

INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD T'KINT DE ROODENBEKE
CHAIRMAN OF BRAFA

An attractive, open, generous BRAFA!



How would you preface this year's event?

First of all, I would like to thank our exhibitors. Because we mustn't forget, they're the real heart and soul of the Brafa! The Board of Directors and staff may well be the orchestra leaders and technical assistants, but the exhibitors are the virtuosos - and they are the ones who make the music! Without them, there'd be no show and no audience! And the success of the event depends entirely on them.

I would particularly like to pay tribute to the vital work they have done for the understanding and history of art. Often, all too little is known about the work they have done as explorers, experts, popularisers, and transmitters of memory, benefiting the commercial side of their work, which, when all is said and done, is the least fascinating aspect. For if one is to excel in this profession, to last, one has to be utterly driven, and possessed by the same hunger that drives a collector.

13 of the total 132 exhibitors are appearing for the first time or returning this year after a break, a turnover of less than 10%. What lies behind this figure?

I'm pleased to note that the very great majority of our exhibitors are regular and loyal, which I consider to be a reliable indicator of their satisfaction. The number of participants is virtually the same as last year, when the figure increased thanks to the creation of a new entrance area. This arrangement has been kept, and the interior signage improved. Many exhibitors are asking us for larger spaces, which is definitely a positive sign. But unfortunately we can't make the building any bigger! So we're discussing creative solutions...

Looking at the new participants, it's clear that there are more representatives of modern and contemporary art.

That's true. A fair like the Brafa reflects the market and its trends, but it doesn't create them. We keep an eye on developments in this market, and analyse the applications and requests, while listening to what the public want. And we find that for every five modern or contemporary applications, we only receive one for the ancient arts. We were already very strong in tribal art and archaeology in particular, and we wanted to have the same strengths in modern and contemporary arts. This year, following galleries such as Albert Baronian, Meessen De Clercq or and the Patinoire Royale last year, we are very pleased to be welcoming newcomers Galerie de la Béraudière, BERNIER/ELIADES, Patrick De Brock, Rodolphe Janssen, and Omer Tiroche. And we are equally pleased to be joined by Pierre Segoura, Galerie Sismann and Albert Vandervelden (La Mésangère), who will be making a great contribution to the ancient arts sector. It's all a matter of balance!

How do you go about selecting new participants?

We never know from one year to the next how many stands will be available for new exhibitors. First of all we examine each new application in terms of the professionalism of the applicants and the quality of what they are offering. We then assess whether their offer is likely to bring something special to the fair, while taking care to maintain a certain balance within the fields we are presenting. Finally, last but not least, we consider the potential public the new exhibitor may attract. It is important never to forget to extend one's audience - every show must lay the groundwork for the next.

The participation of this year's Guest of Honour is innovative ...

Our official Guest of Honour is the Fondation Roi Baudouin, which is celebrating the 30th Anniversary of its Heritage Fund at the Brafa. But the Foundation did not wish to repeat an exhibition similar to the one held two years ago. It was mutually agreed that it would be in charge of programming our cycle of daily lectures, the Brafa Art Talks. Naturally, the common thread will be the conservation and promotion of our heritage, highlighting the importance of the Foundation in this area.

For the first time, the Fair will be spotlighting a specific artist, on this occasion Julio Le Parc. Why this choice?

The Brafa is held in the middle of winter, shortly after the Christmas and New Year holidays. So what do we want at this time of year? Light, colour, joy, and magic! And on this basis, we decided that kinetic art was the right way to go - with Julio Le Parc, naturally. I had already had an opportunity to admire several of his works, in particular his large-scale structures, and they seemed to me to be perfect for the Brafa. The rest was perfectly straightforward – we contacted him, we met, and everything was sorted out within half an hour! This simplicity and friendliness are the trademark of great artists. Julio Le Parc is justly considered to be not only a forerunner of Op Art and Kinetic Art, but one of their great masters. He has now reached a very respectable age (he was born in 1928) but has retained an enthusiasm and liveliness which are utterly astonishing. He has never stopped working or producing, even during a period when several institutions chose to ignore him. It is true that he didn't always

accommodate them... A true story says it all. In 1967, when Op Art and Kinetic Art were booming, the City of Paris Musée d'Art Moderne offered him a major retrospective – which he decided to toss a coin for! And so this retrospective never took place... I can assure you that he has lost nothing of his sharpness or humour over the years...

The art market has recently been in the news and at the centre of many issues which go beyond the simple framework of art collections. What steps do you take to arm yourselves against possible problems?

As organisers, and being dealers ourselves, we are extremely careful and uncompromising when it comes to the probity and professionalism of our exhibitors. Most of them, furthermore, take part in top international fairs, which in itself is a guarantee of reliability!

The same goes for our vetting procedure, for which we call on more than a hundred independent experts, to whom we offer the state-of-the-art services of a specialist scientific laboratory during the pre-show inspection period. If a piece gives rise to doubts, the unanimity rule prevails within the admission committee in question. Everything is set up to protect both exhibitors and buyers from any possibility of error.

At world-wide level, the worst problems at the moment are theft and illegal excavations in war zones. In the case of stolen pieces, it's absolutely impossible to infiltrate them onto the legal market, because these pieces are known, have been published, or appear in the records of international organisations such as the Art Loss Register. They are, therefore, very easy to trace and identify. Illegally excavated pieces are a different problem, however, because by definition, they are not known to the market. In both cases, the buyers are as much to blame as the criminals, and we wholeheartedly condemn such actions.

How do you see the future of the Brafa? What challenges would you like to take up?

The scenario for art fairs such as ours is perpetually changing. Evidence of this is the recent changes and strategic choices made by our colleagues in other countries. The scenario is changing in Belgium, as well. At the Brafa, I don't think we're dreamers or Utopians; we try to advance one step at a time. With this in mind, this year we have developed and completed a real VIP programme. It now offers some twenty exclusive visits to museums, exhibitions, and collections. It has been specially designed for foreign guests who would like to extend their trip to the Brafa to include cultural visits. Brussels has incredible treasures, that put it on a footing with other European metropolises.

Before looking at hypothetical distant markets, we therefore decided some years ago to concentrate on European countries, including those on the fringes, Switzerland and Russia. This has borne fruit and we are going to intensify our work in this direction.

What do you consider to be the reasons for coming to the Brafa?

First and foremost, I would say, the possibility of finding top level galleries and dealers and being able, through their objects, to trace the whole development and all the forms of art from archaeology to modern-day creations. The Brafa is a real ephemeral museum – with the

one difference that all the works are for sale! For both collectors and exhibitors, these ten days are a high point of the year, an opportunity for meetings, discussions, and projects.

Our ambition is to offer the best in an extremely wide range of fields. We must be able to exceed the expectations of confirmed collectors with very specific knowledge and requirements and, at the same time, arouse in art lovers a desire to start a collection or buy a piece of art. The offer we present is also addressed to these different sectors of the public; alongside museum works, at naturally high price levels, it is vital to be able to offer more accessible pieces which are ideal for starting a collection or just succumbing to an impulse! To my mind, the Brafa must continue to be an attractive, open, generous fair.

Interview by Bruno Nélis