

More Western works ending up in China

Nation's rising legions of rich people snapping up an increasing share of European master paintings, art objects as part of their new homes' interior decor.



Valerie Barrelet checks with one antique expert the quality of an antique cloisonne by Galle in a Parisian gallery.



A beautiful suite of various antique chairs are displayed at Art Decorative Museum (Musee des Arts Decoratifs) in Paris.



A typical Galle vase "pate de verre" (the decor was made by hand with acid finish) is placed on the Napoleon III bonheur du jour (one kind of cabinet) with Chinese decor by Maison Vedeer de Paris.

Yang Di

At the recent Biennale des Antiquaires in Paris, the event symbolizing French luxury in culture and decor, top art dealers and galleries have brought together the greatest objects d'art they can offer.

The president of the Biennale Commission has stated: "If works of art were to live only in their own day and age, our profession would not exist. The strength of works is the way they cross the ages. Our work is also to show today's collectors that the past combines with the present and blends so wonderfully well with modernity."

An interior designer and art consultant working between Paris and Shanghai, Valerie Barrelet, agrees about blending old treasures with our modern way of living. Born and educated in France, she is keen to bring the finest of French savoir-faire to China.

With her intuition and sensitivity, fostered by years of research and travel, Barrelet draws her strength from knowledge when looking at works of art. Her mission is to discover the most interesting pieces for knowledgeable collectors.

Why have European classic paintings and antiques started to become popular in the Chinese market?

From the very beginning, art has been the muse of bankers and millionaires, so that a wealthy Chinese clientele has developed a passion for European art and antiques should come as no surprise.

In a country where success and ambition are popular values, investing in art is a comfortable compromise that mingles good taste with culture and offers a financial return largely superior to traditional rates of return.

How do you describe the classic art market evolution in China?

A new group of Chinese clientele is fond of buying and having houses and villas for the pleasure of it and as a prerequisite for starting a family. The new owners are starting to show an interest in Western art in all its forms, the height of luxury being to have a house furnished in a French or English style filled with antique and period pieces, works of art made by European artists.



Auction house Christie's in Hong Kong says 20 percent of its sales now come from buyers from across China, whereas Chinese buyers were virtually non-existent in the market five years ago.

Works of artists like Renoir, Monet and Van Gogh are highly sought by Chinese buyers attending auctions in New York, London and Paris, and a businessman from Shanghai recently paid US\$1 million for a Picasso painting at Christie's auction in Hong Kong.

In addition to its decorative, artsy purposes, this type of investment gives collectors the feeling they have acquired a piece of history. Culturally, the Chinese appreciate sophisticated products, hence their passion for classical paintings.

You brought many Barbizon School paintings from France to Chinese clients. What are the reasons?

The reasons for which the Barbizon School holds such an appeal in Asia are twofold. First, it represents a defining period in the history of art.

During this period (1825-75), the Barbizon School of painters were part of the Realism movement, which arose in the context of the dominant Romantic movement of the time. Some of the



The painting with Art Deco subject by artist Auguste Brunet Houard (1829-1922)

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1. During the Biennale Paris, a beautiful selection of Impressionist master pieces is featured in one gallery booth.

2. Valerie Barrelet's showroom on Shanghai's Huashi Road features a well-selected mix of contemporary design and antique artworks sourced from Europe.

most prominent features of this school are its tonal qualities, color, loose brushwork and softness of form.

Subjects of paintings were not necessarily academic or commissioned works. Artists painted for the pleasure of painting and of expressing themselves. Despite being somewhat mainstream, the Barbizon School opened the door to expressionism. It is important to bear in mind that what is now considered to be classical art represented a revolution at the time.

The second reason is a financial one, as the school represents a very prolific period that is highly documented and established, and for which values of the paintings have been increased in recent years, thus offering relatively stable investments. It is possible to acquire one or more original works from this period within a wide range of budgets, without having to invest millions of dollars. The average budget ranges from 3,500 (US\$4,439) to 20,000 euros for works of artists featured in catalogs, dictionaries of painters, museums and auctions.

Art lovers are also eyeing contemporary art for investment returns. Compared to contemporary art, why do you suggest people also look for classic paintings as alternatives?

Amounts to be invested for contemporary art are significant, with a future deemed more uncertain as a given work's popularity depends upon the judgment of a happy few who decide what shall or shall not be tomorrow's work of genius.

In addition, technical issues linked to paintings being poorly prepared and a lack of techniques for many artists result in works not standing up to the test of time.

What's worth keeping an eye on for



the future is old paintings. Works of masters from the end of the 19th/early 20th century remain very reasonably priced. The European aesthetic of the 1950s is highly sought after in China, and it could be a sound idea to start acquiring a collection of modern works to enhance the originality of an interior design.

Amateur collectors are starting to collect drawings and some only purchase drawings. How do you describe this trend?

Over the past few years, Paris has become the world capital of the market of drawings, as evidenced by the Salon du Dessin ancien (Old Masters Drawing Fair), the Salon Drawing Now and the Salon Dessin (Drawing Fair), not to mention auctions for old and modern drawings set to take place at Christie's and the many museum exhibitions devoted to drawings, amongst which the fabulous Florence and Daniel Guerlain Donation exhibited at the Pompidou Centre, which comprises 1,200 works.

After the fad for photography, it would appear that it is now the turn of drawing to win acclaim.

It is an affordable and promising market and in the space of 10 years, its value has increased by 185% (see Expansion magazine).

From a legal standpoint, drawings are considered to be works of art in their own right and as such, they fully benefit from the particularly advantageous tax conditions applicable to works of art. In France, should you be in the possession of a work of art for 22 years, it becomes fully exempt from its added value.

For example, in 2012, a drawing by master of the Renaissance Raffaello Sanzio depicting the head of an apostle was sold at 36.7 million euros and shattered the previous record of a ravishing head of a muse sold for 32.2 million euros in 2009.

How do you define the new Chinese amateur art collectors?

The new Chinese generation is seeking to set themselves apart from the crowd. The average age of the wealthiest part of the population is getting younger. The ensuing dynamism has generated a fresh perspective on the artistic world, one that is less established and more playful, with a newfound commitment and a willingness to shake things up.

