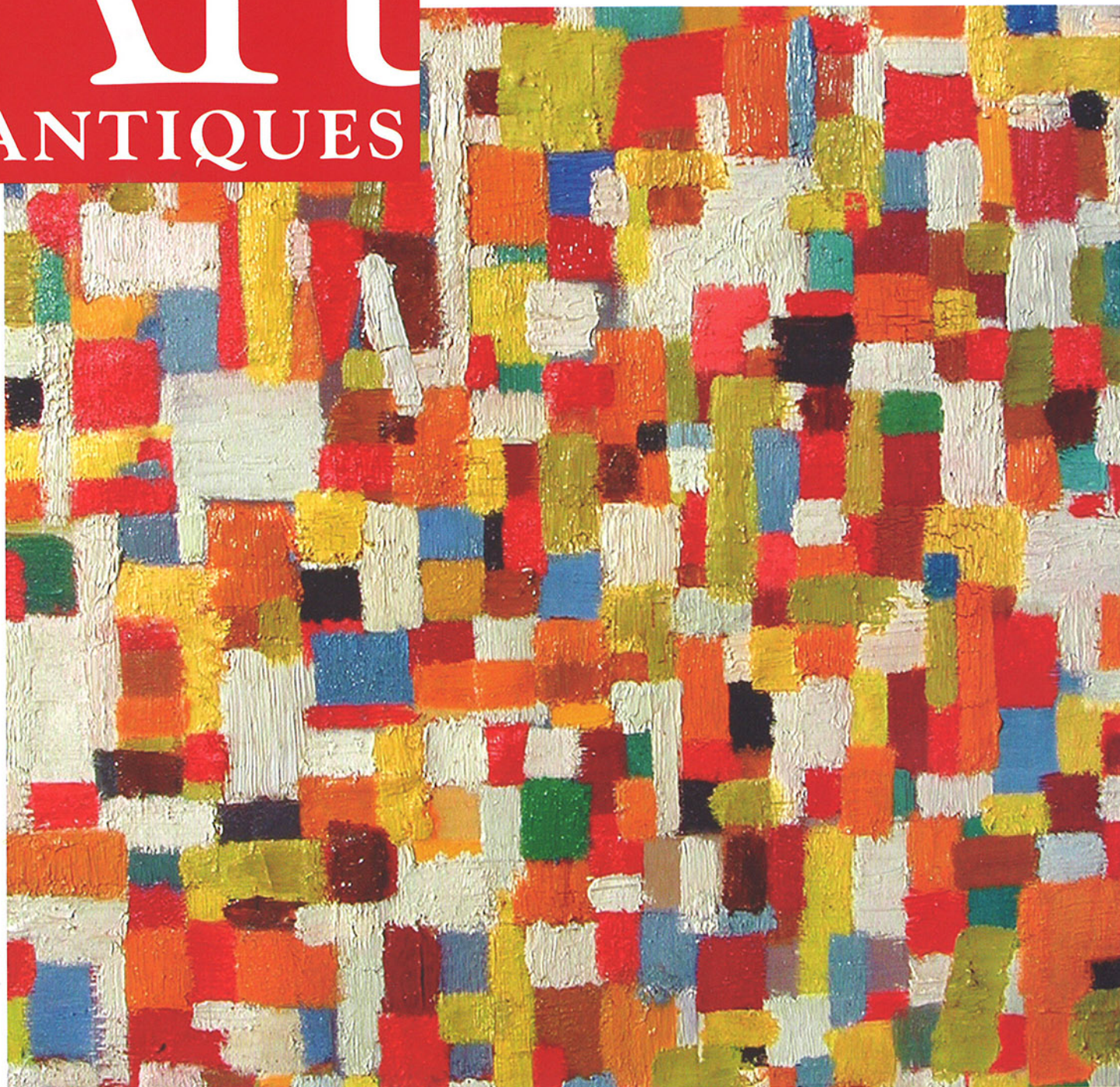


OCTOBER 2013

# Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



ART DECO | FRANK STELLA | LEON GASPARD | FERNAND LÉGER | DUTCH DESIGN

\$7.50US/CAN



JOHN GRILLO

# Curves With Verve

ART DECO PIECES ARE ADAPTABLE AND AESTHETICALLY EVERGREEN, WORTH THE EFFORT NECESSARY TO FIND HIGH-QUALITY EXAMPLES. BY DAN HOFSTADTER



