

Buying Antiques in France - The Fairs Scene



Some large events accommodate the full range of antiquités-brocante. Here, at the annual event in Nantes (October), one stand would not look out of place at a braderie...

.....while below Nelly Mauger of Cholet (centre), a regular exhibitor at major indoor fairs throughout France, has literally moved shop for three days.



French fairs, like their British counterparts, have a hierarchical structure - from single day 'anything goes' events - right up to vetted fairs lasting a week or more. But the strict distinction between public and trade divides that hierarchy both by quality and by type.

Braderies - the bottom tier

The French don't have boot sales quite like ours - weekly jumble sales in muddy fields with a £1 admission charge. They have three slightly upmarket equivalents - 'foire à tout' (anything and everything, including new goods), 'vide-greniers' (attic clearance) and 'braderie' (cut-price market).

These events are mostly outdoors and usually begin at the crack of dawn (the advertised '8h' start is a mere formality). They are often linked to a French public holiday. They might include cultural events. The whole town brings the streets to life, with cafés and food vans open all day, a march past from the local drum and kazoo band, the ubiquitous Moroccan stalls selling T-shirts, baubles and bangles, stalls selling local produce and an evening disco (typically run by the fire brigade in the local sports hall). Sellers are predominantly local to the town and neighbouring villages. Others, in the minority, are licensed dealers. Great fun for the tourist, hard work for the antiques dealer.

Bargains, rather than treasures, are to be found. They are not the best place for dealers looking for stock - two years ago I went to four such events within 24 hours in Dunkirk, Calais, Boulogne and Etaples. Over 2000 stands in total, but around six modest purchases for me. A good job I was on holiday. And don't be surprised if an event advertised with fifty stands turns out to have just six villagers selling only baby clothes. That happens when a neighbouring and larger town has a more established bigger event. I wasn't on holiday when it happened to me last September.



The monthly one-day trade event at Le Mans in June 2001. Often the third Wednesday of the month, but not always. Like all such events at exhibition centres (here some of the livestock stalls), the organiser often competes with others - the 24 hour race changed this one to a Thursday.

The middle tier - split in two

The bread and butter event to the French, UK and USA trade and collector alike is the 'foire antiquités brocante', or sometimes 'puces', of which the French, like the British, have thousands. But the French events are less laughable than many in the UK. In the UK, anyone with an out of date Miller's Antiques price guide and a stack of self-printed business cards can call themselves 'trade'. In France you have to be licensed. You are also required to keep a 'livre de police' - a strict stock and transaction record.

The more common events are held throughout France, usually monthly and on the same Sunday each month (eg first, second etc). Beware the ends of months with five Sundays. Some events are designated 'fourth Sunday' (eg Tours), and others 'last Sunday' (eg Le Perray-en-Yvelines, near Paris). The ends of these months can cause confusion within the French trade, and dilute the concentration of events. They might have as few as 20 stands and as many as 300.

The largest ones, though less frequent, are usually held on a weekday at an out-of-town exhibition centre. They are strictly for trade buyers, the production of licences required at the door. Having said that, a UK, RI or USA passport will do the trick - for two reasons. First, they know that registration is not compulsory in those countries. Secondly, they assume that there is no other reason why a Brit should arrive in a beat up GPO van at an airfield in the middle of nowhere at 7am in the driving rain.

A few are stricter - eg Cipolat's Lille event at the Grand Palais, every six weeks or so. If you want to make sure you'll get in then you'd better join the other wannabes in the queue at the business card printing machine in the service station. (see 'middle tier' above)

Salon events - the upper strata

Salon events are indoors, any nearby outdoor pitches not necessarily being associated with the indoor event. They usually last at least two days, and as many as fifteen if they are in a popular tourist spot. All will have at least some high quality items on offer, although most do not have a minimum requirement for the quality or type of goods shown.

No guarantees ... unless ...

Those that do have policies on what may or may not be displayed are difficult to pin down. Even if the event is run by a local dealers' or trade association then there is still the likelihood of finding reproduction items (albeit 1940s castings of C19th bronzes), or clocks in a poor state of repair.

The top French fairs do not have the same strict (and I would say arbitrary) dateline criteria applied by the more prestigious UK events. A UK datelined fair might, for example, have datelines of 1900 for furniture and 1940 for everything else, with exceptions for jewellery and certain works of art. But when French fairs are 'vetted', items for sale are checked for authenticity, accuracy of description - and whether they are of 'antique' quality. (eg rejecting 1930s bread boards but admitting 1960s art glass)

Unlike the UK, top events in France have the presence of an 'expert', or panel of experts. They act entirely independently of the organiser and exhibitors and write certificates of authenticity for purchasers, for which they remain personally liable for ten years! In the UK the customer is protected by consumer law and at top events by vetting committees and where applicable trade association and/or organiser's own guarantees.

Dates of events

The three leading magazines which include fairs diaries are *Aladin*, *Antiquités Brocante* and *Le Chineur*; all published monthly at the end of the preceding month. French dates can be unreliable due to the application and approval processes and the current 'plan vigipirate'. (anti-terrorist measures at vulnerable locations) Telephone first.



Le Mans Expo is also home to regular salon events (this one in October 2001). Here exhibitor Michel Flandrin (standing) is clearly pleased to see expert Claude Guitter of CNES (Chambre Nationale des Experts Spécialisés) write a certificate of authenticity for an 1820s bronze and ormolu mantel clock. Written free of charge at the request of a prospective purchaser, Maître Guitter, on hand throughout the three days, remains personally liable for its accuracy for ten years.



Tours, the fourth Sunday of every month. Around 130 stands in the leafy Boulevard Béranger.