

dealers' diary

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Hang on to your roots

HAVING spent a lot of time in Brussels over the past decade I know well the Belgian trade and their national fair, which I highlight this week.

It is worth drawing attention to because over the past few years we in the UK have been made aware of an event which has been running since the middle of the last century but was virtually unknown to anyone outside that country.

I remember visiting the fair when it was at the picturesque Palais des Beaux Arts and it was worth a visit. But it was not memorable and although Belgium boasts some very premier players, like **Axel Vervoordt** from Antwerp, they would keep their best displays for the more international forums like Maastricht, where Vervoordt's stand became a landmark.

So the urge to go international was understandable and, as I point out, to an extent it has worked. While aiming to attract international interest, the fact that the Brussels fair retains a Belgian, certainly North European, character is to its credit.

After all, Grosvenor House was a top international attraction but was essentially a very English affair.

Brussels to up its game once again?

■ Once a parochial event, now a major showcase

IF there was an award for the most rapidly improving fair of recent years then The Brussels Antiques and Fine Arts Fair (BRAFA) would be in the frame. I say this in the full knowledge that the rapid improvement follows a half century of history.

Indeed, when 120 top Belgian and foreign dealers gather at the Tour & Taxis site from January 22 to 31 (with preview parties on the 20th and 21st) for the 55th Brussels fair, it will be for a very different kind of event to the one launched at the Palais des Beaux Arts back in 1955 by some 20 Belgian dealers under the auspices of the Royal Chamber of Belgian Antique Dealers.

For years it was a very Belgian, frankly parochial affair; worthy but hardly exciting. And while the Palais des Beaux Arts was a prestigious city centre location, there was no room for expansion.

Until 2004 what was then the Foire des Antiquaires de Belgique did its duty by the Belgian trade but was barely known outside of that country.

But in that year it was decided to go international and turn this staid fair into a glamorous, destination event to match the world's top fixtures. Brussels is a high profile, wealthy city and there is no reason why this should not happen.

The move from the centre to Tour & Taxis was inspired. The huge Victorian space offered room for presentation,

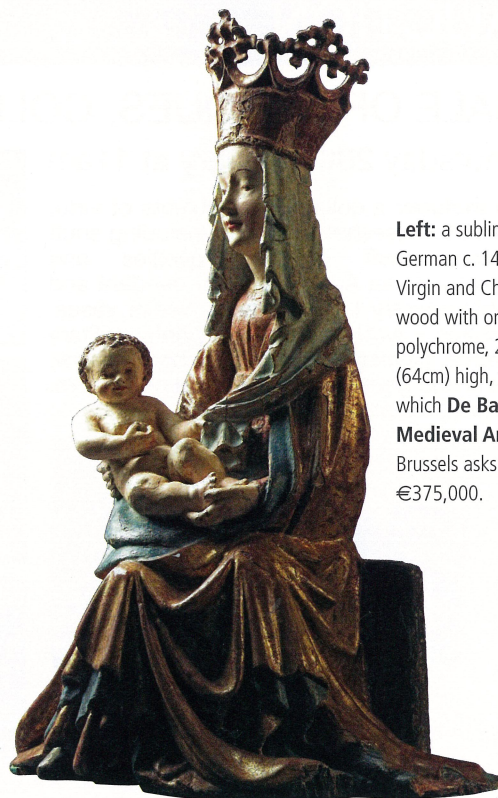
expansion and although in a once unfashionable part of downtown Brussels by the canal, the building itself is the epitome of industrial chic and the 12,400 sq m of display space ideal for a fair.

Marketing became more international and in just six years the fair is now succeeding in achieving the international recognition the organisers envisaged.

This month the fair hosts around 120 dealers from 14 countries. But this is not quite so international as it seems. For the present, it is still very much a North European fair with 61 dealers from Belgium and 39 from France.

Spain and Germany each send four dealers and the UK three, with a single representative from China, Russia, America and the Netherlands (it will be difficult to pick up Dutch dealers since the fair is soon after *Pan Amsterdam* and not long before mighty Maastricht, although there are plenty of Maastricht exhibitors around the Brussels fair).

This year there are 18 newcomers, two from the UK. One of these, **Joanna Booth**, the London dealer in Old Master drawings and medieval and arcane works



Left: a sublime German c. 1410-20 Virgin and Child, wood with original polychrome, 2ft 1in (64cm) high, for which **De Backker Medieval Art** of Brussels asks €375,000.



Above: a very rare 1902 chair by Emile Gallé produced for Gallé himself and inherited by the designer's only grandson, which costs €86,000 at the Brussels fair from Belgian Art Nouveau specialists **Galerie Tiny Esveld**.

of art, says: "It's been a long time since we've done a fair in mainland Europe but since we are not going to Palm Beach this year, we felt we would try something new. BRAFA is the most logical option; it has a great reputation, is known for its quantity and range of early pieces and attracts a more academic buyer than its competitors."

Mrs Booth encapsulates the strengths of the Brussels fair and she takes just the kind of stock suited to this market. As does another UK exhibitor, **Finch & Co** who take tribal art.

Craig Finch says: "For us BRAFA is without question one of the top four fairs in the world, we are there for the fourth time this year and had an excellent year in 2009 despite the economic downturn, selling every day to serious buyers from across Europe, America and the UK."

Belgium has a strong antiques tradition and it must be admitted the fair plays on what Brussels favours: tribal art especially, antiquities and archaeological items, medieval works and 20th century design are all very well represented.

The fair may remain in character and

stock North European, but year on year it is successfully reaching out for a broader appreciation. Last year the presentation was as good as any other international fair and the previews were packed with serious guests. Indeed, at the opening parties I spotted some big, international dealers and collectors from elsewhere.

What has not changed since those early days is the overall quality and upmarket nature of the fair.

Last year's fair did not escape the economic malaise but although the market for Old Masters was restrained there were plenty of sales, mainly in those traditional areas of Belgian expertise mentioned earlier.

If this fair continues to improve as it has over the past six years it will become even more of a force reckon with. Maybe by playing to its known strengths it will always retain a Belgian rather than truly global flavour, but to me that does not detract from its appeal.

And it can only go forward under the new President of BRAFA, the distinguished Brussels silver dealer **Bernard De Leye**. Admission is €20.