

ART

Maastricht's European Fine Art Fair

By BRIAN T. ALLEN | March 23, 2019 11:22 AM



The Grand Canal, Venice, looking South-East from the Palazzo Michiel dalle Colonne to the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, by Bernardo Bellotto. Oil on canvas. (Courtesy Charles Beddington Limited)

The world's most exclusive fair has widened its purview.

The European Fine Art Fair, called TEFAF, is held every March in Maastricht in the Netherlands. It's the grande dame of art fairs: not the world's oldest but in its 32nd year venerable enough, and certainly the best and most exclusive. It has a New York iteration now, and I've written about that, but it's Baby TEFAF.

This week, I spent two days at the Maastricht mothership. With 275 of the best dealers, and with each object vetted for quality and authenticity, it was both a feast and one way to understand the overall condition of the art market.

Of course, the “art market” is not just one market but a thousand niche markets. The Old Master market is much different from other markets and is itself parsed microscopically by nationality, chronology, school, fame, supply, condition, and fads. I’ll use a slice of this market to answer the question, “Why go to Maastricht?”

The big reason is seeing things like Bernardo Bellotto’s *View of the Grand Canal* from 1739. Bellotto (1722–1780) was, with Canaletto, the premier Venice view painter, and this picture is among the zeniths of the genre. It’s gorgeous, with miniaturist dazzle and big scale. So, there’s the highest quality. It’s the freshest of meat, too. Purchased by an English Grand Tourist in 1760, it has stayed with the family since then. It’s entirely new to the market and, to cut the gem more finely, has never been exhibited and was unknown to scholars.

This happens, still. I once saw an unknown Winslow Homer watercolor whose owner kept it under his bed. His grandfather, who bought it from Homer in 1892, had kept it under his. So, there’s quality and freshness in the Bellotto. The dealer, Charles Beddington, cleaned off nearly 300 years of dirt, but the schmutz was one of the things keeping it in pristine condition.

Now, the markets for Bellotto and Canaletto are different, though they lived roughly the same time, did views, and were both Venetian. Canaletto is the more famous. Bellotto did Venice landscapes, but he also did city scenes of Dresden, Vienna, and other cities whose local grandees hired him. So, he does not have a concession on the high-end Venice niche. He wandered inland. That Bellotto was only 17 when he painted this might be a subtle factor in market price. To me, it shows a formidable prodigy at work. For others, he might be just a smart kid.

Bellotto’s light and palette are different. Canaletto at his market prime painted blue skies, sparkling water, and rainbow colors. Bellotto’s light is silvery. His palette is more subdued. Bellotto’s paintings are filled with geometric forms, hundreds of squares and rectangles, which makes them look modern and edgy to me but too much so for the collector looking for the embodiment of an Old Master genre in its perfect form. Looking forward, for some, is too disconcerting.

If it were by Canaletto, with the color and light key juiced a bit higher, it would go for \$15 million. Beddington asks a fraction of that. He has a lovely Canaletto depicting Somerset House in London. Canaletto did English things, too, and the English scenes are less than the Venetian scenes. They’re offbeat Canaletto subjects. Yet the name “Canaletto” is a mighty one. This English scene costs £6 million, still more than the Bellotto.

Weiss Gallery offered an extraordinary Jacobean “costume piece,” or fancy dress portrait, that was in near-pristine condition, having descended from the subject’s family since it was painted in 1620. It shows the young Thomas Dallison with soft sfumato brushwork, sumptuous silk, a lace collar and cuff, kid gloves, and a blue ostrich feather hat. A silver-embroidered mantle and sash with little lace droplets were the height of fashion and taste. Dallison was clearly a rich and ambitious young man. He later took the king’s side in the Civil War and died in 1645 in the Battle of Naseby. Paul Van Somer, the Flemish emigre artist who painted the picture, is an enigmatic figure but certainly a fine talent. He presented Dallison with none of the stiffness of Elizabethan portraits, most of whose subjects have hard, porcelain-like faces.

Both this picture, priced at £250,000, and Porcini Gallery’s new-to-the-market painting of St. John the Baptist by Jusepe Ribera, at €900,000, show how distorted, no, distended and disgusting, the market for contemporary art has become. Agnew’s, always wonderful, had a sublime little painting of Jesus by Luis Morales, also fresh, at \$500,000. He was a peer of El Greco, with a Christian vision powered by sadness and suffering rather than salvation and triumph. Lowell Libson and Jonny Yarker offered “Two Boys and a Bladder” by Joseph Wright of Derby from 1769, again unknown and hidden on the wall of an English country house for 250 years. It’s an early tribute to the Industrial Revolution, then new, so it’s suffused with youth, discovery, and mystery. Yarker is a young dealer and an art-history Ph.D., so his perspective is different. It was already sold when I got there so I couldn’t get the price.

These pictures have presence, heritage, vision, and freshness. When I see people paying \$80 million for a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat, a good but limited and immature artist, or \$50 million for work by Jeff

Koons, until recently the highest price ever paid at auction for a living artist, I despair of the future of high culture. The Van Somer and Bellotto and many other Old Masters I loved are silver to their dross.

