

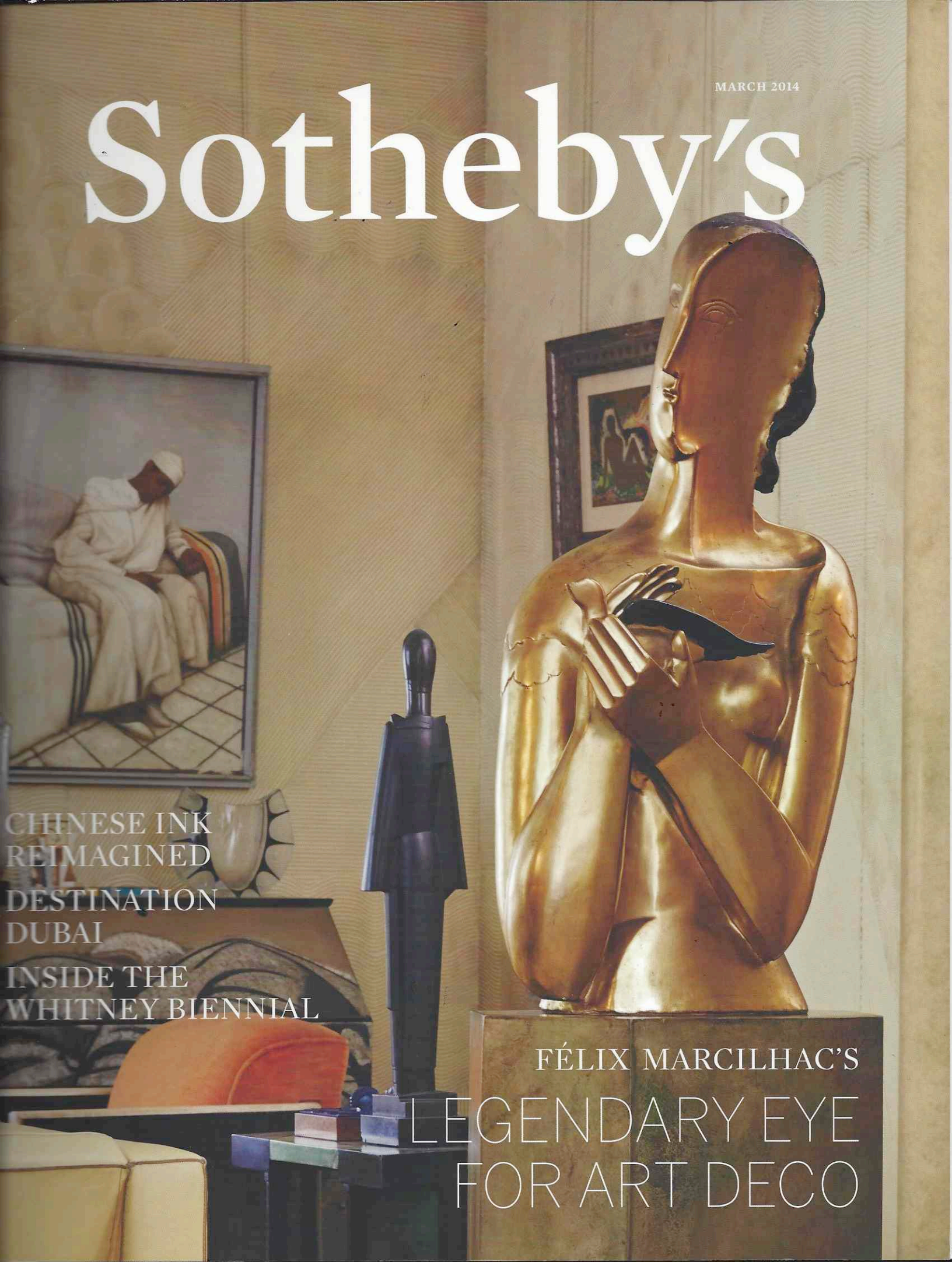
MARCH 2014

Sotheby's

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FÉLIX MARCILHAC'S
LEGENDARY EYE
FOR ART DECO



After spending more than 30 years building a highly curated selection of art and objects, celebrated Parisian gallerist and art historian Félix Marcilhac has decided to part with his beloved collection to embark on a new adventure. As Sotheby's prepares to offer the Marcilhac Collection at auction this spring, **Lucia van der Post** spoke with this legendary collector of 20th-century art and design about his journey and what the future holds.



