

maastricht opinion

Our top tips as technology takes over at TEFAF

■ The Maastricht fair is as stunning as ever – let's just remember to focus on the art



Ivan Macquisten
reports

THE Rise of the Machines was the title of the third *Terminator* film, and it applies equally well to the latest edition of *TEFAF Maastricht*. Laptops, smart phones, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook at this year's fair played arguably almost as important a role as the art itself.

The upside is that it made the debate and engagement immediate and proved an excellent lesson for those less well versed in 24-hour news.

The downside is that many people were so busy snapping photos and tweeting that they could not focus on the art and objects on display. I'm glad to say the art won out in the end though and their depth discussions show that this fair values scholarship as much as commerce. I was lucky enough to eavesdrop on what was effectively a pop-up lecture by Martyn Gregory on 19th century Hong Kong, Macao and the opium trade, as he shared his



Above: what *TEFAF Maastricht* is all about – bringing vast quantities of the best art and objects together under one roof.

enthusiasm with visitors to his stand. Where is his TV series?

Fast-paced technology and the compulsion to connect with the rest of the world, however inanely, is such a dominant feature at today's fairs that *TEFAF Maastricht* was guaranteed global blanket coverage throughout the event

within seconds of anything happening. I know because I played my part in this. It shouldn't all be didactic; tweets should amuse as well, but the difficulty applying the quality filter to flush out all the dross.

At every talk and press meeting, mobile phones shot up to capture views of the slideshows on stage. I

managed to tweet the artist's view of the proposed new art depot in Rotterdam within seconds of curator Sjarel Ex unveiling it at Friday's symposium.

Others had similar scoops. It's great if you are a journalist, because you can talk to your audience instantly. However, the pressure takes its toll too, after a while, and you tire much quicker, which can prove quite a challenge when you still have more than half the stands to cover and the distraction does not help.

For the exhibitors, all this additional attention can, paradoxically, make it hard to stand out from the crowd, so several used Twitter to good

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effect to invite the media onto their stands for special Q&As, or sent round staff to the press office to woo hacks hunched over laptops as they filed copy or uploaded their latest blogs.

Exhibitors also got in on the act with iPads embedded in their stands broadcasting mini seminars and promotional films about additional services and expertise.

If they are having to be more savvy, so are the journalists. Time was when they would visit the fair, then mull over their notes in the town centre cafes before distilling their thoughts a few days later into perfect prose for publication. This distillation allowed for thought, analysis and depth. Now it's all noses to the screen punctuated

MY SIX TOP TIPS FOR TEFAF TO CONSIDER:

- Appoint the lady who runs the press office to the main board. She has everything under control. Titia Vellenga is the only female board representative and the Executive Committee is all-male.
- Insist that the venue's owners improve the lavatory facilities for women. I saw too many queues at the entrance to the fair and a lot of disgruntled faces.
- Review the catering operations at the various food bars. Service was extremely slow and uncoordinated. Twenty minutes waiting for a seat and another 30 minutes waiting to be served is stressful, kills conversation as you fight for attention, undermines the TEFAF brand and damages the otherwise excellent client experience.
- The coffee at *TEFAF Maastricht* is terrible. Stick with what you're good at and introduce a decent coffee franchise that will also generate a good revenue stream. To avoid costly accidents and a build-up of rubbish, ban takeaway cups and keep coffee drinking in restricted areas away from stands. Everyone wins, including the exhibitors who are forced to take a much-needed break from their stands for coffee.
- Consider letting dealers brand their stands more obviously. They can do this in a sympathetic manner. I lost count of the number of visitors craning their necks to see whose display they were looking at. How many visitors loved the art but left a stand not knowing who the exhibitor was? The result is that the dealers miss out while the fair brand benefits from the quality of their displays.
- ban the selfie stick before visitors add that to the mix.

MY FIVE TOP TIPS FOR TEFAF VISITORS:

- Take a snack in with you, so you have something to eat immediately when low blood sugar hits.
- Also pack some mints. The dry atmosphere of the fair can leave even the freshest mouth with killer breath and the free water is not enough by itself.
- Ladies, forget the heels, keep them for the evening.
- Take a break every two hours or you won't make it round and, if you can, allow two full days to cover the fair and take it section by section.
- Talk to the dealers. That's what they're there for and they are only too happy to talk to someone taking an interest in their art and objects. And don't be afraid to admit you don't know anything about a piece. They do not expect you to be the expert.

by the occasional hack huddle as they frantically search for a new angle.

It would be interesting to survey all the output and see if they/we have added to the quality of what went before digital took over.

The ability to communicate in more ways than we ever have before must bring new journalistic opportunities, especially in the visual world of fine and applied arts. One way or another we all find ourselves feeding the insatiable appetite of the worldwide web, and occasionally we should take a breather to reflect rather than rush to publish, if we want to maintain standards.

Conscious of this at ATG, we have been mindful of the need to create a balance between the immediacy of social media/web coverage and the more considered pre- and post-fair features and analysis, which allows us to publish extensive content on the event.

With this idea of balance still in mind, the stands I enjoyed the most were the ones that banned photography. Tanakaya of Paris, who specialise in Japanese Fine Prints, presented an almost zen-like display, aptly titled *Atmospheres*, wire suspending key works across the space,

around which you could walk in cathedral calm, noting the beautiful details within each work.

The subdued lighting at Blairnair enhanced the rich hues of their Arts & Crafts furniture but could not have been described as photo friendly. All the better for them as it also created a welcoming air, whose charm made you want to linger.

Wandering down the aisles having placed my mobile phone firmly back in my pocket, it was refreshing to see what I had missed on my first tour of the stands. It was a little like going for a walk along a well-known route that you only ever drive along in the car. Suddenly you become aware of things that you never noticed before... and remind yourself of just how wonderful nature or, in this case art, can be. Get up close to an early 17th century Flemish landscape or slightly later flower painting and you will see what I mean.

Social media may be adding more of a buzz, but here and there we need to switch it off and concentrate more directly on what makes this the world's greatest art fair.

■ See next week's ATG for Anna Brady's review of the fair and its sales.



Above: the Bel Etage stand offered a superb mix of Art Nouveau and other pieces.

Cannes

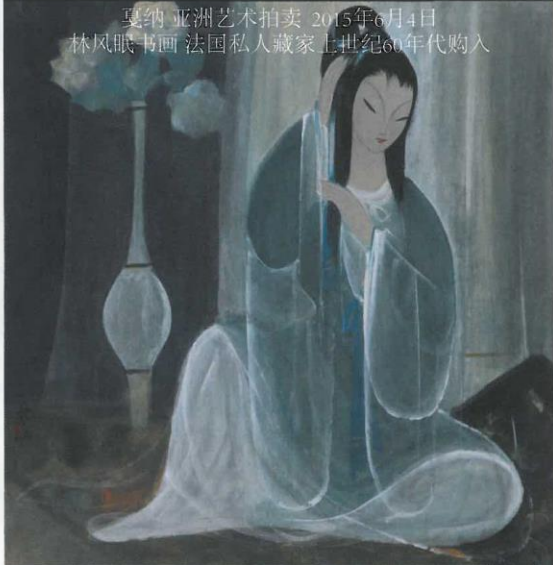
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