

## international events

# Sixty years on, Belgian fair is still going strong

■ Preview of the *BRAFA* which continues to thrive thanks to willingness to change



Anne Crane  
reports

**ONE of the first international art and antiques fairs of the year in Europe is the *BRAFA* (Brussels Art Fair).**

This year the event will run from January 24 to February 1 and it celebrates a significant anniversary. It is 60 years since the fair first started in 1956 as the *Foire Des Antiquaires de Belgique*. For over 30 years from 1967 it was staged at the Palais des Beaux Arts and was very much a national event until it was opened to international exhibitors in 1995.

The big change came in 2004 when the organisers, the Belgian Antiques Fair Association, made the decision to move to the Tour & Taxis exhibition centre.

The new home, a renovated industrial building that was formerly a mail station in the north of the city, allowed much more space and the ability to greatly increase the exhibitor numbers (from the 40-50 at the Palais des Beaux Arts to around 130).

So there is plenty to celebrate for the 60th anniversary, which features 126 exhibitors from a dozen countries.

The main participating countries are Belgium and France (especially from Paris) who between them make up over 100 exhibitors, but there are also around half a dozen each from the UK, Switzerland and Germany plus two or three each from Spain, Italy, Belgium, Monaco and one or two others.

It is obviously popular since the majority are returnees (only a dozen are complete newcomers).

Some idea of what makes *BRAFA* a

popular destination is outlined by the Brussels-based modern art dealer Francis Maere, who has been exhibiting for 12 years and gives his take on the fair on the facing page.

*BRAFA* always offers the visitors a varied range of material.

The fair has long had a reputation for early works of art, the kind of *Kunstkammer* object that appeals to traditional collectors well versed in the field of what is now known as Haute Epoque: early sculpture, metalware, mediaeval objects etc.

Tribal art, another Brussels strength, is also well represented with ten exhibitors, as is antiquities with around a dozen participants. Some, like J Bagot Arqueologia from Spain and Galerie Mermoz from Paris, bring elements of both as this is an area where the two disciplines can cross over.

But there are also decorative arts, furniture, silver and plenty of modern and contemporary art swelled this year by half a dozen of the new first-time exhibitors: Die Galerie from Frankfurt; Frans Jakobs from Amsterdam; Alexis Lartique from Paris; The Opera Gallery from Geneva; Stern Pissarro from London and Alexis Pentcheff from Marseille.

Pictured here are some of the highlights from the different categories that are being brought to this year's *BRAFA*.

No fair would be complete without its non-selling exhibition, which this year will be a broad brush focus on works of art from all periods and styles drawn exclusively from Belgian private collections selected by the King Baudouin Foundation under the title *Le Collectionneur Belge*.

And for the second year running the fair will aim to invite visitors to expand their knowledge with a series of daily lectures, The *BRAFA* Art Talks, discussed in more detail on the facing page.

[www.brafa.be](http://www.brafa.be)

■ See page 48 for a preview of the *BRUNEAF* tribal art line-up.



**Above:** Guillaume Léage of the Paris **Galerie François Léage** is one of a dozen dealers exhibiting at *BRAFA* for the first time this year. His speciality is classic French furniture and objects from the 18th century and he says: "For my first *BRAFA* participation, I selected some rare 18th century pieces of furniture and some 30 objets d'art, with historic importance and museum quality being the guiding criteria. My wish was to present them in a pared-down setting, playing with light and shadow. My aim was to show off these masterpieces by highlighting their refinement and the skills of those who made them."

