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Paris drawings fest, Susan Moore

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Susan Moore

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Two specialist fairs gather works on paper that span four centuries and a surprising range of media



Degas' 'Ludovic Halévy, Backstage at the Opera in Conversation' (c1880), left, and Sam Szafran's 'Untitled (Staircase)' (1986)

Paris lays claim to being the drawings capital of the world, and this year sees the Salon du Dessin celebrating its 25th anniversary, and Drawing Now its 10th.

The two specialist fairs, staged in a city with outstanding institutional holdings and a long tradition of collecting, are the focus of a week crammed with auctions, gallery shows, exhibitions, talks, visits and symposia.

These events reflect not only the buoyancy of this market but also a resurgence of interest in contemporary drawing practice.



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What is striking about the evolution of the Salon du Dessin (Palais Brongniart, until April 4) is the nature of the exhibits themselves. This event was conceived as an Old Master drawings fair, and it has — needs must — become focused increasingly on 19th-century, modern and, to some extent, contemporary works on paper, a more fertile source of high-quality material. There are just 39 exhibitors, but it is a testimony to the particular, intimate appeal of drawings that curators and collectors at every level continue to flock to the Salon: around 13,000 attended last year.

The passion — and the deep pockets — of the US buyers, both institutional and private, who emerged in the 1980s gave owners a powerful incentive to sell historic collections.

The number of great Old Masters circulating on the market first dramatically expanded, to meet this demand, and then diminished. Drawings from the 16th century have become market rarities but unveiled this year is an unpublished sheet by the Florentine Santi di Tito, a preparatory study in red chalk, squared up for transfer and complete with crouching cat, for his 1547 altarpiece of the Supper at Emmaus in Santa Croce (Antonacci & Lapicciarella, €45,000). It was promptly acquired by a Belgian client.

“It is not easy to find early drawings,” says Damiano Lapicciarella, “but what is worse is that I don’t have a client under the age of 65.”

Among other recent discoveries is a rare academic drawing by the history painter Jacques-Louis David, a monumental figure of Hercules, also in red chalk (Nathalie Motte Masselink, €200,000).

Around a century later, Edgar Degas dashed off a black chalk sketch of the playwright and librettist Ludovic Halévy backstage at the opera; it once belonged to the late baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (Arnoldi-Livie, €150,000). Jean-Luc Baroni flourishes Pierre Bonnard’s fascinating early experiment in Japonism, a striking watercolour heightened with gouache (€425,000). And, bringing the timeline right up to date, one of Sam Szafran’s plunging, vertiginous staircases was sold by Jill Newhouse for €170,000 — one among the rash of red dots that appeared on most dealers’ displays by the end of preview day.

Beyond the commercial sphere, a special loan exhibition of





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works on paper spanning Parmigianino to Kandinsky from the Pushkin State Museum in Moscow is not to be missed.

Jacques-Louis David's 'Académie of Man as Hercules' (1775-1780)

In 2007 Christine Phal, a contemporary art dealer, staged the first, modest Le Salon du Dessin Contemporain in an empty *hôtel particulier* on the Avenue Iéna, little realising that it would generate such an enthusiastic response. That inaugural event of 36 galleries drew 10,000

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visitors; now, numbers of both exhibitors and visitors have doubled. "The main difference between 2007 and today is that you could go to an art fair and never see any of the big galleries showing drawings. This part of an artist's work has now been pushed on to the main stage," explains her daughter Carine Tissot, director of the renamed and rehoused Drawing Now Paris (Carreau du Temple, until April 3). Pertinent, too, is the fact that "sales have doubled in 10 years, and prices multiplied sixfold, yet drawings still remain more affordable works of art". Prices here start at around €1,500.

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Just what constitutes a drawing in the 21st century was one of the themes of the event's symposium, and the fair itself supplies its own answers. Here are drawings in wire, engraved on glass — Lenny Rébéré's "Exhibit" (2015) (Galerie Isabelle Gounod, €8,000) — or made with Indian ink on gesso on wood as in Astrid Nobel's truncated staircase "Almost There" of 2012 (A Gallery Named Sue, €15,000). Cathryn Boch's monumental "Untitled" (2015) embraces everything from stitched maps to collage, sugar, fabric, torn paper and wax (Galerie Papillon, €28,000).

Boch was the winner of the Drawing Now prize in 2014. An exhibition of last year's winner, Abdelkader Benchamma, entitled *Curiosités & Merveilles*, was on show last week at Christie's Paris.

A highlight among the many other shows and works on offer around the city is at Galerie Nicolas Schwed (until April 8), which features one of François Boucher's beguiling black-and-white chalk reclining nudes that were keenly collected, direct from his studio, in the 1760s — a rediscovery that was snapped up by an American collector for around €70,000.

The one frustration of La Semaine du Dessin is that, unlike their colleagues in London and New York, members of the Parisian art trade appear incapable of collaborating to produce any listing of all the myriad events staged during this bustling drawings-fest.

salondudessin.com; drawingnowparis.com; christies.com

Photograph: Studio Sebert