



Metal guru

Pablo Picasso was one of many artists who recognised the genius of goldsmith François Hugo. **Kate Youde** talks to Nicolas Hugo about his grandfather



Image courtesy of Atelier Hugo

Left
Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Vallauris silver plate, 1956
Estimate: €25,000 - 30,000
(£20,000 - 25,000)

Above
At the goldface: in the workshop of Ateliers Hugo

Opposite
“What can you make of this?”
Picasso shows a drawing to François Hugo

The artist Jacqueline Roque tried all her “powers of persuasion” to have her lover, Pablo Picasso, exhibit his silver dishes in Marseilles in 1959.

“But Pablo has other ideas and since they are bound to be excellent – let us wait,” she wrote in a letter to the goldsmith François Hugo.

It would be eight years until the public got to see some of Picasso’s designs in silver. An exhibition at Galerie le Point Cardinal in Paris in November 1967 showcased François’s collaborations with artists at his workshop in the south of France on wearable sculpture and limited edition objects in silver and gold.

A plate from each of the 24 silver editions on which Picasso and François collaborated are among the hundred lots being offered at Bonhams by Ateliers Hugo from their work with famous artists; some of them have never been seen before. The sale is timed to coincide with this year’s 50th and 60th anniversaries of the deaths of Picasso and Jean Cocteau, respectively, and the 90th anniversary of the start of François’s career as a goldsmith.

Born in 1899, François’s early work in metal led him to create bespoke buttons for haute couture dresses by fashion designers including Elsa Schiaparelli. His first

collaboration with an artist was with the sculptor Alberto Giacometti on buttons for Schiaparelli, says François’s grandson Nicolas Hugo, director of Ateliers Hugo today. However, it is François’s collaboration with Picasso that put the goldsmith on the map.

In 1956, Picasso was already working with the Madoura pottery in Vallauris, south-east France, when he decided

“It is François Hugo’s collaboration with Picasso that put the goldsmith on the map”

he wanted to do something in silver. His friend, the art historian Douglas Cooper suggested he should contact François. The pair had met before, at the premiere of the Ballets Russes production of *Parade* in Paris in 1917, for which Picasso designed the sets and costumes. French polymath Cocteau, a complete set of whose designs with Ateliers Hugo is being offered in the auction, contributed the story.



Image courtesy of Arelle F. H.



Above
Jean Cocteau (1889-1963)
Visage en V gold earrings
Estimate: €600 - 800 (£500 - 700)

Right
Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Faune
gold medallion
Estimate: €12,000 - 18,000
(£10,000 - 15,000)

Left
Nicolas Hugo following in
his grandfather's footsteps
at Ateliers Hugo



The first piece François worked on with Picasso was a plate based on the Spaniard's *Le Dormeur* ceramic platter. It was a challenge, says Nicolas, although his “genius” grandfather was up to the task, inventing his own tools for the job. He used the repoussé-ciselé technique still used by Ateliers Hugo today, placing a sheet of silver on a bronze mould and hammering it from the back. “What you hammer from the back comes out in the front,” says Nicolas, adding that a plate typically requires 20,000 hits, after which it is polished.

Picasso was so “enchanted by the result”, says Nicolas, that he ordered more plates of different designs. “But he didn’t want to commercialise them,” he says. “He kept them under his bed, hidden like a treasure.”

François, who died in 1981, moved in artistic circles. His brother Jean and Jean’s first wife, Valentine Hugo, were painters. Dada and Surrealist pioneer Max Ernst was a great friend. The Fauvist André Derain was best man for François’s second marriage, to Monique, whom he had met in Cannes during World War II. The friends experimented together on pieces at Derain’s studio in Chambourcy, says Nicolas, without much success: they set fire to the workshop. However, Derain gave François some lead sculptures before his death in 1954, from which François later made editions of gold medallions. Nicolas says the heavy, “primitive” designs “don’t look as sophisticated” as some of those by other artists, but have a “more masculine effect” that matched Derain’s persona.

François and Monique bought a house in Aix-en-Provence in 1954, making the move permanent four years later. François set up his workshop just metres from the kitchen, where Ateliers Hugo remains today. Here he worked on further designs for Picasso, inspired, Nicolas says, by Roque’s desire to wear his work around her neck.

