

CABANA



The name Kugel is almost a synonym for antique dealer. Nicolas and Alexis Kugel represent the fifth generation of the family while their children have just entered the antiques world. A passion for history, alongside a discerning eye, have accompanied these two brothers in their work. Today they are the trusted advisors to decorators, collectors and museums around the world. *Martina Mondadori* discusses the art of dealing with Alexis Kugel.

Martina Mondadori: You and your brother represent the fifth generation of the Kugel family. Tell us about the history of the gallery. It all started in Russia?

Alexis Kugel: Our grandfather's grandfather started the business in Minsk in the first half of the 19th century. Our grandfather, accompanied by our father who was still a little boy, and the rest of their family, fled the Russian revolution and settled in Paris in the early 1920s. After the war, our father, Jacques Kugel, took over the business

and became one of the foremost antique dealers of his time. After he passed away in 1985, my brother Nicolas and I were very young but managed to develop the gallery into what it is today. In 2004, the gallery moved from rue Saint Honoré to its present location, the Hôtel Collot by the Seine and opposite Place de la Concorde. Today several of our children, the sixth generation, are becoming interested in the art world starting with my daughter Laura who joined the gallery in 2015.

A pair of monumental polychrome marble busts of the Roman Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, attributed to Orfeo Bosselli, Rome ca. 1660



MM: Is there a particular era you love the most and a particular geographic area? Why?

AK: Although our gallery is unique in its wide span of interests—from antiquity to the 19th century—my heart belongs to Renaissance Florence, a unique moment in art history. I have been spending my summer holidays in Tuscany for over 20 years and love to return time and again to visit the Medici collections.

MM: Is there a particular work of art or object from the Medici collections that you go back to regularly?

AK: Each time that I'm in Florence I must go on a pilgrimage to the Museo degli Argenti, in the Palazzo Pitti, one of the least crowded museums in Florence that, despite that, has amazing treasures. I particularly admire the turned ivories and mounted hardstones that were, at the time, as valuable and important as the best paintings. An artwork that epitomizes the Medici taste is an oval plaque in *pietra dura* and gold, circa 1600, by Bernardo Gaffuri and Jacques Bylivelt representing Piazza della Signoria.

MM: Who in your opinion has been the most eclectic and interesting collector in history and which court the most prolific?

AK: In every generation there is one collector—sometimes part of a family dynasty—that stands out for his extraordinary eye, taste, passion and curiosity. They act somehow as our role-models and studying their collections allows us to understand their intent and taste to the extent that we can then spot an artwork and immediately perceive that it was probably in one of these great collections.

One of my favorites is Emperor Rudolf II, who managed to gather the most talented painters, sculptors, artisans and scientists of his time at his Prague court. Influenced by both one another and their patron, these artists created some of the world's greatest works of art. However, this only lasted as long as Rudolf II's reign, from the late 1570s to 1612. Later, a personality such as Cardinal de Mazarin, also a passionate collector, was single handedly responsible for the Italianate taste of young King Louis XIV when he started building Versailles. A list of collectors also includes great personalities such as the Marquise de Pompadour in the 18th century and William Beckford in the early 19th century. Sometimes, the eye can be transmitted within a family where several generations carry on a single collecting vision, such as in the examples of the Rothschilds and the Demidovs.

A large Florentine *pietra dura* table top from the Grand Ducal workshop, ca. 1590-1600. Probably designed by Bernardo Buontalenti and Matteo Nigetti.



One of the gallery's many rooms, displaying eclectic and precious works of art. A circular polychrome enamel platter, Venice, late 15th century



MM: *Is there one or a series of objects you'd like to deal with that you haven't yet come across?*

AK: Our natural curiosity leads us towards most fields, regardless of period and material. My bedtime reading is old inventories or sales catalogues and over the years I have created my own personal wish list of great masterpieces that have disappeared and not yet been rediscovered. I am convinced that most of them are still around, lying unnoticed in attics or castles and have not been destroyed. For instance, I have compiled a database of all the missing objects from the French Royal Collection that went missing after the Revolution.

