

# Model Citizens

**THE COLLECTOR** > Obsolete's obsession with full-size artist models

By Jane Gifford



**RAY AZOULAY HAS A KNACK** for discovering fascinating functional objects and presenting them convincingly as works of art. For three 19th-century French life-size artist's models currently on display at Obsolete, his gallery in Venice, Calif., a contextual change seems entirely appropriate. Created originally as teaching aids for artists, these models are now appreciated as sculpture. "More often than not, they were made by the artist, or artists were making them for other artists, for classes, so there's a wonderful artistic sense to them," Azoulay says.


They are also rare. Opportunities for collectors to acquire 18th- and 19th-century life-size models still intact are few and far between, and when they do arise, the asking price is in the realm of \$24,000 to \$36,000. Azoulay lays claim to one of the largest collections of early artist's models in the United States, and says that, unlike smaller artist forms, it is unusual for three models of this scale to be sharing the space at the same time.

Standing tall, his recent finds are eerily lifelike and compelling. They each measure approximately 5 feet, 3 inches, close to the average height of a person living in the 19th century. All are handmade, carved from sturdy hardwood, with careful attention paid to various details of the human anatomy. Wood or brass

A female model from the early 19th century, found at an estate auction in France. Her head is paper composite and removable, her joints and hands were crafted in brass; \$36,000.

joints enable the models to be posed in ways that emulate human actions and, with the slightest tilt of the head or twist of the torso, even the subtlest of expressions. "I encourage collectors to take them off their stands and have fun with them—prop them sitting at a table or somewhat irreverently, as we have done in the gallery in the past, standing in front of a painting with both arms in the air," says Azoulay.

The oldest of the three and the most rare, according to Azoulay, is the female. She has a paper composite head and a slightly worn, beautifully painted cherubic face. Her mechanical body contrasts sharply with her delicate facial features. She would have been draped in fabric or dressed in a high-necked gown and posed for a group of art students to sketch. The other two figures are male and very different from each other. One is intricately carved, with the direction of the wood grain perfectly centered on his torso and limbs. The anatomical detail is exquisite. Frown lines accent his handsome face. He has distinct features: ears, ribs, fingernails and toenails. Everything moves—even his hands open and close. The other is a skeletal form with perfectly considered bones. Straps of metal cross his ankles and seem to replicate Achilles' heels.

"The attraction to collectors is that they have a patina, that they are unique and make a statement," says Azoulay. "But most of all, it's their human scale and form, and their ability to be posed and moved around to reflect personalities that are familiar to us." 

Obsolete, 310.399.0024, www.obsoleteinc.com



Above: An intricately carved male model from the late 19th century, complete with frown lines, intricately carved fingernails and his original wood stand; \$36,000.

Left: A skeletal male model, from the late 19th century. Brass joints hinge his well-considered bones together; \$24,000.

