

The Kraemer Gallery

THE HOUSE OF KRAEMER | Love for three Louis

The crème de la crème of 18th-century French furniture

Few antique galleries would dare to hide their stock in trade behind the solid stone walls of a Haussmanian Parisian townhouse in the heart of the Monceau district, but that is just what the Kraemer Gallery does. Nothing differentiates the house from its neighbors except a discreet gold-lettered sign spelling “Kraemer” — no display window on the street, no large sign or awning.

This unique gallery has been there so long, however, that those who need or want to know about it, do, referring to it as “the Kraemers” or simply “number 43,” its address on the Rue de Monceau in the eighth arrondissement. Inside, room after room — some 20 in all — are filled with the crème de la crème of Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI antique furniture and objects. Even the wood-paneled elevator is furnished with antiques.

Visitors will notice something about a few of these rooms furnished like salons in elegant homes, however. Instead of the usual overall period look for both the setting and the furnishings, some of them have sleek contemporary décors and works of art that set off the sometimes elaborate 18th-century furniture in a fresh way, contrasting the voluptuous contours and decoration of each piece with the clean lines of its surroundings.

This is one indication that this venerable house, founded in 1875 by Lucien Kraemer, is not stuck in the past, for Kraemer is owned and operated by a close-knit family that has no trouble keeping each younger generation in the business, another unusual characteristic of the house. These fresh injections of youth help keep the house vibrant and in tune with the world of today.



Behind the door at number 43 are room after room of antiques.

The most recent addition to the family team is a member of the sixth generation: Alain, only 22, who has just finished his studies in economy and management at the Sorbonne and was steeped in art and culture growing up in the family business. He joins the rest of the family — fifth-generation brothers Olivier and Laurent, who joined the business in the 1970s; Laurent’s wife, Nicole; Olivier’s son, Mikaël; and Laurent’s daughter, Sandra Kraemer-Ibrah — at 43, rue de Monceau, where most of the family members still live and work. “We like to work together,” says Sandra. “We are stronger as a team.”

The “older” generation has enthusiastically embraced this new approach as well. Says Laurent: “There has been a change in our clientele recently. Buyers of modern and contemporary art — paintings by Rothko or Warhol, for example — are now coming to us because they realize how well 18th-century furniture fits into their homes.

They are often young people who don’t know 18th-century furniture.” Mikaël chimes in with the example of a young American couple who liked a pair of chairs, but were hesitating. “When the chairs were brought into one of the rooms with a contemporary décor,” he says, “they saw that they would go very well in their home in the United States.” Adds Olivier: “It allows them to stand out from other collectors.” And, as Laurent points out: “These pieces are not just furniture. They are works of art.”

Customers — even younger ones — know they can count on “the Kraemer taste,” which is based on a rigorous set of quality standards that every object must meet before it is added to their stock: rarity —

accompanied by such intangibles as beauty and charm — authenticity and quality. “We will not sell an object that doesn’t meet all these criteria,” says Sandra. Even beyond that, says Olivier, “Each purchase is a love story between our family and an object.”

Their love for and excitement about each piece shines through as they describe each one — what is special about it, what it is made of, whose hands it has passed through in the centuries of its existence before arriving at “43.” When they are together, their voices may mesh and overlap as they point out a particular feature of a piece.

People have been known to furnish entire homes with furniture from Kraemer, not only because of their reputation as authorities on French 18th-century furniture, but also because this house is one of the few with a stock large enough to pull it off. Along with their good taste and high standards, the Kraemers are renowned for their great discretion and restraint. A client once said to Olivier, “Mr. Kraemer, you never sold me anything — I bought things from you.” The family stresses, however, that there is nothing exclusive about the gallery, which is fully open to the public. All visitors are welcome and are personally shown around the 20 rooms by a member of the family. “We are discreet,” says Laurent, “but we are totally open to visits from collectors and art lovers.”

The Kraemer’s love affair with the “three Louis” began in 1875, when Lucien Kraemer fled to Paris from Alsace after it was occupied by the Prussians following the Franco-Prussian War. After starting with a small shop on the Rue de Penhièvre, he later moved to a shop near the Place de la Madeleine, which began to attract elite clients like the Rothschilds, Camondos, Wideners and Rockefellers.

In 1928, Lucien and his son Raymond bought the hôtel particulier at 43, rue de Monceau, near that of the Camondo family, whose



Three generations of Kraemers (from left): Laurent, Nicole, Mikaël, Sandra, Alain and Olivier (seated).

home is now the Musée Nissim de Camondo, a museum of decorative arts. Art lovers and collectors continued to flock to the house, among them J. Paul Getty, whose eponymous museum in California contains more than one piece from the house of Kraemer.

