

going dutch



The art fair at Maastricht draws serious collectors and industry heavyweights from all over the world. Two local fair organizers venture across the pond.

BY LAUREN COMITEAU

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHANNES TIMMERMANS

■ “You have to see the difference here,” says Scott Diament, co-founder of the Palm Beach Jewelry, Art & Antique Show, excitedly calling a companion over to view *Sous la Pergola a Marquayrol*, an oil painting of French pointillist Henri Martin. They are at the European Fine Art Fair at Maastricht, the Netherlands.

“If you get really close to this painting, it looks like someone took finger paints and went like this, more or less, right?” Diament asks rhetorically, dabbing his hands in the air. Stepping back, he continues, “But if I look at it from here, it’s amazing how it changes depending on the perspective you look at it from and how you light it. This was key to this (pointillist) movement.” He takes a short stroll down the gray-carpeted aisle of the fair—also known as TEFAF, or just plain Maastricht—and calls out with the same enthusiasm, “That’s our exact wall! The exact thickness and exact felt.” Then he looks down. “But our carpet is cream-colored. We like ours better.”



The Maastricht art and antique fair is one of the world's most important destinations for collectors and art enthusiasts. More than 200 dealers show their finest pieces. Opposite page: Scott Diament checks out a Rembrandt. Preceding pages: Diament (left) and his business partner Kris Charamonde examine the merchandise.



Whether it's the art on the walls or the walls themselves, Diament's kid-in-a-candy-store enthusiasm is clear. And infectious. The boyish-looking 34-year-old in the pin-striped suit has traveled across the Atlantic with one of his two partners, Kris Charamonde (third partner Rob Samuels stayed home), to network, glean ideas, recruit art dealers, ruminate on the state of the art world and ferret out its latest trends, and ... oh, yes, see the art. Simply put, if you're a serious art collector or dealer, the only place to be in March is Maastricht. "This is the place you can come to purchase the treasures coveted by humans for the past 3,000 years," Charamonde says. "It's a very unique place. The rarest, most expensive, unusual pieces in each genre are here."

The nineteenth annual Maastricht fair boasts 218 art and antiques dealers from 15 countries, all under one roof (a roof, by the way, that's roughly the size of four soccer fields). Organizers estimate there are between 15,000 and 25,000 objects for sale with a collective value between \$500 million and \$1 billion. It's a pretty hefty price tag, but when you factor in what's up for sale, it all begins to add up: Rembrandt's *The Apostle James the Major* (1661) with an asking price between 33 and 36 million euros, and his *Young Man with a Red Doublet* (1633) for 27 million euros; Vincent van Gogh's *House with Sunflowers* (1886) for \$7.5 million; and a pair of Meissen Birds (known as Bittern) modeled by Johann Joachim Kandler in 1735 for 5 million euros. The museum-worthy list goes on: Monet, Manet, Degas, Klimt, Botero, Picasso, Pissarro, Mondrian, Gauguin, Munch, Koons, Warhol, Lichtenstein. And that's just a sampling from TEFAF's modern art section, which has been strengthened in recent years to bring it up to the same "best of the best" standard that TEFAF claims to offer in all its other areas. From Roman marbles, Greek bronzes, Cypriot limestones, Byzantine bronzes, Ming pottery, and old masters to tapestries, jewelry, furniture, manuscripts, Bibles, candlesticks and wallpaper—if you're looking for it, chances are you'll find it here.

"I call this the Olympic games of the art trade," says dealer Floris

J. van der Ven of Vanderven & Vanderven Oriental Art, which specializes in Chinese ceramics. "It's an international event. We all train to be fit for this fair, which means we all keep special pieces for this fair because we all want to win a gold medal here. We want to sell the best pieces. And that's why the fair is so successful." Van der Ven sold two of his six best—what he calls his "Rembrandts"—at this year's fair (one of them a seventh-century terra-cotta camel from the Tang Dynasty), where he does about 30 percent of his annual business. "The good thing about Chinese art is that it speaks many languages," he notes.

When this year's Maastricht is over, most sellers, by all accounts, have done well, some even noting a "buying frenzy." With a record 84,000 visitors, up eight percent from last year, organizers say buying here has reflected strong sales throughout the art world. While the Rembrandts haven't sold, plenty of other notable works have: Gagosian Gallery has sold a Calder mobile for about \$2 million; Wildenstein & Company has sold Paul Gauguin's *L'Oiseau Bleu* and Camille Pissarro's *View on the Louvre*; Ming furniture specialist Grace Wu Bruce has parted with a treasured Pingtuan table (late-sixteenth-to-early-seventeenth-century China); and Royal-Athena Galleries has sold a Roman marble head of Alexander the Great as Dioscurus (160-180 A.D.) for about 300,000 euros. "Art is a hard asset, like oil, diamonds, silver, gold and platinum," Diament says of the buying craze. "In times of political uncertainty, people want hard assets." William Mitchell of London's John Mitchell Fine Paintings agrees. "Finally, people realize this is an alternative place to put their money," he says. "It's enjoyable and it shows a good return."

