

BRAFA ART FAIR

BRAFA 2023: Interview with Harold t’Kint de Roodenbeke, Chairman of BRAFA



BRAFA © Jessica Hilltout

What were your takeaways from June 2022 and how do you envision this 68th edition of BRAFA?

We had a kind of trial gallop with a first BRAFA outside of our usual standards, since we proposed an event in a new space and at a different time due to a disrupted schedule. January will therefore be both a return to normality in terms of dates and also the writing of a new page in our history with Brussels Expo. It’s a venue that hasn’t always had the aura it deserves since it was showcased at the World’s Fair in 1958. However, I think at the BRAFA in June, we demonstrated that we could make it a prestigious exhibition space with the advantage of being both logistically and creatively adaptable. The reception of the public was excellent despite the slightly reduced attendance rates given the circumstances and the period. Our current goal is to get back to our rhythm and our loyal customers in January, whilst developing the potential of the space.

Having just recently closed in June, you are now working on a new edition that will take place at the end of January 2023. It's a very short preparation period.

The galleries at BRAFA have the reputation and the desire to present original pieces. There was a time when dealers bought an object and put it back on sale, sold it in a matter of weeks and bought something else. Nowadays, as a professional, you have to track the work, do research, study the context to see if there is a history, a particular provenance, if there were reproductions. We really contextualise each piece in order to present it at the Fair with as much information and attractiveness as possible. All this takes months or even years of work. In this case, the period is shorter between the two fairs, which is a real challenge. Some galleries, I hope, have anticipated this and set aside some prestigious pieces that they did not present in June and that they will introduce in January at the next edition.

It has been almost 70 years since the Foire des Antiquaires de Belgique, subsequently renamed BRAFA, was founded. How is the Fair doing nowadays in an increasingly competitive environment?

BRAFA must constantly try to adapt in a world in perpetual evolution, whereas our dealer DNA does not like the idea of a too rapid evolution. The current context, including the upheavals linked to digital technology and the proliferation of events and fairs, has made the art market much more competitive. Mirroring this evolution, BRAFA must refine its concept. There is a strong desire to remain varied and diverse, but there is also a market trend that is increasingly focused on modern and contemporary art. We pay careful attention to all these elements and we want to maintain a balance.

Brussels has been repeatedly described as a hub of art trafficking. What is your take on this?

There is a lack of resources at the political level in Belgium. There used to be an art unit, like the ones that exist in France or Italy, with efficient, specialised teams because it is a very specific market. When a work of art is stolen or despoiled, there is a particular way to investigate or to understand the market, which is correlated with the objects and their origins. This cell was simply discontinued in Belgium. The paradox is that the art dealers are the ones who are calling for the return of a specialised office and a strengthening of controls. We are the first to want a more transparent market. The primary area of focus, which is archaeology, involves complex and lengthy investigations, sometimes beyond our national borders. We see pieces provisionally seized and after study, we find that this was not justified - unfortunately in many cases, the piece, regardless of its value, can remain blocked for several years. The procedures to be implemented must be legitimate and also transparent.

What's new for January 2023?

We are always asked what is new, but in truth, for 70 years now we have been trying to improve and even perfect a concept that has stood the test of time so far. Working in the long-term means working by small touches rather than big upheavals.

This year, we will be focusing on the theme of Art Nouveau, a movement that was very important for Brussels at the turn of the last century.