

Design

THIS PAGE, 'TRONE
SALON SECRET' ARMCHAIR,
PROTOTYPE, \$369,000;
OFFERED IN A LIMITED
EDITION OF 12, \$269,000

OPPOSITE, 'TABLE DES JOYES'
TABLE, PROTOTYPE, \$169,000;
OFFERED IN A LIMITED
EDITION OF 12, \$159,000



Risqué business

A French company raises more than just eyebrows with its revival of Catherine the Great's secret erotic furnishings

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBIN BROADBENT WRITER AND PRODUCER: MICHAEL REYNOLDS





LEFT, THE 'TRONE SALON SECRET' CHAIR IS FASHIONED FROM A MIX OF PRECIOUS WOODS, GILT AND SILK VELVET, AND FESTOONED WITH SCENES FROM A MYTHIC BACCHANALIAN ORGY

As the Wehrmacht steamrolled in every conceivable direction throughout Europe during the Second World War, bringing death, destruction and misery with it wherever it went, somehow, miraculously, it found time to shop. Shopping, in this case, being a relative term - the German army feverishly plundered Europe from East to West, snatching up as many masterpieces of fine art and antiques as it could get its greedy little hands on.

One great vanishing act to emerge from this sordid tale of wartime looting involves the disappearance of a fabled suite of erotic furniture belonging to Mother Russia's famously libidinous 18th-century daughter, Catherine the Great. The same Catherine whose lustful life was an open secret and whose reign was populated with as many as 13 lovers (her final paramour, Platon Zubov, being a positively geriatric 22 years of age, while she was a youthful 60).

Shortly after the siege of Leningrad in 1941, German officers raided the Czarina's summer palace,

best known today as the Catherine Palace, and upon entry into her private chambers stumbled upon what one can only imagine would have been any healthy teenage Nazi's wet dream. Her boudoir was adorned with erotically carved wooden panels and pieces of furniture, all embellished with sexually graphic motifs. When the German forces finally retreated from Russia in 1944, they deliberately destroyed the historic palace, leaving behind only its hollow shell and no clue as to the whereabouts of its contents. The secret erotic furnishings of Russia's most renowned Empress had disappeared without trace.

Fast-forward seven decades to the present and a discovery was made, but not one that solved the mystery of the missing furniture. Instead, it was a discovery that would stimulate the imagination of illustrious French furniture factory Henryot & Cie and its manager Dominique Roitel. After procuring a copy of Bernard Gip's book *The Passions and Lechery of Catherine the Great*, Roitel had a brilliant idea - to create flawless, quality, hand-carved reproductions of the late Empress' missing erotic furniture. After closely referencing images from the book, as well as archival drawings and photos taken by the German military during the war (the latter made accessible to them by filmmaker Peter Woditsch, best known for his documentary *The Lost Secret of Catherine the Great*), Henryot embarked full throttle on its mission.

The first two pieces to be reproduced are a round, phallic-based table and a coitally-encrusted armchair. For the aesthetically amorous task at hand, the company employed the expert craftsmanship of wood carvers Jacques Vidot, Thierry Choppin and Jean-Marc Tournois, and a small army of polishers, gilders and upholsterers. Great pains were taken to accurately reproduce the originals, and each stage of production was expertly executed in a manner that was unquestionably on a par with the level of excellence of those who carved the originals in 1750. After two and a half years of work and over 1,000 hours of labour, both prototypes were finally completed in 2011.

Would Catherine have approved of their efforts? We think so. 'More so than men, the pieces have drawn a tremendous amount of intrigue on the part of women who can't seem to stop looking at them. It is as though they are statements of a woman who assumed an attitude that was very modern for her time,' says Pascal Zay, owner of Cote France, the sole international distributor. And what of the fate of the originals? We may never know. One can only imagine that they are hidden away in some Bavarian castle, routinely oiled by some octogenarian military crew. Because old wood, as opposed to young wood - as I'm sure Catherine would attest, were she alive today - needs plenty of oil. • *The pieces are available worldwide through Cote France, New York, tel. 1.212 684 0707, www.cotefrance.com*

Hours of labour
to complete
both prototypes:
1,000