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## BRETON COLLECTION AUCTION - An inside view

*Sale disperses Breton collection 47 years after his death; unique manuscripts, photographs, book bindings, paintings, sculpture*

Andre Breton's great accumulation of books, manuscripts, photographs and artworks had been carefully tended by his widow in an apartment near Montmartre since his death in 1966. The collection was refined over half a century by the poet at 42 rue Fontaine, an apartment he rented with his first wife Simone in 1922. A virtual museum of the international surrealist movement, its intellectual weight commended certain public access, and researchers were welcomed. Visitors also included French ministers of culture, senior curators, librarians and art dealers who came with proposals to prolong the life of the collection, but none, including Francois Mitterand, had been able to forge an agreement with Elisa Breton. After years of hosting visitors, lending works to museum shows (sometimes in exchange for conservation work) and supporting the idea of a Foundation proposed in 1982 by the surrealist Association Actual, Elisa and Aube Elleouet-Breton, the poet's only child, from his marriage to Jacqueline Lamba, collaborated with the French National Museum of Modern Art's Isabelle Monod-Fontaine and Agnes de la Beaumelle, to gather work Breton had sold, lost to divorce or brokered into other collections, with material from the famous apartment, into a sprawling survey and mammoth catalogue *Andre Breton, La Beaute convulsive* at the Centre Pompidou in 1991.

Consequently many were shocked to learn that the Breton collection was to be auctioned, and that the sale was sanctioned, moreover, by a new policy of the State: no more one-man museums. The current French Minister of Culture and Communication, Jean-Jacques Aillagon, formerly director of the National Museum of Modern Art, had tagged such a monument to an individual "an ambiguous cultural object." He was answering the question about "sites of remembrance" in an interview with *Le Monde* published on April 4, 2003, the day before the sale began. Needless to say, this rationalization had followed many expressions of surprise and concern published in the same newspaper and elsewhere since the announcement of the sale in late 2002. Among the opponents to the sale were activists capable of organizing a website titled by a rearrangement of the letters in "Andre Breton" to form the protest *Te brader, non* -don't sell yourself. (This site is still on the web, at

[http://www.remue.net/litt/breton\\_infos.html](http://www.remue.net/litt/breton_infos.html) in French, with a postmortem and photos of the demo.) More than 3200 signatures to an anti-sale petition were also gathered. On the first day of the ten-day sale about 50 defenders of French patrimony came to the Hotel Drouot, an old auction house re-built in the late 1970s as "a surrealist reinterpretation," to quote the architects' proposal. Some demonstrators handed out prepared statements and gave opinions to awaiting journalists, and others infiltrated the auction room itself, to stage defiant acts: a stink-bomb perfumed the back of the hall, and mock banknotes were hurled into the air; these had a photo of Breton saying "your money stinks of the corpse of the poet you didn't dare to become."

The rights of the owners, proprietors and bidders were defended by cooler heads, patrolling the entrances to the Hotel Drouot for all of the sale's 21 sessions. Tickets had been issued by the auctioneers, the Calmels-Cohen partnership, and only ticket-holders were admitted to the building. More than one protester, however, had taken the trouble of getting a ticket, which also entitled them to a seat in the saleroom. As the first lot went on the block a young man stood and began to read an excerpt from a manifesto about the role of the artist in society written in 1938 by Breton and Trotsky in Mexico. The auctioneer called for order and continued to accept bids for Arthur Adamov's *L'Aveu*, a title which could be translated as Consent, affectionately inscribed to the poet, with a copy of Adamov's *La Parodie l'Invasion*. Those titles were a resonant twist of fate under the circumstances. At the back of the room nine television cameras on tripods turned towards the distraction, and six ushers cleared a path to the door for the pedant. The lot made 1,100 euros, and set a tone of higher-than-expected results generally. Other voices of protest made comments from standing-room: cries of "Scandal!" and "Does no one react?" One persistent heckler was answered by a successful bidder later in the session: the bookseller Jean-Claude Vrain insisted on the validity of his actions. Such behavior, however, was rare. Applause was a more typical reaction of the saleroom crowd, both for committed bidders and for representatives of the State exercising their right to preempt a sale after bidding was completed. More than 300 lots in the sale were resumed into State collections in this way. Television cameras absented themselves at later sessions, with the exception of the sale of paintings, where high prices were the main attraction.

