

Collecting

Antiques: Ways of selling

Fifth-generation dealers Nicolas and Alexis Kugel talk about adapting to less flamboyant modern tastes



Second-century marble Hercules restored in 1628

SEPTEMBER 8, 2017 by Susan Moore

When Galerie J Kugel acquired the imposing Hôtel Collot on the quai Anatole France in Paris in 2004, it was tantamount to a rallying cry. Following the art market crash of

1990, the taste for traditional works had been in dramatic decline, but Nicolas and Alexis Kugel, fifth-generation brothers in an antiques business founded in Russia at the end of the 18th century, demonstrated the courage of their convictions. While colleagues in Paris and London suffered a crisis of confidence, they invested in a business that celebrated the grandest of all decorative arts.

Now the firm is adding a further six exhibition galleries to their already palatial premises. Unlike the rich period rooms of the hôtel, however, these interiors — created by extending the original mews behind — are strikingly spare, simply painted and sparsely filled. “We are not betraying our taste,” insists Alexis Kugel, pointing out that while the new galleries are more sober, they are far from modern. “Accumulations of beautiful objects are our cultural heritage, but we began to realise that these were sometimes overwhelming for visitors and made it difficult for them to imagine how a painting or a commode would look in their own interiors.”

They also realised that sumptuous accumulations did not always provide the best environment for viewing a single work of art. “When a painting is hung above a commode in an opulent room, we found that visitors tended to assume that it was merely decorative and not look at it properly,” he adds.



George Romney's 'Portrait of Mrs North' (1870)

Old Master paintings, plus sculpture from antiquity to the 19th century, form the dual focus of the new expansion. "These are two fields that we have been dealing in for some time but we are hardly known for them, as we are not prominent actors in the

auction rooms, given that we buy privately and also sell quietly,” Kugel continues. “We have the opportunity to buy what we might not [think] of acquiring in other circumstances.”

He cites the portrait of Mrs North swathed in white muslin by George Romney from 1780, which came from the French branch of the Rothschild family. “This was a famous portrait in France around 1900 when there was a great fashion for English portraits. She was known as ‘La Dame en blanc’.”

Counter to current trends, the firm also has a penchant for Grand Tour antiquities that retain their later additions and restorations. “Until the late 19th century, nobody could admire a broken classical torso, but now most modifications tend to be removed. Many of these restorations were made by famous sculptors.” Kugel cites as an example their first-century Roman marble statue of Silenus riding a shaggy goat, which has very obvious restorations by the celebrated Bartolomeo Cavaceppi. Like many such pieces, it has an English provenance: the Marquess of Rockingham had bought it in 1764 through his agent James “Athenian” Stuart, for £50.



Jewelled and enamelled gold hat badge (c1550)

Kugel admits that the relatively austere new galleries have something of an English flavour. He might also have added that they are still rather grand by most people's standards — even the firm's clients'. Most buyers, he concedes, live more in the style of these new interiors than the old. But, he adds, "It needs one person who visits the great rooms to decide that this is the proper way of living and that will have proved us right." Happily for the Kugels, there has been more than just one.

From September 13, galeriekugel.com

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