

## Profile: David L. Mason OBE

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By Michael Prodger

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David L. Mason started life as a dealer on his knees. In 1956, at the age of 17, he joined his father Leslie MacConnal-Mason in the family business in Duke Street, St James's in London, and found himself, somewhat to his surprise, cleaning the doorstep and toilet. With a table, a chair, a six-month renewable lease and £15,000 in the bank, Mason's fledgling career was not a glamorous one. Now, shortly to turn 85, the MacConnal-Mason Gallery owns two buildings on Duke Street and Mason's son, David MacConnal Mason, represents the fourth generation to take the business on.



David L. Mason OBE

Courtesy of [MacConnal-Mason Gallery](#)

Mason senior is an amiable and gregarious figure, a natural raconteur, from whom, as he sits among the Georgian furniture in his plum-coloured office, stories flow effortlessly. Some are about the picture business, such as the time he and Andrew Lloyd Webber offered the Puerto Rican industrialist and politician Luis A Ferré £10 million for Lord Leighton's celebrated *Flaming June* and were gently rebuffed, and some more randomly colourful, such as being brought before a magistrate for a mere half dozen driving offences committed just a day after first gaining his licence.



Eugene de Blaas 'The Venetian Flower Vendor'  
Courtesy of [MacConnal-Mason Gallery](#)

With his rival Richard Green, "We've scrapped over the years... competition is integral to being a dealer", Mason is one of the most venerable picture dealers in London. The gallery specialises in 19th-century British and Continental works – fancy pictures, seascapes, Impressionist landscapes, Dutch works and figure paintings – and early modern British works by the likes of Henry Moore and LS Lowry. "We cater for the majority of tastes", he says. Not quite: he goes nowhere near "that contemporary crap they are playing around with" in galleries nearby.



Sir A J Munnings 'Lord Astor's High Stakes'  
Courtesy of [MacConnal-Mason Gallery](#)

Mason reckons that over the decades he has sold perhaps 300,000-400,000 paintings at every price range. As he helped Lloyd Webber build his spectacular collection, a relationship that has lasted more than 20 years, he paid £10 million for Canaletto's *The Old Horseguards* from St James's Park and £18 million for Picasso's Blue period portrait of Angel Fernandez de Soto. The business has £15 million worth of Lowry's in stock, he says, although the majority of MacConnal-Mason paintings aren't quite as stratospheric. While Mason has watched the market turn increasingly towards more modern works, his clientele nevertheless remains steadfast.



L.S. Lowry 'Excavating in Manchester'  
Courtesy of [MacComal-Mason Gallery](#)

So, how would he treat someone who walks off the street and says: "I know nothing about art but I want to start a collection"? Mason ponders: "I'd say, 'I need a day with you.' We'd have breakfast, lunch and dinner together. We'd go to the National Gallery, for two hours – you can't look at pictures for more than two hours – and by the end of the day I'd know what you like." It is a personal process that he makes sound very much like a courtship. Then "I'd keep showing you pictures and see your reaction. I'd tell you the price of things and why they cost that much. And I'd remind you that one good painting is better than 25 also-rans."

Mason is unsniffy about collectors' motivations. He has dealt with enough of them to know that buying paintings for aesthetic reasons is, for a commercial gallery, no more valid than buying for investment or for "furnishing". His own taste is, he says, for "top quality" and he is particularly fond of the Impressionists, James Tissot and Constable's *The Hay Wain* – "People say, 'It's too bloody obvious.' No, it's not."

Paintings, however, are not his only interest. For many years he was a driving force behind the battle to compensate the families of Thalidomide victims – his daughter Louise was one of them. The campaign was successful, not least because of Mason's insistence, backed up by badgering Harold Wilson, that payments should be tax free. While from the ages of 18 to 80 he was a competitive racing driver – endurance cars mostly – winning numerous races of note. He retired from racing just three years ago and sold six of his Ferraris. Did he make money on them? "I do better with pictures. A car dealer I am not." He perceives one similarity between driving cars at 200mph and dealing paintings though: "lunacy".



Courtesy of MacConnal-Mason Gallery

Nonetheless, it is his achievements as a dealer of which he is most proud. "After all, I've been doing it for more than 60 years and it's been brilliant," and he is still dreaming up plans for the company's future. However, he adds a caveat: "Some people might say that if you are still sodding about with pictures at 84 'You can't have been that successful.'" And for the record, he has no points on his driving licence.

