

FRIENDS

Thomas Leysen, chairman of the Friends of CODART Foundation interviewed by Gerdien Verschoor

Thomas Leysen studied law at the University of Leuven (Belgium) and went on to build an impressive career in the world of business. For years he served as CEO of Umicore, a materials technology group recently named as one of “the world’s 10 most sustainable corporations”. He is also chairman of Belgium’s largest newspaper publisher. In 2011 he was named chairman of the board of the KBC banking and insurance group in Brussels.

He also holds numerous executive positions in the cultural world, serving, for example, as chairman of the Rubenianum Fund and as a chairman of the Heritage Fund of the King Baudouin Foundation and of the European Friends of Versailles. In addition, Thomas Leysen is chairman of the [Friends of CODART Foundation](#), in which capacity he has succeeded in enlisting new Patrons. He was also one of the instigators of the CODART Patrons Workshop, held for the first time during TEFAF 2012 – all reasons for an interview with a passionate businessman who, as he himself admits, suffers from a serious condition: the collecting bug.

You come from a family of entrepreneurs. Did you inherit your interest in the fine arts and your passion for collecting from them?

I’ve been going to museums since I was a child. We had a lot of art books at home and many art historians were among the regular visitors to our house. Even so, I never seriously considered making art history my profession, although I did study art history for a year, alongside my studies in law at the University of Leuven. So in fact I did get my interest in art from my family, and later on I delved into it more deeply. It has only been ten or twelve years, however, since I caught the collecting bug (which is a rather serious condition once it takes hold).

Would you please tell us about it in more detail?

My first purchase was actually a drawing, which I bought at the age of fourteen with money my grandmother had given me: a work by the French draftsman Jean-Louis Forain. My later purchases were mainly modern and contemporary prints. My interest in the fine arts led me to visit many art fairs, such as TEFAF, without buying anything, simply as a spectator. Around 2000 I bought my first old master drawing: an anonymous Flemish landscape drawing, which I purchased at an auction in London. I still haven’t discovered the name of the artist. This was soon followed by a drawing by Hendrik van Balen – a preparatory study for an allegorical painting now preserved in the Hermitage – and other sheets, chiefly Flemish landscapes.

After my fifth or sixth acquisition, I knew that I’d caught the collecting bug and that the condition was probably incurable. Several years later I started to buy paintings, at a time when I had more financial resources available. After that, things started to move rapidly. I began to follow all the most important old master auctions. Nowadays I buy a majority at auctions, but often from art dealers as well.

How would you describe your collection?

My collection focuses on Antwerp masters of 1500 to 1650, that is to say, from Quinten Metsys to Rubens, van Dyck and their followers. Sometimes I can’t resist going down a side track, but I try to keep my passion for collecting in check by maintaining this focal point as much as possible.

The core of my collection consists of portraits, landscapes, and allegorical and mythological scenes. The main criterion is the aesthetic appeal and the emotional impact. Second in importance is the ‘story’ behind the work (the subject in its

historical context, the work's provenance, etc). The attribution and the condition of the work are slightly less important to me. I have no objection to a high-quality work without a firm attribution, and am less obsessed by the condition of a work than many other collectors or curators. Of course, a work's condition is important in assessing its monetary value, so these things must be taken into consideration. But I prefer to hang a great painting that needed some conservation work, rather than a more mundane one in pristine condition.

What about succumbing to other 'temptations', such as buying contemporary art? How do you explain that?

I don't buy much contemporary art, but sometimes I branch out to other periods and schools. In such cases I let myself be driven purely by the aesthetic appeal. If I fall for a work at first sight, and my wife does too, then we may go for something outside our main field of interest.

Would you tell us about any friction that might exist between 'Thomas Leysen the collector' and 'Thomas Leysen the businessman'? Are they at odds with each other, or do they complement and nurture one another?

The businessman needs the collector and vice versa. I can only function optimally in harmonious and aesthetically pleasing surroundings, and in this I'm aided by 'the collector'. Naturally 'the businessman' must provide 'the collector' with the needed financial means. Occasionally the businessman finds the collector impulsive or imprudent, and this can cause some tension between them..

We know you mainly as an art collector. Are you equally passionate about other arts, such as music or literature?

