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La Brocante à Paris.



« The pleasure of acquiring curios is second only to the actual bargaining. »

BALZAC - *Le Cousin Pons*

« The Maréchale d'Estrées was exceedingly avaricious, and was the first to laugh at herself for this trait ; added to this, she had a passion for buying second-hand objects and recognised a bargain when she saw one. »

SAINT-SIMON

The few reflections that follow are directed above all to readers of the country which gave birth to Le Corbusier. They will no doubt be somewhat surprised therefore at the assertion that our period has not succeeded in creating a style of its own. And yet, except for one or two outstanding exceptions, one does not have to look far to see that our contemporaries have failed miserably in this respect : it is sufficient merely to use one's eyes and make a few enquiries. A few months ago, we asked the president of a very exclusive and powerful society of interior decorators the question : « Who is it that buys all this modern furniture ? » « Actually, very few private individuals » he replied, « it is mostly the big concerns, hotels, ministries and public administrations and perhaps a few members of the liberal professions ».

For practically a century now, high society in France has not taken any real interest in the style of the day. Up till the time of Napoleon III, art and furniture were alive. Just as each of the Louis' had marked his passage by patronising and inspiring the arts, so the periods of the Directoire, the Consulate, the Empire, the Restoration and Louis-Philippe had created their own individual setting. With the new Emperor it was quite different. The Palace of the Tuileries was content to have copies made in the styles of Louis XV and Louis XVI,

Viollet-le-Duc and the writers brought the Gothic back into fashion. The Goncourts had a craze for Japanese curios, every pretext was taken to delve into the past and surround oneself with antiques. Balzac's Cousin Pons had his imitators too, everyone took up collecting. From time to time however,



there were reactions : the Exhibition of 1900 gave birth to the modern style, flamboyant with volutes and decorative filigree, which died down as quickly as it had sprung into life ; then came the Exhibition of 1925, showing the influence of the Munich School and Paul Poiret, where the interior decorators tried to find a compromise between a fussy attention to detail and the aridity of layer upon layer of reinforced concrete superimposed one above the other like the wings of Caproni's triplanes. But these were all little more than abortive attempts. Meanwhile, the seekers, the curious, the connoisseurs continued to strengthen their liking for objects out of the past and their refusal to accept anything the present had to offer.

* * *

Hence the unprecedented growth of the antique business and second-hand trade. I could not say exactly how many antique dealers there are in France ; it would be quite a simple matter however to find out by looking them up in the « Bottin » — France's big trade directory. In any case they are steadily increasing in number. They have overflowed from their traditional districts, the Rue des Saints-Pères, the Rue Jacob, the Rue Bonaparte and the Rue de l'Université, and are now found everywhere from the Place d'Italie to the Buttes-Chaumont, from Neuilly to Vincennes. In any of the new buildings springing up, at Passy, Auteuil or on the outlying boulevards, you will always find antique dealers among the first to remove the white-wash from their shop windows. Their shops contain as many allegedly genuine Louis XV dressers as there are bottles of Beaujolais on the tables of the world ; even if the whole of France were completely covered with vineyards, it would not be large enough to produce all the wine that is sold as Beaujolais, just as it would have required some two hundred million Frenchmen in the time of the Louis' — France's golden age — to produce so many dressers. What does it matter though ? The main thing is to discover a really fine piece of furniture.

But in addition to the antique dealers, the better class representatives of the trade, with their mellowed dressers and gleaming woods, there are the poorer cousins, the second-hand dealers, the purveyors of bric-à-brac. And that represents a world in itself.

* * *

A world where one does not waste one's time — or one's money — in sumptuous shops, drawn by subtle lighting and clever window displays. A shelter and some trestle tables are all that are necessary. Go any time between Saturday morning and Monday evening to the Paris Flea Market, or on the other days of the week to the Swiss Village, and you will find yourself in a land of make believe. In all the streets around, with their rough cobbles — we are thinking of St. Ouen — and muddy gutters, you will find a continuous file of parked cars of all types representing every layer of society, from the second-hand dealer's van to the Cadillac or Rolls of a Lopez or a Besteguy ; the cars are waiting for their owners to return with their latest finds. If you are not afraid to sink up to your ankles in mud, join the

connoisseurs strolling along before the stalls, concealing their social status under a careless exterior of old coats and polo-neck sweaters.

