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Will the market
recover in 2025?

**Back to the future?
The art of divination**

An interview
with Jake Grewal

Around the Galleries

BRAFA Art Fair

An eye for eclecticism is key to the continued success of the long-running Brussels event, writes *Samuel Reilly*



1. *A rostrum of musicians in a loggia*, c. 1635, Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678), watercolour, gouache, red chalk, pen, brown ink, brown wash on coated paper, 34.5 × 28.2cm. Cologne

BRAFA is celebrating its 70th edition this month, underlining its reputation as the congenial elder statesman of the European art-fair circuit – though that’s not to say it’s running out of energy or ideas. ‘There’s always an evolution in the fair, year after year,’ says director Beatrix Bourdon. ‘But not revolution’ – and one would be hard pressed to name a fair with a more stable regime than the one here in Brussels. With security comes freedom – ‘you don’t have to be scared’ of trying things out, Bourdon says. As a non-profit organisation, BRAFA also doesn’t have to worry too much about profit margins – when Bourdon talks of ‘turnover’, she means in the roster, with 16 first-time exhibitors among the 130 galleries taking part.

Among them is the Old Master dealer Colnaghi, offering a terrific watercolour by Jacob Jordaens in which the viewer is induced to imagine their neck craning upwards while a band of five musicians, two parrots, a monkey and a dog peer down from a rostrum (Fig.1). Stoppenbach & Delestre and Galerie Nathalie

Obadia also make their debuts, boosting the fair’s offering of French 19th-century and contemporary art, respectively. ‘The selection of the new galleries is very eclectic – from archaeology to today,’ says Bourdon; she points to the antique Portuguese silverwares brought by Lisbon-based J. Baptista as something entirely novel this year.

BRAFA never divides itself into thematic sections; works from all times and places rub shoulders, a means of encouraging surprise encounters. Visitors wishing to avoid spoilers can look away now – but the standouts at this year’s edition include a masterpiece of Venetian quattrocento woodcarving, attributed to Michele Linder, as well as the only known automaton in the shape of a book. With a mechanism that could be activated to reveal a magician, this was the Swiss writer Maurice Sandoz’s favourite in his prodigious collection of automata; used as a guest book for visitors to his villa on the banks of Lake Geneva, it includes signatures from Anna von Bismarck and Charlie Chaplin.

This year brings a new collaboration with the KIK-IRPA (the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage) – the organisation behind the restoration of the Ghent Altarpiece – which is presenting its conservation practices at the fair through archival displays and daily workshops. Its stall is adjacent to that of the King Baudouin Foundation, which shows off the most recent additions to its collection of some 27,000 treasures – among them an exquisite Brussels Tapestry of c. 1530 depicting Solomon and Bathsheba, and a 17th-century still life by Judith Leyster. This year’s guest of honour is the artist Joana Vasconcelos, who is displaying two large-scale textile Valkyries. ‘We were looking for something with a lot of colours – and Joana herself is a very colourful woman!’, Bourdon says. For anyone wishing to escape the January gloom, Bourdon reminds us that the Eurostar is very convenient. 

BRAFA takes place at the Brussels Expo from 26 January to 2 February (brafa.art).