From top: Sideboard with metalwork by Edgar Brandt, 1930s, nickel, bronze, amboyna with silver gilt; detail of medallion on Brandt sideboard; mantel clock by Jules Leleu, 1930s, signed, with garniture vases.

THE WORLD OF Art Deco, as a collectors' field, is a far cry from what it was 40 or even 30 years ago. It was possible then, in France, to knock on château doors, to wander through flea markets, to inspect dusty lots at estate sales and to discover beautiful, superbly-crafted pieces of furniture, things that very few artisans could equal today (though often they required careful restoration). The scruffy cafés in the neighborhood around the Hôtel Drouot, the great Paris auction house, were abuzz with inside-dopesters retailing gossip and trading tips. Yet the dealers who undertook the task of rehabilitating this forsaken world of design—that of the period 1930–50—were often demeaned as reactionary philistines by snobbish, high-end art-market types. At this period the French, drenched in the lingering

bombast of the so-called Student Revolution of 1968, tended to scorn the decorative arts of the '30s and '40s as socially retrograde.

Since then, several factors have brought about an enormous change. The fierce pre-war clash of two groups of designers, the so-called *artistes décorateurs*, who tended to favor curvilinear design and to quote—and sometimes affectionately parody—historical models, and the *artistes modernes*, who were attracted by strict utility and industrial materials, has come to strike us as tedious and silly, like a screaming fight between cousins who should have made up and kissed (as they tended to do during the Nazi Occupation and the postwar



period). We see that a number of key artists tried their hands at both styles, and Deco now looks much more modern than it used to, just as early modernism at times appears frankly luxurious. It has not been lost on anybody—neither dealers nor interior decorators nor everyday buyers—that judiciously selected Deco pieces look terrific together with the right modernist pieces. And as our tastes have changed, the prices, of course, have also risen—often dramatically.

So there is no undiscovered corner of the Art Deco landscape anymore. There are no more “great buys.” But there are





Clockwise from top left: One of a pair of rounded Hungarian modernist cane-back chairs by Lajos Kozma; glass vase by René Lalique, signed; Africaniste table by Jules Leleu; chest of drawers by Maurice Dufrene, 1920s, marble top, thuya burl and mahogany, with gilt wood details and bronze.

certainly good buys—beautiful, reasonable acquisitions—even for collectors just starting out. Karl Kemp, who for decades has owned a sprawling gallery on West 10th Street in New York, and, for the past 10 years, a smaller showroom on Madison Avenue, feels that the situation has certainly become difficult, though not distressing. “Many of my sources in Europe are gone,” he laments. “In cities like Munich, Cologne and Brussels, where there used to be two or three Deco dealers, now there is scarcely anybody. And, well, we have survived by going upscale. We buy large, very fine pieces by major names—stamped, signed, brand-marked. This Edgar Brandt sideboard, for instance— we cleaned it, and that’s it. No restoration work. I charge big prices and the items sell. ‘Nice’ pieces? No. ‘Nice’ I might as well forget about. Because for the top level I have customers. My forte is that I always take things back. If they don’t want it any more, I will take it.”

