



Variety show

Paul Delvaux's disquieting works take centre stage at this year's BRAFA in Brussels, Belgium, and the fair's diverse selection also includes contemporary sculpture, 16th-century tapestries, architectural antiques and indigenous masks

IT is difficult to find an exact place for Paul Delvaux (1897–1994) among the artistic 'isms' of the 20th century; he is frequently labelled a Surrealist, but he wasn't comfortable with that, despite his admiration for de Chirico and kinship with Magritte. He might also be termed a Post-Symbolist, as a representative of that important strand of poetic melancholy that ran through much of Belgian literature and art from Rodenbach and Khnopff in the 1890s. One of Delvaux's works in particular, *La Ville inquiète*, produced in occupied Brussels in 1940–41, perfectly symbolised that troubled time and place. It was sold for £2,971,500 (£6,448,308 today) and since then has acquired a new relevance in our own anxious world.

His paintings are inhabited by almond-eyed women, often naked—not nude—idealised yet erotic, plus skeletons, outmoded trains, stations, clerks and faintly ridiculous scholars, and they are often set in twilight or the moonlit night. André Breton, Surrealism's founder, put it well: 'Delvaux has turned the whole universe into a single realm in which one woman, always the same woman, reigns over the great suburbs of the heart.' His scenes are gentle but disquieting episodes in a recurring dream, which is intensely real and full of some not-quite-graspable meaning, untrammelled by rules of mundane logic.

This year's BRAFA fair at Brussels Expo (January 27–February 4, www.brafa.art), has invited the Paul Delvaux Foundation to be its guest of honour. The foundation will display works from its own collection, which is normally housed at the museum in the artist's former home at St-Idesbald on the Belgian coast, together with others from a major private collection. On January 30, 4pm, as part of the fair's programme of daily lectures, Dr Camille Brasseur, director of the Foundation and author of *Paul Delvaux L'Homme qui aimait les Trains* (2019, Snoeck, €34), will trace the development of Delvaux's very individual style.

Naturally enough, there will be a number of paintings, watercolours and prints by Delvaux for sale among the 132 varied



Fig 1: *La Fin du Voyage*, 1968, by Belgian artist Paul Delvaux. With Opera Gallery, Geneva

stands at the fair. They include: a 1920s *Nu dans l'Atelier* (Galerie Jean-François Cazeau, Paris); the 65in by 57in *La Fin du Voyage*, 1968 (**Fig 1**) (Opera Gallery, Geneva); *Femmes devant la Mer*, 1928, and *L'été*, 1963 (Francis Maere, Ghent); *La Danse Macabre*, 1934 (Harold t'Kint de Roodenbeke, Brussels); *Deux Femmes*, 1950 (Galerie Oscar De Vos, Sint-Martens-Latem); *L'Annonciation*, 1952 (Van Herck-Eykelberg, Antwerp); *La Tente rouge*, 1966 (Galerie Taménaga, Paris) and

Alésia ou les Captives, 1973 (Guy Pieters Gallery, Knokke); *La Ville lunaire*, 1944 (Boon Gallery, Knokke); *La Mise au Tombeau*, 1953 (Galerie Alexis Pentcheff, Marseilles).

Although he would probably be labelled a Pop Artist, because that is where his career began, the British sculptor Clive Barker (b. 1940) also has strong links to Surrealism. Indeed, in 1964, he met Magritte in a London gallery and expressed his admiration. Four years later, after Magritte's death,



like to know what is happening in the 102in by 89¼in early-16th-century wool-and-silk example (Fig 2), probably from Brussels, exhibited by De Wit and described only as Court Scene. An allegory, or an actual marriage negotiation? Based in a former abbey in Mechelen, De Wit is the Belgian Royal Manufactory and combines restoring and dealing in old examples with making new ones. I had long intended to visit it and last October did so for a fascinating tour.

