rui as his financial backer, his ambitions had rekindled.

"Alright, it's settled then. I'll go back and inquire about how this private museum will be built..."

Zhuang Rui nodded in agreement. He figured he had quite a collection of treasures in his basement, and he couldn't let them remain hidden away forever. He decided to take this opportunity to build a museum.

"I'm not entirely sure about the specifics, but it seems there are certain requirements regarding the venue and the number of artifacts. You can ask around, buddy. I can't keep you company any longer; the

auction has already started today, and I'm going to check it out. There's an antique sword I'd like to acquire..."

Seeing that things were settled with Zhuang Rui, Huangfu Yun took his leave. Although he didn't want to be ripped off by the foreigners' arbitrage of prices, he still felt itchy to go to the auction house to see the items he liked.

"Alright, Huangfu Yun, I'll go back to the hotel first and ask about the museum project. I'll go with you tomorrow to check on the auction..."

The Paris auction of Chinese art will last for several days. Zhuang Rui looked at the auction catalog and it seemed there weren't any good items today, so he didn't bother going. He decided to just take care of things at the museum instead.

...

As soon as Zhuang Rui entered the hotel room, he was pounced on by the restless white lion, who pinned him down on the carpet and played with him for a while before letting him get up.

Sitting to the side, Peng Fei joked, "Brother Zhuang, you're just making things difficult for White Lion by bringing him out here..."

"I think you're the one who's really suffering..." Zhuang Rui said with a laugh.

Zhuang Rui was right. Peng Fei was indeed full of complaints. He had come to Paris with Zhuang Rui, originally planning to go out and buy some luxury goods for his wife. Who knew that first he would be left to look after the white lion, and then he would be given the task of staying close to those ridiculous pencil drawings, which made Peng Fei very depressed.

Zhuang Rui waved his hand and continued, "Alright, leave those sketches here. Go find He Shuang and the others to go shopping. You can have dinner outside yourselves..."

"Hey, Brother Zhuang, I was just kidding. I'd really be worried about leaving this thing, worth hundreds of millions, here..."

Despite his verbal sparring, Peng Fei is a reliable person. Two groups of people have already come to see these Picasso works. If someone among them tries to play dirty tricks and sends someone to steal or rob them, Zhuang Rui really can't handle it on his own.

"Well, that's fine. I'll have Tianya and the others bring Zhang Qian some perfume or something. You can come to Paris for fun when you get married..."

Peng Fei and Zhang Qian are planning to get married in June. Zhuang Rui has already made preparations and will reserve an apartment for them in the new residential area developed by Ouyang Jun. Hao Long will do the same in the future. People rely on him for their livelihood, so he should make them feel a sense of belonging.

After chatting with Peng Fei for a while, Zhuang Rui took out his phone and dialed Ouyang Jun's number.

"Fourth Brother, it's me, Xiao Rui..."

Zhuang Rui knew that Ouyang Jun rarely checked caller ID when answering the phone, so he gave his name first after the call connected.

"You little rascal, a phone call like this never means trouble. Get to the point, I'm busy..."

Ouyang Jun impatiently yelled into the phone. Sure enough, the Fourth Young Master Ouyang was quite busy at the moment, accompanying his wife to the hospital for an ultrasound. While answering the phone, his eyes were fixed on the color screen.

Although the country has explicit regulations prohibiting the use of ultrasound or other means to determine the sex of an unborn child before birth, there are always ways to circumvent them. And who doesn't have connections in the hospital? Let alone Ouyang Jun, even an ordinary citizen can find out in advance whether they will have a girl or a boy by finding a way to pull some strings.

Xu Qing had just been lying on the ultrasound bed when Ouyang Jun, who was quite nervous, was startled by the sudden ringing of the phone. If the doctor hadn't been there, he probably would have started cursing.

"Mr. Ouyang, making or receiving phone calls is not allowed here..."

While Ouyang Jun was anxiously talking to Zhuang Rui on the phone, the female doctor next to him frowned and reminded him that even though the pregnant woman was a big star and the hospital director had personally instructed him, he still had to abide by the hospital's regulations.

"I'm not playing anymore, I'm hanging up now..."

When did Ouyang Jun become so easy to talk to? After hearing the doctor's words, he said into the phone, "Don't bother me if there's nothing wrong, I'm with your sister-in-law..."

Hearing the beeping sound from the phone, Zhuang Rui was dumbfounded. Xu Qing was pregnant in broad daylight. Could Ouyang Jun be in such a hurry? Wasn't he afraid of hurting the baby?

"What? A boy?!"

Upon hearing the female doctor's words, Ouyang Jun was so overjoyed that he almost jumped for joy. This was truly a case of having a child late in life; he was almost forty when he finally had an heir. He was so happy that he didn't know what to say.

"Hello? Who is this? I dialed the wrong number, how would I know who you are? Oh, it's Wu'er. Let me tell you, your brother will soon have a big, healthy baby boy, hahaha..."

Overwhelmed with excitement, Ouyang Jun walked out of the ultrasound room, took out his phone, and dialed anyone he could, wanting to share this good news with others.

"You idiot, hurry up and get out of here..."

When Xu Daming saw Ouyang Jun's appearance, she quickly pulled her scarf up a little more. If the news of her seeing an obstetrician and gynecologist got out, it would probably be on the front page of the entertainment news again tomorrow.

"Hey, Fourth Brother, congratulations! I'll prepare some gifts for my nephew later..."

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Rui couldn't help but laugh. So Ouyang Jun was taking Xu Qing for a medical check-up? He had wronged him earlier.

"It's still early, you're not due for another six or seven months..."

Ouyang Jun had also come to his senses by this time. He opened the car door and let Xu Qing get in before getting into the driver's seat himself. He then said, "You had something to ask me earlier, didn't you?"

"Yes, Fourth Brother, there's something I need to ask. What kind of procedures are required to open a private museum in Beijing?"

Zhuang Rui hadn't originally planned to ask about the happy occasion that Ouyang Jun had brought up, but since it had, he decided to ask casually.

"A private museum?"

Ouyang Jun was taken aback for a moment, then said irritably, "Brother, I'm not an expert, how would I know about this? You're always coming up with weird and strange things..."

"Hehe, Fourth Brother, you said you're my only brother in Beijing, who else can I turn to if not you?"

Zhuang Rui laughed upon hearing this. It was true; he had managed to get Ouyang Jun to do things quite a bit lately, and he had to get all the big and small matters done by him.

"Alright, I'm in a good mood today. You can ask Xiao Wei about this later..."

After starting the car, Ouyang Jun hung up the phone. The "Xiao Wei" he mentioned was named Wei Ming, who was now the general manager of his real estate company and a professional manager hired by Ouyang Jun.

Zhuang Rui, who was nominally the general manager's assistant, actually had Wei Ming's phone number. He immediately called him and repeated what he had just said to Ouyang Jun.

Wei Ming is thirty-eight years old this year, a little younger than Ouyang Jun, but he is already a well-known real estate professional manager in Beijing. He has handled the development of many large-scale projects and has a wide network of contacts. Wei Ming also knows the relationship between Zhuang Rui and Ouyang Jun, so he dares not neglect the tasks assigned by Zhuang Rui.

Although Wei Ming didn't know what conditions were required for a private museum, this was no problem for him. After making some inquiries, he sent Zhuang Rui a fax containing the Ministry of Culture's "Museum Management Regulations".

"This matter is actually under my uncle's jurisdiction?"

Zhuang Rui couldn't help but laugh when he saw the name at the beginning of the fax. "I'm following the rules, so I'm sure no one will be so blind as to try and stop me."