Influencers, Tastemakers and Marie-Antoinette

EMBELLISHMENT TO THE EXTREME

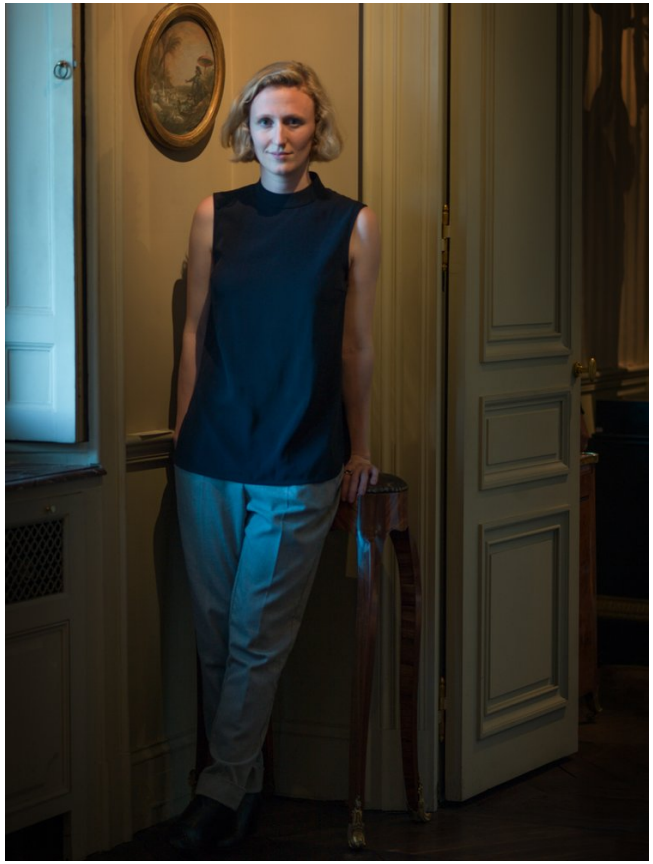
> ***"Learning how to seamlessly mount large lacquer panels onto commodes, desks, and other works of furniture, was a skill only mastered by the very best Parisian cabinetmakers. In that regard, [the Marchands-mercier] really contributed to the invention of a new decorative style, the legacy of which, becomes fascinating when you start thinking of Art Deco furniture and the works of Jules Leleu or Jean Dunand." — Laura Kugel***

For all those using Instagram in a personal, rather than business capacity (there are of course those such as gallerists and interior designers etc who straddle the boundaries, with work and pleasure often inextricably intertwined), one might validly ask: what's the point of posting a song in your story, or, for those falling into the "camera eats first" philosophy, artfully arranged still lives of food or drink in the manner of the Dutch school? It might very well be nothing more than a mindless act of self-expression, or, it could be that on some conscious or subliminal level you're looking for someone to compliment your self-perceived good taste. Essentially the rise and rise of social media has turned us all into closet curators. We now feel absolutely no compunction in sharing almost every aspect of our lives, anything and everything from what we're reading, watching, wearing and eating. It's almost as if each and every one of us has become a "Museum of Self", in which, for those special events, weddings, travel etc. we put on exhibitions, in the form of reams of stories that are then carefully assembled into "highlights" for those that might have missed the opening night. For a good many the word "Curator", which comes from the Latin *Cura*, meaning, quite literally, "to take care", in its traditional sense, conjures images of white walls, white gloves, and off-white ivory towers; a role which was revered and feared in equal measure, as despite the animosity and vitriol often directed the way of critics, curators of lore were essentially the gatekeepers of the art world, and could quite literally make or break careers. One only needs to think of avant-garde artist Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929) who, following her struggle to survive in a New York art scene, which, in the nineteen-seventies was stiflingly white, male and stale, exhausted, and convinced her

