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The Ritz hotel, currently closed to visitors due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, is pictured in central London.—AFP

## Paris Ritz hotel items sell for quadruple the auction estimate

Historic silver, crystal and even towels sold off at auction by the swanky Paris Ritz hotel were snapped up for a total of 1.7 million euros (\$1.9 million), more than four times the pre-sale estimate, the Artcurial auctioneers said Tuesday. Some 1,500 lots of bed linen to bathrobes and ashtrays were sold to buyers from 25 countries, after more than 500 people registered online for the luxury sell-off.

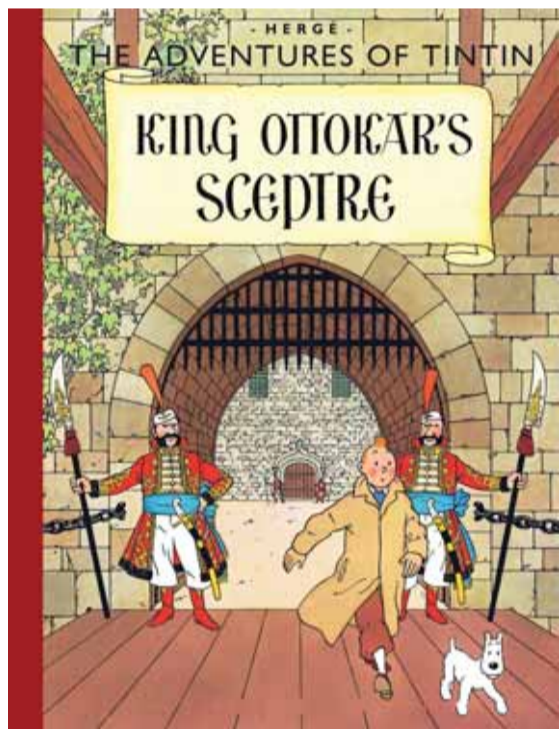
The famous hotel on Place Vendôme in the French capital was a favourite of such icons as actress Audrey Hepburn, fashion designer Coco Chanel—who spent part of World War II tucked up there with her lover, a German spy—and the American writer Ernest Hemingway, who “liberated” its bar when the Allies retook the city. Among the used items on sale, a 12-plate “Marthe service” commissioned by Cesar Ritz in 1898 for the opening of the hotel was sold for 13,000 euros, 45 times

the estimate. Christoffe serving trolleys also sold well while champagne buckets brought in up to 11,700 euros, a mighty 58 times the auction estimate. The auction had been originally scheduled to take place in April but was postponed due to the coronavirus epidemic. Two years ago some of the hotel’s historic furniture was sold off for 7.2 million euros—seven times the estimate—after a major refurbishment of the hotel.—AFP

## Tintin’s Hitler skit cover goes under hammer

The cover of a Tintin story that satirised Hitler’s German expansionism could go for more than a 350,000 euros (\$395,000) when it comes up for auction in Paris Saturday. In “King Ottokar’s Sceptre”, the boy detective’s Belgian creator Hergé was taking a dig at the Nazi leader after his annexation of Austria in 1938. Tintin and his faithful hound Snowy find themselves trying to foil a plot by spies to overthrow the king of the fictional Balkan land of Syldavia. The story was first published in the children’s supplement of the conservative Brussels newspaper Le Petit Vingtième. The cover shows Tintin tripping as he gets out of the plane in Prague and having to grab his new friend Professor Alembick’s beard to right himself.

The drawing is part of a major sale of classic cartoon images at Artcurial auction house in the French capital, which was postponed in March because of the coronavirus pandemic. Also going under the hammer is painting of Asterix and Obelix by their creator Albert Uderzo for a 1966 colouring book, which is expected to sell for up to 25,000 euros. But the biggest bids are expected to go to a 1954 ink drawing called “Le pirogue” (The Dugout Canoe) of the Marsupilami, the fictional South American animal invented by the legendary Belgian artist Andre Franquin. It has an estimate of between 350,000 and 450,000 euros. Franquin was one of the most influential postwar comic book artists, and Marsupilami often appeared alongside the characters Spirou & Fantasio, which he drew from 1949 to 1969.—AFP



## Netflix to screen Kristen Stewart’s lockdown short

Netflix said Tuesday that it challenged some of the world’s hottest directors to make a short film when they were cooked up at home during the coronavirus lockdown. The results, made with whatever equipment and family members were close at hand, will be streamed next week. Hollywood stars Kristen Stewart and Maggie Gyllenhaal were among 17 of those who rose to the challenge, with Stewart shooting hers in Los Angeles while Gyllenhaal sheltered in Vermont.

“Jackie” director Pablo Larrain made his film at home in Santiago, Chile—which had been battered by months of civil unrest before the virus struck—while French-Malian film-maker Ladj Ly shot around the tough Paris suburb where his Oscar-nominated movie “Les Misérables” is set. David Mackenzie of “Hell or High Water” fame got to grips with his hometown Glasgow, while Nadine Labaki used the backdrop of Beirut, which also featured in her 2018 hit “Capernaum”. Larrain said it was “an extraordinary chance to keep working... in days (that were) so confusing and unique.” The shorts will be streamed on Netflix from June 30, with the US giant saying a donation is being made to its hardship fund for cast and crew who have lost their jobs in the crisis.—AFP



Kristen Stewart and Maggie Gyllenhaal



This picture shows longtail macaques sitting on a rooftop in the town of Lopburi, some 155km north of Bangkok.—AFP photos



Longtail macaques pull the tail of a cat in an abandoned building in the town of Lopburi.

