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Kraemer Gallery, Paris: Family Fortunes

BY TARA LOADER WILKINSON
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY BARNHAM
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France's illustrious Kraemer family, which pretty much amounts to royalty in the 'Who's Who' of antique-collecting circles, now has its sights firmly set on a new client base in Hong Kong and Singapore.



Who does Karl Lagerfeld go to when he wants to sell an antique mirror? Who does the Rothschild family turn to buy its 18th century candelabra?

If you are anyone in the antiques world, you will have heard of France's illustrious Kraemer family. With a blue-blooded lineage dating back to 1875, the Kraemers pretty much amount to royalty in the Who's Who of collecting circles.

So when I meet fifth-generation Kraemer family member Mikael, I am not expecting to meet a soft-spoken, self-effacing young man who implores: "Please! Call me Mika!"

Mika serves as the international ambassador for his family's business, travelling the world to exhibit pieces from its world-famous museum-quality collection of French 18th century antiques. Described as "the billionaire's Ikea", the Kraemer family home and dealership is located at 43 Rue de Monceau in Paris, and doubles as an open-house art gallery, welcoming visitors and tourists to see the collection for free, personally guided by a family member.

But with the growing interest in tangible assets and collectors' items from wealthy Asians, Mika has spent the last two years introducing the brand to a new client base in Hong Kong and Singapore. And it is hungry for more.

"Usually, pieces of high quality such as these can only be seen in major international museums. Many Asian people who have visited major museums such as the Louvre, Versailles or the Metropolitan Museum do not realise that these antiques have twins that exist in private hands and that these objects could possibly be in their own possession one day," said Mika. "They are amazed when I tell them!"



SLIDESHOW: The Kraemer Gallery in Paris houses the family's world-famous collection of French 18th century antiques.

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Last year, he took a selection of some of the Kraemer's most precious artefacts to Singapore for a public exhibition at Marina Bay Sands. This year, Kraemer brought the collection, entitled 'The Golden Time of the Kings', to the historic Hullett House in Hong Kong. The exhibition was not for sale but to promote the Kraemer Gallery overseas, as well as lay on free cultural tours for the community.

"This exhibition is to share our passion for the arts with everyone, and we have invited schools, families with their kids, Mainland Chinese, Hong Kong citizens, as well as expats and tourists. The main idea is education, for the public to marvel at and touch the pieces," he says. Indeed Mika ardently believes in the importance of touching, using and wearing antiques, because "that is what they are made for".

This is not a throwaway statement. Later that evening we will dine by the candlelight of a gilded 18th century bronze *surtout de table*, with eight elaborately branched candlesticks decorated with dragons. Our soup is served with a flourish from the bowl encased within this remarkable antique.

The Kraemer collection packs serious credibility. Although greatly diminished after Nazi looting, the family believes the collection is the most extensive of its kind in the world. Many of the pieces were made during the reigns of King Louis XIV, XV and XVI (1643–1793). Names of the most famous masters of the epoch include Charles Cressent, Bernard II van Risamburgh, Jean-Pierre Latz and François Leutaud.

The history of the family is worth a separate story in itself. In 1870 following the Franco-Prussian War, Lucien Kraemer left Prussian-occupied Alsace for Paris, where he established an eponymous art dealership. From the very beginning, the Kraemers counted the A-list as clientele. The illustrious Rothschild and Camondo families were major collectors, as well as Comte Boni de Castellane, Sir Philip Sassoon and several members of central European and Russian aristocracy.

Today, one of the most famous clients is fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld, who was quoted as in *Le Monde* as saying: "For high-quality 18th century, the Kraemer Gallery is my favourite." He buys lots from the Kraemers and sells to them too. One of the family's proudest purchases from the German fashion designer is a stunning Louis XVI carved mirror, originally designed for the library of the iconic Hôtel Lambert in Paris.



Mikael Kraemer: "Many Asian people who have visited major museums... do not realise that these antiques have twins that exist in private hands and that these objects could possibly be in their own possession one day."

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Mika says it is not about the status, however. The family loves selling to truly passionate buyers above all. He has seen several new types of antique collectors coming to the fore in Asia.

"The first type knows what they want, and they like their name to be clearly associated with an art collection. They want to differentiate from other billionaires. The other type of buyer is someone who doesn't know much about art, although they know they love it. Their approach is more like souvenir shopping — they will go to France, Germany or Japan, and buy a prestigious piece each time they visit a country, [as] a high-end souvenir.

"And there is one other type: speculative buyers. They don't love what they buy; they only go for something they think will increase in value like stocks and shares. People looking for investment will always choose the wrong piece," he explains.

Kraemer knows that the rise of wealth in Asia spells good news for the antique trade — this, after all, is where the big money is.

"My grand-father Philippe used to say when you already have a beautiful house and office, a boat or a private jet, the only way you can enjoy spending your money is philanthropy or building an art collection. If you lose everything, culture and knowledge are the only things that no one can take away."

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