Kemp’s gallery is in itself the warrant of one of Art Deco’s most interesting features, which the art world took a long time to discover: the easy terms on which Deco cohabits with many other styles. Modernism, as already mentioned, is the main one, largely because of Deco’s fondness for rectilinear profiles. But in fact Deco

belongs to a group of styles that all trace their roots to the ancient world’s fondness for extreme geometrical simplicity, unornamented or mildly ornamented depending on whether the piece in question served domestic or public functions. Kemp also sells Biedermeier furniture, another great love, and the two styles go marvelously together in his showroom. He notes that Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the great Prussian neo-classical architect of the early 19th century, was at times a gifted minimalist.

Having grown up in Germany, Kemp often compares the European and the American attitude to buying, without nec-

essarily judging anybody. “Most of my great pieces I have sold twice,” he says, surprisingly. “Yes, not all, but most of them. Because this is America. In Europe, even today people collect with the concept of putting something wonderful together, and then”—he laughs—“their children have to live with it!” But in the United States, he says, the taste of wealthy people, their sense of how to decorate, may keep on developing over the years. So he often welcomes back old friends.

But if large pieces have become so expensive, what about smaller, decorative items? Are they more affordable for newcomers to the field? “Yes,” Kemp says, “good glass, for instance, but it has to be signed. Tea sets. Coffee services. I love Art Deco sculptures, bronzes—Georges Lavroff, for instance, those marvelous animal sculptures. Good clocks. We had a fabulous clock by Leleu in our window, very big, caused a stir outside in the street, but”—he breaks into a smile—“it only lasted a few days.”

**Adriana Friedman**, another New Yorker, is the director of DeLorenzo, a lovely, understated gallery on Madison Avenue specializing in Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann, the unquestioned star of the prewar Salon des Artistes Décorateurs, who after an extraordinary career in Art





Clockwise from top: Two glass vases by René Lalique, signed; eggshell vanity and chair by Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann and Jean Dunand; small eggshell vase by Jean Dunand.

Nouveau invented a cleverly pared-down yet luxurious version of Art Deco (straight lines, shallow curves, rich veneers, playful ivory accents). Unafraid to go to great lengths to acquire what she knows to be of museum quality, Friedman yet warns of the ferocity of the bidding at contemporary auctions. At Christie's in Paris, prepared to reach very high to win the Eileen Gray "Dragon Chair" (circa 1917–19) previously owned by Yves Saint-Laurent, she was astounded when it was knocked down for \$28.2 million.

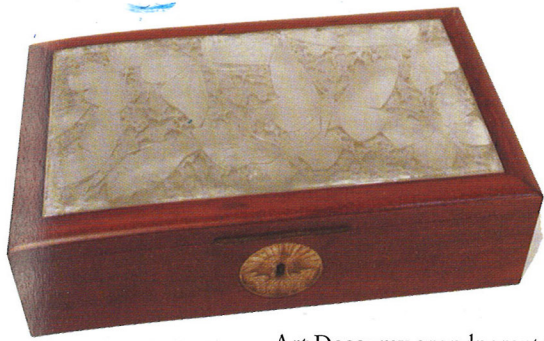
Friedman initially trained in fashion, but through her friendship with her mentor Anthony DeLorenzo, a devoted Tiffany collector, she fell in love with Ruhlmann and, by extension, with several other design fields, notably classic modernism. She feels deep sympathy for anyone newly in love with any sort of art, but her advice to beginning Art Deco collectors is to do their homework. They should "educate themselves by reading as much as possible," she says, "about the period and the top artists of the time. Visit museums, speak to museum curators, look at past auction results and compare prices and how they have changed over the years. Speak to the owners or directors at galleries and ask questions about the pieces. Finding out what makes a piece hold its value will help a

collector when making an investment in a piece. It's also important for any new collector to trust his eye and choose pieces that speak to him, remembering that his eye will mature in time as he becomes more familiar with an artist and the reasons behind his or her genius. Finally, but most importantly, one must have trust in the seller, whether it's an auction house, department head or gallery. Their reputation in the field will dictate who to trust. Remembering there are no bargains, the only bargain is a fair price. Then you have a smart purchase." And there was something else that she wanted to stress above all else. "It's courage," she said, thinking no doubt of those daunting prices that are asked nowadays. "It's not only the eye but the courage to follow it through."