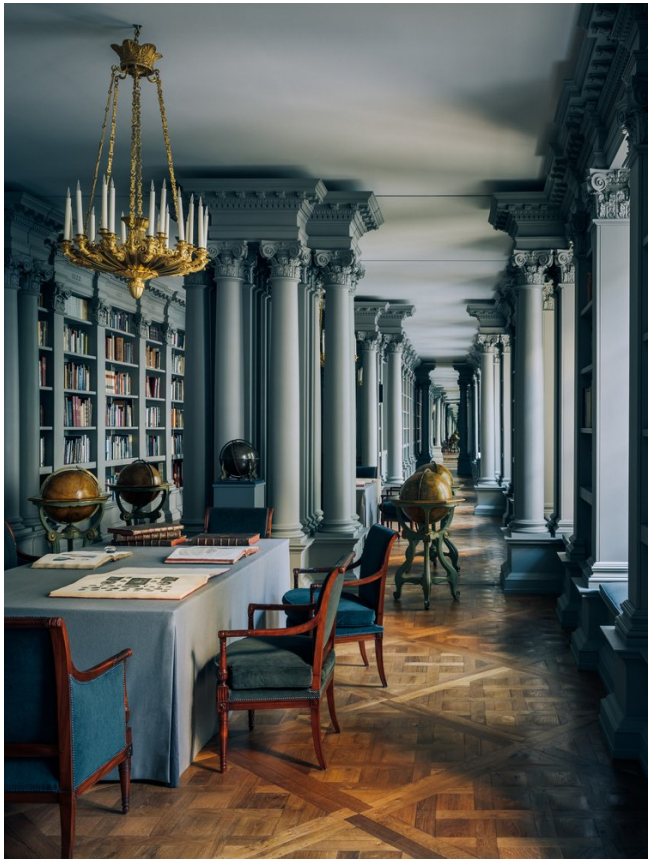
account, thus contributing to the overall democratisation of art and interiors, in the sense that people working within those sectors are able to create a platform from which to gain public exposure in a way that wouldn't have been possible ten years ago. At the same time, it's perhaps worth pointing out that whilst the role and value of curators may have changed in form, it hasn't in terms of cultural significance, and plays an even broader social role in bringing art and design to different sectors of society.

Some might postulate that since the advent of the internet, and the ability of individuals to create websites, online curation has always been possible, but there was one key difference in that fame and notoriety required some degree of creation; for example, fashion or homeware brands that lured in customers through a meticulously cultivated and alluring aesthetic. There are now myriad Instagram accounts that gain influence simply by curating content, with little or no creation, and often simply by taking imagery from the accounts of others who have at least gone to the trouble of opening a book. Ex hypothesi, good taste is now in and of itself a marketable digital commodity, without the necessity for its translation into something tangible. Indeed "curation" is increasingly becoming the preferential strategy for modern brands to differentiate themselves from the pack and gain relevance, thereby building equity and ensuring longevity. Curation in a non-institutional sense is of course nothing new, as when brands moved from merely manufacturing products to culture, design, luxury and art, it became, to an extent, the fuel of a modern aspirational economy (whereby social status is signalled through taste and insider knowledge, rather than monetary worth), applicable to anything and everything from non-objects, quasi-objects and hyper-objects to aesthetics and identity. With the ever-increasing popularity of social media platforms, which, to a large extent are starting to replace print media, big brands have quickly come to realise the value of "digital curators", who sort through contemporary culture, bridging gaps between aesthetic subcultures and introducing them to one another (think LVMH x Supreme, IKEA x Off-White, or Nike x Dior). In a world increasingly weary of traditional advertising techniques, curation is so effective in that shifts attention away from the product to the curatorial point of view, which, when it comes to sales figures, has proved infinitely more valuable. Whilst today's consumers are far more sophisticated, and voracious in terms of their cultural appetite — treating anything and everything as an opportunity to flex aesthetic muscles — somewhat paradoxically, they tend to get bored easily and brand loyalty is nowhere near as strong as it used to be. Symptomatic of this, long-established names often struggle under the constant pressure for

THE LONDON LIST



Laura Kugel, photographed at her eponymous family gallery, who will be staging the upcoming exhibition Tastemakers, in partnership with Villa Albertine in New York

