

## FRIENDS

### Bob Haboldt interviewed by Gerdien Verschoor

Bob Haboldt, born in Amsterdam's Staatsliedenbuurt, set up his own art dealership, Haboldt & Co., in New York in 1983. He concentrated mainly on Dutch and Flemish Old Masters, but also focused on the Italian, French and Spanish schools. Over the years he expanded his business by establishing branches in Paris (1990) and Amsterdam (2009). *Singular Vision*, an ode to the more than two thousand works of art that Haboldt and his team have bought, studied and sold to museums and collectors over the years, was published in 2012 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Haboldt & Co.

Haboldt has been a member of the board of the Friends of CODART Foundation since 2013, and he was the first person to support CODART as a Patron for Life. From his vantage point as an art dealer, he works closely with museums that are seeking to mount exhibitions and carry out research. On the eve of the [CODART ACHTTIEN congress](#) on "Curators and the Art Trade: A Discussion of Opportunities and Dilemmas" we publish an interview with the man described by the New York Times as "one of the most brilliant players in the Old Masters arena."

### The grandson of an Amsterdam grocer who became a passionate art dealer ...

That's right, for someone of my background, art history was certainly not an obvious choice. I come from a family of entrepreneurs and grew up above my father's shop in the Staatslieden district of Amsterdam. Later we moved to Baarn, to a small house with a garden, where, as a boy of twelve, I undertook "archeological excavations" and as a result became fascinated with Egyptology. Part of my adolescence was spent at an English boarding school in Switzerland, where I did a lot of drawing. This helped me to train my eye early on, and to develop an international outlook on life. After graduation I wanted to continue on this international course. I received a scholarship to Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, where I also worked as a trainee at the Portland Art Museum. I received a very broad education there, and that made it increasingly difficult to choose between Egyptology and Western art history, which interested me more and more. In the end I returned to the Netherlands and in 1977 enrolled at the University of Amsterdam – then still the GU, or Gemeente Universiteit (Municipal University) – to study art history.

### But you didn't become an art dealer simply by studying art history.

The necessity of earning money had been instilled in me since birth, and my dream was to combine that with art. While still studying I began as a trainee at Sotheby Mak van Waaij on the Rokin, and after that my first job was with Phillips on the Spiegelstraat. It was soon apparent that I possessed both the intellectual curiosity and the entrepreneurial spirit necessary in the art trade, and these jobs gave me an opportunity to continue training my eye. It also became increasingly obvious that I would choose the Old Masters instead of archeology. I went to work for Christie's in New York and three years later I was asked to set up Colnaghi's new branch there. Later still, I opened my own office in New York, and from that base I led two expeditions to Peru to inventory the colonial art in churches in the Andes: many works had been stolen from the churches and put on the market illegally.

### Your vision of business is the result of your past?

Basically, yes, and by that I mean the combination of

entrepreneurship – an integral part of which is the will to socialize – and the fact that I always had the opportunity to improve my knowledge and my eye. Those are the three pillars of my business: contacts, knowledge and a good eye. And because it's not possible to know everything, it's important to be receptive to the knowledge and ideas of others.

In *Singular Vision* I describe the identity of my business. Its outer ring is determined by its international character. I'd like to define the inner ring as choosing for quality – of both the artwork and its state of preservation – and authenticity. A work of art must also have "appealing subject matter – a subject that makes you want to look at it over and over again." But the book is also, of course, about looking at art.

### **And about taste.**

As an art dealer I like to think of myself as someone who deals in good taste. I want to sell works I believe in myself. Variety is also important to me. Big names are interesting, of course, but it's an art to be able to recognize lesser names and arouse enthusiasm for them in others. Quality remains an important criterion in this respect. I find it increasingly difficult to work with mediocrity.

One nice thing about working in the art trade is that you can continually develop your connoisseurship, taste and refinement, since a very large number of artworks pass through your hands and you're constantly talking about them, with experts and lay people alike. The nicest part of the business is the one-on-one contact with another *aficionado* and looking at art with that person. I'd like to pass on my knowledge of art and the pleasure I take in it. I think I have a didactic role to play as well: I want to instruct people about a work of art and stimulate them to develop their taste.

### **For that you must build up a relationship of trust with your clients.**

That's crucial for a good art dealer. In recent years a completely different pattern has emerged in the buying of art: much more is bought through auction houses and the internet, and this is gradually eroding the intimacy and quality of our profession. New markets such as China and the Middle East are developing at lightning speed, but people there buy in a completely different way – via the internet or auction houses. These days an anonymous Chinese buyer can purchase a cleverly marketed copy by Vermeer after an Italian baroque painting in a London saleroom by placing a single bid against a stunningly high reserve price; such a thing was unthinkable a few years ago. These are, to say the least, confusing and often conflicting elements in our world and are making the traditional art market more and more difficult for art dealers.

