

Younger than ever at sixty!

Harold t’Kint de Roodenbeke introduces BRAFA 2015

In 2015, BRAFA is celebrating its sixtieth edition. Does this make you feel nostalgic or excited about the future?

Excited about the future without a doubt! We have purposefully chosen not to focus too much on this sixtieth edition landmark, and to avoid over-the-top jubilee celebrations. What matters most to us is the present and future of the fair.

But the anniversary can’t be completely brushed aside...

Of course not, and we definitely do not want to forget it. To have reached the sixtieth edition is a real accomplishment, and I know of no other art and antique fair able to boast of such longevity. The anniversary shows how solid the foundations and values of BRAFA are and how well the fair has been able to adapt and evolve over the years. The fact that this will be the sixtieth edition therefore makes us, as administrators, proud, while reminding us of the responsibilities that come with organising such a significant cultural event.

What will be new at BRAFA 2015?

We will keep doing what we do best – there is no point changing a winning formula! Our primary preoccupations will therefore remain the same: quality, diversity of style and period, and eclecticism – a characteristic of the fair highly prized by collectors, in particular those from Belgium. We are also staging an exceptional exhibition, designed by the King Baudouin Foundation, with collectors in mind. This will bring together a number of major works held in private Belgian collections, some of which have never been shown to the public. Organizing the exhibition was both a feat and a privilege, and I would like to take my hat off to the remarkable work accomplished by the King Baudouin Foundation, which is a true guardian of Belgian cultural heritage.

Is the Belgian collector a myth or a reality? How do collectors here differ from those elsewhere?

First and foremost, we wanted to pay homage to the collector in a general way, for they play a vital role in the conservation and transmission of cultural heritage. You only have to wander through museums around the world and look at the provenance of the works on display for this to become manifest. So many invaluable public collections would never have been possible without the input of private collectors. It is thanks to their patience, obsession and discerning gaze that many works of art and even artists have come to light. Their passion is shared, of course, by art and antique dealers, who are equally driven by obsession: determined to unearth the ultimate object or artwork both for their own pleasure and that of others.

How would you describe the art-market context of the fair?

The art market – like all other economic sectors – has evolved considerably over the last few decades! Galleries, for example, increasingly take part in fairs and salons, participate in auctions and sell on the internet using their own and specialized websites. Today, you can access a wealth of information about artworks and artists with a simple click. Social networking sites accelerate the process of information sharing. This new accessibility is not, however, risk-free. Knowledge remains vital, and this is why art and antique dealers remain so important. Nothing can replace direct physical contact with an object, or human contact with a specialist.

Some describe the Belgian art market as a microclimate. Do you agree with this description?

In Belgium, buyers have a reputation for being cultivated and choosy. They are also however, quite conservative, insofar as they are keen to ensure the long-term investment-value of the objects and artworks they acquire. This does not prevent the market from being very open and even cutting-edge. Belgian buyers do not buy compulsively, but they look for both quality and vision in a work. You often come across families at BRAFA, with members of several generations involved in deciding which artworks to acquire.

What is the future of large-scale fairs like BRAFA?

I believe that the lynchpin of fairs like ours is the way they reunite dealers, collectors and art-lovers. I see art and antique dealers primarily as transmitters of passion for beautiful things. This sharing of knowledge is key. Visitors should never hesitate to ask questions: there is no question too big or too small for those passionate about their field. Art objects are like orphans looking for a family – the dealers have brought them in and hope to place them where they will be loved! The other vital role large-scale fairs play is to give dealers the media attention and publicity that is so often inaccessible to them. Their patient work, which involves tracking artworks down, research and study, is widely underestimated.

I believe your term as Chairman of BRAFA is coming to an end. How do you think the fair will evolve in the future?

In a few years we have increased the number of visitors to the fair from 40,000 to 55,000, which marks quite significant progress! The numbers have resulted from years of work. But numbers don't mean everything. Already renowned in Belgium, BRAFA has also developed its image abroad. The foreign press consistently underlines the fair's quality, friendly atmosphere, openness and potential, and it is now considered one of the most prestigious fairs in Europe. To maintain its reputation, BRAFA must remain faithful to its founding principles: professionalism and prioritisation of quality – not to forget its welcoming atmosphere and the fair's very Belgian trait of not taking itself too seriously! It is vital to maintain and strengthen the fair's image at home and abroad while keeping it accessible to all. There will always be new sectors of the public to draw in, even within Belgium, and it is important to question the status quo and to be open to new trends and ideas. The cultural attractions of Brussels must also be focused on, with museums, temporary exhibitions, galleries and shows involved. It isn't easy to convince foreign visitors to come to Brussels in mid-winter, but emphasising the cultural riches on offer here creates a definite draw.