TEFAF has certainly broadened its scope over the years. It was once strictly Old Masters and over time has added antiquities and tribal art. This year, it has pushed to feature dealers selling modern and contemporary art because that's where the big money is. That's where rich young collectors are, too. They add spark, and I suppose their presence cuts collisions of motorized wheelchairs. The Old Master crowd is, well, old.

Most of the modern art, art from, say, 1900 to 1970, was not junk but safe stuff. I saw lots of so-so Legers, Louise Nevelsons, a litter of small Giacometti sculptures, some nice works by Beckmann and Kirchner, a small de Stahl painting from 1952, a Mondrian from 1908, Mondrian before he was Mondrian but still lovely. Pace had it, and I believe the asking price was \$1.3 million. Pace had a small section of early Mondrians, mostly squiggles, but this one is complex enough to see where he was headed. Maastricht is still the peak of Old Masters shows. There's a real drop in quality after the Impressionists.

Some booths had prints by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein that were big, splashy, not what I'd call crappy but let's say the buyers were either decorators or rich people insecure in their taste. I'll reserve comment on the work by living Asian artists since I don't know the field at all. There are some antiquities dealers but I wonder, dimly in terms of aesthetics, how much good material is on the marketplace. It's a legally fraught field because of so much theft and illegal movement.

I saw a fine, strong sculpture by John Chamberlain from 1991, offered by Karsten Greve, a German dealer in Cologne and Paris. It's big, important, and handsome, and at €1.9 million it seems reasonable. Its quality is unquestionable. The fair is embracing contemporary art in baby steps.

Three dealers seem to have climbed to the pinnacle in offering art that was both new and the best of its kind. Their booths were fascinating and clever. Massimo De Carlo is a Milan dealer with a handsome, eclectic selection of work by Piotr Uklanski, Luigi Ontani, Yan Pei-Ming, and Jim Hodges, very international, all new, and all good. The Hodges, at \$475,000, was strong and one of the few American things at the fair. It makes the point that the art market is a world market with many bases aside from New York. Massimo De Carlo, for instance, has a shop in Hong Kong.

Fergus McCaffrey from New York was the only dealer with an all-American booth and, as far as I can tell, the only dealer at TEFAF featuring a single-artist booth. Barry X Ball's *Hermaphrodite* is probably the sensation of the fair. Ball takes famous works of Old Master and ancient sculpture, like the Louvre's *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* from Hellenistic Greece and about 100 B.C., takes hundreds of photos, generates a 3D scan and selects exotic stone. A computer-programmed machine then carves the stone, making a hyper-realistic replica that the artist then polishes by hand, itself an arduous part of production. It's 21st-century technology changing how art is made. If Bernini or Michelangelo had had the technology, they would have used every bit of it. Ball's *Hermaphrodite* wasn't for sale, but smaller works by Ball using the same approach were offered — and selling — for less than \$500,000.

These are not rip-offs of something else. They're freestanding creatures of our culture, our technology, and gorgeous materials. Of course, the Gender Fluidists in the art world loved Ball's *Hermaphrodite* for its topicality. We're in a new, bizarre gender war. Unsaid is that hermaphrodites were figures in Greek and Roman mythology. Like unicorns, Santa Klaus, and the Easter Bunny, they're not for real. That said, I was delighted with Ball's work and Fergus McCaffrey's bravery in presenting a single American artist. Ball is good, and I was proud to see American art so well represented.



European Fine Art Fair 2019

Sleeping Hermaphrodite, 2008-2017

Barry X Ball

Translucent pink Iranian onyx, Greek Thassos marble, stainless

Some of the contemporary and modern art dealers confessed to me how sheepish they felt in pricing work as they choose, as the market dictates, really, while revered Old Master painting, truly smashing work like the Ribera, for instance, or the Somer, or the Morales, sells for less. They know, as I do, that Mr. Market has one crazy set of rules.

Alex Vervoordt's booth showed one approach future fairs might encourage. He's a smart dealer based in Antwerp, again with a place in Hong Kong. His booth was the most eclectic and creative, with an installation of Minimalism, antiquities, Old Master tapestries, and a big, bold, complex figure study by the underpriced and understudied French artist Paul Helleu. Anchoring his booth were two great things. He had a splendid painting from Kazuo Shiraga from 1963. He was the last Abstract Expressionist giant with a good, new idea. He was Japanese and painted very bold, intense works with his feet while in a deep state of meditation. At €2.5 million, it's a good buy. That was on one end of his booth. On the other was a El Anatsui wall tapestry for \$1.1 million made in 2017. Mixed with everything else, these two things created an overall impression of harmony and good taste, spanning many centuries, united by high quality.

It's an art fair, and the bottom line for an art fair is buying and selling. Amid the refined frenzy, Franz Francken's "Death Playing the Fiddle for an Old Man" from about 1620 is a typically Flemish reminder that money, ultimately, is useless. It's the gentlest nudge and at £36,000, a fine and precious thing. Rafael Valls, a London dealer in small Dutch and Flemish cabinet pieces, has it. A finer point to take from everything I saw at the fair? Enjoy it while you can.