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Strong sales as France restarts live auctions

Artcurial, the first auction house to reopen, doubled its sale estimate as lockdown seems to have "sharpened" buyers' appetite

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Parisian auction houses have reopened with restricted visitor numbers and heightened sanitary measures. Yet, despite these conditions, the response from clients has been generous if the results of Artcurial's first post-lockdown sale are anything to go by.

The French auction house's 20th-century Interiors, Art Deco and Design sale on 19 May generated a total of €1m in sales, more than double its estimate of €464,000, with 87% of lots sold. Design performed particularly strongly, led by a pair of brown-patinated bronze Marguerite tables by Hubert Le Gall that soared past the €8,000-€12,000 estimate to fetch €33,800. Clients could view the lots by appointment only and the majority bid online or by phone from home, or made written purchase orders. But around ten chairs were allocated in the salesroom for intrepid collectors keen to attend in person, with sanitising gel and masks provided.



Hubert Le Gall's pair of Marguerite tables (2008) sold at Artcurial for €33,800 (est €8,000- €12,000) Courtesy of Artcurial

“Buyers' appetite did not diminish during lockdown but was even sharpened,” says Sabrina Dolla, Artcurial's specialist in design and Art Deco. “The offer came to an abrupt halt and the market was put on hold but the demand did not. The telephone and live services proved very efficient during our first post-lockdown auction, with more than 400 people registered to the live bidding.”

Christie's is holding three sales next week: The Collector: Le Goût Français interiors on 26 May and Rare Books and Manuscripts and Old & 19th-Century Drawings the next day. The number of visitors will be controlled and markings on the floor will indicate the social distancing requirements. Plexiglas shields have been installed at the entrance and masks will be provided, as well as gloves for those wishing to touch objects.

“The Conseil des Ventes Volontaires [an organisation representing auction houses] obtained an agreement from the government last Thursday that auction houses could reopen to the public with more than ten people, provided social distancing with more than 1m between them was respected and masks were worn,” Cécile Verdier, the president of Christie's France, says. “This means we can be open, not just by appointment-only. On Monday, the day when we reopened, 60 people came who were happy to see art in person again rather than online.”

Regarding the impact of Covid-19 on some people's reluctance to visit auction houses, she says: “Fifty per cent of people who buy in our sales do so without seeing the objects, and this was the case long before the lockdown.”

Meanwhile, Piasa is holding its first physical sale of Modern and Contemporary Art next Thursday (28 May). Sanitary measures for viewing have also been adopted in accordance with guidance from France's health ministry.

Sotheby's Paris will hold its first physical sale of jewellery on 10 June. The exhibition rooms will be open by appointment only.