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**INTERNATIONAL ARTS**

## Paris Art Fairs Strive to Get Back on Track

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By SCOTT REYBURN SEPT. 16, 2016

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Nicolas de Staël's "Composition claire," unseen on the market for 40 years, sold in the first few hours of the Biennale des Antiquaires.

Photo Art Digital Studio for Applicat-Prazan, Paris, via 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via ADAGP, Paris

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PARIS — The art and antiques market has undergone significant changes in the 21st century. Arguably the most dramatic of these is the hegemony of the new, and of the relatively new. Last year, postwar and contemporary art accounted for 46 percent of the world's \$63.8 billion of auction and dealer sales, according to the 2016 Tefaf Art Market Report that was published in March. Modern art generated a further 30 percent of sales, the report said, leaving the material culture of the preceding 5,000 years with less than a quarter of the market.

“Contemporary art is the new religion. It sucks the energy out of everything else,” said Donald Ellis, a New York dealer who specializes in North American native art. Mr. Ellis was one of 77 specialist dealers showing at the 15th annual edition of the *Parcours des Mondes* gallery promotion in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district of Paris, which closed on Sept. 11.

Participating in a collective “gallery trail” event like the *Parcours* is one way dealers in historic art, in this case tribal and Asian art, can attract new buyers. Another is to rent a booth at a major international fair, such as the *Biennale des Antiquaires*, whose revamped 28th edition occupied Paris's majestic steel and glass Grand Palais from Sept. 10 through Sunday.

Both events demonstrate the challenge of trying to sell pre-20th-century art at a time when France and the rest of the world have plenty else to think about.

Founded in 1956 by France's *Syndicat National des Antiquaires*, the Paris *Biennale* is one of the world's oldest and most prestigious art and antique fairs. But sales at recent editions have been dominated by luxury brands such as Cartier, Bulgari and Van Cleef & Arpels. Dealers in old masters and Louis XV furniture had been reduced to spectators as crowds of carefully shepherded Asian clients splashed hundreds of thousands on “[haute joaillerie](#)” (high-end jewelry), but not much else.

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After complaints from exhibitors, the Biennale reduced the space allocated to contemporary jewelers, prompting the major brands to [withdraw](#). This year's fair, which from now on will be held annually (the syndicate is working on a new title), featured just four jewelry dealers, 10 fewer than in 2014. The art and antiques exhibitors increased by more than 30 percent, to 121, bolstered by old master dealers from the discontinued Paris Tableau fair, whose last edition was held in November, right at the time that [terrorist attacks](#) took place in the city.

The design of the Biennale has also been radically overhauled. The last edition's slightly hackneyed "Gardens of Versailles" look has given way to a sleeker, more contemporary "50 Shades of Gray" styling by Nathalie Crinière reminiscent of the rival Frieze Masters fair in London, which opens next month.

"The design is perfect," said Anthony Meyer, a dealer in Oceanic art in Saint-Germain who is exhibiting at the Biennale. "We're trying to get the market back on track in Paris. But we have to give the newly reborn fair two to three years."

There were noticeably fewer foreign visitors at both the Biennale and the Parcours des Mondes than there have been in recent years, reflecting overseas tourists' reluctance to visit France since the [attacks](#). Paris hotels had an occupancy rate of 32 percent in the second half of July, compared to 77 percent during the same period last year, according Matthias Fekl, France's minister for the promotion of tourism.

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“There are fewer people visiting from Asia and the U.S.,” said Franck Prazan, director of Applicat-Prazan, a Paris gallery specializing in postwar art, “but we have met new clients at the fair.” Applicat-Prazan sold Nicolas de Stael’s lovely 1951 abstract “Composition claire,” unseen on the market for 40 years, to a Paris collector for 1.8 million euros, about \$2 million, during the first few hours of the Biennale.

Over in the pared-down “haute joaillerie” section, Cindy Chao, a fair newcomer and an art jeweler in Hong Kong, was displaying a 2015-2016 ruby butterfly brooch — part of her “Black Label Masterpiece” collection — that had been bought before the fair by the Taiwanese billionaire art collector Pierre Chen for \$6 million.

But isn’t the new-look Biennale, just like Frieze Masters and Tefaf in Maastricht, meant to be about finding buyers for older art?

Dealers in old masters and historic objects made positive noises about meeting the “right people” and having “serious conversations” at the Biennale. Yet confirmed big-ticket sales were few and far between. The old master dealer Bob Haboltd of Paris sold a pair of 17th-century Dutch still lifes by Herman Verelst for €175,000; the Tomasso Brothers of London found a buyer for a baroque-period silver “Cristo Morto” by the Augsburg sculptor Caspar Riss for about €100,000.

Confirmed sales were also sporadic in the galleries of Saint-Germain-des-Prés during the *Parcours des Mondes*, widely regarded as the world’s premier dealer event for anyone seriously interested in tribal art.



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But one or two spectacular sales were made. Charles-Wesley Hourde, a former Christie's specialist, showed a selection of African and Oceanic sculptures notable for their distinguished provenances. The pick of these was a Kongo-Solongu reliquary figure that had once belonged to the celebrated modern art dealer Pierre Loeb and had been included in the landmark 1935 "African Negro Art" exhibition at MoMA in New York. Mr. Hourde sold the sculpture at the Parcours for about €1.6 million to a Parisian collector.

Mr. Ellis, the New York dealer in Native American art, also found a Parisian buyer for an outstanding early 19th-century wooden bowl in the form of a seal from the Haida culture of British Columbia, priced at €275,000.

"We had zero expectations, but we still managed to make some sales," said Mr. Ellis. "The buyers at Parcours used to be much more international. It's now evolving into a regional event."

And that, in a phrase, sums up the challenge facing Paris as a center for selling pre-20th century art. The Biennale des Antiquaires has reinvented itself as an elegant and opulent fair to vie with Tefaf Maastricht and Frieze Masters. But about two-thirds of the exhibitors are French, and because of overseas clients' current reluctance to travel to Europe, most of the major buyers remain French.

Meanwhile, Frieze Masters, for all the elegance of its own "50 Shades" styling, still struggles to deliver "[crossover](#)" sales for dealers in older art. And Tefaf Maastricht, despite its quality and scale (last year it featured 276 dealers), is no longer the destination event it was, particularly now that it will be holding two "[mini Tefafs](#)" in New York in the fall and spring.

Art before 1900 has become a more difficult sell. But if the Biennale des Antiquaires can internationalize, and Europe normalize — both are pretty big ifs — Paris might just be well placed to attract whatever buyers there are for objects from those preceding 5,000 years.