

Arts & Culture

Masterpiece 2014 London

Chelsea Royal Hospital
By Don Grant

This is the fifth year of Masterpiece, otherwise known as the 'Unaffordable Art Fair.' The opening night saw a large sparkle of guests, dealers, *jeunesse dorée*, hangers-on, collectors, art lovers and euro-trash milling about.

They hung around the curtains from whence poor, harassed girls emerged carrying salvers of canapés. They only made it a few yards before the gannets pounced and devoured the lot.

Could the popularity of this event be down to the fact that it trumpets being the premier antiques and art fair in the UK, or could it be the enormous amount of Ruinart Champagne on tap? A bit of both, one suspects. Certainly, they invite *la crème de la crème* from around the world, selling clocks and watches, jewellery, porcelain, furniture, antiquarian books, sculpture, paintings, prints, photographs, maps and folk art.

Amongst all these *recherché* objects is a perfectly ordinary Maserati, which one can see in their showroom in the Old Brompton Road, so why has it been elevated to the status of 'art'? It's a car! Now a Bugatti Type 57 SC Atlantic could be labeled 'art', but not a *Quattroporte*, which is simply Italian for four-door saloon.

If you want to buy a Lowry for £200,000 or a scaled-down cast of Rodin's *The Kiss*, for quite a few hundred thousand, this is the place for you. Last November, a 3-foot-high 'lifetime' cast of *The Kiss* sold at Christie's New York for more than \$6m, more than four times its lower estimate; although the current record paid for a Rodin bronze is \$19m, for a 6-foot *Eve*.

This fair is all about money. And class, although, there was a stack of very expensive bling on view, as well. The main sponsor was, after all, RBS Wealth Management, which underlines the notion that art is now all about money. In true fat-cattery fashion, there is even an obnoxious, high-gloss supplement called *How to Spend It*, published by the *FT*, telling their readership what to invest in, and nothing about the quality or integrity of the 'art'. Once it was claret, then classic cars, now paintings and sculpture.

Rob and Nick Carter are young

masters of creating digital images from Old Masters. Previously, they took Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder's *Vase With Flowers in a Window* and somehow three-dimensionalised it. For Masterpiece they produced a version of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, using a digitalised background, with day turning imperceptibly into night, into which they have placed a breathing, twitching model; unfortunately, this enhanced being has lost the innocent charm of the original, and resembles more an airbrushed Playmate, or a Vargas painting.

More successful is Tim Noble and Sue Webster's own *Masterpiece*. Created from the remains of mummified animals, which have been cast in solid sterling silver, it creates a silhouette portrait of the artists on the blank wall behind when illuminated from the front.

If one wanted something a little older, then a visit to Ariadne Galleries from New York would have revealed a *Head of a Cycladic Idol*, a beautifully simple Greek stone carving dated c.2500 BC from the Cycladic Islands in the Aegean, selling for many millions.

Both Henry Moore and Constantin Brâncusi were strongly influenced by Cycladic sculpture, and although not seen at Masterpiece, a Brâncusi head will still attract some of the highest prices of any sculptor, too rich even for this fair.

Rolls Royce car-dealers used to respond to the question, 'How much is it, then?' with a snotty 'If you have to ask, you can't afford it, sir', which is why presumably many pieces were labelled POA, or maybe because many stall-holders were prepared to do a deal.

Robert Young was very much in evidence, with his stylish stand selling folk art, which ranged from painted peasant furniture, trade signs and treen to George Smart fabric collages and old, Welsh oak Windsor chairs. As one of the world experts



on this difficult-to-categorise genre, he recently advised Tate Britain on their widely-acclaimed *British Folk Art* exhibition, reviewed in the June edition of this paper.

Sladmore had not one, but two, stands this year, one focussing on Nic Fiddian Green and his ubiquitous horse heads, bending down to drink, and the other devoted to such modern sculptors as Rembrandt Bugatti, who had a delightful *Flamingo* on view.

If Masterpiece regards itself as part of the 'Season', it has to stand alongside the RA Summer Show and Henley Royal Regatta. Adrian Sassoon had for sale an astonishing work of madness by Giovanni Corvaja, a hat, hand-crafted entirely from 160km of gold wire. The headpiece, priced at £350,000, took over 2,500 hours to make, with each of the 5 million hand-hammered gold wires being drawn through a diamond. That would certainly have turned heads at Royal Ascot.

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