I appreciate good literature and music, but I'm not passionate about them to the same degree. But I am passionately involved in the restoration of a seventeenth-century house in the center of Antwerp, and this has taught me a great deal. I'm also fascinated by the history of my city.

You lend many artworks to museums. Why?

My present house and my offices don't have enough space to hang everything to best advantage. I'd be very sorry to relegate certain works to a hidden existence somewhere in a depot, so I pro-actively offer them to museums. At the moment there are loans to a dozen museums in Belgium, the Netherlands, France and the United States.

This way others can enjoy them too. Often, when works are lent out, additional information about them comes to light. And of course it's good for your collector's ego to know that works from your collection are good enough to be shown at the Metropolitan, the Louvre, the Rubenshuis or the Frans Hals Museum...

For years now you've held important positions in the business world, but you also give a great deal of your time to social organizations, particularly cultural institutions. You're a member of the board of the Cultural Heritage Fund of the King Baudouin Foundation and you're a successful fundraiser for the Corpus Rubenianum. Not only that, but you're the current chairman of the Friends of CODART Foundation. You play a key role in all these organizations. Why do you find this so important?

I consider each and every one of them important and valuable institutions, and if I'm asked to serve on the board, I find it difficult to say no, especially if I think that my contribution could actually make a difference. It's certainly no sacrifice, though. I also get a lot out of it, and that inspires me in other areas. I come into contact with fascinating people, doors open up for me in the international art world, I gain access to a great deal of knowledge, and it is immensely satisfying to achieve our common goals.

What do you hope to achieve as chairman of the Friends of CODART Foundation?

The Friends of CODART Foundation needs to give CODART financial flexibility and additional room to maneuver, certainly in the present-day context of governments in the process of reducing their support to the arts.

It's also important to create a broader basis of support for CODART. One goal is for the Friends of CODART Foundation to contribute to straightforward, professional relations between curators, on the one hand, and art collectors and the art market, on the other. Perhaps we can help to overcome a certain wariness that sometimes prevails between these groups.

Last year we succeeded in attracting more benefactors and Patrons for CODART, but we want to do more. The Patrons Workshop organized during last year's TEFAF was a fine example of collaboration, with several members of CODART generously sharing their knowledge with a group of Patrons. Another such workshop will be held during the upcoming TEFAF, and we hope that these events will become a tradition. In the future it will also be possible for Patrons to attend the annual CODART congress. CODART could likewise play a role in encouraging private collectors to lend their paintings to appropriate museums.

How did you hear about CODART, and how did you first come into contact with it?

I've long known the website as a particularly valuable tool for every lover of Dutch and Flemish art, but it wasn't until a couple of years ago that I came to know the organization better. I was immediately impressed by the network's international range, and I'm amazed at how much can be accomplished by such a small team.

Why, in your opinion, is CODART important?

CODART is an indispensable network for museum curators. The website first made me aware of this, but when I attended the CODART VIJFTIEN congress in Brussels in March 2012 I witnessed the enthusiasm CODART generates and how much its members benefit from these gatherings. Another thing that struck me is that CODART does not confine itself to the circle of museum professionals, but reaches out to others, through its website and the eZine.

You're actively involved in policy-making aimed at sustainable business and a green economy. Do you have anything to say to the museum world in this regard? Or do you see these as totally separate areas?

As far as the necessary greening of the economy is concerned, I don't see such a direct link to museums.

But the concept of sustainability is naturally connected with conservation, with the preservation of everything of value and passing it on to succeeding generations. In this sense museums and curators certainly fulfill an exemplary role.

Do you, as an active entrepreneur and successful businessman, have any special message for museum curators?

Whether we like it or not, the global trend in most countries is for governments to give less money to cultural institutions, including museums. Therefore, more emphasis on fundraising from private sources will be necessary. In Europe in particular, this will require a change in mindset, and it would be good for us to tackle this pro-actively. In my view, this is not only a job for directors. Curators will have to play a role as well for it is precisely them whose authority, expertise and contacts with collectors and art dealers can lead them to make decisive contributions, to the benefit of their institutions. This must be done with high ethical standards, of course, and with the necessary professionalism. But it is better to embrace the inevitable in an intelligent way than to ignore it until it is too late.

Gerdien Verschoor is director of CODART.