MM: *It seems almost like a treasure hunt or a quest. Is that how you feel about your work?*

AK: Yes, the fascinating part of my job is that it is exactly like a treasure hunt, especially the research that is close to detective work. The secret is to always keep your eyes open and never to take anything for granted.

MM: *What is your opinion regarding the presentation and management of museums? There is a big difference between the US model and the European, and again differences amongst the different institutions across the old continent.*

AK: We have always worked closely with American museums and increasingly we have been exhibiting in New York over the past few years. There is a stronger philanthropic culture around American institutions that enables them to make more purchases than European museums. European museums, however, are innovating and constantly adapting their management, in particular when it comes to acquisitions. We recently sold a unique work by the artist Johann Christian Neuber, the Table of Teschen, to the Louvre. The table was purchased for €12.5 million and a sizeable amount of this was gathered through a crowdfunding campaign led by the Louvre that had over 4,500 individual donors.

MM: *Are you and your brother collectors yourselves? And of what?*

AK: It is difficult to collect in the same fields where we deal. I do, however, occasionally collect. Two fields of particular interest to me are scientific instruments and Oceanic art.

MM: *What is your first memory as a dealer with your father?*

AK: Long before I started working with my father, I loved to follow him to fairs and auctions. One



of my earliest memories as a "young dealer" dates from 1978 when, at the age of 12, I had accompanied my father to the first Maastricht fair where he was exhibiting. At one point, he told me, "I have someone to visit, you keep an eye on the stand," and I stood there, petrified of this responsibility, for over an hour. A man came and was scrutinizing every object, making me very nervous, and I became convinced he wanted to rob us. When my father eventually returned and saw the man, he gave him a warm handshake and introduced him as one of his best collectors.

MM: How important is the display in an exhibition?

AK: Our natural inclination, which we've inherited from our father, is accumulation and a *horror vacui*. We have decorated our gallery in the style of a grand Parisian house which makes it a unique experience for visitors. We do realize, however, that specific works of art can sometimes be better appreciated in a more sober environment which is why we are inaugurating six new exhibition rooms dedicated to sculpture and old master paintings in September. A selection of works will be displayed in these new rooms, allowing a clearer reading of the pieces. They should come to complement the other, more richly decorated, rooms of the gallery. A good example of this is the recent exhibition on the French bronze gilder and chaser Pierre Gouthière which was organized at the Frick Col-

lection earlier this year. The Frick is known for its great ambiance and opulent rooms; however, this show was displayed in their temporary exhibition space, with the gilt-bronze pieces isolated and simply displayed on pedestals without glass cases and with excellent lighting which gave the visitor the chance to rediscover Gouthière's work and suddenly appreciate works of decorative art as masterpieces of sculpture.

MM: What is the most special house you have been into in your life?

AK: The most extraordinary display of taste for us was the eclectic eye of Pierre Bergé and Yves Saint-Laurent. The grand salon of Saint-Laurent's apartment rue de Babylone, which I visited regularly, was one of the most memorable rooms I got to see in my career. I like to ask people who had been there, "What is the walls' color and material?" and most of them are unable to answer. It was a simple but beautiful plain oak without any molding, made around 1930 in the style of Jean-Michel Frank. Visitors didn't pay attention to the beautiful plain architecture because their eyes were constantly drawn towards the art: Baroque bronzes, Renaissance silver, Picasso, Brancusi, Burne-Jones.

This place was also always special to me because Pierre Bergé and Yves Saint-Laurent were among our earliest clients and supporters as young dealers when we took over the gallery after our father's death.

Two small caskets by André-Charles Boulle, Paris ca. 1675-1680 on a 16th-century Roman pietra dura table
In one of the gallery's paneled rooms is a "god's grec" desk attributed to the French cabinet maker Pierre Gauthier ca. 1755
Photos by Guillaume Benoit and Simon Schwyzer