

BRAFA BOUNCES ON

BUBBLY BRUSSELS FAIR GIVES RUSSIANS THE CHAMPAGNE TREATMENT

BY SIMON HEWITT

No other European Fair makes such efforts to attract a Russian clientèle as **BRAFA**, the Brussels Art Fair. It has its own special Moscow agent, Comtesse Ekaterina de Rochambeau, who engineers the VIP visits of over 100 Russian collectors, journalists, designers and interior architects. This year's fair (January 21-29) duly saw 'an increase in Russian clients,' in the delighted words of the London-based gallerist Iana Kobeleva. Whether they had jetted in from Domodedovo or Sheremetyevo, or taken the train from Paris or London, all enjoyed BRAFA's relaxed mood, decorative variety and – compared to TEFAF Maastricht and the big London fairs – attractive prices.

Few of their purchases are likely to make it back to the Motherland, mind you. Russians prefer to keep things in the West.

VIPs are generously catered for at BRAFA, which stages no fewer than three ticket-only vernissages before the fair actually opens to the public. The champagne flows in torrents – not the bargain-basement Moët-et-Chandon you usually get at these sort of events, but tasty Taittinger.



NAZARENO, NOVIKOV & HIERONYMOUS BOSCH AT THE MUSEE ROYAL DES BEAUX-ARTS

Illustrious Russian visitors this year included Non-Conformist Couple Igor Novikov and Tanya Nazarenko – currently the subject of a joint gallery show in Zurich. They had been invited by their Moscow friend Andrian Melnikov, whose Zurich-based **Kunstberatung** (Art Consultancy) was offering a stylish selection of European Old Masters.

Russian works at the Fair were few but of high quality, ranging from 16th century icons at **Brenske** of Munich to contemporary glass by St Petersburg's Maria Koshenkova at **Clara Scremini** from Paris.



16TH CENTURY MOSCOW ICON (BRENSKA) – SERGE POLIAKOFF : 1954 COMPOSITION (BOULAKIA)

There was a roster of works by Russian émigré artists: a Sonia Delaunay *Self-Portrait* at **Harold t’Kint**; *Homo Sapiens*, a monumental 1930s plaster sculpture by Ossip Zadkine, at **Galerie Fleury**; an atypically humorous red-and black Poliakoff from 1954 at **Boulakia**, depicting a man with a moustache; and, at **Bailly** of Geneva, a small but compelling 1954 Nicolas de Staël, who was ‘able in just 20 brushstrokes to give the whole feeling of a landscape with boats and houses – as minimal as it gets!’ enthused Peter Silverman, when interviewed on BRAFA’s in-house TV channel. ‘There are lots of things I love at BRAFA, from many different cultures’ added the great Franco-Canadian collector.

Boulakia also had a 1983 silkscreen clockwork *Monkey* by Andy Warhol, *сделано в СССР*, while the muscular oarsman in Anton Otto Fischer’s 1924 *Regatta* at **Berko** had the feel of an Art Deco Guryanov. **Claude Bernard** lined up his usual wallful of whimsical silver creatures by Goudji, the Georgian-born, Paris-based father of the popular Russian contemporary artist Gosha Ostretsov. **Cento Anni** from Brussels brought a plentiful array of the Chiparus-like Art Deco bronze and ivory dancing figures popular among Russian buyers. The early 19th century Charles X furniture housed at **Le Couvent des Ursulines**, made from light-coloured maplewood reminiscent of Karelian birch, is something Russians have been slower to appreciate, but one day surely will.



ANDY WARHOL : MONKEY (BOULAKIA) – NICOLAS DE STAËL : LES MARTIGUES (BAILLY)



LAMBELE : NOAMI (LANCZ)



NAKASHIMA : WALNUT SOFA (LANDAU)

For now, Russian collectors – and their interior architects – tend to focus on 20th century Design. Many combined a visit to BRAFA with a trip to the *Maison & Objet* fair just outside Paris (January 20-24). Design highlights at BRAFA included a vast walnut sofa 1960 by America's George Nakashima at **Frank Landau** (Frankfurt); a 1960 wenge and bronze desk by Jules Wabbes at **Futur Antérieur**; and a choice array of Scandinavian, Italian and Brazilian furniture at **Galerie Le Beau**. There was a monumental 1967 Sèvres porcelain vase (1.7m tall) by Etienne Hajdu at **Galerie Mathivet**; a sleek plexiglas sculpture *Noami* (c.1982) by Antonia Lambele at **Lancz**; and, if you wanted something quirkier for the lounge, a shield-mounted, mega-tusked Arctic Walrus skull at **Finch** of London.

