

THE CHIC SIDE OF THE CLASSICS

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Sarah Graham, *Meconopsis baileyi II*, ink on paper, 2019

The youthful gallerists injecting new ideas into the market for old masters and antiquities are not only inspiring a new generation of collectors – but also changing the industry

For well over a century, we've preferred our gallerists to be grey-haired, faultlessly dressed and bearing family trees as richly embellished with elite provenance as the artworks they sell. Especially outside the idiosyncratic world of contemporary art – where breaking the rules has become a way of life – the traditional galleries and gallerists we trust most have maintained their elevated status largely by staying the same.

But change is in the air, thanks to the creative initiative of young, or at least younger, gallerists, who are using an array of tools – from the latest social media platforms to the age-old tactic of out-hustling their competitors – to force their way into the fusty world of Old Masters and antiquities, changing not only the way the artworks are sold but also how they are perceived.

"I opened my bookshop when I was 25 years old," says Camille Sourget, whose eponymous Paris boutique specialises in first

editions of literary works as well as atlases, scientific tomes and manuscripts. "I was the youngest antiquarian bookseller at the time," she continues – and that's largely still true today, 15 years later, as is evident when wandering the aisles at fairs such as TEFAF or the Paris Biennale.

Her cardinal insight was to change the position of books: "I emphasise the fact that precious books are not reserved for bibliophiles only," she says, "but appeal to all art- or beauty-lovers and can be as sexy as contemporary art in one's home." It's a daring perspective, and one she attributes, at least in part, to her position as one of the very few women in the industry: "I have a special eye for details and aesthetic. And that taste is reflected in everything I do." She points out, correctly, that "my catalogues are recognised worldwide, not only for being the most beautiful in my field, but also for being among the most scholarly – each book comes with a one- to two-page description".

This re-orienting of the industry, underpinned by strong academic research, is an ambition she shares with a pair of even younger dealers who have boutiques just down the street from Sourget in Paris's St Germain des Prés district. Charles-Wesley Hourdé and Lucas Ratton are both shaking up the market for African art, offering not just expertise in this notoriously unstable market, but also a fresh perspective on how the older works pair with contemporary aesthetics and art.

The parallels between Hourdé and Ratton are remarkable: both began their galleries as stands at the famed *Marché aux Puces* on the north fringe of the city, and both have significant family history with "tribal art", as it is known in France. Ratton's grandfather and great-uncle were in the field, while Hourdé was never far from it either: "My mother is an antique dealer; my father is an artist, dealer and collector – and my godfather, one of my father's best friends, was the famous African art collector Hubert Goldet".

How easy it would have been for both Hourdé and Ratton to take the course of so many gallerists of the past and continue the family tradition in the expected manner. But neither has, instead putting their own names above their shopfronts (which are next to each other on the *Rue de Seine*) and charting bold courses through the relatively crowded field. Ratton has equipped his space with European furnishings that offer a stark contrast to the works, as if presenting possible arrangements for an eclectic home. Hourdé, in contrast, has chosen to pair his expertise with a new interest, contemporary African art – thereby building a bridge between his speciality and one of the art world's fastest growing sectors. "The contemporary art market is completely different from the antique market that I know well," says Hourdé, so he partnered with a friend, Clémence Houdart, to create 31 Project, whose cross-era exhibitions, held in Hourdé's space introduce collectors of ancient African art to contemporary art, he says, while simultaneously

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acquainting those interested in contemporary African art with the wonders of the continent's past.

A few steps down the road – Rue de Seine has the largest density of art dealers anywhere in the world – 34-year-old Oscar Graf also has his name above the door, and his difficulties are quite different from those of Hourdé and Ratton. Graf deals in art and design from the pre-Modern period, 1870 to 1914, which is relatively popular at the moment, meaning that Graf's primary task is not to educate buyers but to find the right items for his showroom. To this end, he says, his youth has been very effective: "I am able to travel very frequently, sometimes more frequently than my more experienced colleagues," he explains. "An opportunity may come up that they have seen before, so they will pass, while I am able to go and learn something new for me," he says.

Despite the crowded nature of the field, Graf says he hasn't faced many difficulties from other gallerists. "Except for a very few, most of the high-end dealers were very fair and even mentor-like for me, which I appreciate enormously," he says. And he hasn't faced difficulties from clients either, who appreciate both his expertise and his inventory. "When I was first starting, I put literally every last penny into my stands at art fairs," says Graf, explaining how he first gained a following. "Every fair could have been my last."

Like many of his youthful peers, Graf anticipated that he would primarily be catering to older collectors, and the boom of Millennials with deep pockets has been a very welcome surprise. But it has not surprised everyone: the decorated art advisor Philip Hewat-Jaboor has been chairman of the Masterpiece fair in London since 2012, and part of the concept of the event, he says, is to "make Masterpiece a welcoming fair where those who are new to collecting are given the opportunity to learn about all kinds of objects from antiquity to the present day".

Hewat-Jaboor is enthusiastic about involving young gallerists in order to create this atmosphere. "Our younger exhibitors are immediately welcomed into the core of the fair, giving them equal gravitas and weight as more established galleries and dealers," he explains. This not only encourages the new generation, but it also encourages the long-established gallerists to be at their best as well in order to compete with the "creative and forward-thinking approach to presentation, marketing and storytelling".

