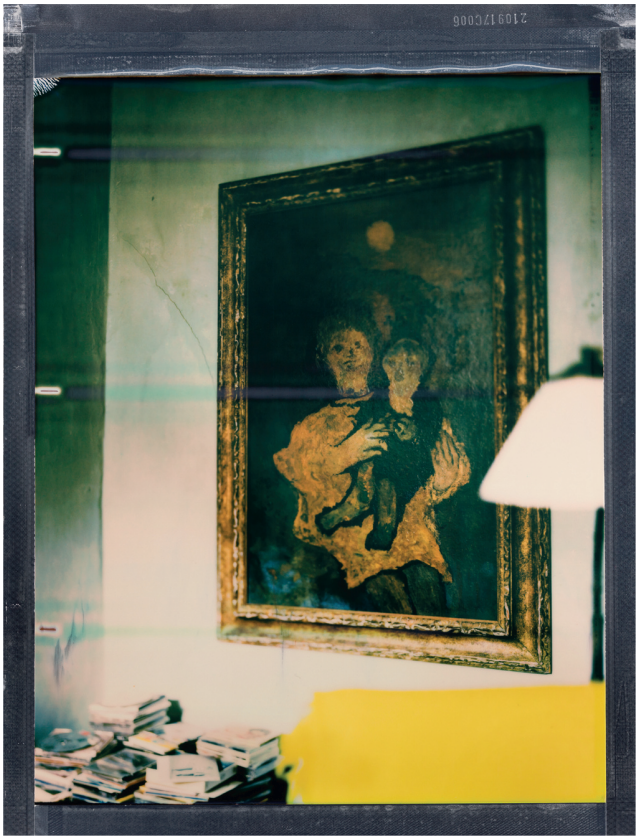
This page: for 20 years, François kept this postcard of Brassaï's *Cast of Picasso's Right Hand*, 1944, before he was able to buy the genuine article. Opposite: an Apulian mortuary vase stands next to a Roman mortuary stele. Arles, the photographer feels, has an Italian influence – when he bought the house 30 years ago, it reminded him of Cy Twombly's dwelling in Gaeta, Lazio

SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS

Photographer François Halard made his name shooting the homes of Cy Twombly and Curzio Malaparte. Inspired by what he saw, he turned his 18th-century Arles town house into a treasure trove of small-scale antiques, African masks and fine art. But what does it all say about the man himself? Here, he turns a vintage Polaroid camera on his own, highly individual, collection. Marie-France Boyer helps him through the process



This page, clockwise from top left: an 18th-century plate from the East India Company; to François, this Roman statue and stele evoke the brooding fashion photography of Deborah Turbeville (*WoI* Dec 2015); this portrait of an unidentified mother and child remind the owner of Les Nabis; African masks keep watch, alongside a Bambara comb and Japanese vase – a nod to mid-1930s Walker Evans

In this reversed image, a Khmer Buddha meditates next to an African statue. In the background is a poster by the artist/film-maker Julian Schnabel. To the left is a copy of *El Planeta de los Toros*, a book Halard worked on with the Spanish painter Miquel Barceló

DISCOVERED BY *Décoration Internationale* magazine in the 1980s, François Halard was just 23 when he moved to New York to work at Condé Nast for *House & Garden*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. Championed by the editorial director Alexander Liberman, and later Anna Wintour, he photographed – as he still does – interiors, architecture and fashion, which are sometimes brought together in 'the world's most beautiful homes'.

But everything changed in the 1990s when he photographed Cy Twombly's home. He had seen where artists such as Julian Schnabel and Robert Rauschenberg lived, but there was something about Twombly's surroundings, his way of mixing cultures and periods, that moved him profoundly. François' parents had been furniture and fabric designers, and as a child he had visited the home of family friend and collector Henri de la Celle, who had works by Alexander Calder and Jean Tinguely hanging in one of the Louis XIII rooms of his château. Reminded of this, he decided to use photography in a new way to show objects and their locations.