However, it was only in 1967 that Picasso granted François permission to make the first limited edition of his designs. In the years since Picasso had started working with Ateliers Hugo, François had collaborated

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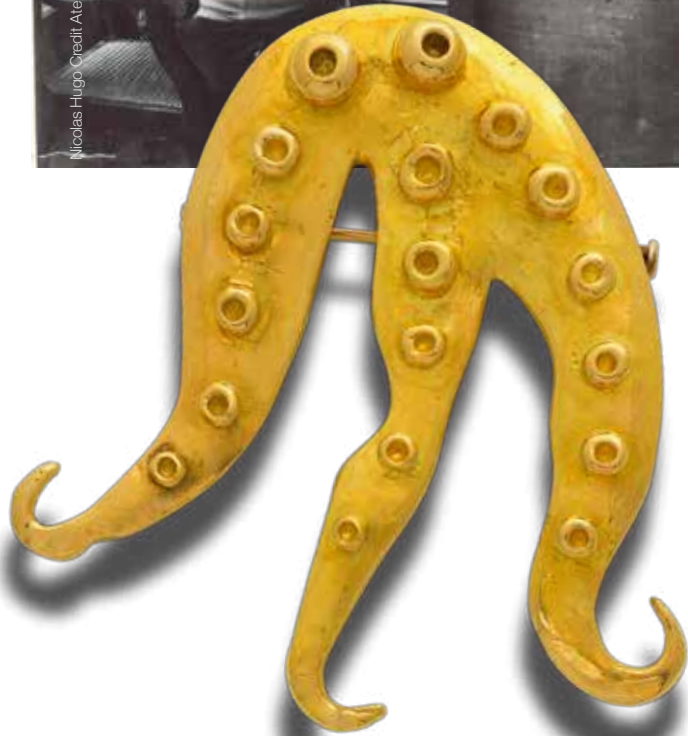
on artist jewels with friends including Ernst, the sculptor and painter Jean Arp, and the painter Dorothea Tanning (Ernst’s wife) – the only woman with whom Ateliers Hugo has collaborated to date. Tanning’s designs in the sale include a gold octopus brooch and a gold bracelet inspired by her dog Groutcho. “She was very smart, very funny,” says Nicolas, who remembers her visiting their house.

The exhibition was the first public display of the work of Ateliers Hugo. “Then it kicked off,” says Nicolas.

François’s son Pierre, father of Nicholas, joined him in the workshop in the early 1970s, taking over in 1977. He oversaw the business’ expansion, selling pieces to international collectors and participating in gallery



Nicolas Hugo Credit: Ateliers Hugo



Nicolas Hugo Credit: Ateliers Hugo



Above left
Picasso at work, in a photo the artist sent to François Hugo

Above
Max Ernst (on the left) playing chess with François Hugo

Left
Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012)
Mademoiselle pieuvre
gold brooch
Estimate : €7,000 - 10,000
(£6,000 - 8,500)

Above right
Max Ernst (1891-1976)
Grand ovale
Gold medallion
Estimate: €10,000 - 15,000
(£8,500 - 12,500)

exhibitions, and brought in his own artists including Salvador Dalí and the sculptor Arman, and later Swiss-born contemporary artist Ugo Rondinone.

Nicolas, a former art dealer, became the third generation to enter the family business when he took over in 2018, and has since overseen a collaboration with American contemporary artist Josh Sperling. He had not wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, seeing the family name – he is the great-great-great-grandson of the French writer Victor Hugo – as “a blessing but also a curse” and wanting to make his own way. However, he didn't want the business to be lost. “Only a Hugo can take over this,” he says. “It's the brand.”

Picasso would mock François about the Hugo name, and gave him a drawing, dated 13 February 1971, addressed to ‘Mon Ami Victor’. François used this as inspiration for an edition of gold ear-rings produced after Picasso's death, presented in the sale. Ateliers Hugo only works with artists the family has met and on designs produced during an artist's lifetime. Once an edition is finished, they do not reissue designs.

The auction features one of an edition of 20 from each of the 24 gold medallion designs Picasso made with Ateliers Hugo based on his ceramic plates, as well as other designs. One of Nicolas' favourites is the *Grand faune* gold medallion, the original drawing for which hangs in his Paris apartment. “It reminds me of me, this guy,” he says about the “cheeky”, smiling face.

Nicolas spends one or two days a week in the

workshop in Aix-en-Provence, while his father Pierre still visits every day and hallmarks the creations. They are joined in the business by four craftspeople: atelier head Bernard Baur, who has been with Ateliers Hugo 35 years, Baur's two nephews, and Nicolas's best friend.

Little has changed over the decades, including the smell of the workshop – a mix of the gas used for welding, nicotine, leather and wood – and the production method. “It's our technique and the artists come for this,” says Nicolas. “Like sometimes at auction you have a still-wet painting – this is a slow way of thinking. A collaboration takes two years to make between three and six jewels.”

While recognition of artist jewels has grown in the past decade, thanks in part to galleries specialising in the genre, Nicolas hopes that the auction, like the pivotal exhibition in 1967, puts the work of Ateliers Hugo in the spotlight. “When you see one jewel, it's impressive,” he says, “but when you see the whole thing there's something mystical about it.”

Kate Youde writes for the Financial Times and other publications.

The exhibition *Picasso – Ateliers Hugo: Les Hommes d'Or* is at Musée Magnelli in Vallauris until 25 September.

Sale: Ateliers Hugo
Bonhams Cornette de Saint Cyr, Paris
Thursday 28 September
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