

What Sold, for How Much, & Why?

By LUKE T. BAKER

Lot 679 Rago "Modern Design" sale, June 16-17: Traccia table designed by Meret Oppenheim, manufactured by Simon International/Dino Gavina, 1970s. Estimated at \$3,000 to \$5,000, the table (complete with two original Simon catalogues) sold for \$11,250. Some reasons for the unexpectedly high price.

LEAVING HER MARK

Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) became a leading figure of the surrealist movement soon after arriving in Paris in the early 1930s to study art. In 1939 the German-born Swiss artist produced the *Table aux Pieds d'Oiseau*, a gilt tabletop impressed with the footprints of a giant bird atop brass bird legs, for an exhibition of surrealist furniture in a Paris gallery run by René Drouin and a young Leo Castelli. Oppenheim is perhaps best known for *Breakfast in Fur*, the fur-lined teacup she made in 1936 at age twenty-two, an early work that garnered international acclaim. Her output included paintings, drawings, prints, assemblages, and designs for jewelry and fashion. Several drawings for furniture exist, notably a presaging table design from 1938 featuring both human and animal legs, as well as lighting designs and drawings of fantastical chairs produced collaboratively by the exquisite corpse method, a surrealist technique.

GAINING TRACTION

In 1971 Italian designer Dino Gavina reissued a version of Oppenheim's 1939 table with fewer footprints on its surface. Christened "Traccia" ("tracks" in Italian), the table enjoyed a cult following among designers as part of Gavina's Ultramobile line for Simon International. The piece sold by Rago in June is a remarkable example of a Gavina Traccia table with its fragile gold leaf in pristine condition, and complete with manufacturer's label and original Simon catalogues. Jad Attal, a modern specialist at Rago, observed of the sale, "the result on the Traccia table is further evidence that the modern market continues to hunger for great objects and

is willing to pay a premium for the best examples. This Meret Oppenheim table functions as both furniture and art. Its iconic profile and surrealist attributes feed the eye and soul."

FOOTNOTES

Oppenheim's use of bird legs makes witty reference to the cabriole leg, a design trope based on the stylized rear leg of an ungulate and popular in French and English furniture from the eighteenth century. Traccia's raptorial feet also evoke the ball-and-claw foot, a motif derived from ancient Chinese designs depicting a dragon or bird's claw with a pearl clutched in its talons. Additionally, the use of gold leaf on the tabletop harks back to eighteenth-century continental traditions of gilded furniture. Unusual juxtapositions, latent eroticism, and dream symbolism became hallmarks of the surrealists' art as they sought to give form to imagery from the unconscious mind. Encouraged by Max Ernst, an erstwhile lover and leading surrealist, Oppenheim explored the incorporation of bird imagery into her work. A fascination with legs, hands, feet, and phalanges is evident throughout her oeuvre, from her draw-

ings (*Love*, 1962) and paintings (*Stone Woman*, 1938) to her numerous designs for gloves and her leg-themed jewelry. This fixation reflects the larger surrealist preoccupation with the body as a site of psychic and physical union.

INDIRECT OBJECT

The surrealists found themselves at once captivated and repelled by the proliferation of mass-produced goods and the pag-eant of Parisian shop window displays. For Salvador Dalí, objects were charged with the power to "make the fantastic real," but they also symbolized the commodity fetishism of the modern age. Oppenheim's table gives eloquent form to this contradictory relationship. While her design operates as a functional *objet d'art* for the fashionable avant garde, it remains undomesticated, subverting the bourgeois occasional table and its attendant notions of the feminine. Other Oppenheim objects such as *Ma gouvernante*, *My Nurse*, *mein Kindermädchen* 1936—a pair of women's heels trussed and presented on a platter like a roast—appropriate commercial goods to comment on the gender and sexual politics faced by Oppenheim and her female peers.