Well over one-third of exhibitors at this year's BRAFA specialized in the 20th century – Design or Modern/Contemporary Art – prompting one dealer in Old Master Drawings to groan that he 'felt like a dinosaur.' The organizers have even dropped the term 'antique' from the fair title, as if it were a dirty word. Yet the fair spans the centuries from Antiquities, Haute Epoque, Old Masters, Tribal Art and Ancien Régime Furniture to Clocks, Books, Sculpture, Tapestries, Ceramics, Modern Jewellery and Comic Strips.

For a fair so strong in the field of Design, it is no surprise that BRAFA prides itself on how it looks. The aisles of the Fair were smothered in Simon Hantai-inspired blue-and-white carpeting designed by a local textiles student, interspersed with giant kinetic spheres by Argentine Op Artist Julio Le Parc. These looked as if they had been loaned from a nearby shopping-mall, setting the tone for the supermarket-style displays of many stands, crammed with as much stock as their dealers could fit in.



WHACKY CARPETS, CUNNING SPHERES AND, IN PLACES, DECORATIVE OVERKILL

In between all the clutter, and the surfeit of Buffets and Dubuffets fresh from the saleroom, there were some fine pictures to discover – several in the field of Neo-Impressionism: a charming 1908 *Bouquet of Roses* by the underrated Pointilliste Achille Laugé at **Hélène Bailly**; Serusier's proto-abstract 1910 *Tetrahedrons* at **La Patinoire Royale**; a sharply lit series of Henri Martin landscapes at **Alexis Pentcheff**; and a sketchy Degas pastel, *Femme Se Coiffant*, at **Seghers** (Ostend).

Belgian highlights ranged from a charming pastel *Milkmaid* by Firmin Baes at **Berko** to a 1955 *Femme Rose* by Marthe Donas (who studied with Archipenko in Paris) at **Lancz**. A Delvaux *Nude with Red Curtain* at **Harold t'Kint**, and a youthful neo-Cubist Magritte *Nocturne* (1923) at **Stern Pissarro**, each sold in the region of €600,00.

There were no major works by James Ensor or Léon Spilliaert, although **Gallery Seghers** sold a couple of Spilliaerts on the first night, each imbued with his hallmark visual wit. A watercolour *Estuary with Lighthouse* by Henry Detouche (1854-1913), at the **Belgian Antiquarian Booksellers' Association**, was the bargain of BRAFA at €2200.



EUGÈNE DODEIGNE : GROUPE DES CINQ (c.1990) – FRANCIS MAERE

No art-lover should visit Belgium without admiring the landscape school of Sint Martens Latem, which remains bewilderingly little-known outside the country. Its artists are superbly promoted at BRAFA by **Oscar De Vos** and **Francis Maere**. Both, this year, had major works by Frits Van Den Berghe (1883-1939) – De Vos sold one for around €600,000.

Maere also served up a giant wooded landscape by the Belgian Barbizon painter César de Cock, as well as staging BRAFA's most powerful single-artist display. This was devoted to Belgian sculptor Eugène Dodeigne (1923-2015) and centred on his *Groupe des Cinq* – five stylized, life-size stone figures (c.1990) with all the tolling tragedy of Rodin's *Bourgeois of Calais* – surrounded by some equally powerful charcoal drawings, and by plinths topped with small bronzes. The stone figures came from a private collection but the other works were fresh to the market, courtesy of Dodeigne's daughter.