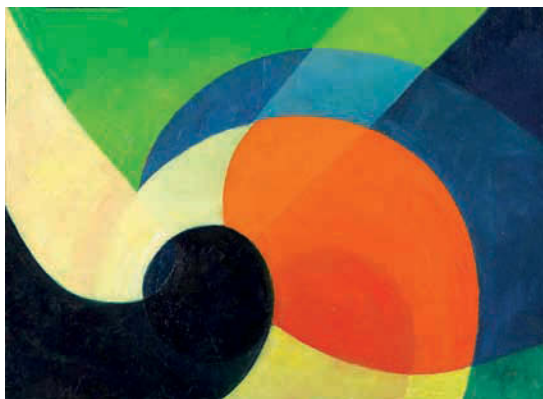
Guillaume's selection will include this restrained late 18th century, 4ft 3in (1.3m) wide, gilt-bronze-mounted mahogany commode which has the distinction of being stamped by two famous ébénistes who both worked for the French Court: Jean Henri Riesener, who was received maître in 1768, and Adam Weisweiler, received maître in 1778. During Weisweiler's early career the two often collaborated and there are a number of pieces bearing these double stamps including a similar commode in the Musée Carnavalet. The piece will be for sale for a six-figure price at *BRAFA*.



**Left:** Herwig Simons likes to mix all period and styles at his Antwerp gallery based in the former Compagnie Maritime Belge. Among the pieces he is taking to *BRAFA* this year will be a pair of terracotta griffons made c.1850 by Giscard of France priced at €26,000 (detail shown here).

**Left:** early works of art specialist Nicholas Mullany of **Mullany Haute Epoque Fine Art** is one of the *BRAFA* regulars from the UK. "For the 60th edition of *BRAFA* and our fourth participation we wanted to highlight the timeless beauty of objects of faith," he says. That includes this 2ft 8in (81.5cm) high carved limewood Madonna and Child produced c.1470-80 in Ulm, one of the most important centres for sculpture in Southern Germany at the time. The group, which was almost certainly originally commissioned as part of an altarpiece, retains a very high proportion of its original polychromy and gilding and is priced at €220,000.

**Right:** London dealers **Whitford Fine Art**, who are regular **BRAFA** exhibitors, will be taking a selection of works by 20th century artists to **BRAFA** – among them this late abstract work by the Belgian artist Joseph Lacasse (1894-1975) which has a provenance from the artist's estate. The 2ft 5in x 3ft 3in (73cm x 1m) oil on canvas titled *Movement* is signed, dated 1973 and inscribed to the verso and comes with a certificate of authenticity dated May 15, 2014 from Mrs Koob-Lacasse. It is priced in the region of €40,000-60,000.



**Above:** this Native American, Dakota Sioux ceremonial peace pipe or calumet will be shown at **BRAFA** by London dealers **Finch and Co** priced at €34,500. Dated to c.1820-40, the 3ft 3¼in (1m) long pipe, which has a catlinite bowl and an ash stem decorated with quillwork, animal skin and hair, was given to a doctor who died in 1902 by a grateful patient, a retired British officer living on the South Coast, and had passed down by descent.



**Left:** Brussels decorative arts dealer **Marc Heiremans** specialises in 20th century glass and among the pieces he is taking to **BRAFA** are a series of Murano pieces by Venetian masters such as Dino Martens and Carlo Scarpa. They will include this 11in (28cm) high *Pittorio* vase designed by Martens for Aureliano Toso c.1954, which is priced at €19,000.

#### THE BRAFA ART TALKS

For the entire run of the fair, **BRAFA** will be holding a daily lecture given by specialists in their field. Under the umbrella theme of The Preservation and Transmission of Cultural Heritage, these **BRAFA** Art Talks encompass an eclectic mix of different subjects.

Starting on Saturday, January 24 with interior designer and architect Brigitte Saby's lecture on ocean liners and their influence on decorative arts and architecture, the progression through the week includes Hélène Joubert, curator for the African Heritage Collections at the Quai Branly Museum, discussing their collections and Jolanthe Kugler of the Vitra Design Museum on how the invention of the electric light transformed our cities.

All the talks are sponsored and *Antiques Trade Gazette* is sponsoring the penultimate talk on Saturday, January 31, which will be given by Nick Humphrey, curator of furniture 1400-1700 at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Under the title *Rearranging the Furniture – A New Perspective at the Victoria & Albert Museum*, he will explain how the V&A has transformed its design and decorative arts galleries since 2001. This includes the newest, devoted to Western Furniture, for which the museum adopted a radical approach as the only gallery in the world to comprehensively examine the techniques of construction from ancient developments like intarsia to the latest 3D printing.

