

Rare tortoiseshell masterpieces from Naples

Bringing together objects that are also made from mother-of-pearl and gold

BY NAZANIN LANKARANI

This week, as global connoisseurs flock to La Biennale Paris, the now-annual gathering of the world's top sellers of art and antiques, one prestigious dealer is sitting this edition out, as it has every year, to host its own show and sale of 18th-century masterpieces.

Running from Wednesday through Dec. 8 in the salons of the historic Hôtel Collet, home to the Galerie J. Kugel in Paris, the show, titled "Complètement Piqué," rivals in rarity and exquisite craftsmanship some of the best offerings of the Biennale across the river at the Grand Palais.

"For 20 years, we have tried to shed light with our annual exhibition on a sophisticated artistic production that has been neglected by art historians," said Alexis Kugel, co-owner of the Kugel

and olive oil, then impressing the softened material with mother-of-pearl and fine patterns of gold to create inlaid decorative motifs.

This limited 40-year production, according to Mr. Kugel, coincides with the highest-quality work by the most inventive artisans.

"Before 1720, the art of tortoiseshell was not truly perfected, and after 1760, the objects became less spectacular," Mr. Kugel said. "What we chose for the show are hands down the most spectacular pieces."

"Complètement Piqué," which in colloquial French means "completely insane," suggests the sheer madness of the tartarugari, or tortoiseshell workers, who specialized in this complicated technique to produce extravagant yet purely decorative objects.

While a number of pieces in the show come from a prestigious provenance, including the Rothschild collections, many are unsigned, which until now had made a precise attribution challenging. According to Mr. Kugel, the absence of modern research on tortoiseshell objects and their makers prompted him to tackle this task.

The fruit of his work, aided by an extensive in-house library, is a catalog published in English by Rizzoli that contains what promises to be the most exhaustive research to date on the subject of Neapolitan tortoiseshell piqué, research that could alter some of the existing attributions for such objects in museums around the world.

Michèle Bimbenet-Privat, senior curator in the decorative arts department of the Louvre, has studied the catalog. "Until now, the writings on the subject of piqué were limited to a few short articles and notices in auction catalogs," she said. "What is both novel and precious about the work done by the Kugel gallery is they have brought together an ensemble of rare piqué objects, something no one had done before, making it possible for the first time to compare different styles and decorative motifs to identify the specific ateliers and set exact dates."

This new scholarship could bring precision to the attribution of a rare tortoiseshell table that the Hermitage Mu-



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seum of St. Petersburg, Russia, has lent to the show. This is the first time that the richly decorated table, with Chinese-inspired motifs of pagodas and exotic animals in engraved mother-of-pearl and gold piqué, attributed today to Gennaro Sarao and dated from 1730 to 1770, has left the Hermitage since it entered its collections in 1933.

Mr. Kugel has concluded that the table was actually made by Giuseppe Sarao, Gennaro's father, whose atelier is known to have completed a number of royal commissions, based on a royal coat of arms under the table's base that Mr. Kugel believes belongs to the Hapsburg dynasty and predates the arrival in 1734 in Naples of the ruler Charles of Bourbon who expelled the Hapsburgs.

"Giuseppe was a genius who produced objects of unparalleled quality," Mr. Kugel said. "After 1734, the Sarao atelier would not have placed the arms of the Hapsburgs on a royal commission by the Bourbons."

While the Hermitage Museum for now maintains its attribution, it agrees that a renewed look may be warranted. "The coat of arms under the table needs



additional research, as does the name of the master, Giuseppe or Gennaro," said Tatyana Semenova, senior researcher at the Hermitage's department of Western European Applied Art.

The objects in the show are all for sale at prices commensurate with the rarity, complexity and provenance of the

From Russia
At left, a tortoiseshell table that the Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia, has lent to the show. Below the table is a chest with chinoiserie décor, standing on four turtle-shaped legs.



Elaborate
Above, a lidless goblet topped with a monkey, made of tortoiseshell piqué with gold and mother-of-pearl. At left, a Neapolitan tortoiseshell ewer, also in mother-of-pearl and gold piqué, dating from the early 18th century.



pieces, with the exception of the table from the Hermitage. For example, a Neapolitan tortoiseshell ewer and basin in mother-of-pearl and gold piqué dating from the early 18th century was sold at a Sotheby's auction in 2016 for \$370,945.

While the hawksbill turtle is a regulated species under the rules of the United Nations Environment World Conservation Monitoring Center, its international trade is permitted given that the objects are more than 100 years old, according to Mr. Kugel, who has obtained export papers for each piece.

"What we show may not be very fashionable," Mr. Kugel said. "But we try to make it accessible so visitors can come in, admire beautiful objects and benefit from our research."

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gallery, in an interview. "Our clients expect to be surprised."

"This year, we chose the art of tortoiseshell piqué from Naples because these objects have never been the subject of a dedicated exhibition," he said.

In recent years, esoteric shows at the Galerie J. Kugel, always accompanied by an erudite catalog, have showcased Renaissance-era automaton clocks, or snuffboxes made by Johann Christian Neuber (1732-1808), a mineralogist and goldsmith in the court of Frederick Augustus III of Saxony.

This year's show brings together about 50 objects made out of tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl and gold, and produced using a technique known as piqué, which flourished from 1720 to 1760 in Naples, Italy. The technique consisted of molding the shell of the hawksbill sea turtle by dipping it in hot water