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Paris Biennale: The Biggest Showcase in the Global Village

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PARIS — In gleaming white garb, the 26th Paris Biennale des Antiquaires, designed by Karl Lagerfeld, opened its doors at the Grand Palais on Friday.

Spectacularly renovated at the initiative of its president, Christian Deydier, the art selling show has shed its fussy appearance of yore. Meet 122 modern-age dealers selling art that can go as far back as the 3rd millennium B.C. or be as recent as the 21st century — the latter, a first in the Biennale.

Until Sept. 23, visitors can discover at a glance where the strength lies in the global art market and where opportunities get scarcer as supplies shrink.

Early Chinese art stands out as the major area where masterpieces worthy of any international museum still turn up — the problem being, of course, that most international institutions will only buy these if documented evidence proves that they tumbled into the market before 1970, the cut-off date adopted by Unesco. This leaves private buyers, whose numbers are growing fast, stimulated as they are by objects that constantly expand our apprehension of Chinese culture in ancient times.

Even in categories that seemed extensively represented, recent discoveries reveal new levels of splendor. A gilt bronze Buddhist reliquary of the 8th century shown by Gisèle Cröes of Brussels ranks among the most beautiful examples of the architecture of form in Tang China. The lotus bud about to blossom that crowns the convex cover, a rare feature, sets it apart.

Nearby, a wine container designed as a reclining bull cast in bronze around the 3rd century B.C. is a reminder of the artistic revolution, one of many in Chinese history, that led the ancient culture to switch from predominantly abstract patterns to outright figural representation.

Mr. Deydier, a leading dealer in Chinese art, shows newly discovered works from a large cache that, he says, was opened up three years ago. Together the silks and the remains of a silver gilt vase point to some location in Xinjiang, as Chinese Turkestan is now called.

Part of a loom with birds enclosed in beaded roundels, obviously from 8th century Iran, reflects the enduring legacy of the Sasanian dynasty in early Islamic times. Other silks are likely to have been woven in remote centers yet to be identified.

The biggest surprise on Mr. Deydier's stand is a product of the art that blossomed at the crossroads of Iranian and Chinese cultures. The parcel gilt silver jar, previously unpublished, apparently reached France decades ago when it passed into the hands of a French academic, the late Louis Hambis of the Collège de France.

The mythical scenes worked in repoussé must have gripped the scholar whose research focused on Central Asia. Two riders, one mounting an elephant and the other a camel raise their Iranian-style swords to strike down roaring lions. Elsewhere, a guardian steadying an Indian trident (a tricula) and another guardian wearing the mask of a goat stand on each side of the lugs. Heated if arcane debates are likely to be triggered by the astonishing piece — which carries a €3.5 million, or $4.6 million, price tag.

Antiquities, that vaguely defined category, which runs from the dawn of history to the occupation of Rome by the Germanic invaders in 476 A.D., represent the other art market pole where astounding discoveries are still made.

At Phoenix Ancient Art of Geneva, the brothers Ali and Hicham Aboutaam display a terra cotta urn painted around 540-520 B.C. by a Greek artist. Also unpublished, it must have come to light in recent years. In a masterly hunting scene that looks like a ritual performance, athletic men in the nude are seen racing. A boar confronting danger points its head down, one front leg raised, as if about to charge the enemy.

A highly important and likewise unrecorded vessel in the shape of a reclining stag is described as "Scythian, 6th-5th century B.C." The gold pouring implement, with a short inlet on the back and a tubular spout coming out of the mouth, belongs in a series of Iranian wine vessels. The strictly figural static style, unknown among the artifacts hypothetically ascribed to the nomadic Scythians, makes a 4th- or 3rd-century B.C. date likely. It was sold at the private viewing on Thursday, its €2.5 million price tag notwithstanding.

French 17th- and 18th-century furniture is one area where the top of the top remains obtainable without raising ethical issues. Outstanding 18th-century pieces here and there remind viewers that the whole of Europe was dazzled by the French court style.

A pair of ormolu (gilt bronze) chenets of the Régence period (1715 -1725) displayed by the Galerie Didier Aaron was commissioned by a Russian aristocratic family when Peter the Great of Russia was building Saint Petersburg. Rearing horses raise their legs over escutcheons engraved with the

arms of the Stroganoffs.

Jean-Marie Rossi of Galerie Aveline shows a unique Louis XVI period armchair, its openwork back carved in the form of two entwining serpents confronted on either side of a shaft. This is a caduceus, signaling that it was destined for some famous physician of the 1780s.

The perfect gem of the period, a solid mahogany fauteuil de bureau, swivelling on its pediment, is on view in the booth of Anne Marie Monin. The curving back of the Louis XV age is associated with tapering fluted legs typical of the neo-classicism that would define the Louis XVI age. With its varnished leather upholstery of the period, which is crackled and has turned a rich brown hue, the armchair stamped with Pierre Garnier's mark is an understated masterpiece of 18th-century design.

The Art Deco age is close enough to our time for its greatest furniture to be still obtainable. On the stand of the Galerie Marcilhac, a commode has the streamlined geometric volumes dear to Eugène Printz by the early 1920s, softened by the rich grain of Brazilian rosewood. Poised on a bold brushed steel pediment, it has a timeless modernity. Félix Marcilhac, the dean of the field, says that he handled only one other example of the model in the past four decades.

Alain Marcepoil chose to devote his booth to the oeuvre of André Sornay, one of the great Art Deco designers on whom he wrote the current reference book "Signé Sornay" published two years ago. The designer has yet to achieve the celebrity he deserves, which explains why much of his finest work remains available.

Were specialists in Old Master paintings under the impression that the Biennale is tilted toward the art of the object? Or have great masterpieces merely vanished from the market? A bit of both may explain their relatively modest displays.

The Robilant + Voena partnership based in London and Milan wins the contest. A still life with the bust of Minerva rising amid the paraphernalia of a military trophy — a plumed helmet, muskets, a drum and a standard — is signed by Anne Vallayer-Costrer who dispatched it to the 1777 Salon. Minerva looks with a human expression at the sunlight coming down through an invisible window. Giorgio de Chirico would have approved of this early outburst of Surrealism.

A few rarities can be seen. Richard Green brought over from London two still lifes by the German master Georg Flegel and another still life by the much sought after Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, signed and dated 1621.

Otherwise it is the 20th century that dominates the paintings displays.

Even Edmondo di Robilant and Marco Voena gave in to the modernist fashion. They have a 20th-

century alcove with works by Giacomo Manzù, Giorgio Morandi and Lucio Fontana.

The Galerie Berès, which focused on 19th-century avant-garde works, has turned to the modern world. Pierre Soulages and Simon Hantaï, Max Ernst and Mark Tobey are now its stars.

For originality, the first prize goes to the Galerie Zlotowski of Paris with its show “Jean Dubuffet en papier.” Dubuffet’s work on paper reveals an artist displaying far greater versatility than those only familiar with the French artist’s pseudo-childish characters would credit him with. In his little known abstractionist phase, Dubuffet’s art can be full of delicate nuances.

There is less on view than in previous years, which contributes to the greater clarity of the Biennale. The greatest works are more promptly spotted. For the casual visitor who comes to gaze at art if not for the collector looking to buy, the Biennale as a show has never been better.