

# Culture

## ART BOOKS



A marble head, left, from a late 14th-century French royal tomb sold for €1.1 million. It was attributed to the Flemish sculptor Jean de Liège and was thought to depict Jeanne de Bourbon (1338-78), the wife of Charles V.

PIASA



SOTHEBY'S

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## Medieval art finds niche market

LONDON

New wave of buyers look to mix modern collections with works from the past

BY SCOTT REYBURN

Contemporary art dominates the minds and wallets of today's collectors. With New York's biannual series of postwar and contemporary auctions now routinely grossing more than \$1 billion, dwarfing sales of Impressionist and modern art and Old Masters, and more than 70,000 people turning up to a fair

elaborate braided coiffure, was attributed to the Flemish sculptor Jean de Liège and was thought to depict Jeanne de Bourbon (1338-78), the wife of Charles V. Their joint tomb in the Basilica of St. Denis on the northern outskirts of Paris was dismantled in 1793 during the Revolution.

The sculpture had been entered for sale by the family of a Belgian industrialist who had owned the hitherto-unrecorded piece for more than 50 years. The head was sold to what Mr. Bertrand described as a "top secret" buyer on the telephone against two underbidders, just above the high estimate.

This rare royal sculpture was the stand-out entry in Piasa's latest biannual

sculpture is in short supply. Sotheby's and Christie's include the best they can find of this material alongside renaissance, baroque and 19th-century pieces in their regular European works of art sales in New York, Paris and London.

Medieval rarities were top of the pile at both Christie's and Sotheby's on Dec. 2 and 3 in London. At Christie's, a 12th-century North German bronze aquamanile — a vessel for pouring water over hands — playfully shaped as a dragon, sold for £962,500, about \$1.5 million, to the German dealer Julius Böhler, who is understood to have been bidding for the Hildesheim Cathedral Museum.

The next day at Sotheby's, the London dealer Daniel Katz, buying for

by the Master of Rimini, a Flemish sculptor whose name is derived from an extraordinarily expressive alabaster altarpiece from the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, near Rimini, Italy, which is now in the Liebieghaus Sculpture Museum in Frankfurt. Recently restituted to the heirs of the prewar Cologne collector Ottmar Strauss, this sculpture, like that altarpiece, was considered by Sotheby's to have been carved by the master himself.

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In today's collecting culture, if art from a more distant past is to find new buyers, it needs to look good when next to 1960s minimalism or the latest "process based" abstraction. Tribal art and classical antiquities are already well-established "crossover" buys at auctions and art fairs. Now medieval sculpture — three-dimensional works produced in Europe from about 1000 to 1550 — is also gaining a reputation for the sort of timelessness that goes well with a Klein or a Koons, often at a fraction of the price.

Most unusually for this niche collecting field, three outstanding medieval objects were sold at auctions in London and Paris this month.

"The market is small, but dynamic," said Benoît Bertrand, a medieval specialist at the Paris auctioneers Piasa, which on Dec. 11 sold a rediscovered white marble head from a late 14th-century French royal tomb for 1.1 million euros with fees, about \$1.4 million. "We have a new wave of rich collectors in their 40s and 50s who want to have originality in their house," he said. "Some of them mix medieval sculpture with contemporary art." The time-worn, but still beautiful, female head, featuring an

elaborate braided coiffure, was attributed to the Flemish sculptor Jean de Liège and was thought to depict Jeanne de Bourbon (1338-78), the wife of Charles V. Their joint tomb in the Basilica of St. Denis on the northern outskirts of Paris was dismantled in 1793 during the Revolution.

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This rare royal sculpture was the stand-out entry in Piasa's latest biannual "Haute Epoque" auction, which raised €1.75 million from 100 lots, 63 percent of which were successful. Only one piece sold for more than €100,000.

As is the case in most sub-markets for historic art, high quality medieval

sculpture is in short supply. Sotheby's and Christie's include the best they can find of this material alongside renaissance, baroque and 19th-century pieces in their regular European works of art sales in New York, Paris and London.

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The next day at Sotheby's, the London dealer Daniel Katz, buying for stock, paid £542,500 for a superb circa 1420-30 alabaster statue of St. Philip, shown with eyes closed and mouth open, lips painted blood-red, holding the cross on which he was crucified.

