

Not the same old things

Say “Paris” and “antiques”, and the Louvre comes to mind. It is the most visited museum in the world. But if you want to go beyond the readily available super-arena of preciousness, here is an ode to the “other” antique Paris.

HAVE NEVER BEEN INSIDE THE LOUVRE (www.louvre.fr). Me, a dedicated museum-goer, not been inside the Louvre? Call me a rebel, ludicrous or plain dumb, but there you have it.

It's not that I haven't tried, but every time I have wanted to go down those prohibitively long escalators, the rest of Paris has beckoned. Whenever I am confronted by the choice between the obvious and the obscure, the latter tends to win.

Besides, my all-time favourite museum moment in the entire world is just two minutes' walk away from there. So the proximity of Madame Lanvin's bathroom always causes me to turn around, dash down the rue de Rivoli, silently mumbling a relieved promise to myself: “Next time.”

In 1920, the couturière Jeanne Lanvin commissioned Albert-Armand Rateau to decorate her apartment at 16 rue Barbet-de-Jouy. When the building was demolished in 1965, her son-in-law bequeathed three of the room settings to the city. The bathroom is one. It is a marvel in green marble, with fabulous little bronze bird-shaped taps and extremely tall bronze standing lamps. This tiny and brilliant monument to La Belle Epoque has found a permanent home on the fourth floor of Les Arts Décoratifs at 107 rue de Rivoli.

The Museum of Decorative Arts (www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr) re-opened in 2006 after a 10-year face-lift that cost 35 million. And although it is by no means “obscure”, it suffers from sharing the city with such a well-known neighbour. Unlike the Louvre, it is

imminently do-able. It is contained, specific, modern, vibrant and accessible.

As the name suggests, it is dedicated to the history of the decorative object (a category that includes items of everyday living) from the Middle Ages to the present. Its focus is design. According to the curator, Béatrice Salmon, their mandate is to illustrate a “history of French taste”, or, as they call it “l'art de vivre”, so, although the majority of the more than 6 000 items on display are of French (mostly Parisian) origin, some international icons are exhibited.

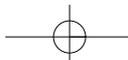


Tesserae Ambra by Barovier and Toso, circa 1950. Galeries Plaisance is famous for glass vases such as this one. Expect to pay in excess of R50 000.

Objects, furniture and interiors by the likes of René Lalique, Hector Guimard, Pierre Chareau, Robert Mallet-Stevens, Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand, Jean Prouvé and Philippe Starck (France's most famous designer today) proclaim the brilliance of these French stars. Besides being beautiful, the pieces featured in the collection are rare and valuable. In 2004, a single bronze chair designed by Rateau was sold for US\$970 700, setting a world auction record for a 20th-century chair. Five of the nine floors are dedicated to 20th-century furniture design.

Paris is in love with the 20th century, and so am I.

If you want to do more than look, Paris is the place to be. It would be difficult to choose my favourite antique shop (which they call galleries), but I have a shortlist: Francois Laffanour's Galerie Downtown (www.galeriedowntown.com), Arnaud and Frederica Plaisance's amazing Galeries >>



ARTYFACTS

>> Plaisance (www.galerie-plaisance.com), Patrick Seguin's (www.patrickseguin.com) and Alexis Lahellec's shop (www.alexislahellec.com). The first two operate from the extremely elegant area on the Left Bank known as Le Carre Rive Gauche; the other two are situated on the Right Bank.

This is the international elite of 20th-century decorative arts. The merchandise is exquisite, rare and well-researched. And, like all else that is exquisite, rare and has had value added by the authentication of world experts, lots of money is involved.

Auctions with authenticity

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO BUY BUT ARE RESTRAINED by a tight budget, you might be tempted to think that the auction houses offer a wholesale option. But beware: unlike in London or New York, Paris auctions are for professionals.

