

INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD T'KINT DE ROODENBEKE
CHAIRMAN OF BRAFA

BRAFA 2019, when I'm sixty-four!



Harold t'Kint de Roodenbeke, the 2019 edition of BRAFA will mark the fair's 64th year, and it seems to be doing better than ever.

That's true ... My colleagues know I'm fond of a bit of humour, and I must say that the number 64 makes me think of the famous song composed by Paul McCartney for the legendary Beatles album, Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. In the song, he asks about his future with slight anxiety: "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-four?". Judging by his continuing success with millions of fans worldwide and his inexhaustible creativity, this could be seen as a good omen for Brafa. I most definitely hope so!

New record attendance levels were achieved last year, with over 65,000 visitors passing through, and the fair seems more creative and more widely appreciated than ever. Is there a miracle recipe for this success?

There are no miracle recipes – success primarily requires hard work and continuity! The Board of Directors as a whole wants Brafa to keep evolving in a positive direction. I often use the term 'evolution' rather than 'revolution'. We aim to refine what we do by making the fair even more complete and specialized; to tighten the selection criteria for both galleries and works of art in order to guarantee the highest possible quality; to seek out new audiences, and to remain attentive to trends in an art market that is in perpetual transformation. Our three watchwords – quality, eclecticism and conviviality – are most probably behind the fair's ability to attract higher numbers of visitors each year.

This year you will host 133 exhibitors, a number that has remained stable for a number of years. Is there anything particularly notable about this edition?

I think it's important for us to be able to provide a certain level of continuity, welcoming dealers who have been faithful to the event for many years and who our visitors look forward to seeing again, while also offering new discoveries. So among the 133 Belgian and international exhibitors, there will be sixteen new names and two who are making a return. I think this proportion represents an ideal percentage, because it means we're able to bring in some novelty without upsetting the equilibrium of specialities. It's thanks to this that our event retains its strength and openness."

At one time Brafa focused exclusively on antiques and classical artworks, but gradually it has opened its doors to modern art and – more recently – contemporary art. How do you explain this evolution?

This change not only reflects the nature of today's art market but also our desire to expand our appeal. No matter how elegant and high quality an event such as Brafa is, it can only echo market trends – not create them. Some people have criticised us because we are exhibiting more modern and contemporary art and less classical art than in the past, but I would like to emphasise that we continue to believe in and support classical art, which is in fact widely represented at the fair. However, we receive fewer applications from top quality classical art dealers than from modern and contemporary art dealers. The truth is that I consider the debate between classical, modern and contemporary a bit outdated and pointless. Brafa is, in essence, a generalist fair, but it can also be seen as an authentic salon devoted to multiple specialities, because of the rich, varied and consistently high quality nature of its exhibits. People often come to the fair looking for a specific object and leave with something quite different. That's the gamble visitors take!

Is this gamble reflected in the arrangement of the stands, which are not grouped according to sector or homogeneous sections, but deliberately mixed?

This arrangement corresponds to the contemporary manner of collecting and acquiring works of art. This is an age of 'cross-collecting' in search of correspondences. Since the beginning Brafa has brought together specialities that are intrinsically alien to each other, and we seek to enhance that diversity, constantly refreshing the viewer's gaze and suggesting new harmonies. Brafa offers over twenty artistic disciplines, and our challenge is to meet the expectations of our various audiences. Experienced collectors and art lovers are often looking for specific works to add to their collection, but we also aim to awaken the interest of those who are perhaps less specialist but who are just waiting to be won over by the beauty or appeal of a work. This is in our event's very DNA!

The guest of honour for this 2019 edition is the Gilbert & George duo. A marriage of British eccentricity and Belgian surrealism?

In a sense! I would like first of all to thank Albert Baronian for having put us in touch with them and enabled us to welcome such prestigious guests. He was one of the first to introduce and promote them. Is there anyone today who is not familiar with Gilbert & George? Who has not seen at least one of their renowned large-scale photo pieces? There will be five on show at Brafa, all large format and all placed at strategic points around the fair. They were chosen personally by Gilbert & George and are from a recent series. Although their art draws inspiration from (their) daily life, the vision they offer is in turn metaphysical, mystical or polemical, and each piece has a touch of humour and conveys a message. A vision we feel to be in perfect symbiosis with Belgian surrealism!

Another event is occurring at Brafa; the Belgian Royal Chamber of Antiques and Art Dealers is celebrating its centenary.

Given their historically strong ties with the fair, it was clear that Brafa would be the ideal place to welcome the Chamber, out of which the fair itself grew. I think the two associations share a common objective: to promote and defend the profession of 'art dealer'. This centenary will be marked by a prestigious exhibition made up of works from private collections all of which were bought or sold by members of the Chamber, as well as by the publication of a book addressing different aspects of the art dealer's trade, peppered with thousands of anecdotes. Last but not least, a lecture will be given on Sunday, 27 January, as part of the cycle of Brafa Art Talks. The Chamber would like to take the opportunity this centenary offers to launch a new dynamic and adopt a new name better suited to the spirit of the age: ROCAD.be, for the Royal Chamber of Art Dealers of Belgium.

A few words about the Brafa Art Talks?

The talks have become a truly indispensable supplement to any visit of Brafa! This year, they will once again cover a wide range of topics. On the occasion of his anniversary year, Pieter Bruegel the Elder will be the subject of two lectures, one in French, the other in Dutch, notably examining the status of recent discoveries made in the course of the restoration of some of his works, including the famous 'Dulle Griet'. There will also be a passionate tribute to the great collector Peggy Guggenheim; a fascinating plunge into Soviet Art Deco; a reflection on the criteria used to judge whether a piece of art is a major work; a round table organised jointly with CINOA (the International Federation of Art and Antique Dealer Associations) on very contemporary art market themes, and another on the risks faced by the collectors today. Truly something for everyone!

A final question, more personal this time. When we spoke last year, you were at the end of your second term as Chairman; with Brafa 2019 you are embarking on a third. Do you have any specific goals for this new term?

We have had the good fortune to have formed a very homogeneous and unified Board of Directors, which is highly committed to continuing the Brafa adventure with emphasis on continuity, stability and positive growth. It goes without saying that Brafa is first and foremost the result of the work of a whole team, and it is important for everyone to work in harmony. We aim to evolve and further consolidate our position on an international level and to strengthen our contacts abroad in order to bring in ever more foreign collectors. We are working on this and are making constant progress, but there is still much to be done!

Interview conducted by Bruno Nélis