

## Antiques

Wendy Moonan

### A Surge of Interest In European Furniture From a Century Ago

Antiques dealers are always rediscovering the past, searching for forgotten or undervalued areas in the market, where important discoveries can be made — and new collections formed from scratch.

Now extravagant late-19th-century and very-early-20th-century furniture from Europe is surfacing in the market both in the United States and abroad.

"It's been the Russians, Middle Easterners and Asians who have been collecting this over the past 20 years," said Elaine Whitmire, the head of decorative arts and single-owner sales at Sotheby's New York. "Americans are just starting to look at it."

The most newsworthy event in the field this fall in New York may be Sotheby's Oct. 26 sale of a private collection comprising 450 lots of furniture made by notable late-19th-century Paris cabinetmakers like François Linke and his contemporaries Henry Dasson and Alfred Beurdeley. The sale includes 75 lots that were bought directly from the Linke family or from Jean Bieder, his last foreman and the man Linke chose to succeed him.

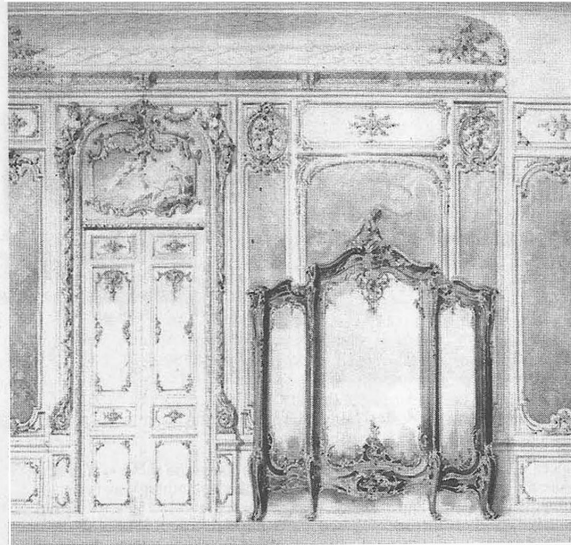
A four-sided Linke vitrine in mahogany with a surfeit of ormolu mounts and cherubs is thought to be a prototype for the one displayed in the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904; its estimate is \$300,000 to \$500,000. A glass-fronted Linke armoire in kingwood, with ormolu foliate decorations and a gilded bronze Minerva, from the early 1900's, is estimated at \$400,000 to \$600,000. These are not bargains.

"Linke had different levels of cabinetmaking — good, better, best — so prices vary," Ms. Whitmire said. "A plain side table might be \$5,000."

Linke was one of the best-known Parisian cabinetmakers of his day, a master of reinterpreting the Louis XV and Louis XVI styles.

"He was before his time," Ms. Whitmire said. "You see his style moving toward Art Nouveau before there was an Art Nouveau movement."

Born in a part of Bohemia that is now in the Czech Republic, Linke (1855-1946) apprenticed there and in Prague, Vienna and Budapest before moving to Paris in 1875. He worked for cabinetmakers in the Saint-An-



Sotheby's

Sotheby's Oct. 26 sale includes the Linke armoire seen in this drawing.

toine district near the Bastille, still a center of artisan activity, and in 1881 married the daughter of the German owner of his hotel. He then set up his own shop, probably with money from his father-in-law, and established a thriving business, with patrons like Kaiser Wilhelm II and Simón Patiño, the Bolivian tin magnate (who owned the Minerva armoire).

Christopher Payne, a former furniture expert at Sotheby's, has written a definitive book on 19th-century European furniture, to be reissued this fall, and a recent book on Linke, both published by the Antiques Collectors' Club. He tracked down Linke's business registers from 1881 and 1901 and a cache of casts, sketches and glass negatives.

In the Sotheby's sale catalog Mr. Payne writes that he helped form the collection for a couple living outside of London who were fascinated by French furniture made during the Third Republic (1870-1940).

"The Parisian cabinetmakers represented in this collection were arguably the best technicians and craftsmen that France ever produced," he writes. "They were able to take the innovative style and verve of the 18th century and adapt it to modern living conditions. Technology was used to improve construction techniques, casting, metalwork and gilding, but

at the same time the traditional methods of hand production were paramount."

Linke's over-the-top confections were expensive both to make and to buy. Once, when he was financially overextended while creating an exhibition for the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, a New York-based Dutch sea captain who had made \$20 million from the Klondike gold mines rescued him by purchasing Linke pieces for his mansion at Madison Avenue and 37th Street. Linke also supplied more than 1,200 pieces to King Fuad I of Egypt in the 1920's and 30's for his Ras al-Tin Palace in Alexandria.

"Linke was doing a delirious reinterpretation of the Louis XV style; I prefer creators who designed furniture that didn't resemble anything that had ever been made before," said Roberto Polo, the artistic adviser to Galerie Historismus, a by-appointment Parisian shop that opened this month and specializes in European decorative arts from 1840 to 1910.

"I'm talking about avant-garde architects and designers, people who created things in new shapes, forms and styles," he said. His list includes some of the forerunners of Modernism: Charles F. A. Voysey, Charles Robert Ashbee, Mackay Hugh Baillie

Scott, Henry van de Velde, Paul Hankar, Peter Behrens, Bernhard Pankok, Édouard Lièvre and Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, along with Joseph Maria Olbrich, Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser.

The new gallery is in the Hôtel de Chaulnes, finished in 1612, at 9 Place des Vosges, the oldest square in Paris. The paneled walls and painted ceilings are perhaps an odd setting, but each piece is given room to breathe. Among the most unusual creations is a cabinet-on-stand from about 1875 in the neo-Japanese style by Lièvre (1829-1886), a French painter and designer who was the subject of a nonselling retrospective two years ago in Paris that Mr. Polo organized. Every inch of the surface is treated.

The Brazilian palisander stand has bronze inserts in unmatched foliate patterns. The veneered top is decorated with fan- and amoeba-shaped insets in silver thread surrounded by brass marquetry tendrils and inlaid ivory flowers. The feet are sheathed in metal protectors bearing imaginary calligraphic motifs.

"Lièvre was a designer, not a cabinetmaker," Mr. Polo said. "Until 10 years ago, you could find a piece by him for 15,000 euros. No longer."

Mr. Polo likes antiques made in Germany at places like the Darmstadt artists' colony that Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig of Hesse founded in 1899. He has a simple chair designed in 1904 by Behrens and a massive pine wardrobe in a vaguely Egyptian Revival style that the German architect Pankok designed in 1900. He even has a "Silex" ladder-back armchair, a piece of early kit furniture designed by Serrurier-Bovy in 1905.

"In 1900 Serrurier-Bovy went to Darmstadt and changed his style," Mr. Polo said. "He designed furniture that could be sold in boxes for workers to assemble at home. The workers found it ugly, but it points to a future in which the structure of a piece is expressed in the design."

Best of all is an Art Nouveau three-light chandelier that the Belgian architect van de Velde designed in 1898. Each brass arm has a dramatic loop that ends in a bare bulb. It's both modern and lyrical, a super-edited descendant of a Linke design, one of many discoveries to be made in this neglected area of the decorative arts.