Like so much else in Paris, the auctioneering system is unique and ever so slightly incomprehensible. In all fairness to the French, this system has been in operation since 1254, according to the website of the Drouot (www.drouot.com), an umbrella organisation of about 72 specialist auctioneers. Yes, 1254 – the year in which this ancient Roman manner of trade was revived in Paris.

Unlike their international counterparts, Paris auctioneers share the spaces in which their auctions take place. The biggest and most famous of these sale rooms is called the Hôtel Drouot. Fourteen individual rooms on three levels serve the needs of the 72 Drouot auctioneers. None of the rooms belongs to any one of the individual auctioneering firms; they merely have the privilege of using them. Auctioneers have premises off-site.

Demand for space is invariably high, so the period for which a particular room is allocated to a particular auctioneer is brief, to say the least. The result is nerve-wracking. On most days, every one of the 14 rooms is occupied with preparations and set-ups, viewings, sales or removals. Staff members and potential buyers jostle for position on escalators and in front of glass display cases.

Only the most hardened old-timers are not intimidated by the pace – from the outside it seems like sheer chaos. It's noisy, but there is no time for social dilly-dallying (that is, after all, what their beloved coffee shops are for). Big decisions have to be made in split seconds.

The presence of only the initiated (dealers) and the most ardently committed (collectors), and the absence of the bored and the frivolous out for a bit of fun, lends to the Drouot an edge of authenticity that is lacking elsewhere.

As for their auction experts, the latest trend from Paris is the arrival of the "consulting" expert or adviser. Private collectors and/or specialist dealers are invited by an auctioneer to "curate" a sale. This trend pertains specifically to the decorative arts of the 20th

century. It is a fairly new area of collecting, so expertise is still limited.

We have just received the latest catalogue from Aguttes (www.aguttes.com). Arnaud Plaisance is the expert for its next Arts Décoratifs du Xxème, to be held at the Hôtel des Ventes de Neuilly (one of the other locations that is used for the more prestigious auctions). Even the catalogue is a work of art.

Hidden treasure

THERE IS, OF COURSE, ONE MORE ANTIQUES-shopping opportunity in Paris: the markets. I cannot speak from experience, because I do not like flea markets. When I am in Paris I want to see the best and to experience the excellent, not wade through tons of junk and bargain my head off. But I am including this section on account of my friend Romi.

According to Romi, who has been living in Paris for more than a decade, Paris flea markets are still strewn with treasures, providing you know where to look. And she can prove it: she has the most beautiful, magical apartment I have ever seen. The tall sash windows of her 18th-century building billow with layers and layers of ox-blood-coloured, deep-piled cotton velvet embroidered with gold bullion thread. On the walls, which match the colour of her long hair exactly (why on earth is it called red if it is so evidently orange?), thick gilded frames complement a mass of ancient crosses. From the ceilings hang a vast collection of crystal chandeliers. All old, all real, all opulent, all Paris flea market finds.

Paris has three main flea markets situated around the gates of the old city: Clignancourt (18th *arrondissement*), Vanves (14th *arrondissement*), Montreuil (20th *arrondissement*). The most famous is the St Ouen Market at the Porte de Clignancourt. It is the biggest flea market in the world. About 200 000 visitors arrive each weekend, so a guide might be needed if you intend to pay a visit.

Alternatively, an excellent website, www.discoverfrance.net, should help you navigate the markets by yourself. Remember, if you really want to find the true bargain treasures, you will be competing with the rest of Paris, so be there very early (between 5am and 6am) or be willing to settle for the experience only – not that the Paris experience itself is not enough. There is always something else to see, to look forward to, to do. I might even ask Romi to take me to the market one morning or pop into the Louvre some time. I might.

PS. I promised myself I would not say anything about the art, architecture or food in Paris. But I simply have to break my rule ever so very, very slightly: if you do go to the Museum of Decorative Arts, check out the coffee shop. I'm not saying anything more, just check out their coffee shop. Bon voyage!

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