The capability of the State to take over the highest bid for a lot deemed of interest to France's cultural institutions was

cited by culture minister Aillagon as the most appropriate way for institutions to honor Breton's achievement. "We are following the sale," he promised, and acquisition budgets at State institutions were increased accordingly. The ministry distributed six-volume Calmels-Cohen catalogues to librarians and curators with declared interests, and they came to the sale from as far away as Nantes and Marseilles. The right of preemption, although exercised for a low percentage of the 6249 lots in the sale, was reinforced by Elisa Breton's heirs, Aube Elleouet-Breton and her daughter Oona, who announced after the sale that they were giving their share of the high prices realized for 15 preempted lots to the particular institutions concerned. The fact that they were also the winning bidder for these lots revealed a strategy intended to protect Breton's legacy for the nation. These gifts were "a gesture of supreme elegance," and this, the minister's description, was used as a headline in *Le Figaro*. As he later put it in a press release expressing the state's gratitude, the new windfall joined a "thread" of other Breton estate matters in support of national collections, a subtle use of metaphor to link the Breton family with Theseus in the Labyrinth, a surrealist compliment.

For an example of Breton's own skills in the marketplace, take one of the sculptures in the Primitive Art session on the last night of the sale. Breton first saw the large New Ireland *uli*, or ancestral cult figure, in February 1930, when he underbid it in the same Drouot salerooms (pre-renovation) where it was to go on the block again 73 years later. Breton had had another chance to buy it in 1948 when it appeared in *Oceanie*, an exhibition for which he wrote a catalogue introduction, at the Galerie Andrée Olive; as it was still not affordable, he contented himself with writing the poem "Uli," which was also published in the same catalogue. The *uli*'s patina is described in the Calmels-Cohen catalogue, still online at <http://breton.calmelscohen.com> lot 6130, as superb. The poem, reprinted in that catalogue as well, creates another sort of patina, an aura. When this same *uli* came on the market again in 1964, Breton had recently sold, for a good price, a by-then famous de Chirico, *Le Cervaux de l'Enfant*. He was able to buy the *uli* and move it to the center of his apartment at 42 rue Fontaine. Not surprisingly when this auratic object was threatened by another sale, his daughter Aube gathered it in again; the hammer fell at 1,100,000 euros. Now thanks to the gift of her share of the sale price, the *uli* will find a home in the Bibliothèque Doucet, a public research library given to Paris by a wealthy couturier, which had earlier accepted his letters and desk in

partial settlement of Elisa's death duties. The Doucet, directed by Yves Peyre, exercised its right at the Calmels-Cohen sale to preempt more than 80 lots of important books and manuscripts including the vast 1925-26 *Seances du bureau de recherches surrealistes*, lot 2102, 375 views accessible on the website. They also preempted the poet's crystal ball, reproduced on the cover of *Minotaure* in 1933.

The preemption of lots of interest to French institutions is a peculiarity of French law which needed to be carefully spelled out in the sale catalogue, and even translated into English from the podium when an occasional lot had been won by someone who seemed confused by local customs. Minister Aillagon had cited the preemption law in his defense for not creating a Breton museum. The comprehensive and lavishly illustrated catalogue was in the hands of those responsible to buy for the state, and many of these, including the director of the National Museum of Modern Art, attended the sales with two or three subordinates in tow. And they had money to spend: *Le Figaro* reported a ministry war chest of 8,300,000 euros. The law gives the state two weeks to match, or not, the top bid.

The bookseller Jean-Claude Vrain, a rapacious buyer, claimed after the sale to have been preempted on more than 100 lots, although he was lucky more often than not to get what he wanted. He also commented freely from the floor about the accuracy of catalogue descriptions. These comments were sometimes acknowledged by the auctioneer Cyrille Cohen and his expert/assistant Claude Oterelo by a drop in the starting price. As an "anti-Stalinist Trotskyite," Vrain criticised the State for not preempting political material from Breton's library. He also described that library as a river of diamonds, in *Le Figaro* on 11 April.

