AHEAD OF THEIR TIME: THE BESSE FAMILY COLLECTION

PUBLISHED 17/07/2026



For one married couple in Aden, Yemen, inheriting their father's collection was only the beginning: Tony and Christiane Besse formed a stunning collection of antiquities, many of which they discovered themselves. Not only did they uncover a wide range of South Arabian artworks, but they had the unusual foresight to retain essential documentation which has enabled their collecting legacy to thrive under ever-stricter provenance standards.

The Besse family collection was first formed by Antonin 'Tony' Bernard Besse's father, Sir Antonin Besse (1877-1951), who began acquiring objects in the early 20th century. Besse built his wealth through the company he founded in Aden, A. Besse & Co., which served as an agent for many international insurance, airline, and shipping companies. He also worked as the agent of Royal Dutch Shell. Besse brought great energy and drive to his business, which was fictionalised by Evelyn Waugh in the character of Monsieur le Blanc in the comic novel *Scoop*. In 1949, Besse donated funds to the University of Oxford for St Antony's College, requesting that it welcome foreign students, with no test of political, racial, or religious beliefs to determine entry. His hardworking ethos and his passion for education were passed down to his son Tony. Upon his death, Besse bequeathed many items from his collection to the British Museum, London including a Qatabanian stela (130884), Qatabanian sculpture (130892), and Qatabanian statuette (130901), among others).



Qatabanian stela, 2ndC BC-1stC BC, © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

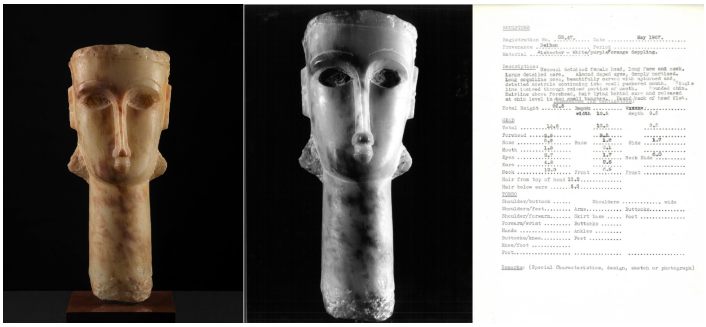
Tony (1927-2016) and his sister grew up in Nazi-occupied France, raised by their English nanny after their parents escaped to Aden in 1941. Tony began running errands for the Resistance, including stealing German weapons and equipment, and awaiting covert supply drops from Allied aircraft. This was a risky endeavour: once, his sister had to sit on a stolen German gun to hide it while their house was searched, and on another occasion, Tony was captured by an Italian officer, who set him free due to his youth and the fact the officer had known Tony's father in Somalia. Tony was even expelled from school for standing up and shouting at the Headmaster, who was a supporter of the Vichy regime. After the war, Tony began working for the family business but found he was unsuited to the comforts of office life. He soon left for New York, where he made his living as a taxi driver.

After his father's death in 1951, Tony returned to Aden and took over A. Besse & Co.. This is when he met Christiane, a journalist and writer working in Yemen at the time. Christiane is best known for her work on television series 'Jamais sans mon livre', and the 1990 film 'La légende de Joseph en Égypte', and was the first to translate the works of William Boyd, James Baldwin, and others, into French. She and Tony were married in 1957 and lived together in Aden for the following years. During this period, the couple expanded their antiquities collection. Tony would frequently dive with Jacques Cousteau in the early days of sub-aqua, and gather Greek and Roman treasures off the Turkish coast.

Wise Predictions

According to the Besse's children, Antonin Louis and Joy-Isabella, Christiane is the reason that the collection can now take its rightful place within renowned museum and private collections. It seems that Christiane's intelligence and uncanny foresight predicted the necessity of official documentation to confirm provenance, well before it was a common practice. After her

death, Antonin and Joy-Isabella discovered that she had procured export certificates for each object in the collection from the Aden government in the early 1960s – a level of documentation that was highly unusual for the time. These documents saved the collection during the events of the Aden Emergency, allowing the Besse collection to reach safe harbour with the children in Europe.



South Arabian Head of a Woman 3rd Century B.C. – 1st Century A.D., Qataban. Image: David Brunetti. May 1967 record of export, Department of Antiquities, Aden State

Tony and Christiane moved to Beirut, where they continued to follow their passion for antiquities. They collected diversely, acquiring alabaster bulls and busts alongside delicate Roman glass, small bronze animals, marble statues of goddesses, and Byzantine mosaics. When the civil war began in Lebanon in 1975, the couple left the Middle East and ceased adding new items to their collection.



