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Treasures Abound! Hamish Bowles Visits Maastricht for The Fine Arts Fair



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by HAMISH BOWLES



Apollo Embraces Daphne Turned Into A Laurel Tree.
Cardinal Francesco Barberini, 1626; Corsini Barberini collection, 1911



Over the years, I have heard Tefaf—the storied Dutch art and antiques fair first established at Maastricht in 1988—spoken of as the holy grail by dealers, collectors, and aesthetes alike. This year, I stayed on a day or two after the Paris shows and was at long last able to experience its wonders for myself—or as many of them as I could in one frenzied preview day.

The local airport may be crowded with private planes, but the convention center on the light-industrial outskirts of the city is not a thing of inspirational beauty or glamour—far from it. Once inside, however, waterfalls of modernistic flower arrangements are a promising harbinger of aesthetic delights to come. (We are in Holland, flower capital of Europe, of course).

And then the sensory overload begins. With 275 participating dealers, the fair is enormous, with sections for twentieth century design and Old Masters and twentieth century art and antiquities and porcelain and fine jewelry and niche areas of collecting—importantly bound books, for instance—and the quality is astonishing: Museum directors and their specialists and trustees vie with deep-pocketed private collectors. The vetting process is rigorous and famously unforgiving: In the days before the fair opens, after the dealers have already set up their stands, an army of 189 experts across 29 categories descend for review, and items that do not meet their exacting standards of quality, authenticity, and condition are locked away for the duration of the fair.

First port of call on my own whistle-stop tour was Brussels' Galerie Flore, where the immensely stylish Flore de Brantes held court, wrists rattling with a pair of tutti frutti bracelets that belonged to her husband's great-grandmother, the asptongued tastemaker Daisy Fellowes. Flore's stand sets exquisite eighteenth century furniture and objects in dynamic dialogue with unique commissions by contemporary designers. A Louis Seize cabinet, for instance, inset with Japanese lacquered panels and once owned by, goodness me—could it have been the Elector of Saxony?—was placed opposite *Armoire Fusion*, a dynamic piece by Herve van der Straeten completed this year using similar elements of lacquer, antique Japanese panels, ebony, and bronze. When opened, it proved to contain a trio of porcelain cups that had once belonged to Louis XV. Casual. Elsewhere, a spiky mirror of explosive shards by artist Mathias Kiss was set up in tandem with a voluptuous Louis Quinze giltwood mirror.

AD's Mitch Owens pointed me to some treasures that he had already sleuthed, among them a tiny oil portrait of the poet Olivier Larronde painted by Christian Berard c 1940, an exquisite thing exquisitely displayed—isolated and unmissable on a vast wall painted the color of Roman stone. In the wunderkammer that is the stand of the famed Parisian dealer brothers J. Kugel, meanwhile, jostling treasures included The Bulgari Clock, a 17th century German Baroque ivory timepiece with stacked groupings of classical figures like a princely Renaissance fountain, and Andrea Fantoni's c. 1700 memento mori tabernacle.

A number of the stands themselves are works of art. The Tomasso Brothers' handsome Pompeiian revival room showcased stately pictures (including Cipriani's late eighteenth century *Castor & Pollux* and an early seventeenth century *Martyrdom of Saint Batholomew* attributed to Jusepe de Ribera) and magnificent sculpture, whilst the Munich dealer Robbig displayed their ravishing Meissen garnitures and figurines in a treillage pavilion set in a room of pale-painted Louis Seize boiseries with roundels of animals symbolic of the four known continents (a dromedary for Asia, a crocodile for the Americas).

There are dealers who make a statement of the eclectic—Dickinson, for instance, with such juxtapositions as Sir Anthony Van Dyck's compelling c 1628 portrait of Adriaen Moens, and Robert Delaunay's electrifyingly Fauve-colored *Still Life with Gloves*, 1906-07—or the uber tastemaker Axel Vervoordt with his suave mix of glutinously impasto postwar Japanese paintings and compelling antiquities showcased in a room laid with wide, dark antique floorboards evocative of his celebrated Belgian castle. And there are those who make a virtue of the specific, including Paris's visionary Eric Philippe, who featured midcentury Finnish design, or Bel Etage and their own wonders from the Wiener Werkstatte.

