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Lessons in Modernism at the Tefaf Fair

By Martha Schwendener

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Tefaf New York, the venerable art fair that started in Maastricht, the Netherlands, and moved to New York to try to capture the American market, differs from other art fairs open this weekend in one particular way: Tefaf has 50 curators and conservators vetting the objects — I saw them at work — with magnifying glasses, flashlights and all manner of technical equipment. Their job is to analyze and authenticate the works, weeding out potential fakes or forgeries and assessing the quality and labeling. (Contemporary art fairs like Frieze New York are not typically vetted.)

The vetters will be gone by the time you arrive at the Park Avenue Armory, but the results of that rigorous process remain. The vetters raise the bar for the 90 galleries from 13 countries here and the quality of the work is unsurprisingly top notch. Modern and contemporary painting and sculpture dominate the spring fair, but antiquities, ethnographic objects, design and furnishings are in the mix. Twenty-four new galleries are exhibiting, some with familiar blue-chip names like Gagosian, Gladstone Gallery, Hauser & Wirth, Marian Goodman and Matthew Marks Gallery (prompting complaints from some dealers that the fair's identity is evolving away from Tefaf's historical roots.)

Art by modern masters has been mounted for the first time in the common areas. A giant Alexander Calder mobile is suspended over the entrance to the fair. A Robert Motherwell canvas hangs in the rear and a Robert Rauschenberg painting on mirrored aluminum is in the stairway. With so much to see, here are some of the threads I saw running throughout the fair.

Modern Masters

From left, modern masters at Di Donna Galleries: “Tête-à-Tête,” bronze sculpture by Joan Miró; “Design for a Tarot Card,” by Kay Sage; “Femme et oiseau devant le soleil,” by Joan Miró; “Mask,” by Anvik; “Monstre,” 1946, by Francis Picabia; “Head of a Man,” 1947, by Max Ernst.

The booths at the entrance set the tone for the fair, and those at the front of the Armory do not disappoint. Helly Nahmad has a presentation titled “The 1920s: A Golden Age” with a Fernand Léger still life from 1927 — an uncharacteristic subject for the mechanically included artist — as well as a large canvas by Max Ernst, an artist who pops up several times in the fair. In another booth at the entrance, David Zwirner has a sleek presentation of Josef Albers and Giorgio Morandi, two painters you might not normally pair. However, their respectively disciplined-but-soulful approaches to minimalism work well together. Deeper inside the fair, Di Donna has one of the most notable and noticeable booths. Painted a deep blue and entered through a small arcade, the presentation is a continuation of their current gallery show, “Moon Dancers: Yup’ik Masks and the Surrealists.” On display here is a canvas painted by Francis Picabia in 1946 depicting a crude postwar monster, alongside works by Ernst, Yves Tanguy and Miró, paired with oddly simpatico masks from the central coast of Alaska.

Latin America

From left, Carrara marble sculpture by Pablo Atchugarry; “Metaesquema” by Hélio Oiticica; and three works by Alfredo Volpi at Galeria Sur. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times

Mexico and South America are well represented in the fair. Galería Sur from Montevideo is showing paintings by Hélio Oiticica and Alfredo Volpi, mounted on tangerine-colored walls, as well as the marble sculptures of Pablo Atchugarry from Uruguay. The entrance to Sean Kelly’s booth has a sly sculpture: it looks like a cardboard remake of Donald Judd’s vertical boxes, but it was crafted by the Mexican artist Jose Dávila. Inside is an undated abstraction by Loló Soldevilla, a pioneering Cuban modernist. Marian Goodman has a wonderfully spare display of squat limestone sculptures by Gabriel Orozco that toy with the idea of cubes or dice, but include references to body parts. You might learn the most about Latin American modernism at León Tovar, whose dark gray walls are hung salon style with bright, geometrically shaped paintings by the Venezuelans Francisco Salazar, Carlos Cruz-Diez and Jesús Rafael Soto; the Argentines Manuel Espinosa and Rogelio Polesello; the Colombian Jorge Riveros, and Carmelo Arden Quin, an Uruguayan artist.

The Sixties

From left, “The Rebecca” by Robert Indiana; “Smoker #5 (Mouth #19)” and “Smoking Cigarette #1,” both by Tom Wesselmann, at Galerie Gmurzynska.

The late 1950s, blurring into the ’60s, are to contemporary art what the 1910s and ’20s were to modernism: a fertile era that is still being revisited by curators and dealers. In Gmurzynska’s booth, which was designed by Robin Scott-Lawson to include a concrete finish on the walls, Pop Art by Robert Indiana and Tom Wesselmann is displayed alongside body prints (or “Anthropometries”) by Yves Klein. Galerie Vallois specializes in Neorealism, and the works here by Niki de Saint Phalle, one of its participants, are the real draw. Her scruffy 1964 portrait of Marilyn Monroe, crafted out of wood, fabric and found objects, is not to be missed. Fergus McCaffrey has works from another movement that extended into the ’60s: the Gutai group from Japan, an “action” approach to artmaking. A terrifically bright, almost scary abstract canvas from 1961 by Sadamasa Motonaga hangs at the entrance. Inside are works by Kazuo Shiraga, Fujiko Shiraga and Toshio Yoshida that approach painting as an explosive performance.

Furniture and Design

Contemporary furniture design has a starring role at Tefaf. Here, Nilufar Gallery, from Milan.

Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times

Scandinavian design has a strong presence at the spring fair. Hostler Burrows has turned one of the upstairs rooms at the Armory into a dark, lounge-like environment with prismatic chandeliers by Frida Fjellman and sculptures inspired by botanical and biological specimens by Eva Zethraeus. Modernity from Stockholm has a large, terrific, blood-colored vase from the 1940s by Danish ceramist Axel Salto, while Nilufar from Milan has a bold, mirrored booth with sexy wooden furniture by the great Italian-born, Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992). Booths from Paris like Oscar Graf and Galerie Lefebvre have more traditional, stately modern pieces. At Graf, a gilded birch settee by Georges de Feure sits quietly under a spotlight in the darkened space, while at Lefebvre a lamp with several branches was created by Jean Royére (1902-1981), a designer who worked for the Shah of Iran and other Middle Eastern kings before moving, at the end of his life, to Pennsylvania.