



Not quite full of Brussels yet

The upcoming BRAFA fair offers a feast of intriguing items to gorge upon

RENÉ MAGRITTE sometimes sneered at the bourgeois origins of Paul Delvaux (despite his own not entirely *unbourgeois* background) and claimed that he was famous only because he painted nudes. It might be more true to say 'because of the nude he painted so many times', as most often it's essentially the same waxy, entranced figure, neither quite statue nor quite sex-object.

Delvaux was first inspired by a wax figure of a sleeping Venus in Spitzner's freak show in Brussels when he was a boy.

As he said later, 'youthful impressions, fixed once and for all in the mind, influence you all your life' and his *bourgeois*

Fig 1 above: *Le Balcon* by Paul Delvaux. With Stern Pissarro. Fig 2 below: 'Glycines' choker, designed by Philippe Wolfers. With Epoque Fine Jewels



origins were key to his vision. His family hoped that he would follow in his father's legal footsteps and gave him a good Classical education. He avoided the law, but retained a love of the Greek myths. When he was allowed to go to art school, at first, it was to study architecture, which again proved to be an invaluable resource for his painting.

Other early fascinations that remained with him included Jules Verne's novels, especially *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, skeletons, railway stations and trains. All these elements reappear constantly in his paintings, together with Magritte-like men in bowler hats and de Chirico moonlit settings.

Between January 26 and February 3, the St James's gallery Stern Pissarro will be making its first visit to the Brussels fair BRAFA and a major work by Delvaux will be a suitable centerpiece for its stand. The 47½in by 35½in *Le Balcon* (Fig 1) dates from 1948 and includes several of the characteristic ingredients: the enigmatic semi-nude, the equally enigmatic clothed female, architecture (including 'bourgeois' gas lights), curtains, contrasted strong sunlight and dim interior. Delvaux did not consider himself a Surrealist,



Fig 3: High gilt and polychrome St Margaret of Antioch. With Mullany

but that is perhaps hair-splitting. Whatever they should be called, I prefer his dreams to those of the avowed Surrealist de Chirico—they are more intriguing and better painted.

Last year, during a press trip associated with BRAFA, we were taken to the former Cinquantenaire Museum in Brussels that had just reopened as the Museum of Art and History. A large room was given over to a reconstruction of the 19th-century Wolfers Frères jewellery shop, which had cabinets designed by the great Art Nouveau designer Victor Horta.

It was very exciting, even though this was not Horta at his most inventive and the room still had a rather 'museumy' feel, as the wallpapers, carpets, chairs and other furnishings that had made the old shop so agreeable for its rich clientele were not there.

However, the wares on display, as it were, were wonderful, with glass and pottery by all the Art Nouveau masters and jewellery designed by Philippe Wolfers. Many of his drawings were with them, including one for a brooch worn by his wife in a portrait nearby.

Pick of the week



Last year, BRAFA gave a special display to Christo (and the late Jeanne-Claude), of whom I am generally an admirer—the *London Mastaba* was really beautiful, perhaps all the more so because it was temporary—but the *Three Store Fronts* installation was decidedly underwhelming. This year, the artist to be honoured is Gilbert & George (singular with '&' as artist, plural with 'and' as people) and I hope to be better impressed. Five photomontages have been chosen from the recent 'Jack Freak', 'London', 'Scapegoating' and 'Beard' editions, in which, as usual, the artist is the medium and the message is the artist's take on modern life. One of the brightly coloured mixed-media works from the 'Beard' series, the 74¼in by 148½in *Beard Alert* (above), will also be for sale with the Bernier/Eliades Gallery of Athens and Brussels. The faces of Gilbert and George appear, in the gallery's description, as 'extravagantly-bearded troglodytes'—surely Green Men—and the pictures show 'a dream-like world of paranoia and destruction and madness and confront the viewer with relentless aggression', which is not perhaps how everyone might try to sell them.

Wolfers, like Horta, was a genius and, this year, the Belgian dealer Epoque Fine Jewels offers one of his most impressive pieces, the 'Glycines' choker (Fig 2), composed of 'five alternating wisteria sets with carved watermelon tourmaline and carved opal, between purple and green *plique-à-jour* enamel leaf clusters, within a scrolling garnet and ruby frame of Art Nouveau whiplash design'. As well as Wolfers's monogram, it is marked 'Ex:unique' to show that it was a one-off rather than made for the family firm. In 2016, it was sold by Christie's in Geneva for €220,000.

As ever, BRAFA will provide a feast for lovers of medieval works of art. From London, Mullany will bring a 17¼in-high gilt-and-polychrome walnut figure of St Margaret of Antioch standing

Fig 4: Kangxi iron-red porcelain moonflask. With Galerie Bertrand de Lavergne

on her dragon (Fig 3). It carries the city-mark for Mechelen and is datable to about 1515.

The saint was swallowed by Satan's dragon, but the cross that she wore gave it indigestion. She was very popular in Europe after the Crusades and was one of Joan of Arc's voices.

Another Flemish sculpture to be repatriated from London, this time by Finch & Co, is a 73¼in-high sandstone carving of Hercules and Antaeus (Fig 5), confidently attributed to Jan Pieter van Bauscheit the Elder (1669–1728), a leading sculptor and architect in Antwerp, where he established a thriving studio. He was appointed sculptor to the Emperor in 1717.

The Galerie Bertrand de Lavergne of Paris, which specialises in Chinese export and Japanese porcelain and 16th- to 18th-century Chinese works of art, will be showing a very splendid 7½in-high Kangxi (1662–1722) iron-red porcelain moonflask (Fig 4). This well-travelled piece has spent time in the USA and the Netherlands, as well as in France.

Brussels maintains its place as a major centre for the tribal, or primary, arts market and, as ever, it will be well represented at BRAFA. Didier Claes, the well-respected



Fig 5 above: Sandstone carving of Hercules and Antaeus by Bauscheit the Elder. With Finch & Co. Fig 6 below: Ivory Coast Baule mask owned by Derain. With Didier Claes



specialist in Sub-Saharan African carvings, will offer a 13in-high Baule mask from the Ivory Coast (Fig 6), which once belonged to André Derain (1880–1954), the Fauvist painter and sculptor.

According to Gertrude Stein, Derain discovered African art even before the Cubists.

Next week The rainbow bridge