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PRESERVATION HALL
At the opulent Galerie J. Kugel on the Quai Anatole France in Paris, a Neapolitan tortoiseshell mirror above a 13th-century wooden Virgin and a 17th-century marble arm that the antiquarians Alexis and Nicolas Kugel have selected to show in New York next month.

Business of Style

World's Most Expensive Pop-Up Shop

Four of Europe's top antiques dealers bring their treasures to America, hoping to seduce a generation of collectors raised on contemporary art.

BY MAURA EGAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY THIBAUT MONTAMAT

"WHEN YOU BUY an artwork from one of our galleries, you are investing in a piece of history — traveling through the course of Europe," says Alessandra Di Castro, an Italian antiques dealer who runs Antichita' Alessandra Di Castro, a renowned shop in Rome's Piazza di Spagna. Di Castro is today ensconced in the sumptuous second-floor salon of Galerie J. Kugel, located on the Quai Anatole France in Paris, with owners Alexis and Nicolas Kugel and French dealer Marie-Amélie Carlier, who runs and owns the nearby Galerie Brimo de Laroussilhe. In October, the four scions of families that have long dominated the insular world of European antiques and antiquities

will come together to host their first American exhibition — a two-week showcase of over 300 scrupulously pedigreed pieces ranging from Ancient Rome to the 19th century — at the Academy Mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Think of it as a movable feast of some of the world's most precious rare objects, a fleeting boutique of artifacts whose virtue is not only beauty but, ironically, permanence.

The members of the group are longtime friends; they grew up playing amid the burnished relics of their parents' businesses. For the past decade, however, their frustration has grown as they have watched American



collectors regard antiques and antiquities with relative indifference while enthusiastically paying huge sums for contemporary art.

New works, they concede, often have flashier investment potential, but such pieces also can be outlandishly expensive and risky: A found-object sculpture by some Chelsea gallerist's twentysomething-year-old Bushwick wunderkind may increase in value tenfold over a few months, but it can also fall off the charts entirely. Some of the pieces the group is bringing to New York in October will range from \$20,000 to more than \$10 million — but a 1775 sculpture of Pope Pius VI on horseback, which he himself commissioned, has a value that is, the dealers argue, demonstrably intrinsic. The four, who travel annually with their wares to the elegant European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht but don't bother with other less uniformly upscale fairs, regard themselves as responsible for a sacred cultural rite: the transmission of complex history and context, provided with documentation that astounds in its rigor. "They are experts in a tradition that really doesn't exist these days," says Ronald Lauder, who has been buying from all three galleries for several decades.

One reason their message has so far eluded a younger generation of American collectors, the dealers believe, is that such pieces are not a part of the scenery in the United States. Europeans grow up "surrounded by history, as though in an outdoor museum," Alexis Kugel explains. Even those who opt for minimalist homes understand that antiques, properly displayed, add layers of meaning and profundity.

But the dealers see the trend turning, which is why they have arranged such an elaborate expedition to the New World. "We believe that we are coming at the right moment," Alexis continues. "It seems that the fetish for the purely modern loft has reached its zenith, that people are craving something new. Which ironically is antiques and antiquities." By bringing part of their inventory to New York, the group hopes to attract an American audience beyond just the tiny slice of buyers and museum curators who regularly visit them in Paris and Rome. "We want to open the circle," Alexis says.

Walking through the preview for the New York exhibition is like entering a portal into another culture and era. "The greatest objects in the world were made for kings and queens who competed to commission the most precious pieces," explains Alexis, whose great-great grandfather founded the

Di Castro focuses on Italian decorative arts, the Kugels on 17th- and 18th-century French objects, Carlier on the medieval period.

Instead, they are planning ultra-modern, streamlined displays to illustrate that the pieces can work in places less ornate than chateaus and palazzos.

At the heart of their ambitious mission is a belief that American collectors have a verve that is unparalleled — that once an appreciation for antiquities is ignited in a new generation, it will burn brightly. "They are very passionate and self-taught," says Nicolas Kugel. "Given the chance, they become better experts than anybody." ■

business in Russia in the early 19th century to specialize in clocks and watches. "It was a game to create the most exquisite treasures." Thus, their inventory includes a 13th-century crosier made of Limoges enamel, a material much coveted by Pierre Bergé and Yves Saint Laurent, a Louis XVI drafting table from 1780 that was commissioned by the Comtesse de Provence, and a 14th-century North German bronze lion aquamanile: a vessel from which servants poured water for royals to wash their hands. A table inlaid with colorful, semiprecious stones, made with a technique called *pietra dura* from 17th-century Florence, was commissioned by a member of the Barberini family. Each of the dealers has a specialty: Di Castro, whose ancestors sold rare textiles to the papal court, focuses on Italian decorative arts; the Kugels' expertise includes 17th- and 18th-century French objects; Carlier, who took over the gallery from her father in 2010, concentrates on medieval and Renaissance artifacts. But at the New York

exhibition, they intend to mix up their offerings, without labeling what belongs to each of them. And although the Academy Mansion, until 2006 the home of the New York Academy of Science, is a grand 1920s edifice with an 18th-century-style paneled chamber, a Gothic smoking room and an Italian Renaissance-inspired dining room, they don't intend to lay out their pieces in situ, as they do in their home galleries.

OLD MASTERS Top, from left: the dealers Marie-Amélie Carlier, Alessandra Di Castro and Alexis and Nicolas Kugel with some of the items they plan to bring to N.Y.C. Below, left: objects from the 12th to 17th century in the gallery. Below, right: under a 1794 bronze portrait of Linnaeus by Johan Tobias Sergel, an 18th-century commode by Martin Carlin from the Rothschild collection topped with a 17th-century Roman candlestick, a 14th-century marble head of the Virgin, a bronze head of Emperor Decius circa 250 and a stone head of St. Peter circa 1280-1300.