### **How can you expand your own activities in such a market?**

I derive great satisfaction not only from expanding my personal knowledge about art, but also from sharing my understanding of the mechanics of this profession. I think that increasing our store of knowledge is also important within CODART, and I'm happy to work towards that goal by supporting a network like CODART and by being part of the community as a Patron.

### **Do you consider yourself a Maecenas?**

No, not at all. To my mind a Maecenas is someone who mainly offers financial support or commissions artists to produce new work. My contribution has more to do with expertise: I like to help think about exhibitions, the conceptual framework and the works to be displayed. My network and my knowledge of which artworks are where means that I can sometimes contribute to the organization of exhibitions.

### **You work with museum curators and other experts on a regular basis. You asked several connoisseurs, including a few members of CODART, to write essays for *Singular Vision*.**

Yes, that's exactly what I was just talking about. I love discussing an artwork, trying to get my message or interpretation across, and I think that museum curators of old art have an important educational role to play. After all, what chance does a small drawing by an Old Master have against an enormous installation by a contemporary artist? How can you exhibit the present without any knowledge of the past, certainly in a situation in which old art is much more difficult to explain than contemporary art? In my opinion, that "didactic mission" is a hugely important part of the curator's job. Naturally the curator can fulfill that role only if he or she is well-grounded in the subject matter – whether or not we're talking about a super curator with a super eye or a focused specialist, who spends a lifetime establishing the significance of a single, forgotten master. It's one of the tasks of the curator to help the public by bridging the gap between that small drawing by an Old Master and that huge modern work. The exhibition *Rubens and his Legacy*, now showing at the [BOZAR](#) (Center for Fine Arts) in Brussels and moving in January to the [Royal Academy in London](#), is an example of this. I'm fascinated by the permanent and temporary installations by contemporary artists in collections of old art, such as Cy Twombly and Wim Delvoye in the Louvre. The relationship between modern architecture and old art is also something I find immensely interesting.

### **What makes an exhibition special for you?**

An artist has achieved something if he or she forces you to pause and think about the meaning of an artwork: that's the best part of the exhibition experience. You're drawn to a work, you observe it, you feel compelled to understand it, you're forced

to develop a singular vision. It's wonderful when an exhibition opens your eyes – that, too, is part of the curator's task.

### **What in your opinion is the role of CODART in the task of the curator?**

Within CODART curators can share their knowledge and stimulate one another to broaden their views. CODART members exchange not only art-historical expertise but also their experiences of how to share that expertise in a museum context. CODART should provide all those people with a platform – eagle-eyed curators and specialists alike.

CODART could also manifest itself in different areas. If you think of CODART as a single apple hanging on a tree, then it should be possible, with the help of CODART's network, to graft an Italian and a French apple onto that tree. CODART is exceptional. The network can be a fount of inspiration for curators in fields other than Dutch and Flemish art, and it can facilitate ties with other specialisms.

I take great satisfaction from my friendships with CODART members. We as Friends wish to support CODART, not only by offering financial support but also by expanding the network and establishing new ties with people outside CODART, making it possible for us to help in other ways. Ultimately the contact between the members and the Friends can make it possible to mount exhibitions and facilitate loans to those exhibitions.

The ethics of the ties between the museum world and the art trade is a very important theme in museology. Neither could exist without the other. This entanglement is fascinating, and we both learn from mistakes made in the past by both sides. Exchanging information on this score and documenting precisely those ties between the art trade and the museum world is a valuable undertaking, not only for CODART, of course, but also for the [RKD](#) and various societies of art dealers, such as [VHOK](#), [TEFAF](#), and [CINOA](#). Naturally I'm curious to see how this theme develops at the CODART congress.

### **What are the nicest things about your profession? Does it also have a downside?**

I have no collection of my own, but I'm surrounded by artworks that I either cannot or do not want to sell. It's wonderful to be able to look intensely with a client at a work of art and to live intensely with an artwork. But it's also nice to be able to part with it and find peace in an empty wall. Even so, I often part with some regret from certain artworks, such as Elsheimer's *Flight into Egypt*, which I sold early on in my career to a private collector, Peter Sharp, and many years later to the Kimbell in Fort Worth, and *The Nativity* by Fra Bartolomeo, which I sold in 2005 to The Art Institute of Chicago. Sometimes I keep certain drawings or paintings as long as possible, or even hide them in a box or a cupboard, hoping that the world will forget they are with me, and I take them out once in a while to look at them in solitude.

It is true joy, however, to find the perfect home for an artwork: a museum, for example, where it is viewed with interest and studied by people who appreciate the work as much as I do.

*Singular Vision. Haboldt & Co.'s Old Master Paintings and Drawings since 1983* (Amsterdam-New York-Paris, 2012) is available for €120 from [oldmasters@haboldt.com](mailto:oldmasters@haboldt.com).