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## ANTIQUES ROADSHOW



When Louis Vuitton presented a new high jewellery collection in Saint-Tropez, they called in Galerie Kraemer, purveyor of period furniture to the 0.001 per cent to set the scene...

By Sarah Royce-Greensill





**H**igh jewellery clients are a tricky bunch to impress: five-star hotels and gala dinners are par for the course. Louis Vuitton raised the bar in Saint-Tropez this summer as it showcased a collection of three loose red diamonds – the rarest of the rare – alongside an 18th-century velvet dog kennel, the likes of which might well have housed Marie Antoinette's prized pug.

More than 100 VVIP clients had travelled to the Côte d'Azur for the launch of the house's Awakened Hands, Awakened Minds high jewellery collection to view the 105 pieces, which were presented at Domaine Bagatelle, a jaw-dropping Provençal villa with views from the infinity pool across to Pampelonne Beach, together worth hundreds of millions.

Inside, a model flopped on to a gilded Louis XVI chair originally made for Madame Elisabeth, the king's sister; her fingers, ears and wrists were bedecked with rare Mozambican rubies that fluoresce under UV light. 'We told her to look really bored, as if time is passing really slowly,' recalls Francesca Amfitheatrof, artistic director of Louis Vuitton watches and jewellery, over Zoom this autumn, adding that her team dubbed the blasé beauty the Marquise de Bagatelle, as they envisaged her life in the Age of Enlightenment.

Beside her was a Louis XV marquetry jewellery cabinet, complete with ink stand and writing surface, at which the Marquise might dash off a scandalous letter to a lover. Elsewhere, the en-tremblant diamonds of the maison's first tiara glimmered in the reflection of a spectacular overmantel mirror that had previously hung in the Hôtel Lambert in Paris. A Louis XVI plum-pudding tiered cabinet heaved with embroidered 18th-century silk gambling purses, which the king would hand, filled with gold coins, to the guests who attended his New Year celebrations, while a magnificent brocade-inspired emerald and diamond bib necklace and matching medallion watch were displayed atop a circa 1770 marquetry chest of drawers that once belonged to the heiress Gladys Vanderbilt Széchenyi.

A bronze bust of King Louis XIV gazed at the riches on display, and in the background ticked a grandfather clock created by the great 18th-century cabinetmaker Jean-Pierre Latz (commissioned by King Frederick of Prussia, it has a twin in the New Palace, Potsdam). The clock's marquetry case was adorned with the regal quatrefoil motif, uncannily reminiscent of the Louis Vuitton monogram flower.

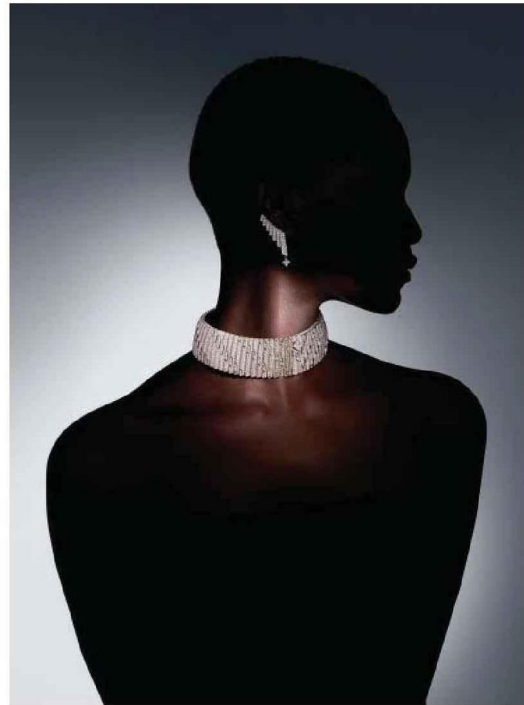
'We go really deep into the storytelling when we showcase the jewellery. We always do it in a very serious way,' says Amfitheatrof, who presented the collection to press and clients during the course of the 10-day event. 'People were blown away. They just don't see anything like that.'

The idea was to immerse visitors in the narrative that inspired the collection. The Awakened Hands chapter was a homage to French savoir-faire, and the creativity that flourished when the country's ateliers were freed from the royal courts. Ornamental wooden carvings and elaborately embellished tapestries housed at the Mobilier National inspired the intricately crafted, opulent jewels. The Splendeur necklace, for example, comprises a lace-like lattice of 2,400 gold, ruby and diamond elements, and it took more than 4,200 hours of work to craft the woven ropes of gold and diamonds that form the sumptuous Séduction bib.