On La Cienega Boulevard, in Los Angeles, is a gallery called Szalon whose owner, Judith Hoffman, feels that she is genuinely in a position to offer excellent Art Deco furniture at comparatively affordable prices. The reason is that all these pieces come from Hungary, a less-known place of origin, and that Hoffman has them restored and finished there, not in the United States. "I was born in Hungary and came here in 1956, after the Hungarian Revolution, at the age of 14," she explains. "I was trained at UCLA as a designer"—she designed the gallery herself—"and in the late '80s, when communism fell in Hungary, I rediscovered my homeland. I grew up with



VALERIO ART DECO; DELORENZO GALLERY



Art Deco; my grandparents' furniture was Hungarian Deco, and my mother was an artist and transmitted a taste for these things to me. In the '90s I started buying things for myself and my friends and bringing them out until I had a whole warehouse full, so I decided to open this gallery. Hungarian Deco is different—initially it was an outgrowth of the Vienna Secession, the Austrian version of Art Nouveau—and compared to French Deco it's simpler, reduced, with cleaner lines and walnut veneers and nickel-plated or brass hardware. Zsolnay ceramics were still being produced too, from the same Zsolnay factory that made those tiles that you see on turn-of-the-century rooftops in Budapest, and I actually negotiated to buy the factory till I realized that I couldn't handle too many businesses at the same time."

Hoffman has a special enthusiasm for Lajos Kozma, the multi-talented master of Hungarian Deco, who excelled in furniture, architecture, and graphics, though "he never had a big workshop like, say, Ruhlmann. People in Hungary worked in very small series, and Kozma went through different periods, too—neo-Baroque, Deco, modernist." Kozma was a virtuoso at combining the curvilinear and the straight: of particular interest is what Hoffman calls the "Kozma curve," an elegant, slightly twisting furniture shape that ties in slyly to severe, rectilinear forms. "My advice," she says, "is to buy things you like, not for the name, which can be overblown. The reason things cost a lot is rarity—supply-



From top: French Art Deco cigarette case; one of a pair of Hungarian modernist chairs by Lajos Kozma, circa 1930s, lacquer frame, rust brown polished back.

# Moon Over Birch Creek



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and-demand. Cultivate your eye.” And she quotes some surprisingly good prices for Hungarian Deco.

Waltford Gonzalez, who manages the Valerio Gallery, in Coral Springs, Fla., agrees that “now everything is frankly harder to find. A lot of younger people are calling,” he says, “but, you know, we ourselves buy pieces already sold in galleries years ago. There are some great pieces in Cuba, in basements and attics, but they have been sadly neglected. And really even that has changed, because people are so much more aware now.”

The Valerio Gallery, which is strong in art glass, dates back to 1988. Gonzalez joined it in 1996, as an intern; he just was finishing his studies in art history. “What’s plausible for collectors starting out?” he muses. “Well, art glass in general. It used to be hard to find a strong clientele for Lalique glass,” he says, referring to René Lalique’s lovely, almost purist work of the late ’20s and ’30s, “but that’s changing. The Great Gatsby movie had a big impact. But signed Lalique is certainly still affordable.” He recommends Charles Schneider and French silver boxes designed for ciga-



rettes and cigars. And in general he advises that collectors carefully consider furniture by talented people who at first worked under great designers. “Maxime Old,” he suggests, who was at the Ruhlmann atelier until 1934 but then cultivated his own, highly personal style. “Gonzalez points out that Raymond Subes, the past master of forged iron (*fer forgé*) enlisted by so many other designers, including André Arbus for his Hall of Marbles at the Château de Rambouillet, can be reasonable. “Even things at good prices turn up by Emilio Terry”—the theatrical-minded Cuban-French artist—“although rarely. I suggest going to the Context Art Miami fair. Studying good books, of course. And looking at movies; I mean old movies, from the ’30s. Yes, study the interiors, the design!”

