

Interview with Harold t’Kint de Roodenbeke Chairman of BRAFA



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In 2020, 133 galleries and art dealers will gather at Brafa, so the same number as last year. Are there any new names?

The quality of an art fair is first and foremost defined by the quality of its exhibitors. In this sense, Brafa 2020 will not disappoint even the most exacting visitors! Our selection of galleries is based on quality and current appeal in all domains. This year, we are welcoming eight first-time galleries and have eleven returning, which demonstrates the loyalty of our exhibitors. It’s worth noting that half of the new exhibitors at the 2020 art fair specialize in ancient art, which signals our commitment to this area of specialization, despite the recent expansion of our scope to include contemporary art. Finally, thanks to our stringent vetting process, which is regarded as one of the strictest in the sector, involving a panel of 100 independent experts, checks by the Art Loss Register and the services of a scientific laboratory, I think we really do everything we can to ensure we only offer top quality artworks.

I don’t think Brafa has ever been this international. Do you think this trend will continue in years to come?

This year, the ratio is 50 Belgian galleries (37 %) to 83 international galleries (63 %). But there are also some trends apparent in the latter section. Although French galleries still make up the largest group (43 exhibitors), the number of galleries from Great Britain (13) and Switzerland (8) is also growing steadily. In 2020, two countries will have far higher representation: Italy, moving from 6 to 10 exhibitors, and the Netherlands, from 2 to 6 exhibitors. This reveals the growing impact and appeal of Brafa in a global context where international exchange is becoming more important every year. I think this combination of galleries with diverse origins also enhances what Brafa offers in terms of art, reinforcing its eclecticism. Brafa will always be a showcase for Belgian galleries, but strong international representation is equally vital to its success.

There's a significant change this year because the art fair will end one day earlier.

That is correct. We have given this matter some thought over the last 2-3 years, and this year we decided to go ahead and make the change. The art fair will be open from Sunday to Sunday, so it will be one day shorter than before. Some people argued in favour of a shorter duration, a common trend among art fairs lately, while others would have preferred no change. I hope this compromise will satisfy everyone, while making things easier during the set-up of the fair which can be quite tiring.

2020 is a special year for Brafa as this is its 65th edition. How do you intend to celebrate this anniversary?

In the recent past, Brafa surprised visitors with a different guest of honour every year. These have included international museums, foundations and artists, who have all added their own unique touch to the event. For the 65th edition, we wanted to do something completely different and unexpected, and I think we've succeeded in our endeavour with the charity auction of five original segments of the Berlin Wall.

What inspired you?

In the summer of 2018, I travelled to Nova Scotia in Canada where I happened to stumble upon a segment of the Berlin Wall in a tiny fishing village. This discovery was so improbable that it made me think about the symbolism of the Berlin Wall and the message that it conveys, even in some of the most remote places on earth. Back in Belgium, I immediately started to research the topic, and travelled to Berlin where I was able to acquire some of the last available intact segments. The idea of a charity auction followed naturally from the find.

Where did these segments come from?

They were originally taken from the Hinterlandmauer, or the 68-km 'inner wall' that blocked off the border strip to East Berlin. They were dismantled by the armed forces of the former German Democratic Republic, or East Germany, during the demolition works following the fall of the Berlin Wall. They were subsequently acquired and re-used by a public works company based in a Berlin suburb. The segments, which are 3.8 metres tall and 1.2 metre wide, weigh just under 4 tons each, and feature graffiti on both sides by anonymous street artists from different periods.

How will they be presented at Brafa? And how will they be auctioned?

These segments are very impressive. Not just because of their size, but also because of their presence and solemnity. They'll be presented outside in the main entrance, so that no-one can miss them! We've planned an auction that will run for the duration of the fair. His Excellency Martin Kotthaus, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Kingdom of Belgium, will declare the auction open during the inaugural gala dinner. The auction ends on the last Sunday of the fair. An information desk will be set up where visitors can find out more about current bids and submit their own. The auction can be followed both at the fair and on our website. Interested buyers will, however, have to come to the fair to submit an offer. The starting price has been set at €15,000 for a segment, and we hope those hoping to buy will be generous because all proceeds from the sale will be split between five selected charities spread across three areas of particular importance to us that will also, we hope, inspire visitors. In the area of cancer research, these are Télévie, a campaign led by the Belgian TV channel RTL-TVI and the non-profit organization Kom op tegen Kanker. To assist with the social integration of people with disabilities, the non-profit organization Hart voor Handicap and CAP48, a charity campaign led by Belgian TV channel RTBF have been chosen. To support the preservation of our cultural heritage, we have decided to back two projects associated with the Art & History Museum (Cinquantenaire). Each segment has been matched with a beneficiary, to which buyers directly make their donation.

This is definitely an original and perhaps unexpected initiative on the part of an art fair, which is ultimately a commercial undertaking. The more so as it involves these fragments that have witnessed such a tragic period of history...

We are keenly aware of the symbolic and emotional value of the segments of the Wall we've acquired. We are keen to put their symbolic value at the fore, to avoid any negative perception of our initiative. I like the idea that charities will benefit from these symbols of oppression and suffering and we feel that buyers will agree. I don't think anyone could buy such a piece without being aware of what it stands for. This is also an opportunity for Brafa to highlight what sets it apart from other art fairs. The aim of the non-profit organisation behind Brafa is not just to create a commercial event, but also to promote art dealers and their often-misunderstood profession which requires a quite extraordinary combination of passion, erudition, savoir-faire and, dare I say it, a touch of folly...

Do you think this also reflects something about Brafa's identity?

Absolutely, and I think it's vital that the event remains open and does not get cut off from the world, for the art market can sometimes seem to function in its own bubble. Brafa should be a celebration, a special occasion that brings exhibitors and visitors together. I believe that every visitor should leave the fair feeling enriched, whether or not they've bought anything. This emphasis on sharing and exchange is even more obvious this year with our Berlin Wall auction. It was important for us to reconnect with the spirit of Brafa's founders on the fair's 65th anniversary.

Each year has been marked by original initiatives or exhibitions. What does this year's fair have in store for us?

I'll mention one exhibition that will be particularly good fun. The King Baudouin Foundation is showcasing part of the Raymond Legrand collection, which features scale models of early 20th century locomotives, railway carriages and freight cars. One of these miniature trains will be in operation on their stand, while another will wind its way through the conference space and restaurant, passing over visitors' heads.

Finally, the programme of daily Brafa Art Talks is once again packed with interesting topics...

It is indeed, and we are very proud of the programme's success. The talks have really found their audience and we always try to offer visitors a wide variety of subjects, and real content. This year's programme includes talks about Keith Haring, Raphaël and van Eyck, a conversation with the great American stage director and playwright Robert Wilson, and a fascinating plunge into the world of frames. In short, the programme is as eclectic as Brafa!

Interview by Bruno Nélis

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