

Follow your dreams but pace yourself

Jackie Cooperman
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From his rarefied Rue de Rivoli office, with its bull's-eye view of the Musée D'Orsay clock, contrarian French designer Jacques Garcia is nearly effusive about the 23rd Biennale des Antiquaires, which opened last week in Paris.

"I detested the biennale when it was held at the Carousel de Louvre. It was terrible; an affront to France; fine for a car show but really awful for antiques," he says. "This year it returns to the Grand Palais; with proper dignity; like a museum where everything's for sale."

In the somewhat less-exalted 18th arrondissement, New York-based modern design dealer Hugh Magen and his wife April are equally excited about the biennale, having donned new outfits (Jil Sander for him; a Commes des Garçons black-and-white gown for her) for the invitation-only opening evening reception. "This is one of the most luxurious art and design shows on the planet," he says. "In terms of quality of merchandise, there's just no comparison."

By the time the biennale closes this Sunday, organisers reckon that 100,000 visitors will have roamed the 111 stands arrayed across the Grand Palais' newly refurbished 4,000 sq metres. They will have seen 18th century cast bronze statues from Naples, 16th century Flemish tapestries, African wood carvings and pieces by contemporary artists such as Niki de Saint Phalle.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when confronted with so many objects of art and design for the home on show. Even veteran shoppers who are typically full of advice for first-time visitors admit to letting some perfect finds slip through their fingers.

"Two years ago, the Vallois gallery had a beautiful Eileen Gray dining room serving piece, for a credenza, all in black and grey lacquer," recalls Juan Montoya, a New York-based decorator with a decidedly spare, elegant aesthetic. "I wish that I'd had the means then to purchase it because it would have been such a wonderful piece to have. I still think about it. It was the one that got away."

Still, Montoya says past trips to the biennale have yielded several critical items for his own home and his clients'. "Un Enfant Terrible", an Antoine Bourdelle sculpture sold by Jean Jacques Dutko, is one he kept for himself. ("Bourdelle pieces keep going up in price. Owning it is like holding your money for old age.") And two years ago he bought a range of 1930s French furniture to decorate an American couple's 1930s apartment near the Bois du Bologne. "That client gave me *carte blanche*," he says. "That's always the best way."

For visitors on a more stringent budget, seasoned dealers suggest a number of ways to make the experience as fruitful and as easy as possible. “You have the most important dealers in the world and the most flamboyant but, on the other hand, you have good opportunities for beginning collectors,” says Juan Pablo Molyneux, who is known for his modern take on neo-classical design. “The biennale can be accessible. You can go and buy a beautiful little silver pot for milk and pay €300. The important thing to know is that the provenance is guaranteed because the vetting process is very strict.”

At the last show, Molyneux found an 18th century Italian gilded wood chandelier at Gismondi and promptly installed it in his own country house. He also bought a set of late 18th century Swedish furniture (“with military, empire flourishes”) and is now upholstering it before shipping it to a client in Moscow. This year he had his eye on a 19th century billiard table, some extremely rare Louis XIV armchairs and a canopy from the dealer Jacques Perrin.

Molyneux advises visitors to bargain, but with moderation. “There’s always room to negotiate a bit,” he says. “You should say ‘What’s the best price you can give me?’ and they might give you 10 per cent. But don’t ask for 50 per cent off. That’s rather vulgar and it’s really not how it works.”

Quick decision-making is also key. “It’s not like strolling into an antique shop. There are hundreds of thousands of people visiting, so if you like it, you have to be ready to buy it.”

But shoppers must not be swept up by the galleries’ gilded displays, Montoya says. “It’s very distracting because the booths are so attractive. That’s not really what you should be looking at. You should be focusing on the object itself. You should ask yourself: ‘Does it pull you in?’ At the biennale I’m looking for an object that’s so special that my hands can’t resist. I’m eating, walking, dreaming about this.”

To stay focused, professionals stop for breaks at the biennale’s lauded café and they often stagger their visits over a period of several days. “You have the best dealers in the world of European, African and Oceanic art, and the diversity is enormous,” says Magen, who had his eye on Galerie 54’s pieces by designer Jean Prouvé. “I think it’s best to go on two separate days, slowly, and to really take it in.”

Whether visitors make significant purchases or simply approach the biennale as they would an art exhibition, they may take heart in designer Garcia’s supremely Gallic view of the enterprise. “It’s important to dream of having the objects, even if you don’t actually buy them,” he says, waving his hand in a gesture at once expansive and dismissive. “It is like a peasant entering a palace. He cannot sleep there but he can at least visit.”

The 23rd Biennale des Antiquaires is open from 11am to 11pm at The Grand Palais, Paris, and closes on Sunday. Tel: +33 1-4451 7474, www.biennaledesantiquaries.com

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