Parisian gallerist and art historian
Félix Marcilhac

A
COLLECTING
LEGEND

CHANGES
COURSE

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élix Marcilhac, the legendary gallerist and art historian most famous for championing 20th-century decorative arts, whose gallery on the Rue Bonaparte has been a Mecca for those who love fine Art Deco and Art Nouveau pieces, is about to do something

extraordinary. He is leaving behind the life, the house, the sophisticated Parisian world he has known all his life to spend most of his time in Marrakech.

Even more importantly, Marcilhac is selling almost his entire private collection of museum-worthy mid-20th-century and Art Deco pieces. These are much-loved decorative objects, paintings, lighting and pieces of furniture that he has lived with since he first started collecting in the early 1970s, and most of them are by legendary names such as Gustave Miklos, Marcel Coard, Pierre Legrain, Jean-Michel Frank, Jean Dunand and many others. Marcilhac is famous for his discerning eye, for his refusal to follow established conventions, and, according to all those who know about such things, this makes the sale (p. 104), to be held on 11-12 March at Sotheby's Paris, one of the most important in years, the accumulation of the passions of a serious and sophisticated collector.

Marcilhac was drawn into the world of the decorative arts while he was still quite young. He initially studied at the Sciences Po and then, after he started scouring the flea markets and market stalls, he went to the Sorbonne to study the decorative arts. In between, however, he was commissioned to put together a *catalogue raisonné* on René Lalique, which seemed to him much more interesting than studying; he never finished the course. As he says, "I've never regretted it – I don't think my thesis would have been much good."

He also decided while he was still young to open a gallery in the same Rue de Bonaparte space that he is in today. "I bought it in installments... the first part for 50,000 francs." He had caught the collecting bug. "The thing is that Art Deco and Art Nouveau pieces were very cheap at the time. They were unfashionable. They were made from fabulous materials with incredible workmanship, but they were made for the élite and their



(Above) Ossip Zadkine, *Jeune fille à la colombe*, 1928

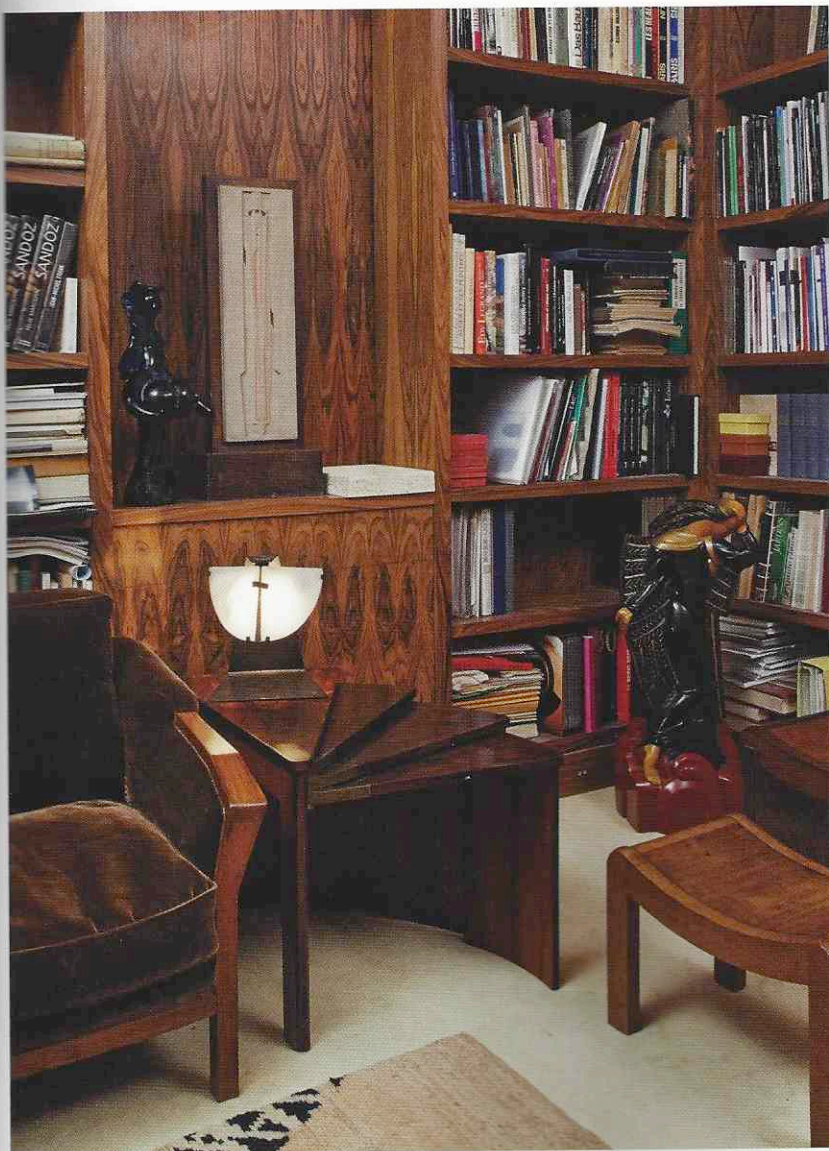
(Opposite left) Félix Marcilhac's personal office