Un ensemble de verres antiques syriens et une exceptionnelle collection de sculptures sudarabes en albâtre, provenant des divers royaumes antiques pré-islamiques de Ma'in, Saba et Qataban (actuel Yémen), et datant pour la plupart des cinq derniers siècles avant notre ère. Ces visages et représentations de dédicants étaient placés dans les temples sous la protection des divinités astrales. Le taureau (bucrane et probablement gouttière d'une table à sacrifices, disparue) était l'animal-symbole du dieu-lune Almaqah.

Photo of South Arabian antiquities in the Besse's apartment, L'Œil, January 1990.

A Lasting Legacy

In an ever-changing landscape of international regulations and increasing requirements for provenance documentation, Christiane's careful planning will allow items from the Besse collection to continue to travel freely for many years to come. As the couple were responsible for excavating many of their objects, the documents provide the current Holy Grail of provenance – a record of legal export from their country of origin. For the vast majority of antiquities, many of which were traded internationally when they were first made thousands of years ago, this kind of documentation is an effective impossibility. The Besse collection is, therefore, unique in its incredibly secure provenance.



ADEN STATE
DEPARTMENT OF ANTIQUITIES
CERTIFICATE OF REGISTRATION
No. 339

This is to certify that the antiquity described below has been registered with me in accordance with section 4, sub-sections (1) and (2) of the Antiquities Ordinance, 1948.

18th April 1967
Director of Antiquities

Name and Address of Owner: Madame Christian
Bess, Tao Lasley, Aden

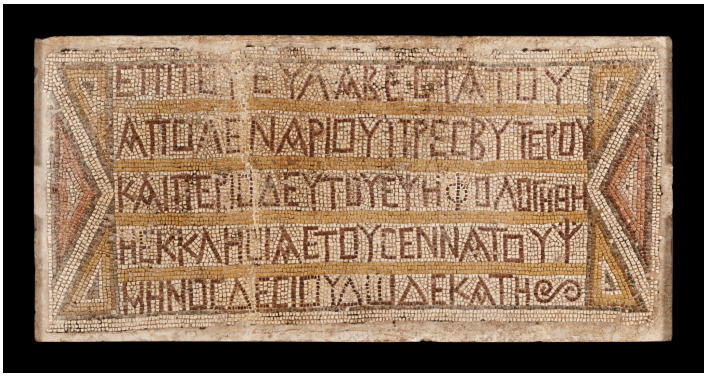
Description of Antiquity: Ibex frieze
Government Inventory Number: 303

Provenance: Marib, Yemen

Date of acquisition:

P.T.O.

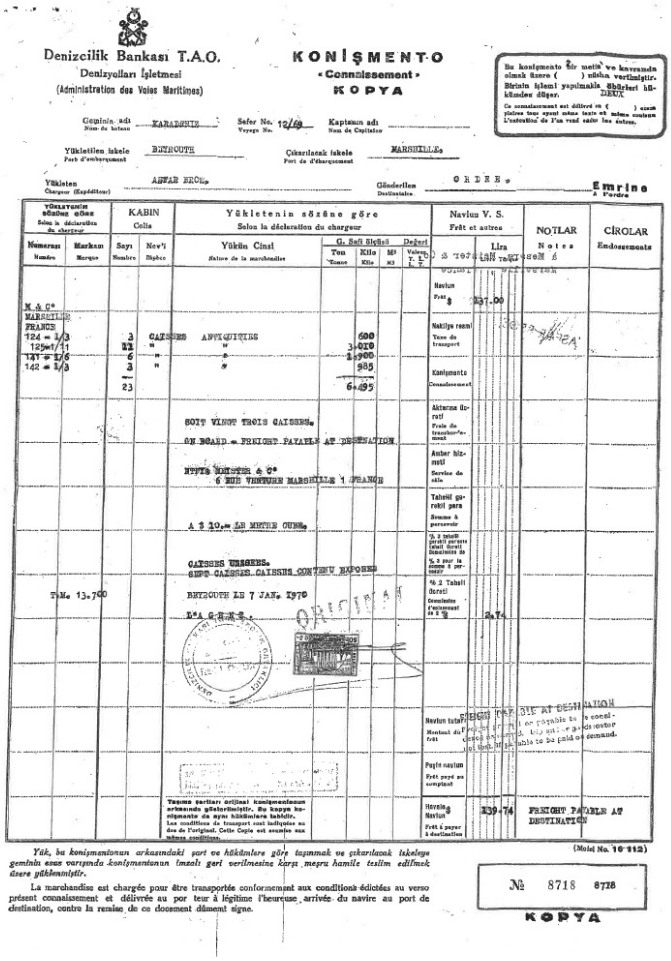
Ibex Frieze, 3rd Century B.C.-1st Century A.D., Qataban.Image: David Brunetti.18 April 1967 Aden State Department of Antiquities Certificate of Registration



Byzantine Mosaic Panel . Circa late 4th Century A.D., possibly near Antioch. Image: David Brunetti



Byzantine Mosaic Panel. Circa Early 5th Century A.D., possibly Antioch or Apamene. Image: David Brunetti



Denizcilik Bankası T.A.O.
Denizyolları İşletmesi
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KONİŞMENTO
«Connaissement»
KOPYA

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Ce connaissement est délivré en ( ) exemplaires tous ayant même teneur et même couleur. L'exécution de l'un vaut valeur des autres.