This was thought to have been made

by the Master of Rimini, a Flemish sculptor whose name is derived from an extraordinarily expressive alabaster altarpiece from the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, near Rimini, Italy, which is now in the Liebieghaus Sculpture Museum in Frankfurt. Recently restituted to the heirs of the prewar Cologne collector Ottmar Strauss, this sculpture, like that altarpiece, was considered by Sotheby's to have been carved by the master himself.

Though more than three times the upper estimate, the price didn't seem excessive when compared with what that money can buy in other collecting areas. Needless to say, £542,500 can't buy much in the way of top-tier-quality postwar art. Perhaps more significantly, it also doesn't go very far at sales of Old Master paintings, where new buyers are increasingly "brand conscious."

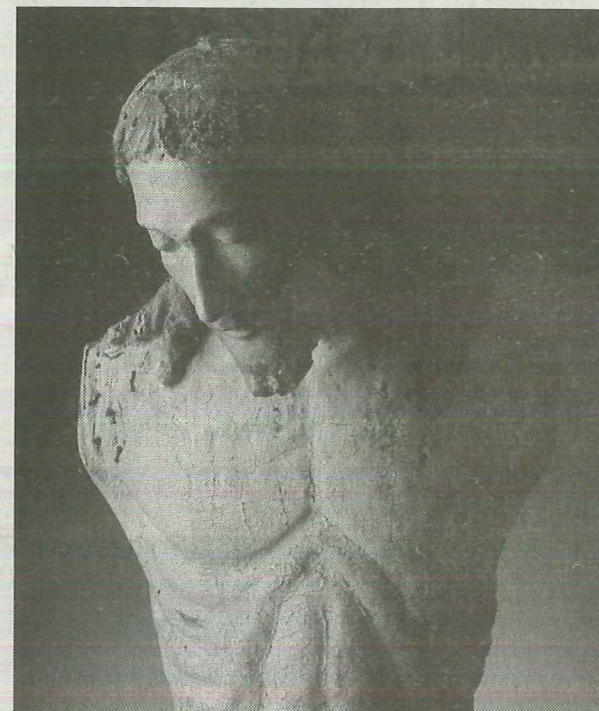
That evening at Sotheby's, the same price of £542,500 bought a circa 1602-1603 Jan Brueghel the Elder river scene on copper — an attractive signed painting, but hardly a visceral masterpiece.

"It puts people off that there aren't names associated with these things," said Erik Bijzet, head of Sotheby's auction sales of what the company now calls "Old Master" works of art. "It pushes medieval sculpture into the realm of the decorative arts. But some of our clients recognize the quality that's there." Among Mr. Bijzet's clients for medieval sculpture are prominent private collectors such as the London-based former hedge fund manager Paul Ruddock and the Canadian media heir David Thomson, as well as American institutions like the J. Paul Getty Museum. The latter paid £313,250 for a circa 1515 German polychrome limewood sculpture of St. John the Baptist by the Master of the Harburger Altar at Sotheby's in December 2011.

But Sotheby's and Christie's also have "treasure hunters" on their books, wealthy clients who will impulse-buy exceptional objects across a range of periods. Back in January 2008 at Sothe-



SOtheby's



DE BACKKER MEDIEVAL ART

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CHRISTIE'S

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by's New York, the artist Jeff Koons paid \$6.3 million for an early 15th-century German limewood St. Catherine by Tilman Riemenschneider — one of the very few "brand" names in the world of medieval sculpture.

Mr. Koons was underbid by the American collector Suzanne Deal Booth, who owns Italian renaissance panel paintings and contemporary works by Yayoi Kusama and Gerhard Richter.

"Younger collectors just buy what they like," said Christine de Backker, co-founder of De Backker Medieval Art in Hoogstraten, Belgium. "They're more eclectic, and they want to enjoy these works in their own homes." De Backker exhibits at the up-scale Masterpiece Fair in London in June, just as

fellow medieval specialists Sam Fogg of London and Brimo de Laroussilhe of Paris exhibit at Frieze Masters in October, in the hope of meeting new "crossover" clients.

Gradually, this is happening. A 12th-century stone font, priced at £100,000, was among six sales Mr. Fogg made at this year's Frieze Masters to collectors who usually buy contemporary art.

At this year's Masterpiece, de Backker sold an Italian polychrome wood corpus of Christ from circa 1300 for £50,000 to a Chinese couple who had never looked at European medieval art before.

"The wife was very moved by the face of Christ," said Ms. de Backker. "It was the emotion of the sculpture that appealed to her. These objects speak to people."

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