But the majority of visitors to the Maastricht fair are, in fact, not buyers. "This is like a walking museum, where you have the added excitement that you can touch and buy things," Mitchell explains. He's been exhibiting in

Maastricht for the past 16 years and also has shown in Palm Beach. "The great bulk of visitors here are coming to see famous paintings, not necessarily to buy," he says, adding that the ones who do buy, buy big. Mitchell has sold a major work by Amsterdam artist Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *The Feathered Choir* (1636-1695). The seventeenth-century baroque painting depicting an Aesop's fable has carried an asking price of about half-million pounds (\$920,000).

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"We visit every year," Maastricht resident Fine Hermanns says. She's been coming to the fair with her husband since before the city's Pictura Fine Art Fair merged with its international antiques fair in 1985 to form TEFAF. "We see a lot that we can't see the rest of the year, not in our neighborhood." But in all that time, they have never purchased a thing. "It's beautiful to see, but it's a lot of money!" she says with a laugh.

Van der Ven estimates that only 10 percent of Maastricht's visitors come to purchase. But when he says that's part of TEFAF's success, you can't help but be convinced. "At every fair you need a group of people who are the background figures, the spectators," he says. "You have the people on stage who actually perform the play. But you must create a buying atmosphere. You need a buzz. So maybe only 10 percent of the people are buyers. You still need 90 percent spectators."



Top to bottom: Charamonde and Diament discuss the finer points of Dutch old-master paintings. Charamonde examines a bracelet. Many of the dealers showing in Maastricht also show at the Palm Beach Jewelry, Art & Antique Show.

The fair's success story is something to marvel at. Van der Ven says Maastricht was originally chosen as the site to please organizers of the already existing Delft Fair, who demanded any second Dutch fair be held 200 kilometers away. That concession has proven to be a boon. A former mining town, Maastricht is close to both Belgium and Germany. And, van der Ven points out, it's an art-and-antiques no-man's-land. "We're all neutral here, it's no one's home market," he says. "It's also a destination fair. People take the effort to come to this tiny place. ... They stay for at least two days and they want a souvenir of their trip, so they buy. Commercially, it's the best principle."

Now, what began as an old-Dutch-masters fair now outshines the big shows in Paris, New York and London. This is the place where representatives of more than 110 museums worldwide (including the Metropolitan, Washington D.C.'s National Gallery of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Tate in London) come to expand their collections. It's the place where the famously private Wildenstein & Company chose to exhibit for the first time in its history, where three-fourths of all Dutch old-master paintings available on the international market can be found under one roof. "That doesn't happen in any other situation in the world," says Mitchell. Whether because of the deals made at Maastricht or the ones that follow as a result, "Maastricht is simply the most important fair of them all," says Dr. Andreas Buhler of Stuttgart's Kunsthaus Buhler.

While Maastricht may be in a league of its own, Diament and Charamonde have found their own recipe for success in Palm Beach, where visitors come mainly to purchase. At their Palm Beach Jewelry, Art & Antique Show, on February 16-20, the two offer a broader price spectrum, mixing exclu-

sive pieces with the more affordable. "That's what we found brings in the big crowds on the American side," says the business-oriented Charamonde. "We're getting the top-level collectors to fly in for it. And we're also getting an attorney from Boca Raton to drive up and start his art appreciation by walking through the fair and seeing a \$300,000 charger, and then going to the other guy and saying, 'I can go home with a Ming plate for \$1,200.'"

While the old masters and religious icons found in abundance at Maastricht aren't big sellers in Palm Beach, Italian rococo desks go over well, Charamonde says. Nineteenth-century paintings, sculptures, decorative arts, Asian porcelain, and jewelry are also coveted. And it's not just what they buy but how they buy it that sets Palm Beach purchasers apart from the mainly European crowds at Maastricht. "The Belgians and Germans here, when they do buy, it's extremely conservative and takes a long time," says Mitchell. "Whereas in Palm Beach, we find they make up their mind, give you a check, and go away with the picture. Here it can take weeks." Ray Waterhouse of London's Waterhouse & Dodd, which specializes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings, says, "Here they say deliver it to our house and we'll wire money. It's much more of a gentleman's agree-

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ment, the old-school way. Whereas in America, it's get out the plastic. That makes sales easier."

