

# DEALERS COLLECT *Who*

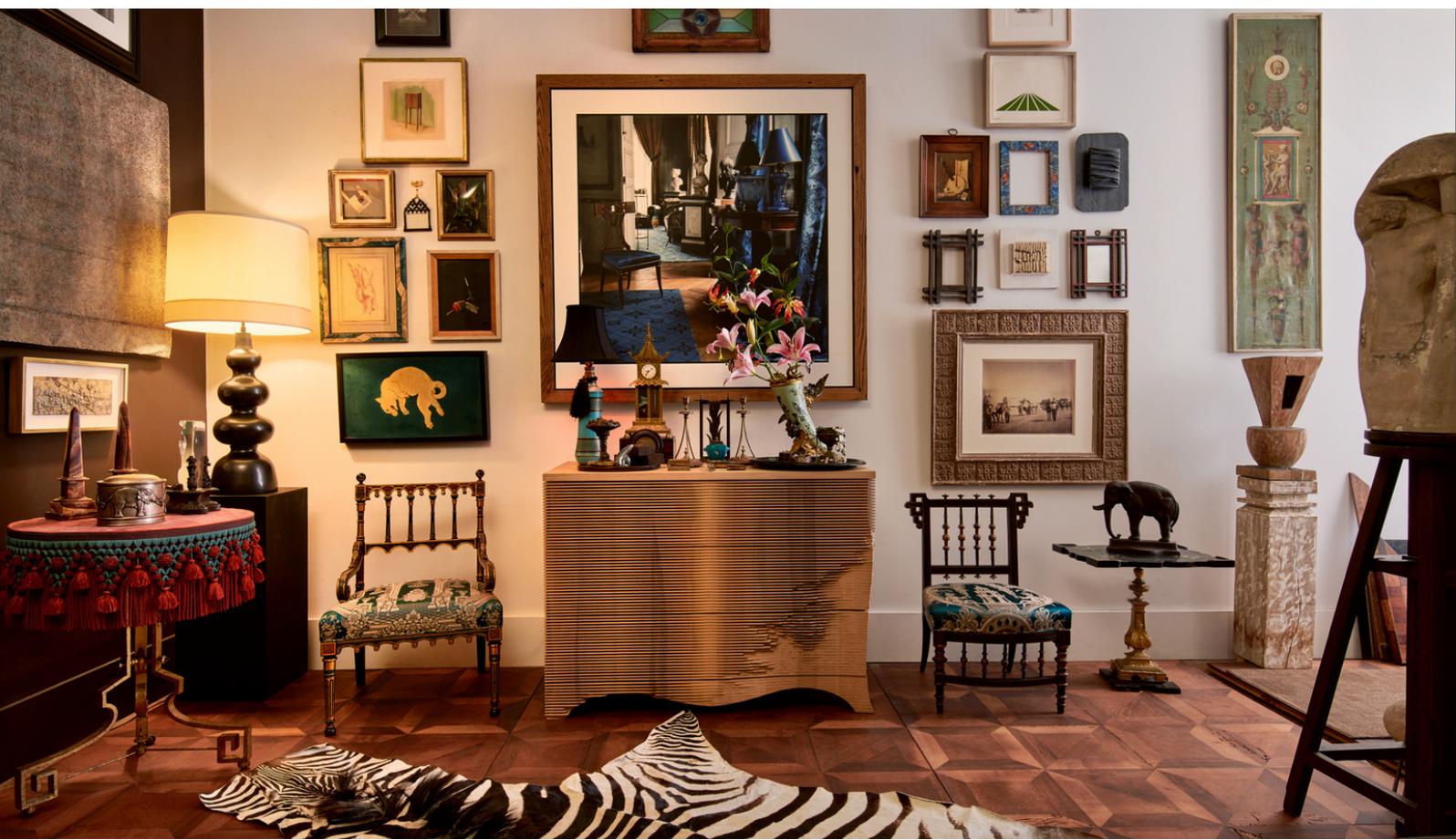
**N**estled downtown on East Tenth Street is Benoist Drut, a French gallerist whose passion for unconventional design predominates over the tides of tastes and trends. He joined Maison Gerard in 1998, a gallery devoted to French Art Deco, following years of training with other dealers and combing local markets for things that caught his eye. In fact, Maison Gerard was just the next step in what was already a way of life.

