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NOVEMBER 23, 2016

EVERY WEEK

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The body beautiful

Next year's BRAFA fair alternates human figures from Germany and Mexico with contemporary art from Europe and America

EACH year, if we are lucky, the organisers of the BRAFA art and antiques fair that takes place in Brussels every January, invite a group of arts journalists to Belgium for a couple of days' recce, visiting galleries and talking to dealers about the choicest things that they will be exhibiting. There are always a couple of extra cultural treats—one year, a backstage tour of La Monnaie, the Brussels opera house; on others, to the Art Deco Villa Empain, the Royal Museum for Central Africa at Tervuren, or to a major private collection of Surrealists. This time, we were based in Ghent, where we saw an interesting exhibition of paintings and works of art on the theme of the birth of capitalism during the Flemish Golden Age.

That evening, we visited Ooidonk, a late-16th-century castle in the Hispanic-Flemish style owned by Count Henri t'Kint de Roodenbeke—uncle of the chairman of BRAFA—who, with the decorator Gerald Watelet, has carried out an



Fig 1 above: A 16th-century Dutch triptych. With Jan Muller.
Fig 2 above right: A German silver-gilt wager cup. With D'Arschot



impressive and sensitive refurbishment over the past few years. The following morning, on the way to Brussels, we visited the studio of Wim Delvoye, a conceptual artist whose intelligent and often witty work, to my mind, makes the factory productions of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst seem very uninteresting.

In Brussels, we concentrated on dealers around the Sablon, which allowed a few moments for chocolate shopping in the square itself, which has gradually been taken over by fashion outlets and *chocolatiers*.

At the 2017 fair in the Tour & Taxis complex from January 21 to 29, there will be 132 exhibiting galleries, 16 from outside Belgium, and including 12 new names. Last year, more than 58,000 visitors were attracted by the mixture of antiquities, paintings, sculpture, furniture, design, silver, porcelain, tribal arts, original cartoons, contemporary art and, ever a particular strength, medieval works of art.

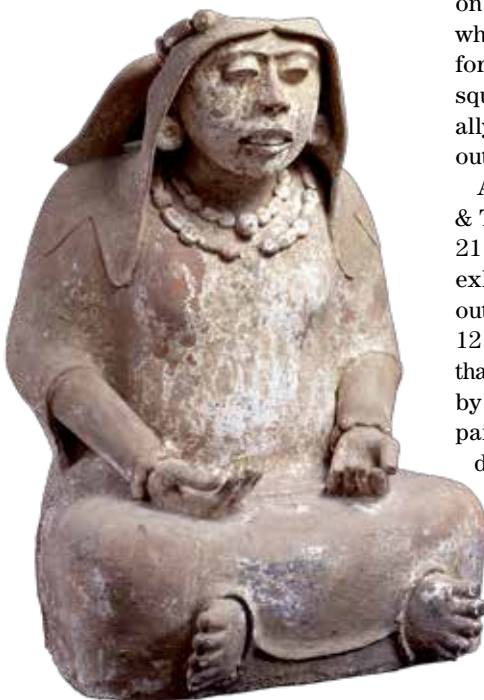


Fig 3: Totonac figure. With Galerie Deletaille

The human figure will play a great part, with fine examples drawn from many different periods and cultures. It would be hard to be unimpressed by a monumental, 33½in earthenware seated figure (Fig 3) offered by the Galerie Deletaille, Brussels specialists in pre-Columbian and African, Indonesian and Oceanic cultures, with a growing sideline in contemporary work. This piece comes from the Totonac El Zapotal culture of Veracruz on the Mexican Gulf coast and dates from between 600 and 900AD.

Then, with Klaas Muller of Brussels, there

is a 60¼in-high south German carved and polychrome lime-wood *Virgin and Child* (Fig 4) dating from the 1460s. The Child is particularly lively and the sculpture is quite remarkably well preserved. There are hardly any wormholes, even in the hollowed-out back, which is unpainted. The Virgin stands on a devil that has been given a human face. Jan Muller of Ghent has a triptych of *The Adoration with Donors* (Fig 1) monogrammed and dated 1531 by Dirck Jacobsz. of Amsterdam (1497–1576), although specialists believe a second hand was involved. Here, the Child looks a little anxious, as if hungry after so much adulation. There will be more medieval Madonnas with De Backker, of Hoog-



Fig 4: Carved figure. With Klaas Muller

straten, always one of my favourite stands, and with De Pauw-Muller of Ghent.

D'Arschot of Brussels has a 5½in-high German silver-gilt wager cup (Fig 2) representing St Margaret of Antioch. This is interesting to see as it was made by Georg Koler of Nuremberg in 1629 and represents the originals from which the many 19th-century copies were taken. These are met with quite frequently in Britain, where they often have the import hallmark of the retailer Berthold Muller. Many Mullers feature this week;



Fig 5: Mannequin. With Herwig Simons

I am not sure how, or if, they are related. Herwig Simons of Brussels has a lay figure (Fig 5), in both senses, that he rightly says is exceptional, even though he has handled many of these articulated artists' mannequins.

This one is late-18th-century French and life-sized, carved from pine, fully jointed and with incised features and ribcage. Such figures were androgynous so that they could sit for both men and women. I particularly enjoyed visiting Mr Simons in the Sablon, as he deals in curiosities of many kinds.

A final figure, or at least human representation, with Galerie Desmet of Brussels is a strongly carved bust of Count Nikolai Demidov by Adamo Tadolini (1788–1868) (Fig 7), who had been encouraged by Canova. Demidov inherited an industrial fortune at the age of 15 and, after a spendthrift period, built on it wisely, becoming a moderniser and philanthropist. A diplomat and soldier, he was an art collector on a vast scale. He was Russian ambassador to the Grand Duke of Tuscany and built himself the Palazzo San Donato on land that he had drained north of Florence.

Even though his work can make many millions of dollars, \$57,285,000 (\$45.78 million) at the last knock, and he ticked so many boxes—Caribbean-American, gay, heroin addict, Andy Warhol was reportedly 'stunned by his genius and allure' and, furthermore, he died young as a genius should—I get very little pleasure from the rap and graffiti



Pick of the week

The Grusenmeyer-Woliner gallery of Brussels prides itself on eclecticism among the sculpture and decorative arts of South-East Asian, Chinese and Indian cultures. Moving a little further, it offers this superb *topi poutanga* ceremonial adze of a Maori chief (above). Beautifully carved, with an equally beautiful greenstone blade, it was in the collection of Nelson A. Rockefeller during the 1950s and is one of only three such known to remain in private hands. There are not many more in museums, even in New Zealand.

Fig 7 right: Carved bust. With Galerie Desmet. Fig 8, far right: Basquiat's *Tesla vs Edison*. With Boon Gallery



Fig 6: *Black Hole Sun* by Belgian artist Thomas Leroy was painted earlier this year. With Rodolphe Janssen

artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–88). However, others do, and certainly there is more than immediately meets the eye in his 12½in by 17½in charcoal and oil-stick drawing *Tesla vs Edison* (Fig 8), with the Boon Gallery of Knokke-Zout. As well as the dispute between the electric pioneers, it refers to

a mock boxing match between Warhol and Basquiat.

Much more to my liking are the drawings and sculptures of the contemporary Belgian artist Thomas Leroy (born 1981), who uses classical language and techniques, as well as irony, in works such as the 19¼in by 13¼in mixed-media *Black Hole Sun* (Fig 6) painted this year, which is with Rodolphe Janssen of Brussels.

Next week Almanach de Parma