‘Delvaux has turned the universe into a single realm in which one woman reigns’

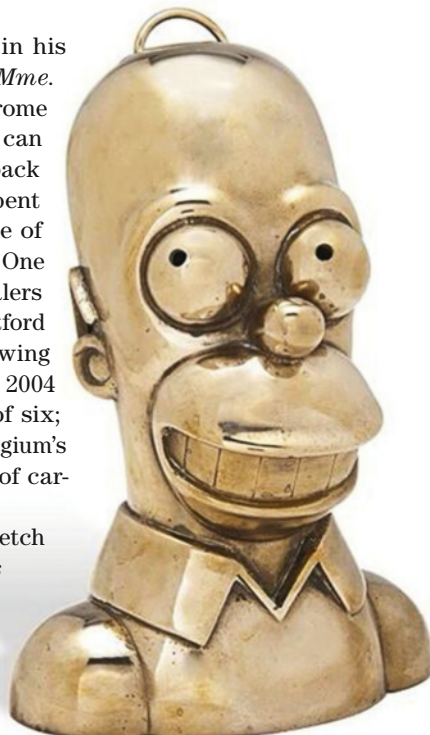
A very different work of art shown by Galerie Flak of Paris undoubtedly has a story to tell, if only one knew the language. It is a *tatuvana* mask (Fig 5) from New Ireland, an island province of Papua New Guinea, used in *mala-gan* funerary ceremonies, the elaborate dances being a link to the spirit world. These masks were made from carved wood, natural pigments, fibres and shells, and were carefully composed to illustrate the character rather →

Fig 4 below: A magnificent 15th-century northern French Gothic Flamboyant limestone canopy. With Dei Bardi of Brussels

Fig 2 above: An early-16th-century wool-and-silk Flemish tapestry. With De Wit.
Fig 3 below: Clive Barker's bronze *Homer*, 2004. With Whitford of London

Barker paid further tribute in his chrome *Magritte's Pipe* and *Mme. Magritte's Pipe*. His use of chrome—and polished brass, which can have a similar effect—goes back to the 18 months he had spent working on the assembly line of the Vauxhall factory in Luton. One of Barker's long-standing dealers and a regular at BRAFA is Whitford of London, which will be showing his 8½in-high bronze *Homer*, 2004 (Fig 3), one of an edition of six; it is a perfect fit not only for Belgium's Surrealism, but also its love of cartoon and comic art.

It is probably too long a stretch to link that taste for *bandes dessinées* (strip cartoons) with the storytelling elements of Flemish medieval tapestries, but I would certainly





Pick of the week

As contemporary and modern inevitably take over more of the art market, the triannual Battersea Decorative Fairs seem to move gently in the other direction. That may only be because there are fewer mid-market antiques fairs and more traditional furniture dealers have signed up.

In any event, Pippa Roberts, who handles the press, tells me that the top-10 trends are currently antique blue-and-white china (*below*) and delftware, old-fashioned hall chairs (*above*), statement wall and ceiling lights, mahogany side tables, Art Nouveau glass, classical garden statuary, farmhouse refectory tables, modernist studio ceramics, dressers and small decorative mirrors.

Running at the same time as the next Battersea fair (January 23–28, www.decorativefair.com) is the London Antique Rug and Textile Fair (www.larta.net).



Fig 5: A tatuana mask from New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, used in malagan funerary ceremonies to illustrate the character of the deceased. With Galerie Flak of Paris

than the actual appearance of the deceased; what could it tell us of this man? One side was often hairless, as men in mourning would shave part of their scalps. The mask has been in a Parisian family since the 1920s.

One of the attractions of BRAFA has always been that it includes top-flight dealers in medieval and older sculpture and works of art, an area in which an intelligent collector can now operate very reasonably. Despite De Bakker leaving for the March Maastricht

TEFAF, this corner of the market is still well represented, notably by De Smet and Dei Bardi, both Brussels galleries, which now form a familial, if not a business, dynasty. At Dei Bardi, there are numerous medieval architectural elements at under €5,000. Although probably rather more expensive than that, I greatly admire its 15th-century northern French Gothic Flamboyant limestone canopy (**Fig 4**).

Next week Dealer's dispersal