

Tefaf Maastricht Refocuses Its Lineup

By Nina Siegal

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Fernand Léger's "Nature Morte au Compas," from 1929, is being shown by Galerie Gmurzynska.

MAASTRICHT, the Netherlands — Tefaf, one of the world's most opulent art fairs, held every year in the southern Netherlands town of Maastricht, offers an encyclopedic array of paintings, sculpture, antiques and antiquities, presented in custom booths designed as mini-museums. This year's showcase takes place at the Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Center from Saturday to March 24, decorated, as usual, with wall-to-wall carpeting and thousands of tulips.

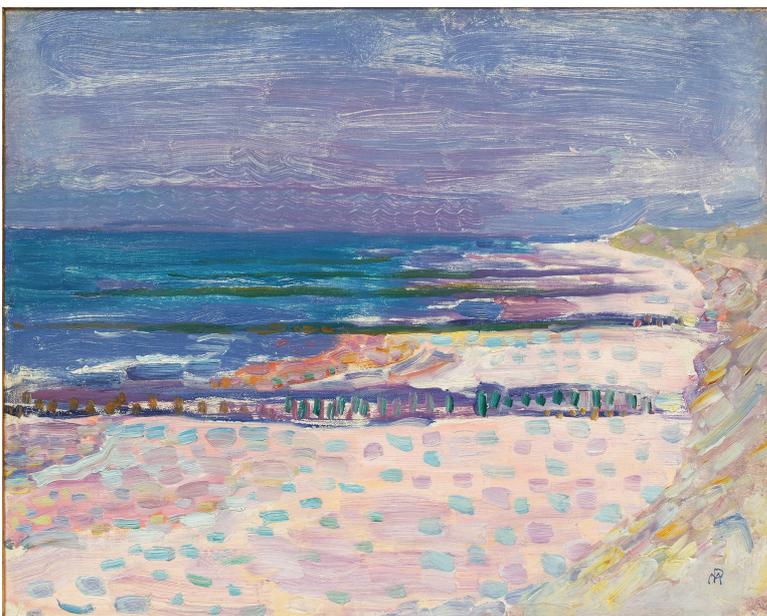
Because it was originally organized by a group of dealers, who wanted to remain exclusive, Tefaf Maastricht has often seemed like a closed circuit to many art dealers. Those who took part were almost always invited to return, leaving very little room for new exhibitors. Even very successful newer galleries didn't bother to apply, sure that they wouldn't stand a chance.

When he became the new chief executive of Tefaf Maastricht in 2015, Patrick van Maris said one of his primary objectives was to make the application process for the Maastricht fair more transparent, to encourage new applicants and to bring in fresh blood. This year, for the first time, visitors will start to see the results of that process, as 40 new dealers replace some longtime participants — about a 15 percent turnover in a showcase of 279 exhibitors.

The greatest change is taking place in the Tefaf Modern section, which welcomes 14 new galleries, including international heavy-hitters such as Pace Gallery from New York; **Galerie Gmurzynska**, based in Zurich; Germany's Sprüth Magers; and Simon Lee from London.

The effort to revitalize the section was spearheaded by the Belgian contemporary art dealer Christophe Van de Weghe, chairman of the Tefaf Modern selection committee this year and a member of the board of trustees.

“The Modern section of Tefaf had to be improved; that's a reality, it just had to be improved,” he said in a telephone interview. “A lot of our collectors were saying that the quality of the dealers was not high enough. Well, now that has changed.”



Piet Mondrian's "Beach With Five Piers at Domburg," 1909, from Pace Gallery. Pace Gallery

Mathias Rastorfer, chief executive and a co-owner of Gmurzynska, said that his gallery participated for several years when Tefaf Maastricht first allowed galleries showing 20th-century art in the early 2000s, but then stopped because he felt the focus of the fair wasn't really on modern art.

“Tefaf was a fair you went to for old masters, jewelry and fantastic designs,” he said. “And then you would also look at 20th century and if there was something interesting, you might buy there as well.”

However, his gallery has taken part in the last two editions of Tefaf New York, a satellite venture begun in 2016, where he felt the modern and contemporary art were given a great deal more attention. When Mr. Van de Weghe approached him to return this year, he said that he had more confidence.

“Obviously, there has to be a critical mass” of strong galleries, Mr. Rastorfer said. “But even if fewer modern galleries of that caliber would have come, I still would have done it. What I really like about the new approach of Tefaf is that it gives that element of magic, that element of surprise where each gallery is allowed to do an individual presentation.

“I don't want a flea market experience; I want an idea, a concept, a curated show and a display that feels like you're entering a gallery space,” he continued. Gmurzynska will be presenting a collection of early modernist paintings that explore the links between abstract and figurative art, centered on Fernand Léger's “Nature Morte au Compas” from 1929, priced at \$4.5 million.

Pace Gallery, which has branches all over the world, last participated in Tefaf Maastricht in 2006 and 2007. Now, it returns with an extraordinary collection of 18 paintings and drawings by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, formerly owned by the American art collector and dealer Sidney Janis, who was a close friend of Mondrian's. Among the highlights is Mondrian's charcoal on paper “Reclining Nude (Dunes and Sea)” from 1910 with an asking price of \$5.5 million.

“A lot of factors joined up at the same time for 2019,” said the London gallery's senior director, Elliot McDonald. “Christophe Van de Weghe is heading up the section and he's been the lead on it, and he's such a great voice in that field so he was a factor, of course, and we're in great company.” He added: “It is really underpinned by being able to present the paintings and drawings of Mondrian. Taking that work to that geographic location turned out to be too good to be true. So we went for it.”



Phillip Rundell's "The Shield of Achilles" from 1823 will be shown by Koopman Rare Art. Koopman Rare Art

Since the overall fair has not grown in size, 40 in also means many dealers had to be left out, and that has come as harsh news for some of the long-term participants. Nico Delaive owns Gallery Delaive in Amsterdam, which specializes in works by Sam Francis, as well as postwar artists from the Cobra movement, sells contemporary work by artists such as Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, and has shown at Tefaf Maastricht for 26 years.

"This is the first year that I was told they don't have space for me," he said in a telephone interview. "It feels more like I got a divorce without knowing what it was about, why I should go. I didn't expect it; they didn't ever complain about anything."

Mr. Van de Weghe said that Mr. Delaive was a friend and colleague, but that hard decisions had to be made among many qualified applicants.

"For a lot of people who have been doing the fair for many years, it's their bread and butter, and we're all aware of that, and it's very difficult," said Mr. Van de Weghe. "We had a lot more applicants this year than in past years. We selected 14, and we had another 35 or 40 more galleries that wanted to participate that had never participated in Tefaf Maastricht before."

Other longtime dealers who are returning this year are concerned that the competitive nature of the selection process makes the fair atmosphere less collegial.

“When I joined in the 1980s, Tefaf was a dealers’ fair for dealers, and they all worked together, and it was a fantastic combination of people all pooling their efforts in a friendly and community fashion,” said Lewis Smith, a director of Koopman Rare Art in London, which is bringing a collection of antique silver, including a gilt-silver “Shield of Achilles” from 1823 with an asking price “in the region of £5 million,” Mr. Smith said (about \$6.5 million). “I don’t like the idea of each man for himself. I like the idea of dealers working together.”

Mr. van Maris said he had sympathy for those who weren’t able to return this year. “I understand the pain,” he said. “But Tefaf wants to be sure that we have the right mixture and balance in the fair. If you weren’t selected this year, it doesn’t mean you won’t be selected next year.”