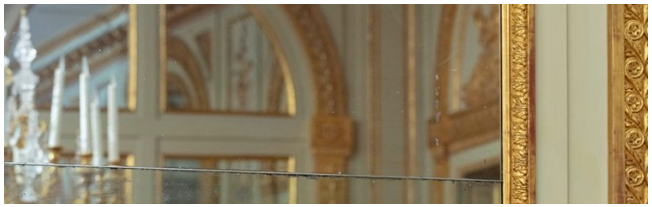


The reading room at Galerie Kugel, Paris, which is housed in the historic Hôtel Collot on Paris's Left Bank opposite the Place de la Concorde

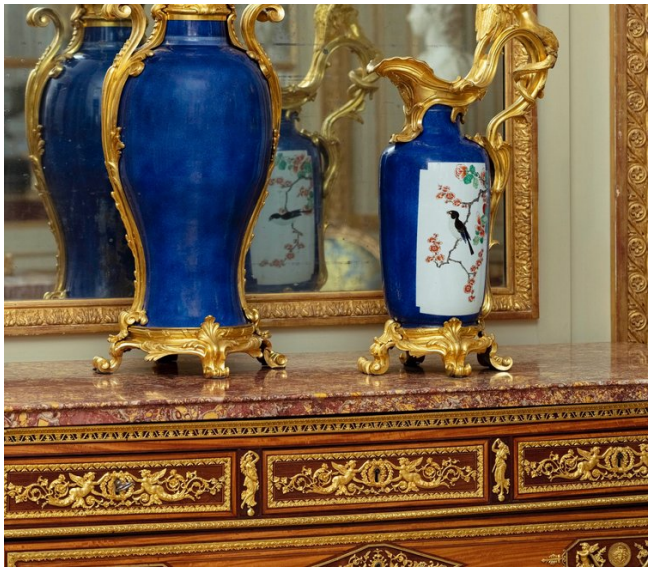
Before the "influencer" came the "tastemaker", i.e. those individuals who, through innate good taste, set the standards of what was popular or fashionable. This is a concept that extends as far back as eighteenth-century France with the "Marchands-merciers" who, described by Diderot in his 1751 Encyclopédie as "merchants of

to some extent can be seen as the first step in the globalization of the arts. Though not allowed to make goods from scratch, the merciers were however permitted to "embellish" the objects they sold, which was in no way seen as a

hindrance, and actually went some way to explaining the reason for their unbridled success. In point of fact, working within such structured confines resulted in luxury furniture and objets d'art of unparalleled audacity and inventiveness; for example, an item of Oriental porcelain might be turned into a fountain, or a lacquer coffer a "necessaire", fitted out with all the utensils involved in the preparation of one of the fashionable and exotic new drinks, such as tea, coffee, or chocolate. Such radical new pieces were particularly appealing to an elite clientele of French and European aristocrats who craved novelty and originality. One must of course be careful not to downplay the full extent of their abilities, as the greatest mercier did more than simply embellish, creating works with entirely new and novel forms, such as drop-front desks and bonheurs du jour, with an unprecedented juxtaposition of materials; Thomas Joachim Hébert was the first to veneer furniture in Japanese lacquer panels (for example, the commode delivered to Queen Marie Leszczynska for her *cabinet de retraite* in Fontainebleau in 1737), and Claude François Julliot produced furniture encrusted in chromatic hardstone marquetry, destined for the most important members of Court and Parisian high society, which included the Kings of France, the Marquise de Pompadour and Queen Marie-Antoinette. During the eighteenth century, the merciers played an immeasurable and instrumental role in the growing influence of the "French art of living", combining elegance, originality and sophistication in a way that captivated conoseuirs from Madrid to Saint Petersburg. Indeed due to their acute awareness of changing tastes, quickly jettisoning those items that had fallen out of favour and developing those that met with commercial success, the merciers were actually able to influence and even generate stylistic trends. We spoke to Laura Kugel of the eponymous Parisian gallery about her upcoming exhibition *Tastemakers*, in partnership with Villa Albertine in New York, which offers a unique insight into the luxury market of eighteenth-century France.



This almost "surrealist" object, sold in December 1754 to the duchesse de Mirepoix was described contemperaneously as "une petite Fontaine sur un rocher de porcelain ancienne, garnie, robinet d'argent"



Each marchand had at his disposition a team of artisans who were engaged to "embellish" pieces, for example, enriching porcelain items with gilt bronze mounts.