Here is the dealer in old iron. He spreads his wares out on the ground : the pans, cages, remnants of wrought-iron gates, the ten foot high statue of Admiral Courbet in cast iron, the metal bed, the decorative ironwork from a well. Further along the street, you will come across the dealer in swords, spears, old gramophones and antiquated wireless sets ; everything has a poverty-stricken look. But all at once you pull up short. In the middle of all this junk you have just caught sight of an old dressing table in wrought-iron which, repaired and repainted, will make the most adorable flower stand, the very thing for your hall. As for the papier mâché horse from some long silent merry-go-round, it has all the makings of a romantic setting. Continuing on our way, we pass many charming baubles : opalines, old lamps, bridal coronets under glass globes, ornamental clocks, vases, decorated glass paper weights, porcelain hens brooding in their baskets, crystals of all periods, dishes and plates decorated with scenes of Paris or riddles ; and a whole series of «trompe-l'œil» objects — the match-box that is really an ashtray, the sausage that is made of china, the fish that looks as though it had come straight from the angler's hook, the tobacco jar with its ceramic cigars ; row upon row of statuettes, busts, furniture in miniature, boxes of all kinds and all materials, medicine and ointment jars, picture frames, engravings, paintings, bottles shaped like the Eiffel Tower, violins or pistols, fans with advertisements, sweet jars, old buttons, brasses, pewter-ware, puppets and dolls, telescopes, souvenir spoons, collections of post-cards, china slippers and the wicker manikins of the time of Charles X ; innumerable watches and water jugs, thermometers, medals, kaleidoscopes, chandeliers of all styles, in iron, copper, wood and crystal, footmuffs in moth-eaten old

fur and coachman's boots. And a thousand and one useless and delightful trinkets : old hand mirrors incrustated with marcasite, rusty sabres, dolls of all styles and all countries, crested compas sets, tin soldiers and wooden soldiers, copper carriages and reproductions of the 1898 Panhards and Levassors, tortoise-shell knives, daggers of Toledo, paint boxes in decorated wood, fire screens, fire dogs, wooden scuttles covered with tapestry, animals in silver, brass, ceramics, china pitchers of all shapes, sizes and origins ; Mexican spurs and old candle sticks ; then further on there is the writing desk of the time of George Sand, and a collection of goose feathers, the little bronze canon used at the battle of Austerlitz and the shell case from the 1914-1918 war transformed into a flower vase ; there are collections of butterflies and insects speared by pins, the coffee mill of great grandmother's day and the oil lamp that made the fortune of the first Rockefeller, the snuff box owned by the Duke of Lauzun and the tiger's paw that adorned Tartarin's waistcoat, Monsieur Homais' gold purse with spring clip and the map of the world that belonged to Jules Verne, Déroulède's bugle and Cocteau's black good-luck charm ; chess men in bone, ivory, porcelain and wood, and paper knives in jade, and a million pairs of spectacles, the books that have their cut out secret





hiding places and the countless money boxes ; scale models and copies of everything under the sun, everything in fact that is not what it appears to be ; two centuries or more of everyday objects, of pastimes, of relics of former existences, the little conveniences of life with which human beings try to make their lives more pleasant, the relics of skills and vanities, the useful and the useless. Men and women have lived, loved, suffered and created, surrounded by these baubles, these silent companions, this fantastic bric-à-brac.

Between the stalls, past the trestle tables, inside the lean-to's and the wooden shacks, the men and

women of 1956 come and go, strolling to and fro in search of a dream ; sometimes they find it and carry it off triumphantly, wrapped in an old copy of the *Figaro* or the *Gaulois*, to their car, where it is laid carefully on the back seat.

Paris has been badly bitten by the «second-hand» bug. And Paris, in order to pander to its vice, goes off — at least it used to in the good old days not so long ago when it still had the petrol — to the provinces where the depots and shops of second-hand dealers and old-iron and bric-à-brac merchants receive, in the dust and grime of their musty abodes, the ambassador of the United States and Madame Simone, Salacrou or Steve Passeur, or even the Queen of curio collectors, Louise de Vilmorin, whose cellars at the Château de Verrières-le-Buisson contain the amassed treasures of twenty years of zestful curiosity and a keen sense of timing, of choosing the right moment to produce an object for it to become all the rage. Cousin Pons has been left far behind. Thousands of Parisians now know, just as well as the connoisseur, the value of a candlestick or a medicine jar. It is a perpetual game, a captivating pastime, a hobby of which one never tires, the sign of an age that has a sort of nostalgia for a more brilliant, calmer existence, one less thrilling perhaps but deeper, when people knew how to surround themselves with beautiful objects. Not everyone can take up the violin like Ingres, or go in for painting like Winston Churchill. But everyone can become a collector. Well, what are you waiting for ?

GALA