“We always tell people to look at a lot of things first before they buy,” says Gary Calderwood. “Galleries, museums, books—that’s how your eye starts to learn.” Gary and his wife Janet have, since the ’80s, maintained the Calderwood Gallery in Philadelphia with a vast, high-quality inventory of French Art Deco and an extensive, one-of-a-kind library of period documentation. In fact, solid scholarship is one of the hallmarks of their business, and Gary urges collectors to start by gaining serious knowledge of the field. “Don’t buy anything for the first six months,” he warns. “The first things that most collectors buy are just mistakes. And buy the best thing you can—limit your-



Clockwise from top left: chair by Armand-Albert Rateau; zebrawood card table by Lajos Kozma, circa 1930s, foldout top with cream linoleum inside; sideboard by Dominique, French, circa 1930s, amboyna marquetry, gilt geometric details.

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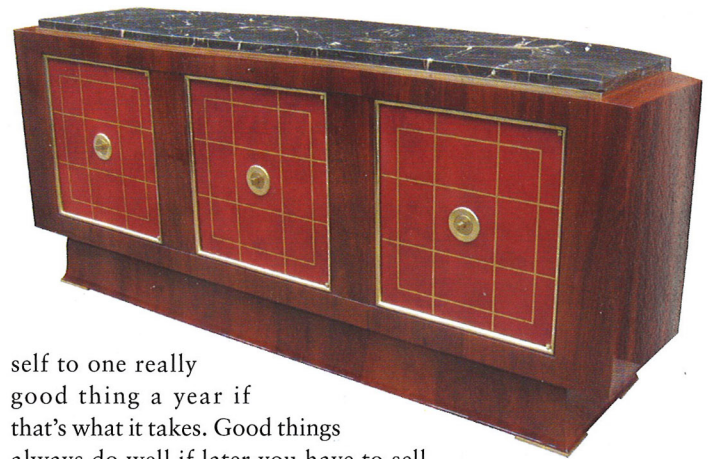
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self to one really good thing a year if that's what it takes. Good things always do well if later you have to sell. Marginal stuff you're just stuck with. Nobody will want it. And a lot of sellers aren't very trustworthy, so whatever you buy, ask for original documentation. Ninety percent of the stuff advertised as Leleu," he says, referring to Jules Leleu, prolific originator of much shrewdly historicist furniture for the grande bourgeoisie and French steamship salons—"is just junk." He points out that auction houses are by no means infallible and often, in fact, provide incorrect documentation. "So an auction catalogue is not sufficient," he says, "to establish that a piece is right."

"In Art Deco there's nothing that hasn't been discovered yet," Gary says. "You may find new *works*, but that's it." As one who frequently offers pieces by the likes of major creators like André Arbus or Jacques Adnet, he speaks disparagingly of the unrestrained touting of third-tier designers at auctions, which he feels is unfair to collectors, especially newcomers. And he confesses to utter amazement at the prices now commanded by the Irish-Parisian designer Eileen Gray, whose life was certainly fascinating but "not all of whose work was even good," as he acerbically notes. Like other major dealers, he insists that if you love this material you will study it constantly, seizing every opportunity to do so, and not be waylaid by deceitful deals or false bargains. **A**



From top: sideboard by Maxime Old, palisander, bronze trim and details, red leather doors with gold tooling; marquetry writing desk by Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann.

KARL KEMP ANTIQUES, DELORENZO GALLERY

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Lamp, c.1902. Cat's claw design base. Esther Huger Elliot, decorator; Joseph Meyer, potter. Magnolia design shade. Hand-cut and embossed brass sheeting with copper rivets and screen. Attributed to Elizabeth Goelet Rogers. Hinks duplex burner. Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University

