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TEFAF 2015

Fine art, fine fair

Mar 17th 2015, 14:34 BY P.W. | MAASTRICHT



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Named after the hero of Shakespeare's "The Tempest", this blog provides literary insight and cultural commentary from our correspondents

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Gold cup with stags from the second-century Marlik culture in Iran

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THE MERRIN GALLERY

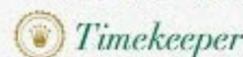
THE European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF), which takes place every year in the Dutch city of Maastricht, is widely acknowledged to be the biggest and best of its kind in the world. Its broad aisles are full of collectors, museum curators, artists and makers. The 275 exhibiting dealers frequently strive to save their best, most exciting pieces for the Maastricht crowds.

Suspensions had been growing, though, that TEFAF's dealer-managers had become complacent and resistant to improvements. So one of the happy surprises of this 27th show is that it has lightened up—and not only metaphorically. Signs of change begin at

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the entrance. A previously claustrophobic, if tulip-lined, tunnel, has been hung with fluttering, transparent white panels; white roses in glass vials are suspended from the lofty ceiling. The vast, dreary cafeteria has been replaced by food bars dispensing lobster, sushi and the like, freeing up space for a contemporary art display. However, with contemporary art fairs multiplying like very expensive rabbits—and one of the most influential, Art Basel Hong Kong, clashing this year with the Maastricht show—TEFAF rightly concentrates on its many strengths: Old Master and Modern paintings and sculptures, antiquities, antiques, works on paper, and jewels of all periods.

One of the oldest manmade objects on view is also among the most beautiful. Merrin, an antiquities dealer, has a second-century gold cup from the Iranian Marlik culture. Forged from a single lump of gold, then etched with stags, it is under 7cm tall, and on sale for \$1.2m. Other items to catch this correspondent's eye included some Qing-dynasty Chinese ceramics at the stand of Jorge Welsh, a gallery specialising in oriental art made for export. Pairs of giant *famille rose* soldier vases, 135 cm tall, occupy centre stage, while stage left are two tureens, 11 cm high and modelled as dormice. At Mark Weiss's stand are eight paintings by Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622), a group of works exceeded in number only in the Medici collections. And Derek Johns, another Old Master dealer, has an unusually large, 18th-century map of Jerusalem painted in Mexico by Ramon Ramirez (€600,000, \$637,000). The European etching on which it is based is unlikely to have depicted bare-chested Indians with bows and arrows defending the city walls.

The high quality of the art at TEFAF means that many less expensive pieces are covetable, too. Georg Laue, who deals in the cabinets of curiosities known as *Kunstkammer*, has a museum-quality amber cabinet; but just as desirable to this correspondent is a miniature Renaissance hourglass, its supports wrapped around with pearls and rubies, that has sold for €45,500. Carlton Hobbs, a dealer specialising in antique furniture, has another unusual courtly delight: a 17th-century, silk-embroidered travel box from Lyon. Covered in flowers, its coat of arms and its tableau of dogs chasing a stag are evidence of its once belonging to a titled member of the king's hunt.

Among the more ambitious displays, two stand out. Paul Kasmin's contemporary gallery commissioned Mattia Bonetti to design its stand; the result is rooms of cloud-themed furniture and wallpaper within. A landscape by Chaim Soutine (selling for \$1.35m) and a metal chandelier by Claude Lalane (\$250,000) are among other art works on show here, but what could have been visual chaos is in fact terrific evidence that eclecticism really can work. But the most talked-about booth belongs to Laffanour-Galerie Downtown, from Paris. It pays homage to the simplicity, proportions and power of wooden furniture and objects made by early 19th-century Shakers (an American Quaker offshoot; communal, celibate and pacifist). The stand is an evocation of one of their dwellings, complete with wood stove, baskets and a broom—and all the items have been sold.

It is such treasures that make TEFAF a joy for anyone interested in art and antiques. Having shaken off its overtones of self-satisfaction, the fair promises to get better still. Improving the quality of the food would be a welcome next step.

TEFAF 2015 closes on March 22nd



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