(Opposite right) Jean Dunand's *Caducée*, a unique gilt and silvered bronze, 1913

(Overleaf centre) Madame Marcilhac's office, including pieces by Marcel Coard, Edouard-Marcel Sandoz, Jean-Michel Frank and Ernest Boiceau

(Overleaf right) Cabinet d'amateur

HE BEGAN TO ACQUIRE CLIENTS WHO ASKED HIM TO HELP THEM BUILD UP THEIR COLLECTIONS – KARL LAGERFELD, YVES SAINT LAURENT AND CATHERINE DENEUVE.



children didn't want their parents' things – they thought them old-fashioned. Ruhlmann, for instance, had been very expensive when the older generation bought it originally, but when the next generation didn't want it, they sold it off very cheaply.”

Marcilhac used to haunt the Marchés aux Puces and the *salles de vente* in Paris and Monaco and soon he began to acquire a reputation for having an eye. Merchants would put things aside for him and he studied monographs and catalogues and learned as he went along. Then he began to acquire clients who asked him to help them build up their collections – Karl Lagerfeld, Yves Saint Laurent and Catherine Deneuve. Marcilhac has always loved a bit of panache – Ruhlmann, he says, was strictly speaking “a bit too perfect, a bit too classic,” for what he calls his unusual (using the wonderful French word *insolite*) tastes.

I ask him what he thinks are the most memorable pieces in his long collecting life and, of course, he remembers his very first serious buy – a Gustave Miklos sculpture that he bought in 1967. Then there was an Orientalist painting by Jacques Majorelle, the son of

the Art Nouveau furniture designer Louis Majorelle, about whom Marcilhac wrote a book; and very important furniture by Jean Dunand, one was more like a commode, the other had one of his famous eggshell veneers; and then a serpentine fire-guard by Gaillard.