You represent the sixth generation of a family of prominent art dealers, and accordingly, you grew up surrounded by museum-quality works, but had your intention always been to follow in the family's footsteps?

I can't say it had! In fact, I studied social sciences and politics in London, but whenever my father visited on business I would accompany him on his errands and we would dart between auction houses to museums to

Saint Laurent was clearly something of a *tastemaker* and helped popularise the idea of an interior whereby works of art from different eras and epochs are juxtaposed against one another, which, arguably, has become the predominant twenty-first-century decorating style. In that vein, you have an upcoming exhibition at the French cultural institute in New York, focusing on the marchands-mercier, who were effectively tastemakers of the eighteenth-century luxury

about this world, it just seemed so fascinating.

Whilst Kugel is a specialist in everything from Medieval and Renaissance up to the Empire period, is there any one area or genre that particularly interests you?

My personal taste is as eclectic as that of the gallery. Above all, I love works of art that delve into fantasy. The creativity of the Renaissance and early Baroque artists is something else. As a child, we travelled every summer to Tuscany and spent afternoons sheltering from the heat in churches and museums. My favourite visit was always the Museo degli Argenti in the Palazzo Pitti, the Treasury of the Medici Great Dukes, and in particular works of art made from hardstones, rock crystal, and ivory. It's as though the artists created objects whereby the main purpose was to defy logic and nurture the imagination, beyond any practical purpose. One example of this is a small sculpture from the early seventeenth-century attributed to Filipo Planzone, who carved a perfectly proportioned horse within a sealed cage. It's sculpted from a single piece of ivory. You look at it in awe and can't help but wonder how he managed to pull it off — it's magical.

Collecting has always been a preoccupation in

retailers whose most successful members settled in Paris on rue Saint Honoré and its surroundings in the early eighteenth-century, establishing the roots of the French luxury market as we know it today. The most illustrious of these entrepreneurs were at the helm of the luxury industry, but we should really think of them more as art dealers. Under the marchands-merciers, new designs and forms were brought to life. Their role in shaping artistic trends is truly fascinating. The exhibition we are organising, in partnership with Villa Albertine in New York, will focus on ten of these dealers, all of whom can be credited for having fashioned the French touch that swept through Europe for over a century.

There are a great many archival sources at our disposal so as to enable us study the unique role these dealers played. We find them mentioned in the accounts of their royal clients and in the books of important cabinetmakers of the time. The Sèvres porcelain manufactory produced elements directly for some marchands-merciers, allowing porcelain plaques to be embedded on works of furniture at the initiative of dealers such as Simon-Philippe Poirier. One of the most remarkable marchands-merciers, Lazare Duvaux, who was patronised by Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour, is also perhaps the best known, courtesy

reclining, resplendent in a black moire silk evening gown, next to a table chocked full

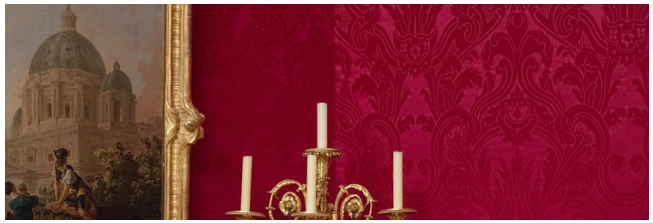
of *objets d'art* to Nicolas and Alexis Kugel, with the request they reconstitute the arrangement entirely. To your knowledge, has that been the most eccentric request the gallery has received?