## Macaque attack: humans try to take back Thai city from monkeys

Residents barricaded indoors, rival gang fights and no-go zones for humans. Welcome to Lopburi, an ancient Thai city overrun by monkeys super-charged on junk food, whose population is growing out of control. Pointing to the overhead netting covering her terrace, Kuljira Taechawattanawanna bemoans the monkey menace across the heart of the 13th-century city in the central province of the same name. “We live in a cage but the monkeys live outside,” she tells AFP. “Their excrement is everywhere, the smell is unbearable especially when it rains.”

The fearless primates rule the streets around the Prang Sam Yod temple in the centre of Lopburi, patrolling the tops of walls and brazenly ripping the rubber seals from car doors. Their antics were largely tolerated as a major lure for the tourist hordes who descended on the city before the coronavirus outbreak to feed and snap selfies with the plucky animals. But a government sterilisation campaign is now being waged against the creatures after the epidemic provoked an unexpected change in their behaviour.

As foreign tourism—Thailand’s cash cow—seized up so did the flow of free bananas tossed their way, prodding the macaques to turn to violence. Footage of hundreds of them brawling over food in the streets went viral on social media in March. Their growing numbers—doubling in three years to 6,000—have made an uneasy coexistence with their human peers almost intolerable. Some areas of the city have simply been surrendered to the monkeys. An abandoned cinema is the macaques’ headquarters—and cemetery. Dead monkeys are laid to rest by their peers in the projection room in the cinema’s rear and any human who enters is attacked. Nearby, a shop owner displays stuffed tiger and crocodile toys to try to scare off the monkeys, who regularly snatch spray-paint cans from his store.

### Simians in the city

No one in Lopburi seems to remember a time with-



Park rangers prepare to sterilise longtail macaques in the town of Lopburi.

out the monkeys, with some speculating that the urban creep into nearby forest displaced the simians into the city. Residents have taken it upon themselves to feed the macaques to prevent clashes. But locals say the sugary diet of fizzy drinks, cereal and sweets has fuelled their sex lives. “The more they eat, the more energy they have... so they breed more,” says Pramot Ketampai, who manages the Prang Sam Yod temple’s surrounding shrines.

The macaques’ mob fights have drawn the attention of authorities, who restarted a sterilisation programme this month after a three-year pause. Wildlife department officers lure the animals into cages with fruit and take them to a clinic where they are anaesthetised, sterilised and left with a tattoo to mark their neutering. They aim to fix 500 of the creatures by Friday. But the campaign may not be enough to quell their numbers

and the department has a long-term plan to build a sanctuary in another part of the city. But that will likely be met with resistance from the human residents. “We need to do a survey of the people living in the area first,” said Narongporn Daudduem from the wildlife department. “It’s like dumping garbage in front of their houses and asking them if they’re happy or not.”

Taweesak Srisaguan, the shop owner in Lopburi who uses stuffed animals as a deterrent to the unwanted monkey visitors, says that despite his daily joust with the creatures, he will miss them if they are moved. “I’m used to seeing them walking around, playing on the street,” he says. “If they’re all gone, I’d definitely be lonely.”—AFP



A longtail macaque climbing on top of a monkey statue in the town of Lopburi.



Longtail macaques gathering outside a closed shop in the town of Lopburi.

## Tolkien TV show seeks burns victims, amputees as extras

A New Zealand casting agency is appealing for aspiring actors with facial burns, missing limbs and other “funky” looks to become extras in a Lord of the Rings television series. The Amazon Studios’ show is set to resume shooting in Auckland after a coronavirus-related halt in production, prompting an urgent casting call from tal-

ent agency BGT. “Funky looking people needed!” the company posted on its Facebook page, urging readers to tag a suitable friend.

“Do you have an overbite, face burns, long skinny limbs, deep cheekbones, lines on your face, acne scars, ears that stick out, bulbous or interesting noses, small eyes, big eyes, any deformities, skinny faces, missing limbs—do you look unusual?” Amazon is reportedly spending US\$1 billion-plus on the series as it seeks to emulate the runaway success enjoyed by “Games of Thrones”.

New Zealand was selected as the shooting location last year, although the production is not linked to Peter Jackson’s “Lord of the Rings” and “Hobbit” trilogies, which were also filmed in the Kiwi director’s homeland. The series is expected to explore

storylines set in author J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy realm of Middle Earth long before the events depicted in Jackson’s films. Previous BGT casting calls for the series have sought “hairy, hairy people”, “stocky mean-looking bikers”, redheads, Eurasians, and people who are androgynous, freckled or wrinkled. Extras who stand over 1.95 metres (6’ 5”) or below 1.45 metres (4’ 8”) are also in demand, as are sword fighters, archers, and gymnasts. The show is scheduled to debut next year, although it is unclear whether plans have been delayed by the virus-enforced shutdown.—AFP