

Art market
News

Treasure House Fair hopes to be the flagship summer event London desperately needs

The third edition of the "heir" to Masterpiece London opens tomorrow at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, with a diverse group of 72 exhibitors spanning antiquities to contemporary art

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Treasure House Fair in 2024
Photo Ben Tomlin

“I think, surprisingly, there's a general mood of optimism. It's a pretty ghastly world out there, but people are really keen to come—exhibitors are keen, we're selling lots of tickets, lots of groups are coming. And, against my expectations, there is a sort of mood of 'let's all have a bit of a party'”

Thomas Woodham-Smith is speaking to *The Art Newspaper* ahead of the third edition of Treasure House Fair, which opens at London's Royal Hospital Chelsea tomorrow (until 1 July). The event, which stepped into the same venue and date slot as the now defunct Masterpiece London, was formed hastily in 2023 by Woodham-Smith, who co-founded Masterpiece in 2009 and chaired it until 2022, and Harry Van der Hoorn, another co-founder of Masterpiece and the owner of Stabulo, whose stands are seen at fairs the world over.

“The first year was a bit ridiculous—we organised the fair from scratch in three months—but we did it with tremendous enthusiasm,” Woodham-Smith says of the 2023 event. “We were not doing it as an entrepreneurial venture, more a reaction to the disappointment of lots of Masterpiece exhibitors.”



The kennel through which the 'la Esmeralda' Aguas Zarcas meteorite fell in 2019 in Costa Rica. The meteorite narrowly missed its occupant, a German Shepherd called Rocky, and made a seven-inch hole in the roof. The kennel, along with the meteorite, is for sale at the Treasure House Fair with Art Ancient, priced at £450,000 for both

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Last year, with more time to organise, Treasure House grew by around 30%, Woodham-Smith says, going from 55 exhibitors to 70: “We’ve got a few more exhibitors this year [72], but essentially we’re the same size as last—we’ve got to the point where we’re doing things better, rather than just doing things.”

Treasure House, like Masterpiece, is a truly cross-disciplinary fair, spanning the ancient to contemporary, with jewellery, design, antique furniture, antiquities, works of art and even classic cars sitting alongside “flat art” from all periods. Such fairs are an increasingly rare beast, a counter narrative to the one-a-week contemporary art merry-go-round, which sucks most oxygen.

Thanks to a combination of Brexit and Covid-19, this end of June season in London is a shadow of its former self. Once, there was the Grosvenor House Art and Antiques Fair, a grand world-renowned event held from 1934 until 2009 at the eponymous five-star hotel. Masterpiece was positioned as its successor, running alongside other events such as the Art & Antiques Fair Olympia (which like Masterpiece closed in 2023, before what would have been its 50th year) and Anna and Brian Houghton’s Art Antiques London in Hyde Park—a successor to their long running ceramics fair—which is also no more. Add to that the scrapping of the Old Master-focused gallery trail London Art Week last year (though Classic Art London is hoping to fill that vacuum) and the fact that the once packed auction schedule is now increasingly sparse. Hence Woodham-Smith and Van der Hoorn’s determination to keep a tentpole event going.



Surrealist Landscape by Cedric Morris, with a painting of a keeper's cottage, Wales, on the reverse. Priced at £385,000 with MacConnal-Mason. The rediscovered painting appeared at auction at Cheffins in Cambridge in February, where it sold for £162,500

American buyers, often flying over for events like Wimbledon tennis too, have always been key to these events. Despite tumultuous geopolitical events, Woodham-Smith says some US visitors are still making the trip: "We've got most of the big museums coming from America, as well as a lot of private visitors...purposeful Americans are coming."