Across the villa's courtyard, another vast atrium showcased the Awakened Minds section of the exhibition, where bold, geometric jewels were presented alongside a private collection of scientific instruments and a library of technical drawings celebrating the industrial advances that led to the advent of passenger rail, mechanisation and, of course, Gustave Eiffel's iron masterpiece.

'We want people to feel that they are surrounded by real objects, not fake objects,' says Amfitheatrof. 'There is so much history that you will pick up on, whether you're aware of it or not. We go a bit deep and crazy with it. It's a real joy to do these

PREVIOUS Louis Vuitton Awakened Hands, Awakened Minds high jewellery in the Domaine Bagatelle. RIGHT Gold, platinum and diamond Optimisme choker and matching earring. FROM BELOW The villa itself, and the exhibition. Artistic director Francesca Amfitheatrof



*'We want people to feel that they are surrounded by real objects. There is so much history that you will pick up on, whether you're aware of it or not'*



installations; it's one of my favourite things, to add this kind of magic dust on top of everything else.'

To find that authentic ingredient X, Louis Vuitton partnered with Galerie Kraemer, the 149-year-old Parisian specialist in 18th-century French furniture and objets d'art. The oldest family-owned art gallery in France, its acquisitions feature in museums including the Louvre, the Palace of Versailles, the Metropolitan Museum, the Frick Collection, the Getty Museum and the Wallace Collection, as well as in the homes of the world's 0.01 per cent. The family are far too discreet to reveal their current clients, but they move in the same circles as the guests who joined Louis Vuitton in Saint-Tropez.

'I remember Galerie Kraemer from when I worked with Karl Lagerfeld,' says Amfitheatrof, who collaborated with the designer at Chanel and Fendi in the 1990s. 'He would spend evenings there when he was going through his 18th-century phase. They are world-renowned for that period. And they have an encyclopaedia of knowledge. So, they were the obvious people to work with.'

Armed with her sketches and a mood board of royal French furnishings, she visited the Kraemer townhouse, hidden behind vast green doors on a street of austere beautiful mansions in the 8th arrondissement. Inside, there is no such solemnity, as I discovered when I was welcomed by Mikael Kraemer, his brother Alain, father Olivier, cousin Sandra, and uncle Laurent. They bicker, interrupt each other and share in-jokes as they recount the gallery's progression from its beginnings in 1875, when it was founded by the young Lucien Kraemer, to its current position as the world's leading supplier of ormolu and marquetry to billionaires.

Lucien left Prussian-occupied Alsace for Paris in 1872, and followed in the footsteps of his cousin Eugène, who was an antiques dealer and art advisor to the Rothschild family. Mikael takes a





LEFT The Galerie Kraemer townhouse is full of museum-quality 18th-century furniture. FROM BELOW The rue de Monceau townhouse, its home since 1928. The Kraemer family: Laurent with his daughter Sandra, and Olivier with his sons Mikael and Alain

*'All of these pieces were made to be beautiful, of course, and to bring great prestige for their owners, but they were also made to be used'*



framed invoice from the wall: dated 1895 and issued to Baron Gustave de Rothschild, it marked the beginning of a long relationship between the two families. In 1928 Lucien and his son Raymond moved to rue de Monceau, close to the townhouse of the wealthy Camondo family, who also became faithful clients.

During the Second World War, the Kraemers fled to the south of France, and their entire inventory was plundered and sold in what Olivier describes as 'one of the world's greatest unsolved Nazi lootings'. When they returned to Paris after the war, Raymond and his son Philippe (Olivier and Laurent's father) rebuilt the collection from scratch, resolving that 'even if each room contains no more than one or two pieces, they will all be outstanding'.

This dedication to quality has secured the gallery's reputation and longevity. Together, the family decide whether a potential acquisition is good enough for Kraemer. 'Sometimes we might see a piece of art which is not exactly the quality we want, but there's a lot of money to be won,' says Mikael. 'The correct answer is to say no. Even if it is a very good deal.'

