



Tradition and modernity: a restyled fair

Harold t’Kint Roodenbeke presents the 2014 edition

Harold t’Kint Roodenbeke was elected President of the BRAFA for a three-year term in June 2012, and for him, it is evolution rather than revolution that has categorized his approach. In the following text, he discusses the strong points of the 2014 edition, emphasizing a number of significant innovations.

I am often asked what my dream is as President, and it only takes a few words to sum up my answer. I desire, over and above all, to bring about a perfect synergy between exhibitors and visitors. I would like every art dealer to be pleased with his/her participation in the fair, in other words for their commercial success to be assured, but I also want each visitor to be blown away not only by the quality of the objects on show, but also by the welcoming atmosphere of the fair.

Who is this year’s guest of honour?

The Royal Museum for Central Africa. Having lived in Tervuren during my youth, this museum was already well known to me. I visited it countless times as a young scout! When I went back there recently, I immediately recognised the odour – so typical of old-style museums and so suggestive of the place’s colonial past. I think that this may well be the last surviving institution of its kind. As you may well have heard, an extensive refurbishment of the Museum is on the cards and the old colonial aspect of the place will inevitably fade away, replaced by a more contemporary set-up. What no-one could ever guess is that this majestic building not only houses remarkable collections relating to Central Africa, but also numerous research activities that involve around 300 people. Some of the Museum’s teams even work abroad. The researchers’ investigations extend to fields as diverse as ethnography, zoology, botany and medicine. It really is a huge institution, and will profit greatly in years to come from the new attention it is being given now. It most definitely merits its position of honour at the BRAFA.

What sort of guarantees do buyers have at a fair like yours?

We go to great lengths to ensure that each object is checked by the top specialists in each domain. The fair incorporates a number of different sections and each checks every object relating to its area of specialization over a period of two days. In other words, the degree of expertise involved is very high. We bring specialists in from all over Europe and sometimes even from the US. It goes without saying that the art and antiques dealers we select for the fair are all serious professionals. They are all required to provide us with extensive documentation concerning the pieces they exhibit. Our role is to ensure maximum guarantees for our visitors.

Have you noticed any new trends amongst the exhibitors, any particular sectors that are growing in importance?

No, I haven't noticed any radical changes. In fact, I have remarked a return to traditional areas like antique furniture. Currently, for example, there are more candidates wishing to present 18th century furniture than modern or contemporary paintings. In any case, we have two different balances to consider; one geographical and the other regarding the representation of the diverse areas of specialization. Brussels remains a real hub for tribal arts. As for the domain of classical antiques – by which I mean pieces from Greece, Rome, the Middle East etc. – this sector has become much stronger here since last year. I would now call it one of the most significant worldwide. In other areas, the repartition has once again been very harmonious and unforced.

People sometimes suggest that Brussels is perhaps not the most attractive destination for international travellers. Can the BRAFA help seduce visitors?

We have worked hard on this for the 2014 edition. The question we posed was: from the moment a foreign visitor receives an invitation to the BRAFA, what will motivate him/her to come to Brussels? There is no doubt that January over here is a bit less glamorous than London in May or Paris in September. This is why we decided to offer visitors other cultural draws such as our conferences on arts subjects that run during the fair. We also came up with the idea of exterior events, such as visits to collections and museums. This led to our new Privilege program. This is intended to increase the attractiveness of Brussels in the eyes of the potential visitor and it offers a range of advantages related to art collections, museums and gastronomy. I should remind you that the Michelin guide classes Brussels amongst the cities containing the highest number of starred restaurants in Europe! I feel that it is necessary to concentrate on what is happening beyond the fair to convince collectors not only to come but to stay at least two days in Brussels. It will be very interesting to see, for example, how long the numerous Russians we are expecting for this new edition of the BRAFA will choose to protract their visit.

Will the evolution of the BRAFA also involve new design?

Absolutely: we have decided to part ways with Van Eyck's 'Man with a blue turban' that has been the fair's trademark figure for so long. We have simply retained the blue Van Eyck used for the turban. This decision reflects our desire to refresh our image. From now on the acronym BRAFA will act as the primary visual trademark of the fair. This is a message that can easily be captured in few seconds, by someone passing in a car for example. Our visual will contain all the essential information: the name, the place and the date. The word BRAFA has been assimilated very quickly in Europe. If you pronounce these two syllables in Paris, for example, they are recognized immediately. We have also opted for a new version of the site www.brafa.be. The aim is to enable the Internet user to access a maximum amount of information with the minimum number of clicks. The website is therefore far more user-friendly. There will also be a version for mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones so that information is readily accessible to all.

Our team has worked harder than ever to present you all with the best edition of the BRAFA to date, and before the fair begins I would like to thank our exhibitors, our organizers and of course our faithful visitors.

Text: Marcel Croës