Of the 72 exhibitors this year, a quarter are based outside of the UK and 40% are new. Returning galleries include a host of London names (and former Masterpiece exhibitors) such as Ronald Phillips, Richard Green, Osborne Samuel, Christopher Kingzett, Wartski, Adrian Sassoon, Butchoff Antiques, MacConnal-Mason, Piano Nobile, Godson & Coles, Rose Uniacke and Koopman Rare Art. Among the newcomers are: the New York and Palm Beach-based modern tapestry specialists Boccara; Grob Gallery from Geneva, specialising in 20th-century photography; the long-running Dutch gallery Douwes; Paris-based Ary Jan, who focuses on turn-of-the-20th-century painting; and the London-based dealers Bowman Sculpture, James Hyman, Jonathan Clark, Vigo Gallery and Kallos Gallery.



Original 19th century fairground carousel pig, attributed to Gustave Bayol, Angers, France. Exhibited by Robert Young Antiques, priced at £8,500
Courtesy Robert Young Antiques

Another new London-based exhibitor is Robert Young, a folk art specialist who was a committed Masterpiece exhibitor, exhibiting at every event until it closed. “Since then we have continued to show at the Winter Show in New York, but have not participated at a public art fair or event in the UK,” Young tells *The Art Newspaper*. “Now established in its third year, it feels like the right time to join in. I admire the way the organisers and core exhibitors have supported and grown the event and we believe that after the fall out of Covid and still reeling from the effects of Brexit, London needs a flagship summer fair.”

Although it is a smaller fair, Young sees the event as building on Masterpiece’s legacy: “London needs a significant summer art/antiques fair, in my view, and Treasure House is a visually exciting ‘event’ that challenges the trend of online business and makes it enjoyable to view and discuss works with some of the world’s leading specialists. It may be an old-fashioned concept, but I’m hoping it will continue to grow organically and to attract an audience of seasoned collectors and art market professionals, alongside a new group of curious art lovers and potential collectors.”

As Young says, the world is “currently frighteningly unstable” and, against this backdrop, art fairs feel “incongruous”. Therefore, he concedes, business may be difficult. However, the life of an antiques dealer is always a gamble and, Young says, “as a specialist gallery we feel it is right to join in again and present a curated collection of works that we believe are worthwhile and hope to excite the interest of a new audience and catch up with some old clients.”

The broader geopolitical environment aside, some of Treasure House's exhibitors face a more specific problem in the form of the new EU regulations regarding the import of cultural goods, which come into effect on 28 June. This is a major concern for some exhibitors, especially those dealing in antiquities, Woodham-Smith says: "In the long term, if it stays, I don't think it's going to be a massive burden for Treasure House, but I think it would be a real problem for Tefaf Maastricht. I think that we risk literally destroying the international nature of the art world."



Harry van der Hoorn and Thomas Woodham-Smith
Photo Jack Hall, Courtesy of Treasure House Fair

Special displays at this year's event include *The Brilliant Bugattis*, a non-selling exhibition of 30 works of art, designs and cars by father Carlo (1856-1940), a multitalented designer of furniture and silverware, and his sons, the animal sculptor Rembrandt (1884-1916) and car engineer Ettore (1881-1946). It is curated by the Bugatti expert Edward Horswell, the owner of London's Sladmore Gallery, which also exhibits at the fair.

Meanwhile, an expanded sculpture walk, set out in the fair and around the Royal Hospital Chelsea grounds, is curated by the sculpture expert Flo Horswell and Melissa L.Gustin, the curator of British Art at National Museums Liverpool. Based on the theme "Disrupt Connect", it includes 30 sculptures spanning 300 years.

Finally, in a bid to tap into the all-important interior design community, Treasure House commissioned the interior decorator Daniel Slowik to design a room at the popular WOW!house in Chelsea Harbour (until 3 July), entitled A Room for a Collector and including highlights from the fair's exhibitors.

Organising an art fair is, Woodham-Smith says, like herding cats: "Every single one of these people—exhibitors, contractors—is preeminent in a way, and they don't like to be told what to do. So, you know, it's a challenge to keep everybody on board and in line." He adds: "I don't know that it's easy, running a fair, but it's very rewarding. As I stand here in this massive, massive structure and watch all these rooms go up, I find it very inspiring."

- **Treasure House Fair**, Royal Hospital Chelsea, London, 26 June-1 July

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