Geminin adı / Nom du bateau: KARADENIZ
Sefer No. / Voyage No.: 12/69
Kaptanın adı / Nom du Capitaine:
Yüklendiği liman / Port d'embarquement: BEYROUTH
Çıkarılacağı liman / Port de débarquement: MARSEILLE
Yükleten / Chargeur (Expéditeur): AGFAR BEOG
Gönderilen / Destinataire: ORDRE
Emrine / A l'ordre

Yükletenin sözüne göre / Selon la déclaration du chargeur								Navlun V. S. / Fret et autres		NOTLAR / Notes	CİROLAR / Endossements
Numaralar / Numéros	Markası / Marques	Sayı / Nombre	Nev'i / Espèce	Yükün Cinsi / Nature de la marchandise	G. Safi Ölçüsü / Tonn	Kilo	M³	Navlun / Fret	Lira		
M & C° MARSEILLE FRANCE 124 = 1/3 125=1/11 121 = 1/6 142 = 1/3		3 12 6 3 — 23	CAISSES	ANTIQUITES		600 3.010 1.900 985 — 6.495		Navlun / Fret $	837.00		
				SOIT VINGT TROIS CAISSES. ON BOARD = FREIGHT PAYABLE AT DESTINATION.				Nakliye resmi / Taxe de transport			
				BEYTS MEISSEN & C° 6 RUE TURTURIN MARSEILLE 1 FRANCE				Konişmento / Connaissement			
				A $ 10.= LE METRE CUBE.				Aktarma ücreti / Frais de transbordement			
				CAISSES USAGEES. DIPS CAISSES CAISSES CONTENU EXPOSES				Amber hizmeti / Service de table			
T.M. 13.700				BEYROUTH LE 7 JAN. 1970 E^el G.E.N.E.S.				Tahmil garubil para / Somme à percevoir			
								% 2 Tahmil garubi para üzerinden tenzilat / Diminution de % 2 pour le fret			
								% 2 Tahmil ücreti / Commission d'encaissement de 2 %	2.17		
								Navlun tutarı / Montant du fret		FREIGHT PAYABLE AT DESTINATION	
								Peşin navlun / Fret payé en comptant			
				Taşıma şartları orijinal konişmentonun arkasında gösterilmiştir. Bu kopya konişmento da aynı hükümlere tabidir. Les conditions de transport sont indiquées au dos de l'original. Cette Copie est soumise aux mêmes conditions.				Navlun / Fret	839.74	FREIGHT PAYABLE AT DESTINATION	

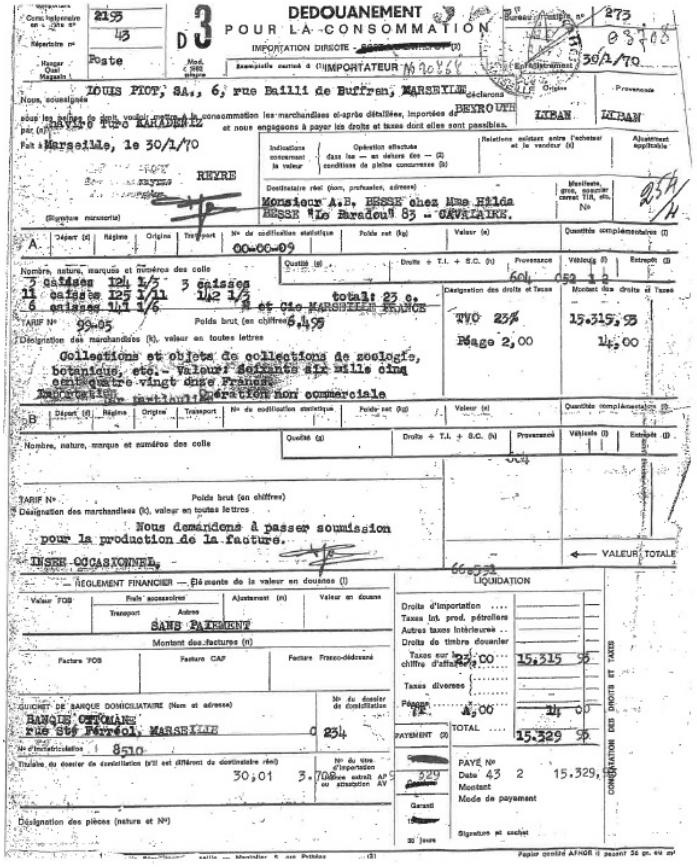
Yük, bu konişmentonun arkasındaki şart ve hükümlere göre taşınmak ve çıkarılacak iskelede geminin esas varışında konişmentonun imzalı geri verilmesine karşı meşru hamile teslim edilmek üzere gönderilmiştir.

