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Klaas Muller © Guy Kokken

Klaas Muller was elected Chairman of BRAFA in June 2024. He has been on the Board of Directors since 2015 and was appointed Vice-Chairman Antiques & Old Masters in 2021. From his new position as Chairman, he shares his vision for the future of BRAFA, which will be celebrating its 70th anniversary in 2025. He also discusses the Fair's strengths and the challenges that lie ahead.

Could you tell us a little bit about your connection with art?

My family, on my father's side, has always been very interested in art. My father who was a painter and sculptor, my sister and my brother-in-law have always had a penchant for contemporary art and design. My grandparents and some of my uncles, aunts and cousins were actively involved in the world of antiques. I therefore had the luxury of being immersed in this environment from a very young age; at home, we talked about little else. After studying art history in Ghent, I opened my gallery in the Sablon in Brussels in 2000.

How do you see your role as the new Chairman of BRAFA?

My colleagues, members of the non-profit organisation Foire des Antiquaires de Belgique, have decided to place their trust in me. I believe it is essential to prioritise dialogue and collaboration with the Board of Directors, the organising team and the other members of the association. I want to be a chairman who takes exhibitors' needs into account as much as possible, whilst simultaneously making decisions in the general interest of the Fair: it will be a balancing act. But I'm very confident: the Board of Directors and the team around me are 100% committed!

What is your vision for the future of BRAFA?

I feel very positive about the future of BRAFA. The Board of Directors is entirely made up of active art dealers. They, more than anyone, understand what matters in the art world and how the market is developing. What's more, the art market has always been somewhat isolated from the rest of the economy. If the stock market is up, for example, that's not automatically a guarantee for the art market. Conversely, if there is a general economic recession, sometimes the art market seems to be the only sector that is doing well.

What are the current challenges facing the Fair?

We are one of the most important art fairs in the world and we need to maintain that position. With the former Board of Directors and the exhibitors, we succeeded in organising one of the best editions in 2024. This organisation, this base, this "well-oiled machine," is something that we absolutely need to preserve. Naturally, there are always new challenges to face. Whilst contemporary art has and must always have its place at the Fair, I would like to place a little more emphasis on ancient and classical art, Asian and ethnic art, archaeology, and so on. We also need to continue to internationalise the Fair by attracting more exhibitors from countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the UK, Italy and Spain. In turn, these exhibitors will attract international clients. I would also like to develop closer relationships with national and international museums.

What are BRAFA's current strengths?

BRAFA has become a brand in its own right. We have managed to avoid the lure of passing trends and fashions. What matters is the quality of the featured works and galleries. Our move to Brussels Expo in 2022 has increased accessibility to the Fair, for visitors from outside Brussels and abroad. The general atmosphere amongst participants is positive and friendly, the exhibitors are welcoming and always ready to share their passion with visitors, and our audience is very varied, from art lovers to discerning collectors, by way of interior designers and museum curators. BRAFA is the first major event on the artistic calendar, and everyone look forward to discovering our Fair, which has become an unmissable event.

Can you tell us briefly about the new galleries that will be taking part in the next edition of the Fair?

We are delighted to announce the first participation of COLNAGHI (London, New York, Madrid and Brussels). It is one of the most important art galleries in the world, specialising in Old Masters paintings, prints and drawings. Galerie Nathalie Obadia (Paris and Brussels), a very fine gallery with an internationally renowned expertise in contemporary art, is another noteworthy addition to this year's list of participants. Other prestigious new exhibitors include Stoppenbach & Delestre (London and Paris), which presents French art from the Barbizon period to Impressionism and Post-Impressionism (nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). The Edouard Simoens Gallery (Knokke), which focuses on post-war and contemporary art, and Galerie Lowet de Wotrenge (Antwerp), specialising in paintings, drawings and sculptures by Flemish and Dutch Masters, will also be present. BRAFA will also be welcoming a new gallery specialising in Greco-Roman archaeology, Valerio Turchi (Rome), and the Dutch Stone Gallery (Baarn), which will be presenting crystals, fossils and meteorites. The Patrick Derom Gallery (Brussels) will be returning to BRAFA in 2025, currently managed by Patrick Derom and his son Edouard. Covering a vast period from 1880 to the present day, the gallery features works representing modern movements from Symbolism to pop art, with occasional forays into contemporary art.

Each year, visitors eagerly await the opening of the Fair. This year's guest of honour is Joana Vasconcelos.

Given that BRAFA will be celebrating its 70th anniversary in 2025, we decided to organise a festive and colourful edition! We are delighted to be welcoming Joana Vasconcelos as our guest of honour. This internationally-renowned Portuguese artist is particularly fond of colour, and her monumental installations and sculptures are truly impressive. Joana Vasconcelos' works feature in the greatest museums around the world.

The IRPA (Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique) will have a stand at BRAFA in 2025. What can you tell us about this collaboration?

The IRPA is an exceptional Belgian institution that remains little-known to the general public. We share a love of art and heritage. During the Fair, the IRPA will have its own stand next to the King Baudouin Foundation, with the aim of explaining its missions of research, conservation-restoration and the documentation of Belgian heritage. It will also be offering daily workshops to visitors on its stand at 2pm and 5pm. These will run in parallel with the BRAFA Art Talks, which will be held daily at 4pm on the stand of the King Baudouin Foundation.

Do you remember your first time at BRAFA? What was it like?

It was a good twenty years ago. I clearly remember the stress I felt at the time. As a young dealer, you ask yourself a lot of questions: are my pieces interesting enough? How will the appraisals go? How will the clients and colleagues react? And above all: will I be able to sell anything?

Over the course of the twenty years I've been exhibiting, BRAFA has helped me to grow and become more critical, which is reflected in the fact that I'm constantly on the lookout for quality pieces.

It was predicted that a number of fairs would disappear after Covid. Yet new fairs are added to the calendar every year. Is there room enough for everybody? How can fairs maintain their drawing power?

There is admittedly an overabundance of art fairs and auctions. Some are specialised, others are aimed at a wider audience. I think that the most important thing is to maintain our own identity and not be too influenced by what others are doing and thinking. BRAFA has always gone its own way, and that's an excellent way of doing things.