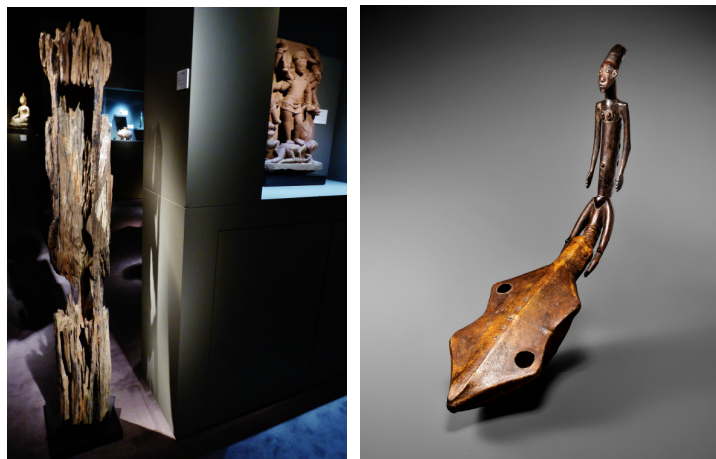
Just across the aisle, in a contrast of Trumpian vulgarity, **Guy Pieters** had wheeled out a typically glitzy, self-indulgent display by the Jeff Koons of Europe, Jan Fabre. Nearby, two

stands devoted to Comic-Strips (I'm not sure that these have to do with Art, either) revealed the world of difference between the refined draughtsmanship of *Tintin* author Hergé and Philippe Geluck's fatuous canvases smothered in his tiresome Fat Cat, *Le Chat*.

From the fleetingly ridiculous to the timelessly sublime.

The Antiquities section featured **Bagot** from Barcelona, **Phoenix** from Geneva, **Harmakhis** from Brussels and two galleries from Germany – **Roswitha Eberwein** (Göttingen) and **Günter Puhze** (Freiburg). Pre-Columbian Art was also available, while Asian Art ranged from India to the Pacific, with a 12th century Japanese wooden figure of *Bishamonten* at Antoine **Barrère** and an early 20th century wooden Vietnamese *Pleureur* (Weeping) figure at his Parisian colleague **Christophe Hioco**.

This international mix was refreshing, but hardly typical: over 80% of BRAFA's 132 exhibitors were from Belgium and France.



VIETNAMESE PLEUREUR (HIOCO) – MANGBETU HARP (DULON)

Ten exhibitors were selling Tribal Art, led by those giants of the Brussels trade **Bernard de Grunne** and **Didier Claes**, who offloaded a 19th century Hemba ancestor statue from Congo for a cool €700,000. They were joined, notably, by **Jacques Germain** from Montreal and **Bernard Dulon** from Paris, with an extraordinary anthropomorphic Mangbetu harp, also from Congo.

Brussels has dozens of Tribal Art market galleries, all of them clustered around Place du Grand-Sablon; June is usually the best time to visit them, when they are joined by a score of foreign dealers to form the famous BRUNEAF gallery trail. Now, though, there is a 'Winter BRUNEAF' too – held during BRAFA (January 18-22).

Belgium's passion for Tribal Art dates from its 19th century colonization of the Congo; the palatial Royal Museum for Central Africa in the Brussels suburb of Tervuren, due to reopen in 2018 after a five-year renovation, is one of the world's premier museums of African Art. Much of this is made from wood – carved figures and masks lead the way. So, during BRAFA, it was a welcome bonus to discover *paintings* by 20th century African artists at an entertaining, sometimes poignant show of Congo Art Works at the Bozar cultural centre.

Bozar was also hosting an eye-opening display of *Japanese Expressionism* – abstract paintings from around 1960 – and a show entitled the *Power of the Avant-Garde*, featuring works by several Russian artists (Malevich, Goncharova, Jawlensky, Drevin and Matyushin).

Brussels is an exciting city at any time of year and, in January, more culturally dynamic than most. BRAFA is the main vehicle for that dynamism. It will be interesting to see if it continues to progress in the years ahead.

Some, led by the Fair's go-getting Vice-President Didier Claes, would like to capitalize on the recent exodus of prominent dealers from the crisis-hit Paris Biennale to give BRAFA an injection of high-quality new blood. Others, including BRAFA President Harold t'Kint, are happy with the status quo – and, in justification, can point to a 6% increase in the number of visitors this year, up to 61,250. 