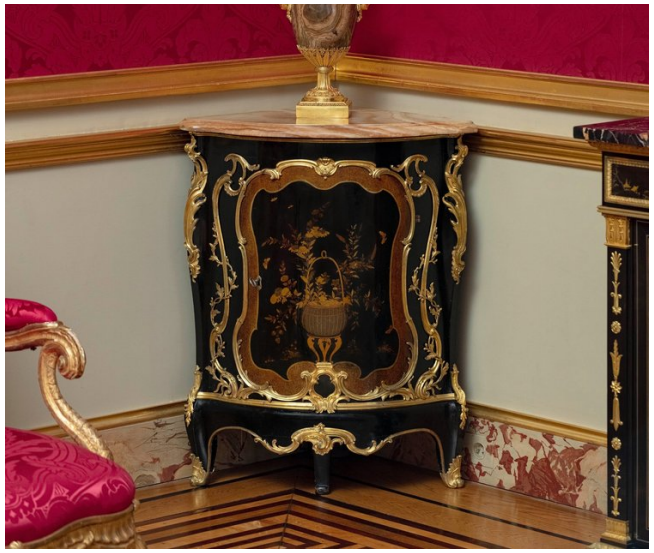
You're trying to get secrets out of me! That was certainly one of our more eccentric requests and one of few that received such publicity. Though Saint Laurent certainly wasn't alone in making such requests, we're asked all the time to source objects, and even entire collections, something the gallery is well known for. It may take us years, decades even, but we do our utmost to fulfil the requests. Though sometimes, I must admit, we don't succeed: the last fair I exhibited at, a nice gentleman enquired as to whether we had any early icons in stock, specifically from before Christ.

terms *tastemaker* and *influencer* have attracted somewhat negative connotations, associated with

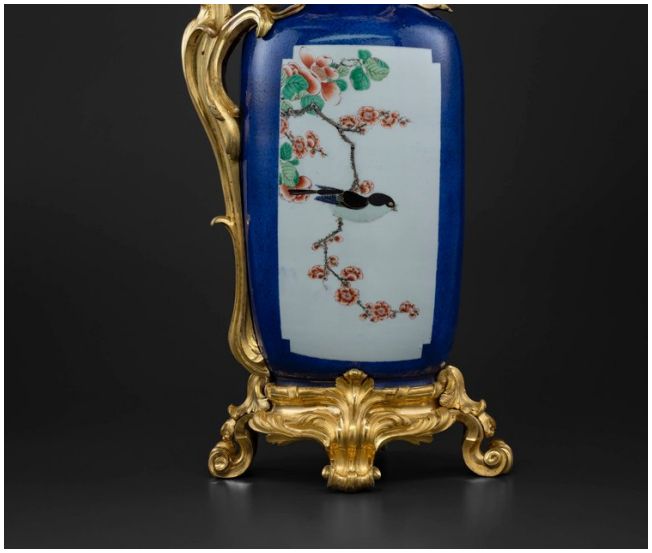
the likes of the Kardashians and other reality television stars; but would you agree that effectively, the Marchands-mercier, in the way in which they helped shape the canon of French decorative arts were themselves tastemakers, and their wealthy clientele, collectors such as Madame de Pompadour and the Duke de La Vallière, who helped spread and popularise fashions, influencers?

The line between tastemakers and influencers, between the dealers and the collectors, becomes blurry when we start thinking of who had the most aesthetic sway. I believe a dealer's most impactful vitrine is not their gallery window, but their clients' interiors. The marchands-merciers seemed to viscerally understand this and their success was in large part because of the close relationships they formed with their top collectors.





The marchand-mercier Thomas-Joachim Hebert was the first to use Japanese lacquer panels on cabinetmakers' furniture in the early 1730s, originally for his royal clients.



The marchands-merciers could have operated very lucrative businesses simply by importing from the East Indian Companies, selling Asian porcelains and lacquers to the European market.

Being patronised by the likes of Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour not only ensured that the objects they supplied would be sought after by other influential members of the court but also created a feedback loop of innovation. The demanding taste of their clients pushed the dealers to constantly dream up new ideas. Once their royal clientele put on show their latest purchases, it ensured maximum visibility, and this exposure stretched far further than just the court of Versailles. If you think about it, the

The marchands-merciers could have operated very lucrative businesses simply by importing from the East Indian Companies, selling Asian porcelains and lacquers to the European market. But instead, they devised experimental objects – and their success was phenomenal! We know, for instance, that the marchand-mercier Thomas-Joachim Hebert was the first to use Japanese lacquer panels on cabinetmakers' furniture in the early 1730s, originally for his royal clients — Louis XV and his wife Queen Marie

