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BRAFA ART FAIR

Interview with Beatrix Bourdon, Managing Director of BRAFA



Beatrix Bourdon © Guy Kokken

The 68th edition of BRAFA is fast approaching. How do you envision this BRAFA 2023?

With great optimism. We were lucky enough to hold a fair in June at Brussels Expo, a new venue for us, which enabled us to see what needed to be improved or changed. The June 2022 edition was very interesting. The whole team is working hard to make the next edition even more successful: the result can only be more beautiful.

This has been a special year for you. It has been 30 years since you started working at the Fair. What was your first contact at the time with the Foire des Antiquaires de Belgique, since renamed BRAFA?

During a dinner, I learned that they were looking for a manager to organise the Fair as a whole. I sent my CV and that's how the adventure started. I was 27 years old. At the start, I had no idea about the behind-the-scenes and the different aspects of the organisation of such an event.

Were you aware of the enormous responsibility you were taking on?

Not really, and that was a good thing, because I arrived full of enthusiasm and a willingness to learn. I had never compiled a catalogue in my life, never drawn the floor plan for a fair or held a press conference. It was thanks to the chairman at the time, Christian de Bruyn, that I learned everything. He gave me time and all his energy to explain the inner workings of the Fair. Ultimately, putting together a fair is like putting together a puzzle: all 20,000 pieces have to fit perfectly.

Nowadays, BRAFA is a small team composed of different profiles?

Yes. The fair has evolved and grown tremendously. It started out as a national fair. To take part, you had to be a member of the Belgian Royal Chamber of Antiques and Art Dealers (ROCAD). Communication was different at the time: no website, no emails, no mobile phones. It was probably a bit more of rough and ready (laughs). Given the international dimension these days, doing the Fair without a dynamic team would no longer be possible. That said, having started 30 years ago with a smaller fair, it gave me the opportunity to become acquainted with all the positions at the Fair.

Do you remember your first BRAFA?

It was at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Since I had no specific location at the Fair at the time, I had no choice but to set up between two stands, with a very small desk made up of a stool on the stairs. I remember that what impressed me the most during this first fair was the discovery of the beauty of so many works.

Do you have memories that you particularly cherish from the Fair?

I have a lot of them. It's very difficult to quote them like that. I think what I cherish the most is the meetings. I have met a lot of people through BRAFA, from very different areas. We have been lucky enough to welcome prestigious guests of honour such as Julio Le Parc, Gilbert & George, Christo, and Arne Quinze.

Seeing the exhibitors each year has always brought me a lot of joy. It is ultimately for their benefit that we work all year round and do the best we can so that when they arrive, everything is perfect.

Thanks to the Fair, I have had the opportunity to access varied and incredible places. I am thinking for example of Axel Vervoordt's Castle or the Royal Museum for Central Africa, whose storerooms I was able to discover with Didier Claes. It gave me other perspectives.

The world of fairs and the art market have changed significantly over the past 30 years. What is your personal vision of these developments?

There are increasing numbers of fairs. Some of them have a very commercial aspect. That's what differentiates BRAFA, which is a non-profit organisation. We are there primarily for the exhibitors. We could also do mini BRAFAs in Paris, London or Amsterdam and see BRAFA as a brand. That's not our vision. What does interest us is improving our Fair. We see fairs that last five or ten years. We have been running for nearly 70 years. So it's a fair that really does evolve, whilst keeping its feet on the ground. It has a very solid past, a good reputation, and I hope it has many more years still ahead of it.

What would be your hopes for BRAFA over the next 10 years?

For it to become ever more qualitative and international, whilst consistently retaining its exhibitors.
For the collectors to be satisfied with their purchases at BRAFA and to return each year.