Waterhouse & Dodd, whose clientele is mostly American, did well at last year's Palm Beach Jewelry, Art & Antique Show, where the firm also ran an art advisory service (it actually makes house calls) and served on the vetting committee (which is less stringent than Maastricht's). "I think what's amazing is how they built up that fair in three years into a major fair," Waterhouse says of Diament and Charamonde. "It's a very worthwhile, successful fair."

Diament and Charamonde entered into the show world via

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Charamonde visits with a porcelain dealer, gleaning ideas and resources for the Palm Beach show.



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jewelry: Both deal in antique and period pieces in West Palm Beach. After attending other people's shows for years, they believed they could do it better. They were the first to sign with the Palm Beach County Convention Center in West Palm Beach—before it was even built. But they had no trouble attracting exhibitors and getting deposits a full two years before their first fair. "People were giving us checks, giving them to people they had never met, who had never been in this business before," says Diament.

Adds Charamonde, "People loved the idea it would be a vetted show, that it would be a broad spectrum in price, that we were really going to mix it up, have a very eclectic fair."

They also loved the logistics. Palm Beach in February has a lot of appeal, even without the art. "All we said was Palm Beach, and people were like, 'Tell us more!'" says Charamonde. "Even in Milan, Palm Beach has an amazing cachet." The demographics and wealth of the area also appealed.

In a weird way, the events of September 11, 2001, also helped Diament and Charamonde. With Americans initially wary of traveling to Europe, the dealers came to them. In their first year, Diament and Charamonde sold out. Last year—their third—they had 205 exhibitors and more than 50,000 visitors. "There was unbelievable buying," says Diament. "Some dealers sold out their entire inventory." But this year,



Diament and Charamonde take a break from the action at the Maastricht fair. The show is so large that four soccer fields could fit under its roof.

Charamonde predicts, European art will be a hard sell. With the euro surging once again against the dollar, he's wary about signing up too many European dealers. "I switched my strat-

egy," he says of his new emphasis on American dealers, including Gerald Peters and New York's Debra Force. "American art will be hot this year."

But the "diehards," like Hancocks jewelers of London, will return, Charamonde says. Walking to one of their favorite exhibitors, Diament and Charamonde immediately start gushing over a 56-carat-diamond Oscar Heyman bracelet. It's invisibly set, so you don't see any prongs. Charamonde explains that the "floating in air" look is due to the way the diamonds are cut—"grooved and set into metal like railroad tracks." Hancocks' Amy Burton elaborates: Oscar Heyman & Brothers—"the jeweler's jeweler"—made this "mystery" setting in 1975 for Van Cleef & Arpels in New York. Invisibly set diamonds are extremely rare, she says. Most mystery settings were made in ruby or sapphire. The bracelet retails for 350,000 euros, and Burton shows it a lot over the course of a day. Interest also is strong in Hancocks' Laliques, while in the United States, Burton says, David Webb is all the rage.

"I love selling to Americans," she says. "They know how to wear jewelry. They're not scared of going out wearing a big brooch, a big bracelet, a big ring. Whereas I think here, people are slightly more apprehensive." Part of the thrill of selling, she says, is seeing "someone go, 'I'm going to wear it to this party and I can't wait!' They're going to enjoy it. And

that's really exciting. Jewelry shouldn't be locked away in a safety deposit box. It's made to be worn."

Back at the Vandervan & Vandervan exhibit, van der Ven is waxing poetic about how art fairs have created a new "art consumer," whom he differentiates from the old-fashioned collector. "He's in his 40s to 60s, has his own business, or is the CEO of a huge company," van der Ven observes. With little time to shop around, he goes to destination fairs, where everything is under one roof. "He comes to the fair because he wants to buy art. He just needs to know the price. It's love at first sight. He buys with his heart." And for those who don't exactly fit the new-consumer bill, van der Ven says, buying art is all about priorities. To prove his point, he goes to the back of his exhibit and returns with a blue-and-white porcelain cup and saucer from China's Kangxi period (1662-1722). Although it has two small chips, it's "perfectly good quality," he assures. "And for only 250 euros, you can have something that's 300 years old. That's less expensive than my shoes."

"It's a sale!" says Diament, pulling \$300 from his pocket for his first fair purchase. The dish set is the so-called "step-in" model, the possible start of a future porcelain collection. For Diament, it may also prove to be his start with this renowned dealer. For in the end, these shows—whether in Maastricht or Palm Beach—are all about the deal. ❧

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