At the end of the 1990s, while working on a temporary collaboration with the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, he took a detour to Capri to visit Villa Malaparte, which sits on a rock overlooking agaves and the Mediterranean. Curzio Malaparte had been his mother's favourite author, and François had long dreamed of showing his famed Modernist house – which enjoys a starring role in the 1963 Jean-Luc Godard film *Contempt* – in an entirely different light. The result was a small book (published by Actes Sud), an exhibition and a collection of prints that propelled him into this 'other world', as he puts it, of galleries, art books and artists, to which he now devotes a great deal of his time. This year he is design curator at large for Miami Basel.

Long before this new intense period of photography, he bought a faded old 18th-century town house near the Rhône in Arles. It is not far from the Editions Actes Sud bookshop, which today is a collaborator as well as a neighbour, like the art patron Maja Hoffmann (also based in the Provençal city) and the Collection Lambert in Avignon.

'When I bought the house around 30 years ago, I found in it something of our old friend Henri de la Celle and even of Twombly in Gaeta, for there is an Italian influence in Arles,' explains François. 'It is 18th century but it could just as well be Mallet-Stevens or Chareau. What is important is that it says who I am. Some people do that with a pen. I do it with objects and photos, which then become objects in their turn. My aim is to try and capture the beauty, the meaning, the contrasts or the similarities between the periods and the artists who are in my company. Today the ground floor is occupied by my archives and my assistants. The house has become an immense working studio.'

With his small battered hats and his Scholl clogs, François doesn't just look eccentric, he is eccentric. He is a man of few but incisive words, his eyes are preternaturally blue and his erudition unusual. He has the delightful characteristic of always popping up where you least expect him, and is passionate about the objets d'art he has always collected – sometimes compulsively, he admits, bursting into peals of laughter. 'My first serious purchases were a Twombly and an 18th-century four-poster bed,' he remembers. He has African masks, fragments from antiquity, drawings by Matisse and Picasso. (He has never quite got over having been shut up for a few days photographing Picasso's sketchbooks).

He also has antique fabrics, Buddhas, Japanese jars, 20th-century black-and-white photographs, including work by Brassaï and Saul Leiter (a book about whom he has just completed). And then there are the cuneiform tablets and seals, funerary stelae and a whole population of sometimes very humble objects, though he is often short on detail about the period or provenance. 'First of all, I listen to my eye, then I do my research,' he says. And in the main house everything has a reason for being there, known by him and him only. So when *WoI* asked him to photograph his collection, of course he proposed doing it 'his way'. He would, he said, use the Polaroid camera he bought almost 20 years ago, fitted on to a 19th-century tripod, which is raised and lowered by crank, and the Impossible film, framed by silver strip, that was designed for the medium. Irving Penn and Paolo Roversi used it too.

When you disappear under the cloth, the image in the viewfinder appears inverted and upside-down. It is a photographic shoot from another era. Then you have to contend with the developing machine, also crank-operated. It jams – is it too old? Is it because Impossible is 1mm thicker than the usual film? Assistants Hélène and Clara clean the machine with soft cloths on the end of a paintbrush or kitchen knife. They explore the inside with the torches on their phones. The Polaroids dribble a corrosive pink liquid that produces blisters if you don't wash quickly enough. And in this old-style process, very few images are produced by the end of the first day. Several more will be needed… ■

'Saul Leiter', by François Halard, is published by Libraryman, rrp £38. The Rencontres d'Arles photographic festival takes place 2 July-23 Sept. For more information, ring 00 33 4 90 96 76 06, or visit rencontres-arles.com

Clockwise from top left: these 17th-century plates were rescued from the bottom of the sea; a Picasso lithograph stands behind a 19th-century Hokusai engraving and a Miroslav Tichý photo; François shoots his collection with a vintage Polaroid camera in front of a piece by Cy Twombly, his 'first serious buy', mounted on wallpaper by Réattu; a sketch of Yvonne Landsberg by Matisse