The Kraemers, a Jewish family, survived World War II by escaping to the Free Zone in the South of France and later hiding under false names in central France with the help of a former employee. When they returned to Paris after the Liberation, they found no. 43 empty, looted by Nazi occupiers, and had to start over from scratch, slowly building up their stock and always preferring quality over quantity — like their cousin, the Paris

antique dealer François Léage, who has the same specialty.

“It wasn’t until the 1960s that we became leaders in the business again,” says Laurent, adding: “We are really proud of our family. Our great-great-grandfather started with nothing and soon became a supplier to the Rothschilds. And we greatly admire the way our grandfather and father put the business back together after the war.”

As the family prepares to exhibit in New York at The Salon: Art + Design at the Park Avenue Armory, in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, it hopes “to help raise spirits,” says Sandra, “in a gesture of friendship to those affected by the storm.” ■

THE SALON: ART + DESIGN | Direct from Paris

Historic treasures on display in New York

Eighteenth-century French furniture may be the epitome of elegance, but today, with the trends favoring the mixing of styles and periods, few would decorate an entire home or room exclusively with furniture made during the eras of the three Louis (XIV, XV and XVI).

Kraemer, Paris’s most venerable and selective antique gallery, has brought some of the highlights of its extensive stock to New York from its Parisian townhouse for the first time to demonstrate that “18th-century French furniture adapts to all décors,” as Laurent Kraemer puts it.

With its fine furniture surrounded by modern and contemporary art at The Salon: Art + Design in the Park Avenue Armory (Nov. 8-12), the message will be clear: these pieces would be as much at home in a downtown loft next to a Basquiat painting as they would in a Park Avenue showplace.

The gallery, a board member of the French Syndicat National des Antiquaires, the co-organizer of the fair, was the only one asked to show 18th-century French furniture in New York. With a selection of rare pieces on show, its space will have the look of a museum exhibition.

One of the star pieces in the Kraemer show could well have been part of “Extravagant Inventions: The Princely Furniture of the

Roentgens” (through Jan. 27), an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum featuring the work of the father and son Abraham and David Roentgen, leading 18th-century German cabinetmakers in vogue at the French court who were known for their pioneering designs, which often incorporated ingenious mechanical devices.

A case in point is the handsome 18th-century mahogany secretary made by David Roentgen that the Kraemers will be showing. Its user can write standing up when the top flap is lowered or sitting down when the central leaf is dropped. Behind each drop-leaf are adjustable pigeonholes and small drawers.

The lower part of the secretary conceals a real surprise. When one of the two side doors is opened and a button is released, a sliding panel on the front rises to reveal a music box whose tall pipes fit behind the drawers.

The piece was sold in Berlin in 1928 at one of the famous auctions of the contents of the Russian imperial palaces by the Soviet authorities, who desperately needed money to feed their starving people. This is the last important piece by Roentgen auctioned off at those sales that is still in private hands. Most of them now belong to the world’s major museums, including the Louvre, Versailles, the State Hermitage Palace Museum in St. Petersburg and the Moscow Kremlin



Left: A very rare, large 18th-century upright double secretary in mahogany, with chased and gilded bronze mounts. Below: A Louis XV *dos d’âne* writing desk in black lacquer and gilded bronze.



Armory Museum.

These sales also provided the basis for many great private collections, including those of Calouste Gulbenkian, Armand Hammer, the Dodge family, Moïse de Camondo and, later, the Gettys. European royals like King Umberto of Italy and the Von

Thurn und Taxis princes also picked up a few pieces at the sales.

The secretary will be accompanied by a number of other fascinating pieces, among them a late-18th-century mahogany gueridon, or pedestal table, stamped by

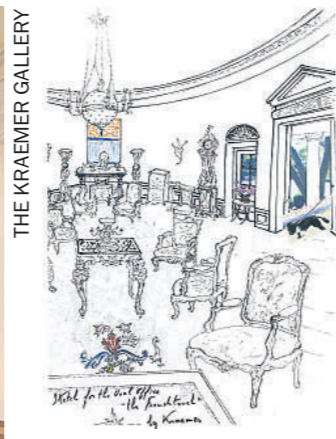
Bernard Molitor, a cabinetmaker who supplied both Marie-Antoinette and, after the French Revolution, Napoleon. What makes this piece outstanding is its unusually large size; as big as a dining table, the elegant two-tiered table is adorned with chased gilt-bronze decorations.

Another unusual piece will be a chandelier (c. 1800) in the form of a blue-lacquered sphere sprinkled with gilt stars. It closely resembles another chandelier, made by Claude Galle and inspired by a hot-air balloon, that was among the Kraemers’ acquisitions and now belongs to the collection of the Getty Museum.

An exceptionally lovely piece to be shown by the Kraemers is a rare black-lacquered Louis XV *dos d’âne* writing desk with gracefully curving legs and elaborate Japanese landscape scenes in chased and gilded bronze. It is stamped by the master cabinetmaker Jacques Dubois.