The world's largest art and antiquities fair, TEFAF, has a slightly different approach to young galleries: it has a Showcase section, which segregates the young from the old. Yet this can be an advantage, says Costas Paraskevaides of ArtAncient, a gallery specialising in pieces that date back thousands of years. "We did [Showcase] in 2019," he says, "and it gives you an opportunity to participate in the fair for one year only, skipping the waiting list and taking a smaller stand." It's a different feeling from Masterpiece, he explains, "which we also love", and he also participates in several other fairs as well, including BRAFA and Frieze Masters, explaining that "perhaps because of my background online, I really value the fairs as great venues to meet people face to face and inspire them to collect in our field".

Paraskevaides studied medicine at university, but found his true calling when he started ArtAncient online not long after graduation in 2008. "We sold mostly on eBay at the time," he recalls. "We gradually improved the quality of our stock and we were pleased to participate in our first fair in 2012." In 2016 he opened a physical space in London, round the corner from Chelsea Harbour, a design hub.

Another London-based gallerist, Lyndsey Ingram, took a more traditional route. Starting her career in the prints department at Sotheby's, she then spent more than a decade at Sims Reed, one of the British capital's leaders in works on paper. She launched her own gallery in 2017 just a stone's throw from Sotheby's in Mayfair. Because she had a wide acquaintance with the industry before branching out on her own, her clients in the first few years, she says, have been "not that young", which she attributes to working largely with established post-war artists, whose works aren't cheap. Ingram's entire staff is women, like Camille Sourget's book team, but Ingram says she thinks in her field "gender might be less complicated than age. People respond differently to us than they do to a patrician man in a well-cut suit – sometimes that's good for us, sometimes it's not," she continues. "And there are some of the older generation who can be quite critical of the younger generation and of tools like social media and the internet that didn't exist 10 years ago." Ingram notes that many people do find her via Instagram or Artsy, an online gallery, and that both have been "very powerful platforms" for growing her business both locally and internationally.

The digital space is one where the younger gallerists have led the way, as one might expect, in nearly every corner of the industry. Sourget notes that "80% of my customers live outside France", which means that digital acumen really does translate into book sales and other commissions. Oscar Graf has a similar digital consciousness: his recent booth at TEFAF Maastricht, featuring an exhibition called Anglia Sancta, was digitally captured by a French firm called ArtView, which created a virtual reality experience as well as an online viewer, allowing digital visitors to click on every object in the display in order to see its details.

Paris-based Galerie Chenel, which focuses on antique pieces, has split its media strategy down the middle, combining academically informed publications with photo-savvy social media posts. The gallery, which was founded and is run by the Chenel siblings, is now 20 years old and has a showpiece location just across the Seine from the Louvre on Quai Voltaire. "Our vision of the classical world is very aesthetic and modern," says Gladys Chenel. "Our main priority is the provenance of the sculptures, but what really sets us apart is the approach we have to the sculptures, presenting them in our gallery and at fairs." The gallery is indeed photogenic – it has been the site of multiple fashion shoots – and the choice to invest in taking high-quality images of their works is a priority they share with other young gallerists.

Images are only the beginning for Massimiliano Caretto and Francesco Occhinegro, an Italian duo, age 32 and 33, who not only began their Old Masters gallery online – but want to keep it that

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way. They founded Caretto & Occhinegro in 2014 after seeing what they describe as “a strong lack of communication between some Old Master dealers and the new generation of customers”. Their gallery, they say, “was essential born as a 2.0 gallery”, which means that digital technologies were essential from the very beginning: “Our first customers were very far from Turin, and our first deals were closed via smartphone.”

They are bold in their approach – and perhaps even bolder in their proclamations. “The art gallery as a traditional exhibition space is a fading concept,” they contend. “Today, an art gallery is an idea to share, a concept in common between seller and buyers.” When it comes to the role of the gallerist, it is not merely to passively offer, they say: “An art dealer should be prepared to accompany his customers to a cultural exhibition, to chat with them on WhatsApp, to share pictures from holidays.” As we evolve from physical to digital, dealers need to “borrow from our colleagues in contemporary art” and conceive the relationship more holistically.

This is a philosophy that many of these young gallerists mention – and live through. Camille Sourget speaks about the growing number of clients who ask her “to be in charge of building their library, from the choice of books to the design of the bookshelves and to the décor that matches their tastes, areas of interest and budget”. Oscar Graf, too, says he is constantly on his phone, “every single day”, talking and messaging with clients, “sometimes about potential purchases, but often just about life”.

There is a delicate balance to be struck in being an expert who is friendly yet at the same time professional. And especially given our long cultural association of grey hair with expertise, this balance can be especially difficult for young dealers. Which is why all of them are quick to mention their bona fides – and insist on doing so with clients as well. “Some new collectors simply take our trustworthiness for granted,” say Ceretto and Occhinegro, but for them “aspects like attribution, conservation and provenance remain fundamental in the Old Masters market.” And well they should be. That’s one aspect of the Old Masters market, and of all antiques, that won’t be changing anytime soon. But it’s very possible that nearly everything else will – the art world over the next decade is going to look much different than it has for the previous century.