The house's archive of purchase ledgers is punctuated with names such as de Castellane, Vanderbilt, Morgan, Rockefeller, Churchill and Getty. Christian Dior, Aristotle and Jackie Onassis, Henry Ford, Stavros Niarchos, Giovanni Agnelli, Pierre Bergé and Hubert de Givenchy were all welcomed by various generations of Kraemers. Olivier estimates that 15 per cent of the Met's collection of French 18th-century furniture and 10 per cent of the collection at the Louvre passed through Galerie Kraemer at one time or another. It's not inconceivable that there may be a sprinkling of Kraemer magic in the many residences of the famille Arnault, whose patriarch Bernard is founder and CEO of LVMH.

'We have an obvious connection [with Louis Vuitton] because we are all looking for excellence, beauty, quality, craftsmanship and savoir-faire,' says Mikael. 'When Francesca came to the gallery, she showed us her designs, and she was looking for antiques and furniture to match with her drawings. And we found exactly what she needed. What was funny was

she had a rendering of the types of furniture they were looking for, and some of them were pieces that we previously owned.'

'People say that we have the most important inventory in our kind of furniture,' adds Olivier. 'So it was – I don't want to say easy, but easier. Because we have a lot of items of such a quality. It's not as if it was in one room. It's a complete house.'

'House' seems an understatement, as Mikael and Olivier guide me through a warren of rooms over three floors, each more opulent than the last. Here is a set of rocaille armchairs from a castle in Normandy. Here is a bureau originally from the Hermitage in St Petersburg. Here are two vases from the collection of Hubert de Givenchy. Behind this door are hard-stone trinket boxes and Sèvres porcelain that belonged to Marie Antoinette. And here is the grandfather clock that was in Saint-Tropez – Olivier describes it as 'our business card'.

It's a treasure house of royal-quality pieces by the greatest craftsmen of the 18th century. André-Charles Boulle, Charles Cressent, Jean-Henri Riesener and Martin Carlin – to antiques collectors, the roster of makers evokes the same spine-tingling excitement as words such as 'Golconda diamond' or 'Kashmir sapphire' do for gemstone connoisseurs.

'All of these pieces were made to be used. They were made to be beautiful, of course, and to bring great prestige for their owners, but they were also used,' says Olivier. I think back to Vuitton's extraordinary feats of high jewellery craftsmanship, where hundreds of precious gems are woven into jewellery that is articulated to move fluidly with the body, and engineered to offer multiple styling options. Prestige and practicality.

We enter what Olivier describes as a 'bric-a-brac' room, filled with 18th-century high-heeled shoes, miniature cannons and more velvet dog kennels. There are objects that even the wealthiest collectors could never imagine, like an extraordinary glass dome on gilded legs, inside which is a miniature replica of the wedding of Louis XV's parents in the chapel at Versailles. Is everything for sale? 'I would say yes and no,' says Mikael, smiling. 'Most of what we present is for sale. Actually, that's not the right phrase. One of our clients once said, "You never sold me anything. It was always me who bought from you."' (Olivier later tells me that when Michael Jackson visited in the 1980s, he asked if he could buy the lift.)

As the sixth generation takes the helm, Mikael, Alain and Sandra are attracting younger collectors by introducing modern and contemporary art by the likes of Rashid Johnson, Olafur Eliasson, Takashi Murakami, Hans Hartung, Fernand Léger and Pierre Soulages, which hangs throughout the gallery alongside the antiques.

'We want to get the attention of young, new collectors who are starting to buy art – at the same time, they discover the beauty of French antiques,' says Mikael. 'And the older generation feel happy because they say their children will be able to mix their art together with their collection.'

The mix of history and modernity is what made the Awakened Hands presentation all the more extraordinary. 'Nowadays, people with great wealth live a lot in hotels and private planes and boats, which all have a certain universal aesthetic,' says Amfitheatrof. 'And when you see instead these extraordinary pieces which are incredibly rare, next to contemporary art, you realise how individual the object is. It's that tension between the pieces that makes them really interesting. Our clients are not used to having such an eclectic mix.'

What Galerie Kraemer specialises in is not just objects of incredible beauty, but an inheritable store of wealth. Rather like a red diamond or three. 'I imagine that most of the ladies who went to buy jewellery in Saint-Tropez chose something that fits well, that they can wear for galas and so on,' says Mikael. 'But the idea is also to transmit something to the next generation; it's a patrimony. And it's the same for art and antiques. You buy something exceptional, you attach your name to it, you enjoy it, and you transmit it.' ●