

A view of Brussels

The city's art fair has grown into a chic but unshowy event. By Susan Moore

Art fairs are no longer just art fairs. The best of them flourish a range of entertainment – performances, screenings, music, panel discussions and VIP programmes offering visits and private views, receptions and parties galore. This all-singing, all-dancing “after-party” phenomenon has not quite caught on at antiques fairs, which still tend to confine themselves to charitable gala previews, loan exhibitions and the odd lecture. And of course they have always provided a convenient excuse for a long weekend in one of the great cities of the world.

Fifty years ago those cities were London, Paris and New York; these days the greatest international fairs are as likely to lure you to Maastricht or Basel (the latter stages pre-eminent ancient art as well as modern and contemporary fairs). Another in the list is Brussels: in the last five years or so Brafa – the Brussels Antiques and Fine Arts

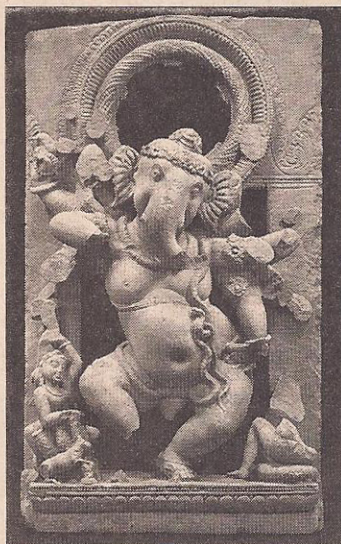
always been strong on northern sculpture and the applied arts, and this year offers, if not a Pieter Breughel the Elder, then an evocative riverscape painted in oil on copper c1599-1613 by his son Jan Breughel the Elder (Galerie Florence de Voldere). By contrast, expect the world's best tribal art and art of the comic strip (two local specialities) and a feast of 20th-century decorative art and design plus tapestries, carpets and textiles. Highlights include some unexpected minimalist abstract kilims from the remote Mazandaran province of Iran, woven in the first half of the 20th century and only discovered by the western carpet trade about a decade ago (N. Vrouyr).

In all, some 120 dealers from 11 countries (54 of them Belgian) are offering everything from antiquities to contemporary art. Brafa allows the repeat attendance of only 20 per cent of participants, which makes for a rotation of exhibitors. So this year, for instance, stalwart antiquities dealers Phoenix Ancient Art – offering an Aegean marble idol from the 3rd millennium BC – is joined by the likes of Galerie Chenel, Roswitha Eberwein and coin specialists Tradart, the latter offering a silver tetradrachm featuring the nymph Arethuse struck around 450 BC in Syracuse.

Among the new exhibitors showing medieval sculpture and works of art is the London-based Australian firm of Mullany, with, for instance, an affecting and well-preserved Burgundian limestone sculpture of the Virgin dating around 1450 and complete with original polychromy. Another medieval specialist, De Backker, presents one of the most intriguing discoveries of the fair, an anonymous “Nativity” of around 1500 based on a lost work by the great Early Netherlandish master Hugo van der Goes.

Asian art ranges from a 10th/11th-century sandstone Dancing Ganesh from central India (Jacques Barrère) to a striking group of 19th-century Japanese Bachi (the sticks used to play taiko drums) carved in whalebone, ivory, tortoiseshell, buffalo horn, rosewood and cherrywood (Finch & Co). As for 20th-century highlights, they include a previously unrecorded Picasso, “Still Life with Fruit Bowl and Guitar” of 1922 (Manuel Barbie). Epoque Fine Jewels has an exquisite Lalique dragonfly pendant of 1903 confected out of glowing plique-à-jour enamels and centred on a large oval aquamarine, while one of the most recent exhibits is a unique sofa on twisted gilt-bronze legs by Garouste and Bonetti.

This chic but understated fair is not a place for the showy and the sensational; what it offers are high-quality works of art to an audience of serious collectors in a friendly atmosphere.



Godly Dancing Ganesh 10th/11thC

Fair, now in its 56th year – has transformed itself into one of the most agreeable events in the international fair calendar.

Brafa has the additional appeal of offering two cities. A half-hour away by train is Antwerp, one of the most picturesque and most unsung of historic European cities. Here the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal (Cathedral of Our Lady) houses Rubens's astounding, monumental “Raising of the Cross” and “Descent from the Cross”, and a collection of Renaissance and baroque altarpieces from the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, temporarily rehung where they were placed originally.

Of the city's dozen or so museums, a favourite is the Museum Mayer van den Bergh, which includes the collector's greatest discovery, Pieter Breughel the Elder's strange, apocalyptic “Mad Meg”.

This collection invariably springs to mind at Brafa. The fair has

Runs January 21-29; www.brafa.be