Drut was raised in Omerville, a beautiful, quaint village of 350 people that is a world away from Paris even though it is just an hour away. His mother, he recalled, “never purchased the furniture in their home from a store,” but rather spent weekend mornings with her son scouting “little yards” and “village fairs” in nearby communities. By the time he was eight, he was already collecting Pepsi Cola bottles, complemented by a Johnny Walker figurine —early manifestations of his catholic



**Benoist F. Drut**  
Maison Gerard

interests. After attending boarding school, Drut wanted to be an auctioneer and entered law school (a requirement for that profession in France at the time) and at the same time interned for a Paris auctioneer. He soon realized, however, that the day-to-day responsibilities of the French auction business would not allow him to be as hands-on with objects as he would have liked.



**A**nd so, in 1992, Drut moved to New York—determined to make it in a city he had never even visited. “I had nothing but two suitcases; I left everything behind so that I could start out fresh on my own.” He found a job working at Malmaison for Roger Prigent, a photographer turned collector turned antique dealer, and was paid two hundred dollars a week (in today’s terms \$445). It wasn’t much, but at least it was a start.

Six years later Drut joined Gerardus A. Widdershoven (1951–2020) at Maison Gerard; Gerard had long before given Drut the affectionate moniker *mon petit héritier* (my little heir). The two formed a meaningful collaboration, “It was not just me; it was not just him. It was the two of us . . . on a very exciting journey,” Drut explained. Together they grew the gallery fourfold within Drut’s first year. Three years later, Drut introduced contemporary design to the gallery, a very unusual step for the time. He sees his profession as a dynamic, living process: “It’s not static knowledge,” he mused about the ever-evolving nature of his work. Curiosity is his driving force, which helps to explain why Drut has never been attached to a particular style—both professionally and personally. When he develops an interest, however, he goes deep. For example, after studying photographs of interiors of Madeleine Castaing (1894 - 1992), a Paris-based antiques dealer and interior designer, Drut became



interested in Napoleon III furniture of the mid-nineteenth century. He was so inspired by Mme. Castaing that a large photograph of her living room shot by Jean-Francois Jaussaud is the centerpiece of his bedroom in Sullivan County, New York, where it hangs over a modern dresser by the British designer Gareth Neal, which is flanked on each side by Napoleon III chairs. The composition is enhanced by the room’s patterned wood flooring, gifted to him by another dealer and reminiscent of French seventeenth and eighteenth-century examples.

*Previous Page:* A Napoleon III chair and armchair flank a contemporary chest of drawers by Gareth Neal. On the chest stand a Neo-Gothic gilt bronze clock and ceramic vase with silvered and gilt bronze ornaments. The table is by Huret (ca. 1865), with trimming by Maison Verrier. A large Jean-Francois Jaussaud photo of Madeleine Castaing’s apartment in Paris hangs on the wall. Other artworks include a representation of a dog by Tsuguharu Foujita (1886-1968), the Gustave Le Gray photo depicts the French Imperial Guard of Napoleon III at Châlons-sur-Marne in 1857.

*Above:* An unusual late Louis XVI gilt-carved wood armchair. Drawing by Salvatore Scarpitta, “Angel” (1991)

*Left:* On the mantel and coffee table, vessels in pewter, disko metal, bronze, and silver by Danish artist Just Andersen (1884-1943). This collection was started by Gerardus A. Widdershoven decades ago. Above are three ink on paper drawings by Salvatore Scarpitta (1919-2007). The contemporary bronze and onyx sconces are by Achille Salvagni, the glazed ceramic parrots by Luc and Marjolaine Lanel (ca. 1950, France). The ink drawing of a cat is by Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007).



**H**is living room is even more elaborate, beginning with the 1930s Just Andersen metal vessels from Denmark throughout the room. Widdershoven was an

early collector of these items, and Drut continues to enlarge the gallery's holdings. Above them are a series of drawings by the Italian American Salvatore Scarpitta (1919–2007)—an American artist recognized for his sculptural renderings of objects in motion and championed by the legendary art dealer Leo Castelli. Also in the room are portrait busts of African subjects made by European artists in the 1920s and 1930s as well as African-inspired masks made by French ceramists in the 1950s. Admittedly, Drut tends to surround himself with multiples of the things he loves, including everyday objects. When a friend observed his collection of kitchen cutting boards, he was compelled to ask jokingly, “Is there anything you don't collect?”



**A**t The Winter Show, where Maison Gerard has been a participating dealer for fifteen years, his booth design is guided by his wide-ranging interests and the juxtaposition of old and new from around the globe. The show, he believes, has evolved over the years so that there is much more diversity than in the past, and he always finds something new or unexpected there. It's “a living museum”—a place where you can look and touch the items while also learn from dealers who are happy to share their knowledge.

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*Above: Just Anderson bronze vessels*

*Left: Detail of Living Room arrangement*

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