An Austrian thrives in Paris

By J.S. MARCOCI

On Jan. 28, 13, M. P ALOUSSON will become a giant hit when British sculptor Tony Cragg unveils a red sun-like sculpture of a woman clad in a tangle of wood, called “Versus.”

In talking about the work, which the Louvre specially commissioned for the space, Mr. Cragg said he credit his own inspiration or dilution, but rather his relationship with his Paris art dealer Thaddaeus Ropac, who has shown him Mr. Cragg’s monumental pieces for the past decade.

The Louvre exhibition, which includes several other recent sculptures installed elsewhere in the museum complex, “developed out of the fact that the gallery and I worked very successfully together,” says Mr. Ropac, a Romanian-born dealer in Weppen, Germany, Mr. Cragg. He believes that showing with the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, which first opened in Salzburg in 1983 and expanded to Paris eleven years later, has given him critical visibility in Paris and beyond.

In Paris and Salzburg, the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac is breaking the latest trend among its European competitors. While other major galleries, such as Hauser & Wirth or Goleman’s Spalatt-Murugan, have recently chosen to expand or to relocate to new, purpose-built contemporary art galleries, London and Berlin, Mr. Ropac has stayed put. In the process, he has managed to attract many of the world’s most important artists, including Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer and Gilbert and George, and he has helped to put Paris, the undisputed capital of the art world until World War II, back on the contemporary art map.

“Paris has changed its position,” says Mr. Ropac, speaking by telephone from Salzburg. It is now “one of the main capitals of contemporary art again.”

Things weren’t always that easy. In the first decade after opening his gallery, in the heart of the city’s Marais district, “I found it really hard to work there,” he says. “I had the feeling that things were moving on other places and not in Paris.”

Mr. Ropac credits Paris’s restored status to the emergence of important local art collectors, like businessmen Francois Pinault, whose holding company Groupe Artémis now owns Christie’s auction house, and Bernhard Arnault, chairman of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton in Paris, the French luxury conglomerate. Muses, Pinault and Arnault not only finance major collectors but also tastemakers.

Mr. Ropac also cites the re-emergence of Fiac, Paris’s art fair, which he places in importance just behind fairs in Basel and Miami. “You find more big-ticket items at Fiac,” he says, than at the fair’s rival, London’s Frieze.

By maintaining locations in Paris and in Salzburg, which Mr. Ropac uses as a way to access the whole German-speaking world as well as the city’s cosmopolitan festival goers, the gallery is emphasizing a geographic neares to collectors and important art institutions, rather than artists. Of the dozens of artists that the gallery represents, less than a handful actually live or work in either city.

Mr. Ropac’s artists emphasize another aspect: his preoccupation with other galleries. “With other galleries, you sometimes have to fight for money,” says Erwin Wurm, the Austrian sculptor who chose the gallery as one of his primary venues a few years ago. By contrast, Mr. Ropac is “always very correct and fair.”

Mr. Wurm, whose recent relationship with Mr. Ropac has coincided with a marked increase in his international reputation, opened his first show at the Paris gallery this week. “An artwork can breathe there,” he says of the gallery’s large upper-level space.

Mr. Wurm had worked with Mr. Ropac on group shows and other projects, but he had his first solo gallery show in Salzburg in 2008. Since then, he has had a successful museum show tour in Austria and Germany, and this past fall, he had a show with a new York gallery, Lehmann Maupin, which also represents Gilbert & George. Mr. Ropac’s gallery often trend to have around three so-called “primary” galleries, which generally get first crack at new work. Mr. Ropac says that his own gallery, with its continental venues and connections, doesn’t worry about other galleries showing his artists’ works on his turf. But the situation is different in the Middle East and Asia. “We are coming with the same artists,” he says, of his other primary galleries. And although he may collaborate with these galleries through “discussions about the projects and price structures,” in these new markets, “there are no rules.”

He sees this form of competition as a part of his larger mission. “This is the goal of our generation,” he says, “getting the best artists of our time—and get the best works out of their studios.”

Checkmate: Intricate sets

[Collecting]

By MARGARET STONE

Chess is the name of the game at Bonhams auction house in London this week.

On Monday, Bonhams will offer rare chess sets from Africa, Asia, America and Europe dating from the 18th to the 20th century.

Chess figures owe history, craftsmanship and fashion through the ages, and carry commemorative value. At Christie’s South Kensington in December, a surrealist chess piece made to commemorate the historic match between the British House of Commons and the U.S. House of Representatives in 1857 was sold for $6,375. The match was played over two days by cable transmission and resulted in a draw.

Chess pieces at auction have risen steadily over the past 30 years, with particular demand coming from “well-heeled collectors.” Bonhams specialist Luke Honey says. The often esquisitely sculptured figures usually aren’t bought to be played with, but for the joy of owning them, he adds. A major highlight will be an ivory and ebony figurial chess set from southern Germany or from circa 1700. Crawford Kings of queens are dressed in regal medieval fashion and move with breeches and flared-bottomed coats. The set will be sold with a $5,000-$10,000 estimate. “It is very rare to have a complete set from so far back,” Mr. Honey says.

From circa 1780 comes a French ivory bust that plays European chess against the Moor. The European side is left in natural ivory, while the Moorish side is dyed red. There are charming details such as the Moorish queen wearing divinity robes and the European king with his hair tied with a ribbon underneath his crown ($70,000-90,000). Another 18th-century set comes from China and is carved from mammoth ivory, it is valued at $20,000-$30,000. And a 15th-century English shaker’s maritime travel set will be offered in its original mahogany box, engraved with the name of the whaling ship’s captain ($5000-$10,000).

West meets East in a decorative Chinese set that was made for the export market in circa 1820. One side depicts the king and queen of England, with bishops as clergy and knights as horsemen; and the other, the Chinese emperor and empress as king and queen, bishops as mandarins and rooks as elephants with flags (estimate: $2,000-$3,000).

A fun item comes from 19th-century Africa. A 1500s hardwood tribal set shows queens bearing tusks for one force and blue for another. They include Infantry, cavalry, and cannon, with tusks as gun units (estimate: $1,500-$2,000).

“Time is a rare and superb example of a late 18th-century war game,” says Mr. Honey. “It gives us a fascinating insight into the tactics of the last days that ultimately culminated in the tragedy of the First World War.”

Funk-A-Skittz (1990), a Suf- fan, taken from the name of British Suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst and the anti-Suffragette British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, Green, white and yellow were the colors of the Suffragette movement, and this is clearly represented on the board. There are 50 squares, with the aim of the game to end at the last square, which represents universal suffrage. Six pieces are Suffragettes breaking the window of the British Home Office. White piece has a notice, “Any player landing on this square loses one Suffragette fund” (estimates: $5000-$5000).

Among the playing cards will be an English pack from 1892-93 decorated with royalty and flags (estimates: $5,000-$10,000) and an English pack from 1932, depicting Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen’s discovering of the South Pole, estimated at $4000-$6000.

A 19th-century whaler’s maritime traveling chess set is estimated at $5000-$10,000.