

INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD T'KINT DE ROODENBEKE
CHAIRMAN OF BRAFA

Each new edition is a challenge!



This year, Brafa is welcoming a record number of exhibitors (137). What is the reason for this increase?

We have a considerable waiting list of galleries who have often been hoping to participate in Brafa for several years. Among them are a number of international galleries that we've been very keen to include. The desire to expand the fair has been with us for a while, but we have of course been limited by the size of the building – we've always used every available square metre. This year our guest of honour is the Ghent Flower Show, and the show's talented organizers are bringing their creative input to the decoration of the fair. We have therefore been able to free up a new exhibition space, thanks to a redesigned entrance hall. The brasserie has also been moved to an annex outside the main building. These rearrangements have enabled us to make room for a dozen new stands.

You have twenty more new exhibitors than in 2015, twelve of which are participating for the first time. How do you choose between the various applicants?

By remaining faithful to our strategy of aiming for the highest possible quality, and our desire to keep strengthening and diversifying the fair, so that it becomes ever more attractive. Our first criterion is always quality, but we also consider each gallery's speciality in order to safeguard the eclecticism of the event. We are interested in the gallery's geographical origin too, because we are always keen to increase our foreign clientele. Retaining a balance between artistic disciplines and countries represented is key.

And what about returnees?

Galleries regularly ask to return. The Brafa is becoming increasingly renowned both in Belgium and abroad, and the fair's steady progress motivates former exhibitors to return. The very special – and particularly congenial – atmosphere of the Brafa plays a significant role in this too.

Do you seek out particular targets?

We are keen to strengthen our relationship with easily accessible countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, which are all countries with a strong potential for collectors. The more substantial and high quality the fair becomes, the more foreign collectors we will attract.

What are the trends in the 2016 edition?

I get the feeling that we have never put on such a high quality fair! The pieces illustrated in the catalogue show the very high level of objects to be displayed. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we are offering the finest selection of certain specialities in the world, which is quite something for a general art fair. The domain of tribal arts and archaeology, for example, has never been as strong.

There is also more modern art on show this year, which reflects a trend apparent at all art fairs. We remain devoted, however, to reserving significant space for the old masters that have done so much for the strength and reputation of our event. Not to forget fine furniture, which will also be displayed by several highly regarded dealers.

Do you plan to open Brafa up to more contemporary art?

Brafa has come to be known for its eclecticism, and the fair draws the most diverse specialities together in a unique way. I am of course open to contemporary art and am personally very keen on it. Nonetheless, our mission is not to talent scout or to try to promote the great artists of the future via those exhibiting. That is more the role of those involved in contemporary art fairs. Our selection rules state that the artists exhibited at the fair must have a proven track record and must already enjoy a certain international renown. This year, the contemporary art section will be enhanced by the arrival of galleries that are highly specialized in this area. This change reflects the vitality of contemporary art in Brussels, for it has flourished here in recent years. By enabling a selection of top specialist galleries to participate, we can offer both connoisseurs and the curious a fascinating range of works by established artists.

This year you are welcoming the Ghent Floralties Show as guest of honour: why this choice?

One of the aims of our association (Brafa is a non-profit or ASBL organisation, let's not forget!) is to support Belgian artistic institutions. The Ghent Flower Show was looking for a platform to present their history, which dates two centuries back, while also offering a preview of their 2016 edition, and they thought the Brafa would be the ideal setting. Their idea of entrusting the fair's scenography to Mark Colle, a florist originally from Bruges who has worked notably with Dries Van Noten and Dior, seemed most appropriate, because his designs are not only refined, they are also extremely artistic. The visitor's entire route through the Brafa will be enhanced by the flower show's creative input. This year, there's no denying that 'Flower Power' has come to Brafa!

You are also celebrating 10 years of collaboration with Delen Private Bank this year. Is this important to the Brafa?

Yes, we see it as a very valuable partnership, and over the last 10 years the collaboration has seen both partners flourish. Delen Private Bank has received numerous awards as the best private bank in Belgium, and our fair, a leader in Belgium, has carved out an enviable position within Europe. So it has been definitely been a positive and very symbiotic relationship! I have also noticed that Delen Private Bank now uses art in its communications: it has even become a key element of its various offices: it's quite remarkable!

A couple of words about your cycle of daily art talks?

The subjects are discussed by our committee, and we work hard to come up with accessible and interesting topics. Our visitors want to learn while also enjoying themselves, and we try to fulfil that wish, while offering subjects that reflect the artistic specialities featured at the fair.

You were re-elected Chairman last June for another three-year term. What do you think will be the hallmark of this mandate?

The Brafa aims more than ever to promote the diversity and richness of its treasures, and to retain its reputation for eclecticism. That is why we like to mix the stands; we don't want a layout drawn up according to speciality, which encourages people to spend just an hour visiting only the disciplines or periods they are interested in while ignoring the rest. We want to surprise people, awaken their interest, offer them a feast for the eyes... We would like to encourage everyone to take the time to really enjoy themselves.

What are your hopes for the future development of Brafa (for this edition and the near future)?

Our main aim is to strengthen our reputation as an unmissable European event and to attract increasing numbers of international clients, while also gradually expanding as a fair. In short, we are hoping for an organic development, despite the fact that arts events have been multiplying in recent years. We want to offer our exhibitors an unparalleled platform, because their work as 'treasure-hunters' often goes unrecognized. It's not easy to organize an event like ours, but nor is it easy for an exhibitor to find and acquire rare, unique and sought-after works, particularly in the face of ferocious competition from auction houses. For both exhibitors and organizers, each new edition is a definite challenge!

Interview conducted by Bruno Néllis