Details of all the talks can be found on the **BRAFA** website under the **BRAFA** Art Talks link.

[www.brafa.be](http://www.brafa.be)



**Right:** James Ensor's *Still Life with vegetables and parrot*, c.1920 priced at over €1m, which Francis Maere (**above**) will be showing at **BRAFA**.



#### BRAFA: THE EXHIBITOR'S VIEW

The **BRAFA**, now celebrating 60 years as a Belgian art and antiques fair, obviously has staying power and many exhibitors make the return year on year to stand here. *ATG* asked one longstanding exhibitor, **Francis Maere** of Francis Maere Fine Arts from Brussels, why the event ticks all the boxes for him.

**ATG: How long have you been a **BRAFA** exhibitor and what makes it a good choice of fair for you as an exhibitor?**

FM: I have been exhibiting for 12 years now in what has always been the best fair in Belgium. The *Belgian Antiques Fair* that used to take place at the Palais des Beaux-Arts united at that time the best dealers from the Flemish- and French-speaking part of Belgium with an emphasis on Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels and Liège. It was, at that time, the only antiques fair in Belgium that was followed by the international trade and press and as a consequence gave the best exposure.

**ATG: What do you think have been the most noticeable changes to the **BRAFA** since you first started exhibiting?**

FM: What started as a convivial Belgian happening changed rather quickly into a fully awarded international event. The move to the new premises of Tour & Taxis gave us more space and flexibility and also the possibility to enlarge and 'internationalise' the scale of the fair. The professionalism of the organisation also moved towards a higher degree.

**ATG: Have you changed the type of works that you exhibit at **BRAFA** since it moved to Tour & Taxis and, if so, what is your emphasis now? Have you noticed any general changes in the type of material shown at the fair among other exhibitors?**

FM: I think that everybody involved with arts and antiques for more than ten years has noticed the same changes in the market. The globalisation and growing professionalism of the art market forced us all into a new way of practising the metier. Quality is the only important standard for everybody and all disciplines, be it paintings, ceramics, tribal art or silver – this is reflected in **BRAFA**'s ethos. The interesting aspect about that is the meeting of different sorts of arts from different countries and periods. I mainly deal with Belgian Art 1830-1950 and I realise that at a certain level the quality becomes universal and that it stands the comparison with other artists or schools worldwide.

**ATG: How would you describe the visitor profile at **BRAFA** and how has it changed over the years?**

FM: One often hears the remark that the big art fairs are becoming too predictable, showing the same sort of artists, movements or styles – reflecting the actual demands. **BRAFA** is different because of its perfect mixture between tradition and innovation: young and entrepreneurial dealers together with long-established serious houses. The visitor profile shows the same diversity, a good mixture of international experienced collectors and a young, unconditioned public eager to learn.

**ATG: Do you exhibit at any other fairs, either in Belgium or overseas?**

FM: I have been participating for years at PAN-Amsterdam. No overseas experiences so far.

**ATG: Now that **BRAFA** has reached its 60th anniversary, what do you think will be the main challenges for the fair in the future? Are there any changes/innovations you would like to see?**

FM: The main challenge will be to maintain and continue to improve the quality of exhibitors and visitors, of course. We would like to 'internationalise' the fair even more by attracting good dealers from the UK, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Holland and other overseas countries. We can only achieve that goal by continuing to provide a good service for the exhibitor as well as the visitor.

**ATG: Do you have a favourite piece that you are taking to the fair and what makes it special?**

FM: The painting by James Ensor, *Still-Life with vegetables and parrot*, oil on canvas, 2ft 7in x 3ft 3in (80cm x 1m), is a wonderful example of the underlying duality in the work of the Ostend painter. A perfectly balanced composition and a freshness of colour and light shows Ensor at his best. The painting has been in a private collection since 1960 and is appearing for the first time on the market.