There were some fascinating women at the fair—the Marquise de Beaumont, for instance, in an 1830s drawing by Inges (with Baroni), and Winterhalter’s 1850 portrait of a crinolined German aristocrat in a lavish contemporary frame (with Robilant + Voena, who also showcased Anne-Louis Girodet Trioson’s 1806 portrait of the comely Madame Bertin de Vaux). Remarkable too was Joseph Granie’s compelling 1893 study of the cafe concert singer Yvette Guilbert, looking not at all as she did in Toulouse Lautrec’s famous depictions (with Agnews), and very pretty was Sylvie Boutet de Monvel as depicted by her father, the modish art deco portraitist Bernard Boutet de Monvel, in 1944 in her lace-hung bed toying with her fluffy little white dog Champagne, apparently unconcerned by the Occupation (Stair Sainty Gallery). Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s 1868 portrait of the ravishing *Jane Morris* at Maas Gallery was a heart-stopper, and Sir Peter Lely’s *Elizabeth Capel, Countess of Carnarvon*, c 1662, had the marshmallow charm of Charles II’s court beauties (Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts), although her oyster satin dress was prettier than she. At Thomas Sallis, *Les Tasses Noir*, a large 1925 Vuillard painting, depicted the style setter and artist muse Misia Sert seated at table with her niece in her silvery dining room with its Chinoiserie furniture and rock crystal and jade green objects—a setting that inspired her friend Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel’s own adventures in atmospheric interior decoration. At Sam Fogg, a c 1470 statue of a *Standing Virgin and Child* from central France was a vision of perfect, serene, and timeless beauty, whilst Charles-Antoine Coypels’s witty 1743 *Folly Embellishing Old Age with the Adornments of Youth* (at French & Company), was a caution to us all.

There were some knee-trembling men at the fair too. At Weiss, for instance, a swaggering portrait of James Hay, 1st Earl of Carlisle, from the studio of the Jacobean artist William Larkin—a dandy in a face-framing starched white collar and the most fanciful ribbon rosettes on his shoes. And alongside their female lovelies, Robilant + Voena had a Pompeo Batoni portrait of George Craster, who had presumably taken his Horse Grenadier Guards uniform all the way to Rome to have the famed Grand Tourist artist memorialize him wearing it. Gerard ter Borsch's *Portrait of Pieter de Graeff*, painted on copper c 1674 (with Douwes Fine Art) had a grave air, but the subject was depicted sitting in a lilac velvet chair with my name all over it. Gustave Caillebotte's *Portrait of the Painter George Roman*, 1879 (Arnoldi Livie), is an unvarnished depiction but a picture strong enough to stop you in your tracks.

There were objects epic—Swedish artist Julius Kronberg's *Cleopatra*, a deliriously kitsch 1883 pompier-style picture (hung practically floor to ceiling in these high-ceilinged galleries)—and intimate, such as *Approaching Night: A Coastal Scene at Dusk*—a tiny landscape, shadowed by stormy clouds, painted by John Constable in the 1820s and a thing of astounding modernity.

Didier Aaron had a wall of the small portraits that were the artist Louis Leopold Boilly's bread and butter in early 19th century Paris, and a more elaborately worked painting of his depicting the delights of *Conjugal Affection*. Two different dealers (Richard Green and Haboltdt & Co.) had mid sixteenth century male portraits by Corneille de Lyon, each handsomely presented in contemporary architectural frames, and there were a flotilla of charming Second Empire and Troisieme Republique beach scenes by Eugene Boudin.

And let's not forget, at Franes, the yellow 1780 Cuenca carpet woven with Chinese figures and possibly intended for King Carlos III's Porcelain Room at the Palace of Aranjuez—later owned by Cristobal Balenciaga—or the wonderful 18th century paste jewelry at S. J. Philips, including an extensive parure in shades of peach and melon.

What an education it all was—and what motivation to win the lottery this year in readiness for the next round of treasures to be presented next year.