They also knew how to make themselves indispensable. For instance, the records of Lazare Duvaux's day-to-day commercial activities show us that he offered a wide range of services. It went from coordinating packaging and deliveries to acting as an agent, making purchases on their clients' behalf from famed collections of the time. Madame de Pompadour, arguably Duvaux's most important client and the top influencer of the time, entrusted him with the furnishings of her many residences. Even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI sought the assistance of the marchands-merciers to choose diplomatic presents. Their way of dealing reminds me of Joseph Duveen, arguably the greatest art dealer of all time. Take his relationship with Henry Clay Frick for instance. Duveen furnished Frick's house with eighteenth-century French furniture, supplied the paintings for the Fragonard and Boucher room, and went as far as picking the silverware. The Frick Collection is in some way a vitrine designed by Duveen, who hoped other collectors would strive to emulate this great achievement. See – our trade hasn't changed much over the centuries!

Dealers, as well as interior decorators and collectors, play an important role in re-

style, the legacy of which, becomes fascinating when you start thinking of Art Deco furniture and the works of Jules Leleu or Jean Dunand.

Some of the artworks we are presenting in the exhibition must have been so experimental that we found few or no comparable pieces known. One in particular — and perhaps my favourite piece in the show — is a small fountain made of early 18th century Japanese earthenware set with gilt bronze and silver mounts in Paris around 1730. We think the original Japanese object was perhaps an inkwell, with a recipient for paintbrushes and another for the ink. But we don't know for sure, and I almost prefer thinking of it as an abstract sculpture with incredible fluidity of modelling. For a contemporary French audience, being able to purchase such a work from a dealer was astounding, they must have never seen anything like it. So yes, without a doubt we are discussing the avant-garde!

Over the years you've worked with numerous important and influential figures in the worlds of art and design, everyone from artists to decorators to auctioneers and collectors, but whom would you say has had the biggest impact apropos your own approach to interiors?

even generated stylistic trends as a means of enticing the next generation of collectors?

The marchands-merciers can teach us a lot, and I, for one, drew inspiration from them when planning this show. As previously alluded to, they were masters of customer service. They realised the power of branding and marketing. They had business cards and printed posters showcasing their shops. Dominique Daguerre and other leading marchands-merciers placed labels on the backs of the furniture and objects they sold, with their name, addresses, and a shortlist of their specialties. But more than anything, I appreciate how they used what was clearly a limitation to their advantage. While unable to create, they embellished to the extreme, and became innovators despite the inherent limitation of their trade. Those who visit us at the gallery in Paris will know that the types of artworks we are showcasing in this exhibition are usually displayed in opulent, decorated rooms, which are set out like an imagined interior. For the show at Villa Albertine, we wanted to re-contextualise these works of furniture and decorative arts from such an atmosphere. They will be presented against plain backgrounds, and hopefully apprehended as radical works of art.
My wish is that our visitors can see for themselves that coming up with such shapes and mixes of materials required true audacity.

hosts. The harmony of their interior was unlike any place I had visited before. The works were all stunning and beautifully arranged, but perhaps the most striking was how much the place felt like the two of them. It was imbued with generosity and concord. That's when I first realised that an interior carefully brought together by passion can become an extension of those who created it.

What's your favourite work of art?

Perseus holding the head of Medusa, by Benvenuto Cellini. Anyone interested in the Italian Renaissance should read Cellini's autobiography. He's wonderfully pretentious and aware of his talent. He must have been a really difficult person to deal with — but the small corpus of works he left behind is out of this world. This life-size bronze from the 1550s is not only beautiful, it shows technical mastery at its paroxysm. It's also one of the first works of public art purposefully displayed outdoors by the Medici. It still is displayed on the Piazza della Signora in the centre of Florence. Perseus stands naked with a belt around his chest on which you can easily read Cellini's signature. So brilliantly arrogant, it's terrific!

What was the first important piece of art you ever owned?