La marchandise est chargée pour être transportée conformément aux conditions édictées au verso présent connaissement et délivrée au por teur à légitime l'heureuse arrivée du navire au port de destination, contre la remise de ce document dûment signé.

(Matbaa No. 10 912)

№ 8718 8718
KOPYA

Shipping documents for transporting mosaics from Beirut to Marseille, dated January 1970



DEDOUANEMENT
D 3
POUR LA CONSOMMATION
IMPORTATION DIRECTE

Bureau émetteur n° 273
Répertoire n° 2195 43
Poste
Mod. C 1002 bis/gros
Exemplaire exercé à DIMPORTATEUR N° 20656
Enregistrement 03 03 03 30/1/70

Nous, soussignés
IOUIS PIOT, SA., 6, rue Bailli de Suffren, MARSEILLE déclarons
sous les peines de droit vouloir mettre à la consommation les marchandises ci-après détaillées, importées de BEYROUTH par (n) navire Turc KARADENIZ et nous engageons à payer les droits et taxes dont elles sont passibles.
Origine LIBAN Provenance LIBAN
Fait à Marseille, le 30/1/70
Indications concernant la valeur | Opération effectuée dans les — en dehors des — (5) conditions de pleine concurrence (b) | Relations existant entre l'acheteur et le vendeur (c) | Ajustement applicable
REYRE
Destinataire réel (nom, prénoms, adresse) | Manifeste, pro., associer carnet TIR, etc. N°
Monsieur A.B. BESSE chez Mme Hilda BESSE "Le Mazadou" 83 - CAVALAIRE.
25/1/H

A	Départ (d)	Régime	Origine	Transport	N° de codification statistique	Poids net (kg)	Valeur (e)	Quantités complémentaires (f)
					00.00.09			

Nombre, nature, marques et numéros des colis | Quotité (g) | Droits + T.I. + S.C. (h) | Provenance | Véhicule (i) | Entrepôt (j)
3 caisses 124 1/3 3 caisses
11 caisses 125 1/11 1,2 1/3 totalt 23 c.
6 caisses 1,1 1/6 M et Cie MARSEILLE FRANCE
Désignation des droits et Taxes | Montant des droits et Taxes
TVO 23% 15.315,55
Rage 2,00 14,00
TARIF N° 99.05 Poids brut (en chiffres) 6,495
Désignation des marchandises (k), valeur en toutes lettres
Collections et objets de collections de zoologie, botanique, etc. - Valeur dollards six mille cinq cent quatre vingt deux Francs.
Importation temporaire - Opération non commerciale

B	Départ (d)	Régime	Origine	Transport	N° de codification statistique	Poids net (kg)	Valeur (e)	Quantités complémentaires (f)

Nombre, nature, marques et numéros des colis | Quotité (g) | Droits + T.I. + S.C. (h) | Provenance | Véhicule (i) | Entrepôt (j)
TARIF N° Poids brut (en chiffres)
Désignation des marchandises (k), valeur en toutes lettres
Nous demandons à passer soumission pour la production de la facture.
INSER OCCASIONNEL
VALEUR TOTALE 66631

RÈGLEMENT FINANCIER — Eléments de la valeur en douane (l)
Valeur FOB | Frais accessoires: Transport, Autres | Ajustement (m) | Valeur en douane
SANS PAIEMENT
Montant des factures (n)
Facture FOB | Facture CAF | Facture Franco-déboursé

LIQUIDATION
Droits d'importation
Taxes int. prod. pétroliers
Autres taxes intérieures
Droits de timbre douanier
Taxes sur CA 23,00 chiffre d'affaires 15,315 55
Taxes diverses
Parafiscalité 14,00
TOTAL 15.329 55
PAYEMENT (o)
PAYÉ N° 43 2 15.329,
Date
Montant
Mode de payement
Signature et cachet

GUICHET DE BANQUE DOMICILIATAIRE (Nom et adresse)
BANQUE OTTOMANE
Rue Stè Pétrol, MARSEILLE 0 234
N° de domiciliation 8510
N° du dossier de constitution
Titulaire du dossier de constitution (s'il est différent du destinataire réel) 30,01 3.700
N° du titre d'importation ou acquit-à-caution ou situation AP AV 329
Garant
30 jours
Désignation des pièces (nature et N°)

CONSIGNATION DES DROITS ET TAXES

Papier recyclé AFNOR 11 pesant 36 gr. au m²

Shipping documents for transporting mosaics from Beirut to Marseille, dated January 1970