

WEEKEND ARTS

At right, Georges Seurat's black chalk drawing of a horse done in the 1880s, is one of the masterpieces at the Salon du Dessin in Paris, which closes on Monday. At far right top, a rare masterpiece by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, "The Torrent"; at center right, Francesco Guardi's "Venice," a sheet of figure studies of characters ambling on the Piazza San Marco.



DE BAYSER

Drawing outside the lines

PARIS

At the Salon du Dessin, 39 galleries show eclecticism and versatility

BY SOUREN MELIKIAN

Nobody has yet worked out the magic formula of the perfect art fair. But at the private view of the Salon du Dessin, which opened on Tuesday and closes on Monday, the buzz of excitement told you that the 39 galleries taking part in the event have pulled off the trick with their works on paper ranging from the Renaissance to the 20th century.

The right proportion of a few masterpieces strewn amid overall high quality displays, and the harmonious distribution of the galleries which preserves a human scale, accounts for the pleasure experienced by visitors. Add the capa-

city to surprise, which is the goad that keeps collectors on their toes.

The best dealers owe this ability to their great versatility.

Even professionals who used to focus on the 17th and 18th century, like Hervé Aaron, have been venturing for some time into new areas. It is no great surprise to discover on Mr. Aaron's stand two imaginary landscapes painted in gouache on vellum in 1687 by Pierre-Antoine Patet the Younger, even if these were hitherto unpublished. One, in which a castle on a hilltop, half-concealed by vegetation, is enveloped in a late afternoon haze, has a fairy tale atmosphere.

The real hit, though, is the view of the Villa Chigi at Ariccia painted by Jean-Achille Bénéville. Sitting in the park of the villa near Rome in August 1848, the artist used oil and gouache to render with scrupulous accuracy the color shades in the pale light coming through the foliage of tall trees. Aware that he

had surpassed himself, Bénéville sent the view to the 1848 Salon.

While revolutionary turmoil was breaking out in European capitals from Paris to Budapest, some artists were also radically breaking away from tradition. It is when drawing spontaneously that they most spectacularly rejected the past.

Victor Hugo, the poet and novelist who furiously opposed the authoritarianism of the Second Empire proclaimed in 1852 by Napoleon III, sought refuge in the British Channel islands of Jersey and Guernsey. There, the writer drew in black ink the earliest works of European Expressionist Abstractionism. In one of these, shown by Eric Coatalem of Paris, Hugo only approaches abstraction. A few trees emerge at opposite extremities of a desolate immensity, vaguely suggestive of a strand. But in a smaller sketch dated 1868, the jump into nonrepresentational art is made. Despite the title supplied by Mr. Coatalem, "The

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GALERIE ERIC COATALEM, PARIS

Below, a pastel of a baboon by Simon Bussy. At bottom, the "Portrait of Caspar David Friedrich" by Alphonse de Labroue, and the chalk "Head of Venus" by Baron Gérard, which is believed to have been a model for a picture destroyed by the dissatisfied artist.



JEAN-LUC BARONI



DE BAYSER

of the times

Tempest," the break with figuration is radical. A surge of black ink conveys nothing but rage and despair.

The extreme contrast offered by one of Fragonard's most admirable landscapes in a small format done around 1763-1765 says all about Mr. Coatalem's nimble eclecticism. Painted in oil on paper, later laid on canvas, it betrays the lasting influence of 17th-century Dutch landscapists on the French master. But the concision is greater and the breath of nature fresher in a fluid composition freed from the contrived effect of the previous century.

At just under €300,000, or about \$400,000, the rare Fragonard masterpiece grabbed by a collector on the opening day was one of the inspired buys at the Salon.

The adrenaline of true art lovers flows fastest when they come across masterpieces by famous artists working in an unusual style.

On the stand of Talabardon & Gautier of Paris, the star drawing is a portrait of his brother René signed by Degas in 1855. The artist is best known for his participation in the Impressionist Salons, even though he never really belonged to the movement. The likeness of his brother was done at the height of his Classical phase in a manner that betrays his admiration for Ingres. Made particularly rare by the signature seldom found on drawings from this period, the portrait priced at around €300,000 went to a collector at the private view.