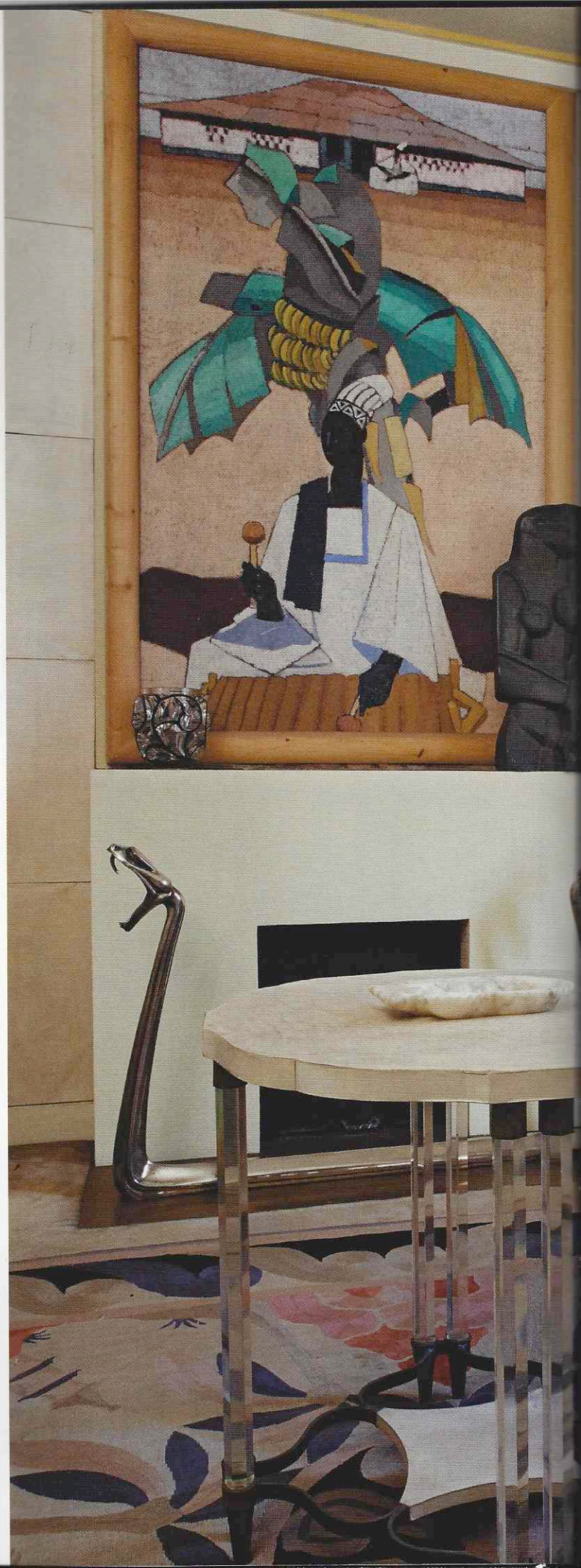
When Marcilhac started he tried to buy three things – he would sell two to cover the cost and keep one, which meant that he therefore acquired it for nothing. He still thinks it is a good way for any collector to start. “If I was going to collect anything now it would be Chinese bronzes, but even they have become expensive.” Trust your eye, is another piece of advice he would give.

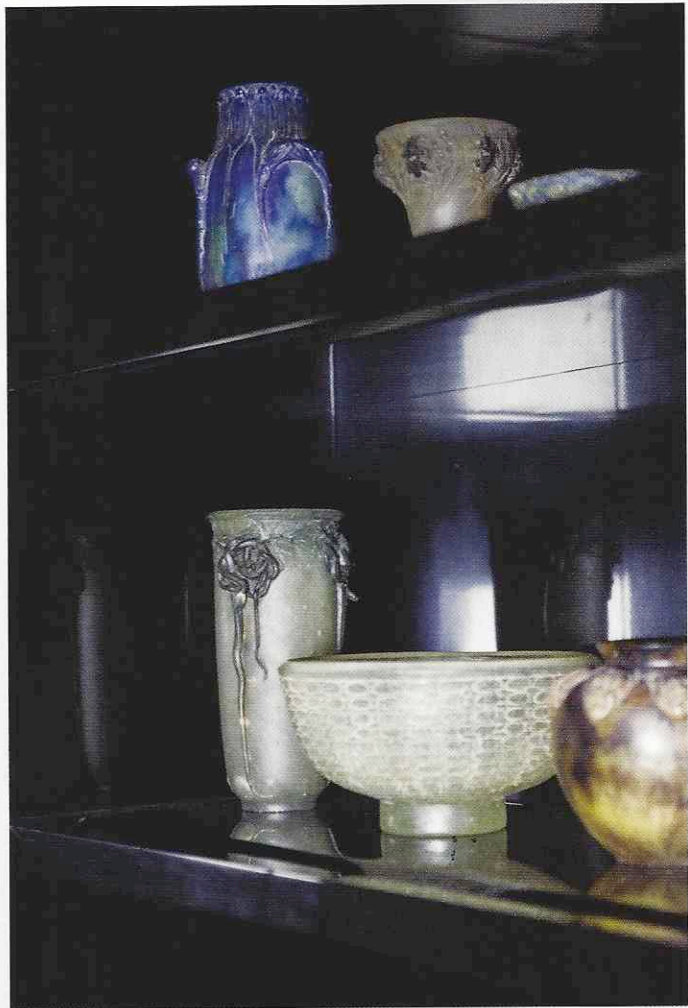
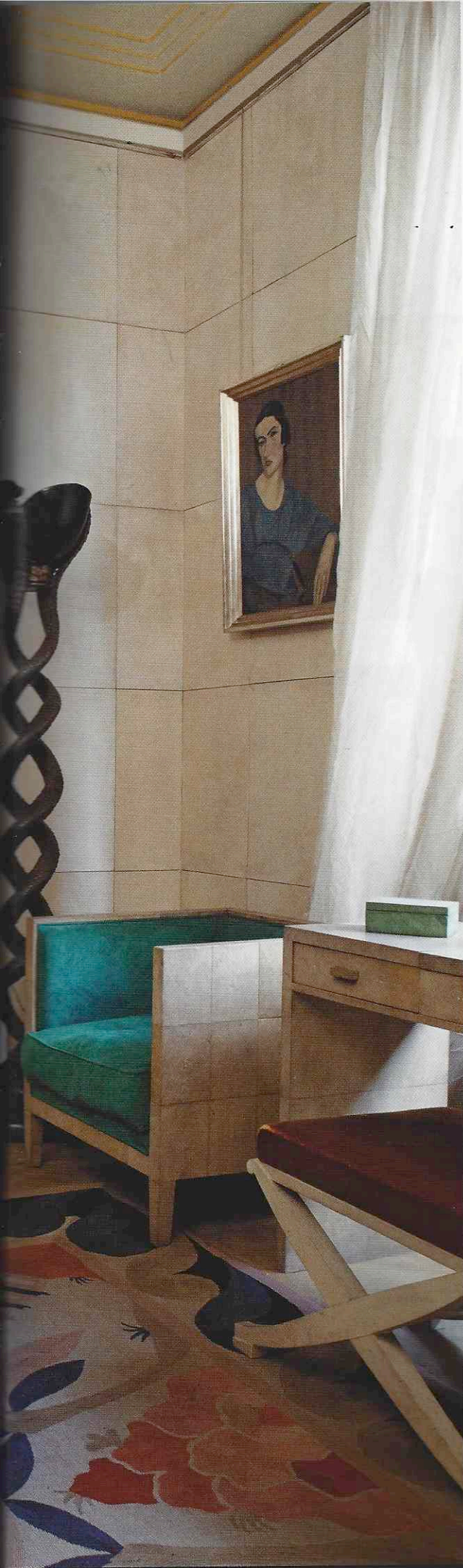
Marcilhac is not undertaking this move to Morocco in a rush. “I’ve had a house in Marrakech for many years and I’ve had this day in mind for a long time,” he tells me. He has supervised everything to do with the house. He’s designed all the furniture but it is “furniture without pretention, not precious, simply functional though it reflects certain elements of Moroccan culture.”