A small ancient Egyptian alabaster vase from the

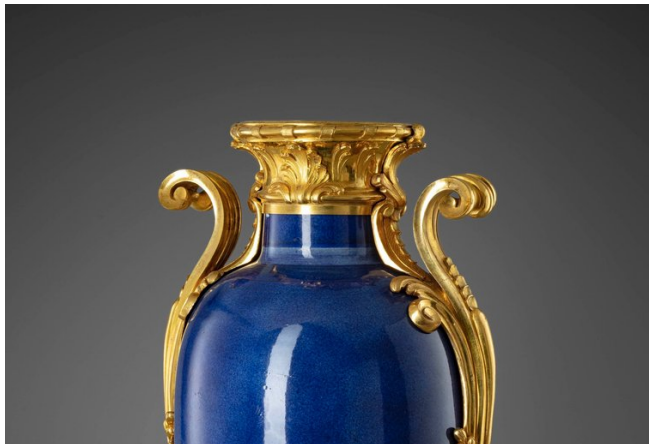
that are experimental, radical, or unorthodox with respect to art, culture, or society, would you agree that many of those objects sold by the Marchands-mercier meet this criterion?

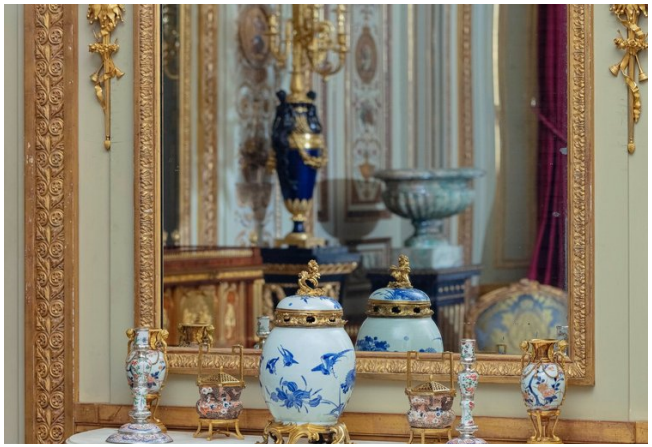
Every moment in time has its own avant-garde. While the statutes of the marchands-merciers corporation forbade them to create objects themselves, the members were legally allowed to "embellish". This subtlety was subjective enough for them to play a defining role in the conceptualisation of new designs, and act as coordinators between different trades, so they really were at the heart of the creative process. The most avant-garde works created under their impetus were without a doubt those incorporating Chinese and Japanese luxury materials.

de Waal, that felt very special. If I could have anything to put in my apartment, it would be a pair of gold ground screens painting with irises, which I saw only once when visiting the Nezu Museum in Tokyo. I don't know how long I stayed in front of this work, it was love at first sight.

An object you would never part with?

My contact lenses.





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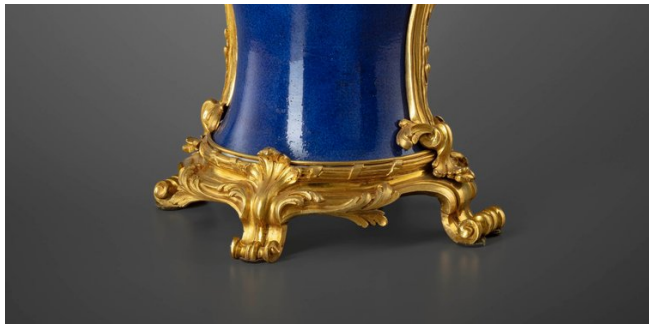
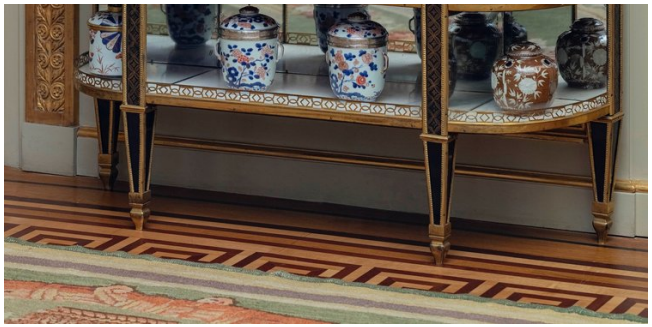


The demanding taste of the Marchands-merciers' elite European clientele pushed them to constantly dream up new ideas.