But the brilliant coup to be made at Talabardon & Gautier was a landscape dashed off in gray and ochre wash heightened with white by François-Auguste Ravier. The 19th-century petit-maitre spent his career in Lyon, in eastern France, painting many landscapes in a tame naturalist manner that has great charm. "Cliffs," as the watercolor was dubbed by the gallery, belongs in another category. Sketched from nature with a striking economy of means, probably in the early 1870s, it explodes with energy. The asking price, €20,000, would have been about right for a good Ravier. For a masterpiece of this caliber, however, it was a steal. Just for once, an institution moved as fast as collectors do. At the private view, the Institut Néerlandais in Paris added one more extraordinary drawing to its vast treasures.

Sketching allowed at all times spontaneity and freedom, even when painting was at its most formal. Pierre-Charles Trémolières, whose red chalk study for "Agar and the Angel" is shown by the Galerie Terrades, would probably have risen to fame had he not



GALERIE TALABARDON ET GAUTIER



STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART, LONDON

died prematurely in 1738. Few of his paintings survive, and fewer drawings still are recorded, possibly because some remain unidentified. In this case, the picture "Agar and the Angel" dated 1729, which is preserved in a private collection, settles the question of authorship.

Slight differences between the drawing by Trémolières and his finished painting make it clear that the sketch discovered by the Galerie Terrades is a preliminary study, not a drawing made after the picture was executed as a project for an engraving. The brio with which the fluttering angel is drawn is worthy of the greatest 18th-century masters. A sharp-eyed collector did not miss out at the private view. At €20,000, it would have been a pity.

By the 19th century, the impact of the received conventions of the day over acclaimed painters became more stultifying than ever. Looking at the charming sketch of a young woman with a self-deprecating smile as she looks down, one would hardly guess how banal Baron Gérard's ponderous portraits commissioned by the establishment could be. Stephen Ongpin who asks a modest €8,000 for the portrait titled "Venus" by him, believes it was used as a model for a picture destroyed in 1816 by the dissat-

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ified Gérard. A lithograph of the work, printed at the period, preserves its image, allowing the dealer to prove his case.

The abyss separating the paintings that earned Rosa Bonheur fame and wealth, later in the 19th century, from the drawings that she did from nature is far more astonishing. The all-time queen of "l'art Pompièr" (kitsch, as it later became characterized) was perfectly capable of drawing pleasing impressionistic renditions of the countryside, as witness a sketch of olive trees in the glare of the southern French sun displayed by Ongpin.

Even when their paintings escaped the excessive weight of academic convention, 18th-century masters did not allow their spontaneous perception of the world to come through in the pictures that made them rich. None of the Venetian views for which Francesco Guardi was famous across Europe remotely conveys the alacrity that he felt while briskly sketching a string of characters ambling on the Piazza San Marco. Jean-Luc Baroni of London has identified two views of the piazza where some of the characters reappear. Somehow, Guardi's lightheartedness got lost in the painterly translation.

Only in miniature size did some painters allow their whimsical perception of the world and of their fellow humans to express itself in works destined to be seen by others. In 1820, the little-known Alphonse de Labroue portrayed in wash and gouache the famous Caspar David Friedrich. Then aged 46, the master triumphantly glares with the merest touch of madness in his dilated eyes. This fascinating discovery takes center stage in a special glass case on the stand of Talabardon & Gautier.

All this is dwarfed by the ultimate masterpiece shown by Bruno de Bayser. The famous Seurat was greatest in his black chalk drawings, and among these the sketch of a dark horse probably done in the 1880s, like some strange, threatening symbol, outdoes most others.

Even the baboon sketched by Simon Bussy around 1930, which was sold on Wednesday, failed to relieve the tension created by Seurat's overwhelming drawing.

As you leave the salon, you walk away with a markedly altered image of what past masters saw in the world, and in what unexpected moods.