



Vide-grenier - here the whole town of Vitré (Brittany) was turned over to its annual event in September.

Why France?

Even frequent visitors to France see the unfamiliar as a challenge, earning Brownie points for credibility and boosting self-respect. Car servicing, 24 hour petrol pumps and the state horseracing tote are all major achievements for most Brits in France. A purchase from a brocante, whether an old Peugeot coffee grinder or a fine bronze, is one such rite of passage for true francophile status.

Browsing round French shops, fairs and markets need not be painful, not least because you don't have to engage anyone in conversation. There is no urgency and, if necessary, the vendor will do all he can to accommodate you. Purchases are likely to be far more satisfying and lasting than anything picked up in the souvenir shop. And, if you are in the habit of looking for French items in the UK, you could find bargains. The French vendor's price won't include the same overheads.

Money

Transactions at fairs and markets are predominantly cash based. The UK banks' Eurocheque facility is not being restored alongside the introduction of the euro, which runs in parallel with the franc for six months. Those with current accounts in euros (eg ROI residents) should benefit from lower charges.

Credit cards are accepted by a minority of dealers. Apart from outlets such as shops and antiques centres (which are few and far between in France) it really has to be cash. Many French cashpoints are limited to around £200 or £300, regardless of the card's limit at home. Be prepared to use several cards.



Most sizeable towns have a weekly market - here the Monday market in Cours Saleya, Nice.



Quartier des antiquaires in Nice - around 30 shops around the old port.

First of a 3 part series Buying Antiques in France - introduction

by Ivor Hughes

Language is no barrier

In major cities, and at major exhibitions, most dealers speak good enough English. At upmarket Salon events it is not unusual to hear English spoken among dealers of all nationalities. Otherwise, you will experience minimum difficulties if you can count to one thousand and make the following much appreciated efforts:

Parlez-vous anglais? (Do you speak English?)

Combien? (How much?)

Et pour les (deux, trois, quatre)? And for the (two, three, four etc)?

Quel âge? (How old?)

Quelle région? (Where's it from?)

Le dernier prix? (The best price?)

Espèces! (Cash!)

D'accord. (OK)

Be careful when you get into specifics. Words like 'régule' (French for spelter, a zinc alloy and an inferior substitute for bronze) are not usually in the vocabularies of otherwise fluent Brits. There are also ambiguities in French, just as in English. For example, 'cuivre' (copper) can often be taken to mean brass (also 'cuivre jaune' or 'laiton'), and 'étain' means both tin and pewter.

Where to go - fairs, markets and auctions

Don't set aside whole days for visiting single events. Unless you know what to expect you may be disappointed. Unlike in Britain, street events generally carry on well into the afternoon but one-day trade events often wind up around lunchtime.

Outdoor events in town centres are the most accessible. The whole community joins in the spirit of things. Shops and cafés usually open for the duration, even on a Sunday. Vendors, both trade and private, set up along the pavement and outside village centre shops. There are also stands devoted to local produce. These events are generally advertised as 'braderies' (boot sales) or 'vide-greniers' (attic clearances). That doesn't mean all the goods are down-market. The 6000 exhibitor all-weekend 'Braderie de Lille', each September, is a major antiques-brocante and cultural event, attracting around two million visitors.

Other fairs events are 'salons' (similar to datelined quality fairs in the UK), 'antiquités-brocante', 'puces' (fleamarkets) and 'débaldages professionnels' (strictly trade only, although production of a UK passport will usually get you in). In France, there is an important distinction between 'trade' (professionnel) and 'public' (particulier). Dealers are required to register and be licensed by the local council, although an exception is usually made for residents at occasional events.

Auctions. Check their conventions (registration, proof of ID, payment, collection etc). Be prepared to concentrate for hours - not all auctions have lot numbers and you don't know what's coming up next. If necessary, call out a name that the auctioneer is more likely to recognise. I often use "David", a common French surname, to make life easier all round.

Information

For fairs info, at least one of the magazines *Aladin*, *Antiquités Brocante* or *Le Chineur* are usually available at French newsagents. Some tourist information offices keep lists of events. The only reliable source of information for local auctions is the Saturday edition of the local newspaper, which may also list fairs.

Shops

There is an observed hierarchy of 'antiquités', 'antiquités-brocante' and 'dépôt vente' (selling for the public on a commission of around 20%). Prices, even for similar items, reflect the status of the establishment. Be prepared for Monday and lunchtime closures.

UK Customs

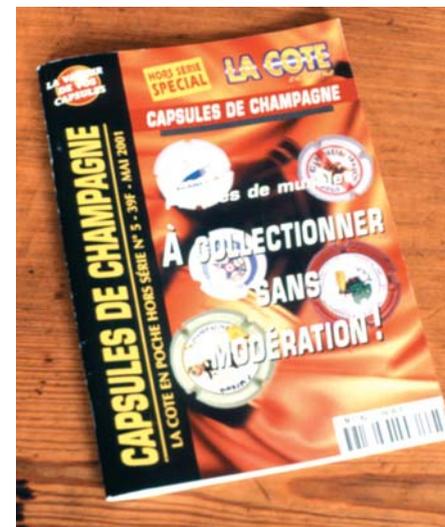
HM Customs assume that purchases in EC member states are subject to local VAT rules and therefore not liable to further VAT on import. Unless they are controlled items (eg firearms) or liable to excise duty (eg alcohol) you should be OK. Get an information leaflet from HM Customs and Excise, who are always remarkably helpful.



The outsides of French provincial auction houses tend not to be as grand as those in UK (here in Mayenne).....



....but you never know what you might find inside. Here bronze and ormolu statues and clocks are waiting to be catalogued.



The French are as quirky as the British when it comes to collecting. Here a standard reference work giving the values of almost 10,000 different 'capsules'; the metal plates on the top of champagne corks.



Only titles change. Bookshop in the quartier des antiquaires, rue Jean Jaurès, Nantes.



Some typical finds at a French brocante. Unusual British items do turn up - a Lambeth Doulton disinfectant dispenser (looking like a chicken feeder) was found in Chinon.



A typical roadside brocante - this one on the N23 between Le Mans and Angers.



Also at Vitré - not just brocante - the oyster stall, in front of the railway station, was doing a brisk trade by mid-morning.