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A Popular Art Fair Has Fought Its Way Back

Masterpiece London, postponed by Covid and hampered by Brexit, may not have returned yet to its high point, but it's determined to get there.

By Farah Nayeri
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LONDON — Except in exceptional circumstances — such as a deadly pandemic — summer in London is the season for such prestige events as the Wimbledon tennis tournament and the Royal Ascot horse races.

Since 2010, the summer calendar also includes Masterpiece London: an art and antiques fair held in Chelsea whose eclectic mix of galleries, attractive layout and champagne bars are popular with visitors.

Heir to the Grosvenor House Art and Antiques fair — a hotel-based event that closed in 2009 after 75 years of catering to an older, upscale clientele — Masterpiece, as usual, plans a very wide range of offerings this year: from antiquities and old masters to contemporary art, jewelry and design, not to mention stands showcasing sports cars and luxury boats.

Since 2017, the fair has been 67.5 percent owned by MCH Group, the operators of the Art Basel fairs. The group's controlling shareholder since 2020 is James Murdoch, son of the media proprietor Rupert Murdoch.

Among the assortment of pieces showing at Masterpiece London will be this Triceratops skull. More than 60 million years old, it was discovered on private land in Wyoming in November 2019. David Aaron

After two years of pandemic-induced postponement, this year's Masterpiece fair is scheduled to be back from Thursday to July 6 at its usual riverside location: the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea (a vast complex that is home to some 300 British army veterans). To welcome everyone this year, the entrance has been covered with very large yellow anemone drawings by the British artist Sarah Graham. Visitors will also encounter two giant light installations by the Pakistani-American artist Anila Quayyum Agha.

Masterpiece 2022 "is a celebration of what we do, but also of people coming together," said Lucie Kitchener, the fair's chief executive since 2017. "It's been a difficult two years," Ms. Kitchener added, pointing out the benefits for Masterpiece of being part of a larger organization.

Ms. Kitchener said the London art market was currently emerging from "a collision of Covid and Brexit — so we're definitely behind where we need to be, not necessarily as fair organizers, but as a country trying to open our doors and welcome people in."

Brexit made it “overly complicated” for galleries and participants trying to do business in London, and it was “harder for people,” Ms. Kitchener added. She urged fair organizers, dealers, auction houses and the British government to “work collaboratively” to preserve London’s status as a major global destination, adding: “We shouldn’t be putting anything in people’s way.”

Advance ticket sales have been healthy this year, higher than in 2019, Ms. Kitchener said. But fewer galleries have taken stands at Masterpiece: a total of 127, down from more than 150 in 2019. She explained that this was either because the gallery in question had stopped doing fairs, or because of the date clash: Covid has led multiple art fairs to be held in June, later than usual, including Tefaf Maastricht and the Brafa Art Fair in Brussels.

A first edition of Jane Austen’s “Emma: A Novel,” in three volumes from 1816, may be seen at Masterpiece. Peter Harrington

As a fair, Masterpiece London has something for everyone. Galleries represent art, antiques, decorative objects and design. On a wander through its airy, carpeted halls this year, you might come across a Triceratops dinosaur skull more than 60 million years old, a first edition of Jane Austen’s “Emma,” an emerald bangle and a painting by the British-Portuguese painter Paula Rego, who died earlier this month. Also displayed on site are two Ferraris and a luxury boat.

“It’s a very London fair, but it’s what I would call New London,” said Melanie Gerlis, author of “The Art Fair Story” (a recent book on the art-fair industry) and a Financial Times art-market columnist.

Ms. Gerlis said the Chelsea location had meant that Masterpiece appealed to “lots of young bright bankers” and “nondomiciled people” — meaning British residents whose permanent home was elsewhere.

Importantly, also, it occupies a niche.

“It is local, but when local is London, that’s a pretty international local. And the timing is really good,” she explained, referring to Wimbledon and Ascot. Given the challenges of the global fair business — from financial to logistical to environmental — “the more local you are as a fair, the better.”

In its early years, Masterpiece strove to find an identity. The first fair was “comparable to a teenager in her first pair of high heels,” said Robert Young, a folk art dealer, in a 2018 interview with the Art Newspaper. Offering everything from expensive luxury goods and status symbols to antiques and design objects, it was “aspirational” and “a little try-hard,” he said.

The luxury-goods aspect of the fair was subsequently toned down, allowing Masterpiece to come into its own and become an attractive enough proposition for MCH Group to step in and buy it.

In its December 2017 announcement of the purchase, MCH Group said Masterpiece brought together wide-ranging groups of collectors and had the potential to expand to other locations in the United States, Asia and the Middle East.

The pandemic postponed those and so many other plans.

One change that regular visitors will notice in the 2022 edition is that the champagne bars, which used to stretch all the way down the central aisle of Masterpiece London, have been moved to the end of the aisle. Why?

“We had 55,000 people at the fair in 2019, and there were a lot of bodies crammed around those bars for a lot of the time,” said Ms. Kitchener. “I don’t think that’s how people want to experience events.” She noted also that in the post-Covid world, more spacing was preferred, and that the crowded bars “divided the fair into two halves.”

The London gallery Piano Nobile will exhibit “Island of the Lights from Pinocchio” (1996), a pen, ink and watercolor by Paula Rego, at Masterpiece. Piano Nobile

At this year’s fair, the central aisle is narrower and filled with a sculpture series.

Overlooking the aisle, in a very visible spot, is the Dickinson gallery booth. Co-founded in 1993 by Simon Dickinson — previously a senior director at Christie’s — the gallery is a leading dealer of old masters, impressionist and modern art, and contemporary art. The gallery is a Masterpiece stalwart: It has been showing there since the start in 2010.

Emma Ward, managing director, said that over the years at Masterpiece, Dickinson had sold important works by such artists as Picasso, Legér and the impressionist painter Gustave Caillebotte, sometimes priced in the millions, and had met great new clients there, so “we’ve always been a great fan and advocate of the fair.”

She said Masterpiece was “very accessible” both in terms of its size and the variety of objects on display. It attracted a range of age groups, including very young fairgoers who, unlike at other art fairs, were not afraid to wander in, browse the objects on display and buy something that might be the start of a collection.

Ms. Ward confirmed that Brexit had created bureaucratic hurdles and complexities for those working on the London art market. But she said that wasn’t going to get in the way of international travelers drawn to the British capital’s many attractions, or art buyers. She recalled that in the same week as Masterpiece, auctions of modern and contemporary art as well as old masters were being held.

“I don’t think that we will be seeing less footfall,” she said. “London is a very popular destination still.”

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