More elaborate is an early Louis XVI eight-legged console (c. 1760) with a white-veined marble top, draped with swags of gilded carved-wood flowers and with a carved and gilded vase full of flowers sitting on its base.

Animal lovers will be intrigued by a plush Louis XVI dog kennel by the cabinetmaker Georges Jacob, made so that a house pet can curl up in its cozy carved-out interior. ■



The Oval Office by Kraemer, in reality and sketch.

OVAL OFFICE | Presidential makeover

Reimagining the White House décor in the style of Versailles

Few antique dealers would have the wherewithal to completely redecorate the White House’s Oval Office without even leaving home, but such a feat was no problem for Kraemer, the oldest family-owned antique gallery in Paris. Its stock is so large that when the family set out to show what they would do if asked to make over the most famous room in the world, all they had to do was choose some of the best pieces from their 20-room gallery. Their efforts were rewarded with letters of appreciation from no fewer than three American presidents: Barack Obama, George W. Bush and George H.W. Bush.

The White House is already home to a number of pieces that were once part of the Kraemer collection. Jackie Kennedy, no stranger to the Kraemers’ townhouse/gallery, bought some of the 18th-century furniture she used to redecorate the White House during her husband’s presidency from their Paris gallery, and many pieces

purchased from the Kraemers by others were later donated to the American presidential residence.

To create their replica of the Oval Office, the Kraemers started with the room itself, reproducing all of its details — size, shape, wall color, fireplace, doors, molding, etc. — so exactly that any U.S. president would recognize it immediately. Then they set about furnishing it with their unerring “Kraemer taste.”

“We wanted to show what high-quality 18th-century furniture would look like in a room like this,” says Laurent Kraemer.

The result is plush and refined, yet airy and serene. The president’s elegant desk, created by the cabinetmaker Pierre Garnier, looks “strong and distinguished” with its chased gilt bronze legs and drawers.

Other standout pieces include an elaborate French Regency table representing the four corners of the world, a spherical star-studded blue chandelier and a spectacular monumental Louis XV pendulum clock. ■

TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTIONS | American acquisitions

Pieces that grace some of the leading U.S. museums

The house of Kraemer has had a long-standing love affair with the United States. Back in the 1930s, J. Paul Getty came calling at 43 rue de Monceau in Paris and made a note of it in his diary. Today, his museum in California displays numerous pieces purchased from the Kraemers. Other American customers from the same period included Consuelo Balsan (née Vanderbilt), George Widener and Mrs. Alexander Hamilton-Rice.

The parade of Americans continued in the 1950s. Laurent Kraemer recounts the story of his father, Philippe, receiving Henry Ford II: “He bought so much that my father, who was a young man at the time, said, ‘Maybe that’s enough for today, Mr. Ford.’ He was worried about depleting the stock the gallery had been painstakingly building up since the end of World War II, but Ford thought he was using a clever sales tactic on him and bought even more. Not only that, but he was so impressed that he offered my father a job!”

Later, socialites like Sao Schlumberger and Susan Gutfreund patronized the gallery in the eighth arrondissement. The architect Peter Marino, who bought a Louis XVI commode by Jean-François Leleu from the Kraemers for his contemporary apartment, claimed that he had had to sell two of his children to acquire it.

Today, furniture and objects from the Kraemer Gallery can be found in a number of American museums besides the Getty, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Birmingham Museum

of Art and the San Francisco Fine Arts Museum Legion of Honor. The White House is also home to pieces that have passed through the selective hands of the Kraemer family. “These objects in foreign museums are ambassadors for French taste,” says Olivier.

One of the most important recent acquisitions made from Kraemer by an American museum was the purchase by the Legion of Honor in San Francisco of a Louis XV drop-front secretary with an illustrious provenance. It was purchased in Paris from the dealer Simon-Philippe Poirier by George William Coventry, the sixth Earl of Coventry, on Sept. 9, 1763, for his neo-Palladian mansion in south Worcestershire, Croome Court, designed by the landscape architect Capability Brown.

After staying in the same family until 1948, the secretary later passed into the Chester Beatty collection, and then belonged to the Maharani of Baroda, who was known as the “Indian Wallis Simpson.”

The secretary bears the stamp “B.V.R.B.,” whose meaning was unknown until 1955, when it was discovered that it referred to a line of cabinetmakers founded by Bernard II van Risenburgh, the leading cabinetmaker of the Louis XV period.

This very elegant secretaire, with a slightly curved shape and splayed sides, is made of marquetry and veneer of King-

wood, amaranth and end-cut wood with chased and gilt-bronze mounts. Its panels are decorated with motifs of flowering shrubs and branches.

Olivier and Mikaël Kraemer were invited by the trustees to accompany the secretary to San Francisco when it traveled there to be shown, an indication of how seriously such purchases are taken by both buyer and seller. ■



In New York, Kraemer is showing a Louis XV secretary identical to this one, now in the San Francisco Museum of Fine Art.