The Marchands-merciers rose to prominence at the same time as France came to be the arbiter of culture throughout Europe. They were very much active on the international market as well.

What was the last thing you bought and loved?

Two miniature paintings by Oskar Bergman from Galerie Michel Descours. Bergman was a Swedish artist who worked in the early twentieth century. Inspired by Japanism and the art of the late nineteenth century, he travelled around Sweden and painted beautiful landscapes. The paintings are minuscule, only a few centimetres high. They make me think of nature and adventure every time I look at them.

What would you like to own that you currently don't possess?

A ruined house in Scotland to restore and spend all my summer holidays.

What's the best gift you've been given?

If you had to limit your shopping to one neighbourhood, in one city, which would you choose?

My favourite way to spend a sunny Saturday morning in Paris is to wake up early, cycle South to the Vanves flea market, grab a cup of coffee and treasure hunt for a few hours. I run into many friends, we compare our latest finds. I never come searching for anything in particular but always end up leaving with something. The traders change nearly each time, so you'll constantly be surprised.

What's your favourite room in your apartment?

My apartment is on the sixth floor with no lift. A small

Books. I cannot walk past a book shop without buying one.

The site that most inspires you?

Kettle's Yard in Cambridge. It was the house of a former Tate curator and his wife who bequeathed it to Cambridge University. They wanted to create a living harmonious space that could showcase a way of life, rather than a museum stuck in time. Going there is like hitting the "refresh" button.

Where's the most unforgettable place you've travelled?

Scotland moved me like nowhere else. I loved staying at the Fife Arms in Braemer, but the most memorable part of the trip was driving through the north of the country. I never exclaimed so much in such a short amount of time. It's vast, wild, and empty.

Where would you like to go next?

Japan! I've been twice already, only ever in Tokyo and Kyoto. The urban centres are so spread out it felt foolish to only spend a couple of days exploring — so we ended up staying there each time. I want to explore Hokkaido, the northern island of the country, and go far away from cities, into the Japanese forests and mountains.

What's your biggest indulgence?

Peaty Scotch from Islay.

What's the best book you've read in the past year?

Every two years or so, I read the same book my father gave me on my first day at the gallery. It's the biography of Joseph Duveen by The New Yorker author and playwright S.N. Behrman. It's titled *The Story of the Most Spectacular Art Dealer of All Time* and it is the Bible of art dealing. The book was adapted from articles originally published in The New Yorker in the 1950s, the tone is witty and unforgiving, yet it paints the portrait of this legendary dealer in a subtle way. Duveen was not necessarily a pleasant man, but he was a genius when it came to sourcing and selling art. I've once heard this book never left the nightstand of Larry Gagosian. I'm not sure if that's true, but I wouldn't be surprised. And luckily, it's highly entertaining to read.

What would you do if you didn't work in design?

I would have loved to be a video games designer, creating layered worlds that people can get lost in.

What ambition do you still have?

Learning engraving and creating ex-libris for all my

Tell us about a recent "find"?

Café du Coin, in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris. Since lockdown ended I've been going there regularly. They have a great selection of wines and a no-fuss menu. It's the kind of café that you wish you would stumble upon visiting any city.

If you didn't live in Paris, where would you live?

I love Copenhagen, where I returned a couple of months ago. The city is beautiful, with great museums and stunning food. You can walk and cycle everywhere. I love it, especially when it feels cold outside but the sun is shining.

Aside from the Tastemakers exhibition, what's next?

The next couple of months will be exciting! Mid-June, Christie's Paris will be organizing the sale of the collection of Hubert de Givenchy. He played a defining role in my father and uncle's early career and entrusted them with the sale of some of his most prized works. He was such an influential figure in all things cultural, but above had above all a singular eye for beauty. A week later, we will be back at TEFAF Maastricht for our first art air in over two years. I hope you can join us!

Ben Weaver

The exhibition Tastemakers, 18th Century French Luxury Market and the Global Art Trade, will be hosted at the Villa Albertine headquarters, 972 Fifth Avenue, New York, May 4th – 8th, 2022

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NEXT

Opposites Attract

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