

BRAFA

Belgian treats

The Brussels Fine Arts & Antiques Fair is thriving, and this year it celebrates its 10th anniversary at the halls of Tour & Taxis with a mighty 128 international participants

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More than half a century on from its opening at the Galerij Louiza, the Brussels Antiques & Fine Arts Fair (BRAFA), one of the world's longest established salons, continues to thrive. Last year visitor numbers were up by 15 per cent, as indeed were sales, with exhibitors reporting a more successful fair than that of the previous year. In addition to 2012's accomplishments, the 58th edition of BRAFA has more to celebrate with the appointment of its new chairman Harold t'Kint Roodenbeke, as well as the 10th anniversary of its relocation to Tour & Taxis.

In 2003, the fair moved from the Palais des Beaux-Arts to a much larger exhibition space in one of Brussels' most notable industrial architectural heritage sites, located in the Noordwijk district of the city. At the time, the former mail-sorting halls of Tour & Taxis seemed a potentially erroneous setting for the fine art and antiques salon. However, the 14,000 square-metre exhibition space permitted a rise in exhibitor numbers, something that Mr t'Kint Roodenbeke says 'put the Belgian fair on the international map, in an amazing setting'. Following its name change to BRAFA



1 Book of Hours, after 1530 Robert Boyvin (active 1487–1536) Manuscript on a gilt and floral background, bound in velvet 19 x 12.6 cm Librairie Lardanchet, Paris

in 2004 (formerly Les Antiquaires), the fair has positioned itself at the forefront of the European circuit. An initial 20 Belgian antique dealers has grown to over 128 international participants from 11 countries – 26 of which are showing here for the first time.

The 2013 event, which runs from 19 to 27 January, promises not to disappoint, with an array of fine and decorative work that spans the centuries. On display around the halls is everything from 20th-century furniture (a fine pair of bergère armchairs by André Groult [1884–1966], dated around 1912 and presented by Galerie Mathivet) to tribal objects and illuminated manuscripts. Visitors can also admire a Moorish-inspired entrance, designed by Nicolas de Liedekerke and Daniel Culo of Volume Architecture, as well as a lavish carpet with a pattern conceived for BRAFA by the designer and fresco artist Julien Colombier.

Special emphasis at the fair is given to archaeological artefacts and primitive art. Didier Claes, for instance, presents a Lwalwa *nkaki* mask from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Fig. 3). This carved, wooden mask is

heavily stylised, its features arranged in simple, geometric forms, with its signature enlarged, rectangular nose extended to the forehead. Traditionally worn by men, *nkaki* (or 'male') masks were worn at the initiation of adolescent boys into the tribe, and were also used in hunting and fertility rites. African ritual masks also take precedence on the stand of Brussels gallery Serge Schoffel, which presents its collection of Bete masks originating from the Ivory Coast. Acquired over many years, these objects have been selected both for their antiquity and fine workmanship. Previously worn in preparation for war, their grimacing features were believed to instil fear and terror in the enemy.

Egyptian antiquities are among the archaeological highlights at this year's BRAFA. Galerie Harmakhis presents a small statue of a dignitary dating from the 5th or 6th century. Wearing a loincloth and bare-chested, the figure is depicted walking and would have originally leaned on a walking stick, now lost, held in its left hand. David Ghezlbash Archéologie shows an arresting example of Fayum portraiture, in this case a young man

crowned with a laurel wreath. These naturalistic portraits were painted on wooden boards and placed with mummies dating from the Coptic period.

A divine example of a Book of Hours from early 16th-century Rouen is also on offer, courtesy of Librairie Lardanchet (Fig. 1). Illuminated by Robert Boyvin (active 1487–1536), it offers a window into religious life in the Middle Ages in Normandy, and is among Boyvin's most accomplished works. The highly decorative manuscript borders can be attributed to Jean Serpin.

Mullany presents a French, late-medieval example of the female form via a limestone carving, *Virgin of the Intercession* (c. 1445–50) is attributed to Jean de la Huerta (active 1431–62), and is a fine example of 15th-century Burgundian craftsmanship. The soft limestone is typical of the type found in Asnières-lès-Dijon, and the figure retains traces of its original polychrome in its deeper folds and crevices. This is a significant piece, distinct from others of a similar type owing to the edge of Mary's veil which covers the top of the head of Christ. This rare feature is a bold statement – it could only have been made by an artist of master status.

A seated female figure, originating from Western Asia and dating from the late 3rd or early 2nd millennium BC, can be found on the stand of Phoenix Ancient Art. This antique figure, whose body, legs and hair are made of chlorite, and the head and foot of white limestone, depicts a woman seated on the ground with her legs bent awkwardly (Fig. 4). She is wearing a tunic, which recalls the *kaunakes*, the traditional Mesopotamian dress worn during the Bronze Age. The purpose of such Bactrian figures has not been entirely determined, however their provenance suggests a funerary connection.

Meanwhile, *Epoque Fine Jewels*, which has specialised in period and antique jewellery since 1958, showcases an exquisite art nouveau piece from the estate of Elizabeth Taylor (Fig. 2). This emerald and diamond pendant (c. 1900) is by Lucien Gautrait (1865–1937), of whom we know little, but who is believed



2 to have worked for Léon Gariod in 19th-century Paris. The pendant resembles the bust of a medieval princess, her hair stylised almost like a veil in pale green plique à jour enamel. A diadem with a central band resembling a crown, bordered with rose cut diamonds and centred by a cognac diamond and three cabochon emeralds, sits on her head. Gautier reveals himself again with the inclusion of his signature star motif, which secures the chain. Similar works of this kind can be found at Geneva's Musée de l'Horlogerie et de l'Émaillerie and the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt.

Steinitz brings an outstanding ebony chest, inlaid with *pietre tenere* mosaics and lined in olive wood. Produced by the Medici workshops in the late 17th or early 18th century, it was probably originally fitted with fragrances or medicines, prepared by a specialist for the Medici court for curative or cosmetic purposes.

Modern and contemporary work is on offer here too, and is among the highlights at BRAFA. Guy Pieters Gallery brings a 1947 Magritte gouache, *Shéhérazade*, while an enormous mixed-media portrait (entitled *Sleepy* and dated 1985) by Gilbert & George is presented by Maruani & Noirhomme Gallery. There are also curiosities to be spotted amidst the panoply of elegant and rarefied objects on display. An eclectic but by no means unappealing choice might be the 19th-century German model of the skull of a Neanderthal man, with an articulated bottom jaw (Finch & Co.).

The Brussels Antiques & Fine Arts Fair takes place at Tour & Taxis, Brussels, and runs from 21–29 January. Visit www.brafa.be for more information.



2 Pendant, c. 1900 Lucien Gautrait (1865–1937) Gold, emerald, diamond and plique à jour enamel, 9 x 4.7 cm (including gold star motif) Epoque Fine Jewels, Kortrijk
3 Mask Lwalwa, Democratic Republic of Congo Wood, ht 30cm Galerie Claes, Brussels
4 Female idol, late 3rd–early 2nd millennium BC Bactrian Chlorite composite, ht 8.2cm Phoenix Ancient Art, Geneva