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Warhol, Richter, Fontana, And Royal Suit of Armor Among TEFAF 2012 Highlights

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Top works, top names, top prices and top players – including world leaders – star at this year’s 25th edition of The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) in Maastricht, where every year at this time, the city welcomes the largest congregation of private jets to be found anywhere, all carrying the world’s most passionate – and powerful – collectors of art and antiques. In an era glutted by art fairs – far more than there should be at this point – Maastricht remains the crown jewel. It is where Old Master dealers showcase their newly attributed **Rembrandts**, Modern dealers spotlight their newly-discovered **Van Goghs**, and Contemporary dealers grab attention with not only the top names, but the most desirable works to be found. It is, in effect, the art market’s answer to the season auctions: the best, and nothing less, with prices – and buyers – to match.



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P. Madden

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Somewhat surprisingly, this year’s jubilee does not seem to have pulled the kinds of major blockbusters out of the closets that have appeared in previous years. There are no 40-plus million dollar Rembrandt portraits like the one Otto Nauman exhibited last year, or \$30 million Van Goghs like the one Dickinson sold in 2008.

Nonetheless, there are, as always, a number of sparkling discoveries this year, such as the early, earthen **Van Gogh** “Potato Diggers” at Dickinson – a new acquisition that has not been seen in public in over 50 years. Faceless and rough, the peasants face outward at the viewer as they dig into the earth, the artist’s quick, rough strokes what was to become, ultimately, his signature

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style. (Price, surprisingly, seems quite reasonable at 3.75 million euros – though it may well have sold by now.)

And while Van Gogh is reputedly the most beloved artist of all time, **Gerhard Richter** is the most beloved of the moment. Hence, accordingly, Richters galore line the walls at San Francisco dealer Anthony Meier’s stand, including a mystical 1987 landscape, “Kleine Strasse,” which sold for just shy of its \$5.7 million asking price (along with a second Richter priced around \$2.5 million) within the first half hour of the preview, via an intermediary who negotiated the sale by telephone. (The same work sold in 2008 for \$4,546,533 at Christie’s London.) Other works by the world’s top-selling living artist also on view at Meier include several overpainted photographs and works on paper, almost all of which had found new owners by Saturday evening. (Plenty of other Richters on hand elsewhere, of course, including a large canvas at Van der Weghe, which also boasts a **Warhol** “Dollar Sign.”)

Meantime, over in antiques and antiquities, another German is grabbing the spotlight at British dealer Peter Finer’s captivating stand filled with arms and armor, including a full set of late 15th century armor once belonging to Prince Otto zu Stolberg, with heavy breastplate, marvelously stylized joints, and Star Wars-appropriate details. Its massive presence, marvelously modern in its presciently post-industrial design, is priced according to the dealer, “in the seven figures.”

Also impressive is a one-man show of 35 Lucio **Fontana** works at Tornabuoni Art, Paris which form a kind of mini-retrospective of the artist’s oeuvre since the 1950s. At a time when Fontanas are flooding the market (last year’s FIAC featured one in virtually every color, like Tootsie-roll pops at a penny candy store), Tornabuoni has managed to return Fontana’s paintings to a context of art historical significance and weight. It is a kind of museum experience any visitor to this year’s TEFAF should be sure to see – and other fair participants would do well to learn from their example for the future.

Top prizes for this year’s edition, though, would have to go to Fabrizio Moretti – whose newly-acquired **Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio** “Holy Family” from circa 1530 (in its original frame) wraps you in its glowing arms and refuses to let go. (Priced at 350,000 euros, the painting was purchased from an Italian family and has never been seen publicly); and to Daniel Blau, with a jaw-dropping exhibition of very early sketches by Andy **Warhol**, including several ball-point studies of fellow diners in New York’s now-defunct Automats. Culled (with great patience and, according to Blau’s wife, Maria, persistence) from the archives of the Andy Warhol Foundation – where they have languished, unnoticed, for decades – the group of 25 drawings, priced from a surprisingly affordable 20,000 euros and up (almost all of which had sold by the end of the first weekend), presage both the art and the person that became the Warhol phenomenon.

Admittedly, the fact that an Italian Old Master and an American Pop icon can share the podium as “best in show” may strike some as incongruously odd: but to my mind, it stands as proper testament to the glory of Maastricht, and the universal timelessness of good art.

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