

Second of a 3 part series

Buying Antiques in France - the retail scene with a special emphasis on architectural salvage

by Ivor Hughes

Look again

When Francophiles first walk into a tumbledown antiquités-brocante shop 'somewhere' in France, they are likely to marvel at the remarkable variety of goods on offer. Faïence, pewter, ironwork, copper, enamel signs, clocks, coffee grinders, glassware, bedside cabinets, spelter figures

But look again. The faïence is chipped, the pewter is of indeterminate age and origin, the iron is decayed or repro or both, the enamel signs have rusted through, the clock doesn't work, the coffee grinders are missing clips and labels, the glassware is more likely to be from the back of a van than from Vannes itself, the furniture has been breakfast for generations of woodworm and the arts nouveau and deco spelter figures lost their fingers years ago. That, I'm afraid, has been the sad reality at the majority of the hundreds of out-of-town brocantes I have visited throughout France in the last fifteen years. Only the copper is likely to be ok and then only for decorative purposes as the linings will have worn through and the bases be so distorted that they won't sit on Agas or ceramic hobs.

It can, of course, be fun to 'discover' a brocante off the beaten track and spend ages combing through every box, hoping to find your own

house number in enamel or uncover a Gallé picture frame. But if you are seriously looking for antiques, decorative items or furnishings either for yourself or for profit then you are far better advised to stick to establishments that see more trade.

Architectural Salvage - an Important Exception

Land is cheap in France, but not that cheap. And you wouldn't like to have to get stone wellheads, troughs or five metre high gates through the traffic, never mind through your shop door and up the stairs. Architectural antiques and garden statuary remain very much out-of-town businesses.

The migration of rural populations to the cities and the subsequent dereliction of buildings in the countryside makes France a wonderful place for architectural salvage. But inevitably high transportation costs mean that only the choicest of the larger pieces make it to the UK. Marble statues and Durenne foundry urns, for example, have often been star exhibits at Sotheby's South architectural sales in Billingshurst.

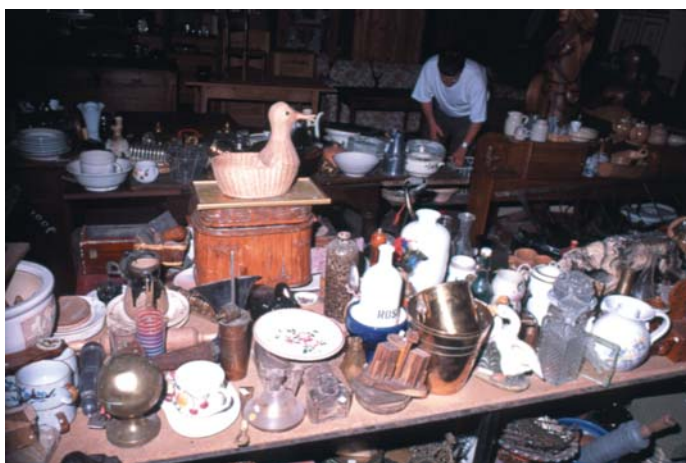
By far the best way to obtain details of salvage yards in the region is through the UK based pan-European affiliation SALVO (01890 820333 or www.salvo.co.uk) who provide a full information kit for £10.



L'Or Verre - one of the 240 units at Le Louvre des Antiquaires, Paris. L'Or Verre is one of many with spectacular displays of arts nouveau and deco, other units ranging from antiquities to contemporary art.



Shops like these are to be found in and around most large towns (this one near Mayenne). Though without many out and out bargains, there is plenty to be bought at price levels generally lower than in UK.



Left and right. A typical dépôt vente - a rummager's delight. At these, the vendor is usually on a commission of around 20%, so don't expect any great movement on prices.

How to find your shops - or not

Yellow pages are not very helpful. Listings for all types of business are generally split first by town or village location. They do not give an indication of the calibre of shop, its hours of opening or any specialisms. The Internet is no better in France than in the UK. Details are incomplete, fragmented and rarely up to date. And most web searches are case and punctuation sensitive, a bit of a handicap if you can't type 'é'.

The first thing to do is to ask at Tourist Info, your hotel or the café if there is a 'quartier des antiquaires' in the town - most larger towns do have one, if only with a handful of shops. Failing that, just one will do as a starting point. There you can ask for details of others. They may keep a list, or have a small colour brochure for the whole département.

These brochures, though common, are by no means comprehensive. But they are an excellent start as they give a good indication of type, quantity and quality of stock. The example shown is for the two départements of Côtes d'Armor and Finistère (both Brittany), listing 140 shops and 40 restorers by location and speciality. Although representing only a fraction of the trade in these counties, none of the 140 is likely to be a waste of time.

Antiques Centres

Antiques centres, with dealers invariably absent, are nowhere near as commonplace in France as in the UK. There are occasional conglomerations of separate shops, the most extreme version of which is at St Ouen (Clignancourt to Brits), north on the Paris Périphérique, with some 2000 shops on adjacent sites. Paradoxically, one of those sites (l'Entrepôt) is a substantial marshalling and sales area for architectural pieces of all sizes.

But what the French lack in quantity they make up for with quality. There is nowhere else in the UK or France, possibly the world, with the concentration and quality of goods to be found at the 'Louvre des Antiquaires' in Paris. Situated on rue de Rivoli, you could easily spend longer in its 240 shops than in the nearby museum.

Trade Organisations

Some shops combine forces on a regional or district basis. The title doesn't usually mean a great deal. Such groupings are often used to share costs of publicity on a website. There are, however, two national organisations that offer a level of confidence. SNCAO was formed in 1948 and represents dealers at all levels - antiques, collectibles and secondhand goods. With such a broad catchment, membership of 2000 is quite low. Then there is SNA, broadly equivalent to the UK's BADA and formed in 1901. Their 350 members are at the top of the trade. Both organisations have codes of conduct and enforceable arbitration in the event of dispute.



France is rich with architectural salvage - tiles at around one euro (currently about 1.61 to the pound) each in a yard near Alençon -



But for the dramatic signage, a typical town outskirts brocante - this one in Caen -



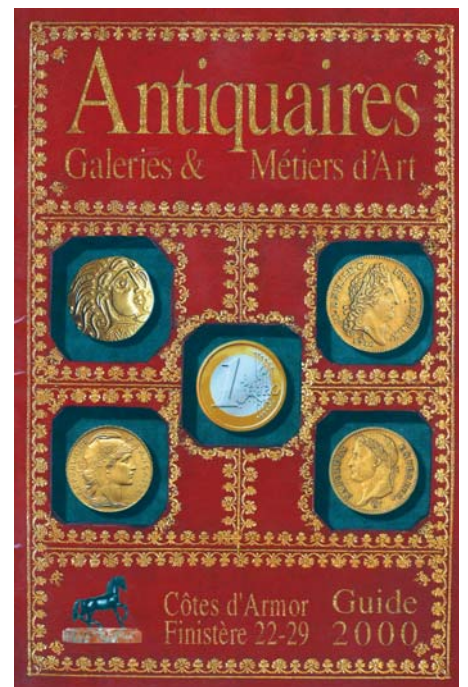
- or around 60 euros (about £37) a square metre in this specialist shop near Paris.



- with a wealth of smaller architectural pieces in the yard.



Around 1000 to 2000 euros will buy you a substantial horse trough in Normandy and Brittany. Note the attractive rose granite well to the right of the photograph. But transportation can double the cost.



Useful brochures such as these represent only a minority of shops in the region.