Diamonds of interest from the sale of a library offering over 2500 books and 800 manuscripts include the autograph manuscript of Breton's long prose poem of 1944, *Arcane 17*, named from tarot lore. "A mystic book of transfiguration," according to Breton biographer Anna Balakian, *Arcane 17* was composed during a three-month stay in eastern Canada with his new love and last wife Elisa. This corrected draft is dedicated to her, and 56 views of its pages are still accessible on Calmels-Cohen's website <http://breton.calmelscohen.com> at lot 2254. The elaborately bound notebook also contains their rail tickets, a tourist map, clippings, photos, a drawing on birch bark and 2 tarot cards (both #17, the stars). The binding was made by a favorite of the Surrealists, Lucienne

Talheimer, in a mosaic of light brown speckled peccary-skin, with a heart-shaped photo of Elisa by Man Ray deeply inset behind bright green glass on the front cover. René Alleau devoted an essay to this production in the 1991 *La Beauté convulsive* catalogue. I noticed it at the first preview on 1 April being opened for a news reporter by Camels-Cohen's literary specialist Claude Oterelo. He was more gentle with it than the assistant who put it back into its showcase, but such is the life of books at auctions. It was only rescued at the sale when the Bibliothèque Doucet, a public research library, preempted it, bravely announcing that they would match the highest bid after the hammer fell at 750,000 euros. (Prices mentioned here are taken from the auctioneer's database and do not include commission or tax.) The saleroom resounded with cheers and applause, but the tenacious highest bidder (by telephone) turned out to be Aube Elleouet-Breton, whose intention to give the volume to the Doucet was only announced after the sale. Published copies of *Arcane 17* in its earliest editions were also sold at high prices, some including 4 tarot cards designed by Matta, another with postcards from Quebec.

Breton's role as chief of the Surrealists was emphasized by lot 2191, a dossier he had labeled *Question affaire Dali* which pertained to Dali's exclusion from the group, with letters, etc. from Dali, Tzara, Tanguy, Giacometti, Eluard, Crevel and Peret. The auctioneer's hammer fell at 65,000 euros for this. A dossier of 49 pages of clippings about the 1938 Exposition Internationale du Surrealism, which was resumed, preempted by the City of Paris, is presented for inspection on the Camels-Cohen website in 101 views, with zoom capability for enlargements. Bidding for this, lot 164, reached 12,000 euros. Another expensive item was lot 148, a copy of Breton's "Qu'est-ce que le Surrealism" which included the original drawing for the cover, the famous *Le Viol* by Rene Magritte. This rarity found 243,000 euros. Lot 179, *Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares*, with a cover designed by Marcel Duchamp and illustrations by Archile Gorky had been a consequence of Breton's exile to New York during WWII. As the book included an inscribed *Chanson pour Elisa* it not suprisingly was knocked down for 5,600 euros. A presentation copy to Elisa of *Nadja*, Breton's best known work, from the publisher NRF's Bibliophile edition, was wrapped in a beautiful binding designed by Mario Passinos. Beneath bindings designed by Paul Bonet were complete runs of *Litterature* (2nd Series) and *La Revolution Surrealiste*, periodicals edited by Breton between 1919 and 1929. These elaborate volumes also carry Breton's

ex libris: *le tamanoir* or a great ant-eater, engraved for him in happier times by Salvador Dali. These are only a few of the 541 lots listed under Breton's name in the Calmels-Cohen index, and the index contains a thousand names. Hopefully the culture ministry, following through on its new policy, will take a continuing interest in the database established for the catalogue by the auctioneers Calmels-Cohen. M. Aillagon described to *Le Figaro* on 25 April how he had coordinated assessments of need regarding the Breton sale with Bruno Racine, president of the Centre Georges-Pompidou, in liaison with his head of department Guillaume Cerutti and Francine Mariani-Ducray, Director of the Museums of France. This team still has work to do. The Calmels-Cohen database requires corrections, elaboration and other improvements. If the whole were well-maintained, the website could become a fitting alternative to the now "ambiguous" one-man museum.

But is a website preferable to a museum? The dilemma presented by Breton's collection was given a market-solution, i.e. dispersal in a sale. This sale was assaulted by more than 50,000 curious visitors, roughly handled over a period of two weeks. This was, despite the white gloves and part-time assistants, marginally adequate protection for a large quantity of fragile material. This particular collection had been carefully preserved with a view to the heritage it might be able to communicate. It still may be able to accomplish this goal, but the debate involved with procuring the necessary resources must be vigorous.

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