He says he will never buy another Art Deco object. “If I turn a page, I turn a page. I did the same thing with my collection of fine bookbindings. I had some very beautiful bindings, but I decided to sell them all and that is that.” Marcilhac is keeping for himself just one thing – a scarab beetle on a bronze loop by Gaillard. “I particularly cherish it. I’d seen one in a museum and so admired it and I waited and waited until one came up in a sale and then I bought it.” His wife is keeping one beautiful Orientalist painting and each of his four children has been given a Warhol – the artist gave Marcilhac the paintings in exchange for four chairs that he had his eye on. “I made the children draw lots so that there would be no conflict. They each seem entirely happy with the one they’ve got,” he says. Even the Miklos sculpture – the first thing of real value that he bought – is going under the hammer. “I never considered myself the owner of all these things,” is what Marcilhac tells me now. “I was merely the custodian.”

The gallery itself will not close. His son is carrying on in exactly the same premises on the Rue Bonaparte, but these days it is known as the Galerie Marcilhac, the *prénom* of Félix having been dropped. The day I visited there were still *objets*, paintings and furniture of great distinction, most notably a fine classic Ruhlmann low bookshelf.

One wonders how he can bear to let things of such extraordinary beauty and value go, until I remember Carl Jung’s writings on the business of aging. As





people grow older, Jung discovered, they find less and less meaning in “things.” They begin to look inwards rather than to the outer world in their search for meaning. So, it seems, that Félix Marcilhac, after a lifetime’s obsession with accumulating some of the greatest treasures of the Art Deco and Art Nouveau periods, is looking for a different sort of life for himself, one more engaged with inner contemplation than material possessions. What this means though is that for those who, to refer once again to Jung, are still in the nest-building, accumulating phase of life, this is a perfect opportunity to do a little natural acquiring and become owners of some of the most life-enhancing and beautiful objects that the world of design has to offer.

Lucia van der Post is associate editor for *The FT’s How to Spend It*. Félix Marcilhac Collection Privée will be offered at Sotheby’s Paris on 11–12 March, page 104.