

Vetting – BRAFA Style

INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD BLONDEEL

PRESIDENT OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE ADMISSION OF OBJECT



An expert on ancient tapestries and former art dealer, Bernard Blondeel has presided over the *Committee d'Admission des Objets* (Committee on the Admission of Objects) for the Brafa Art Fair for the past four years. This role was entrusted to him by Harold t'Kint at the time he assumed the presidency of the fair, and one that Blondeel had already mastered for other distinguished events such as Tefaf and the *Biennale des Antiquaires de Paris*, as well as fairs in New York and Milan. In this interview he elucidates the significance of vetting, indeed a crucial step that must be taken before the exhibition halls can be opened to the public.

So just what is vetting in the context of an art and antiquities fair?

Vetting is an advisory service that seeks to ensure a high level of quality with respect to the objects put up for sale by art dealers; it also holds great benefits for the fair itself. This consultative aspect also ensures buyers a certain degree of safety. The role of the appointed experts is to confirm whether or not the descriptions of the presented objects coincide with reality. We therefore attentively examine the documents and the identifying labels accompanying each object, as well as any information supplied by the galleries for each and every piece. A further task consists of verifying that the object to be put on sale corresponds to the quality criteria specified in Brafa guidelines. The committee can therefore raise reservations with regard to a specific allocation, it can request that information be corrected (information on dating, allocation to an artist or to a region of manufacture), and can even reject a particular work.

What are the criteria for exclusion?

These criteria are manifold and tend to differ from one domain to the next. They are defined

in a regulation enacted by the fair administration and communicated to the exhibitors. For example, we would remove any painting that has been over restored, any damaged or resculpted item allocated to a period prior to its original creation, any work that is anonymous or of little decorative value, any false allocation or apocryphal signature, any lithography whose printing details are unknown... We will also refuse any work that has been exhibited too often at fairs and that is now of limited interest to the wider art market.

Why is this step so imperative and so indispensable?

We would not need vetting in an ideal world. Art dealers are motivated above all to sell their best artworks, and in doing so, they are generally very precise in carrying out their research work. But there are those who confuse the various disciplines and whose own expertise lacks the required precision, or who are not in possession of the supporting documents that can ensure the authenticity of their offered items. Our experts are tasked with eliminating any lingering doubts.

Who is on this committee?

Each year I bring together nearly 100 international experts, chiefly Europeans (Belgian, French, Italian, British, Dutch, German, Swiss) in addition to an Australian and one or two Americans. It goes without saying that their identities need to be kept confidential in order to avoid any possible accusations of collusion vis-a-vis the exhibitors, however, some members were already active participants in the fair before I was appointed to oversee their work. Representing a total of fourteen spheres of artistic interest, these experts express their opinions within their own specialty area; occasionally, members may be consulted outside their primary field of expertise in the event that their knowledge extends to other related sectors.*

How is this step implemented in practical terms?

Starting at 9 a.m. and for the entire day of Monday and continuing into Tuesday morning, the experts from each sector roam the fair's stands set up the evening before, but in the absence of the respective exhibitors. On Tuesday afternoon, the exhibitors are allowed access to their stands, at which time they discover the committee's recommendations; they reserve the right to appeal certain of these decisions by providing new documents or further proof of attribution. Certain documents furnished with the object are on occasion lack the required level of reliability or have been issued by overly accommodating experts. Such instances remain infrequent nevertheless. And finally, the results of the vetting process are always left to the discretion of the art dealers and are never rendered public. The decision is unilateral in nature: it is ultimately the committee that authorises or excludes an object at Brafa.

Is it really an objective procedure? Is it well received by art dealers?

It is an important component of any fair and it serves to promote objectivity, of this I am certain. With just two or three exceptions the experts appointed to carry out the vetting are not exhibitors at Brafa and, I repeat, their names are not released beforehand (as is indeed the case at both the Paris and Maastricht events). The goal of vetting is to protect both the buyer and the seller. The former is reassured in terms of acquiring a verified piece of art, while the exhibitor benefits from his/her pledge of trustworthiness and credibility. In this way the fair itself also further underpins its excellent reputation. This is why all those involved are amenable to this approach, even if at times the art dealers' egos may be challenged. Still, I

cannot remember even one negative opinion that has resulted in any significant conflict. Organisers, dealers and experts all work in concert to defend their profession, one that continues to impose increasingly high demands.

Especially because no expertise is ever perfect or definitive...

This is a fact. One never possesses the absolute truth, among other things because knowledge of the disciplines of art and history continues to evolve, as do the related investigative techniques. In this regard it is important for me to state that I do not supervise an advisory committee, but rather an admissions board responsible for the objects presented at the Brafa fair. This is an important nuance. We do not issue a valuation for each object; the real expertise remains within the purview of the specific dealer. Our experts form an opinion of whether or not to exhibit a certain object at Brafa, a decision they base on the fair's criteria as laid down in a specific regulation.

Does vetting have any impact on art prices?

No, the experts never intervene on the issue of pricing. Even those who are themselves art dealers or former dealers who are still familiar with current market conditions do not express any opinions with respect to prices fixed by the exhibiting dealers. The monetary value of a work should indeed never be limited solely to its technical and historic characteristics.

Have you observed an evolution in the art and antiquities market?

In fact, a striking evolution has emerged over the past few years. There is an increasingly sustainable trend towards modern and contemporary art. We are now seeing fewer classical antiquities and fewer pieces of furniture. Even though there are fewer objects on offer in these sectors, the quality demanded by buyers continues to increase.

How would you rank Brafa vis-à-vis the numerous other European and international fairs?

That which characterizes Brafa is - in my opinion - also the very thing that has made it successful, namely its enormous diversity. But we are also rightfully proud of the very high level of expertise we provide in certain domains such as archaeology, the primitive art, modern and contemporary art, the decorative arts... Our fair is not only very well received among local collectors, it also continues to attract many international professionals. We draw nearly twice the number of visitors than the Biennale des Antiquaires de Paris. The Brussels fair is also extremely attractive for international visitors, a fact that can surely be put down to the excellent level of quality we offer.

* These fourteen sections include the Middle Ages, Textiles and Tapestries; Artworks of the Middle Ages to xviiird Century; Ethnic and Primitive Arts; Arts of Asia; Asian Porcelain; Archaeology; European Ceramics; Jewellery, Clock-Making, Weapons and Curios; Old Books; Paintings of the xvth to xviiith Century; Old Drawings; Paintings and Graphic Art of the xixth to xxist Century; Ancient Sculptures and Furniture; Furniture of the xvith to xviiith Century.

Text: Louis of Biasin, for L'Eventail