FT Weekend
Collecting

Beauty in the eye of the buyer

Masterpiece | The fair's chairman talks to *Melanie Gerlis* about balancing accessibility with quality — and his own eclectic collection of art and objects

The seven-year-old Masterpiece fair, in the grounds of The Royal Hospital Chelsea, has become part of London's summer season, alongside events such as the Chelsea Flower Show and the Wimbledon tennis tournament. The fair's understated chairman, Philip Hewat-Jaboor, didn't plan to be the face of the glamorous cross-category fair — previous director Nazy Vassegh left at the end of last year — but in many ways he exemplifies it.

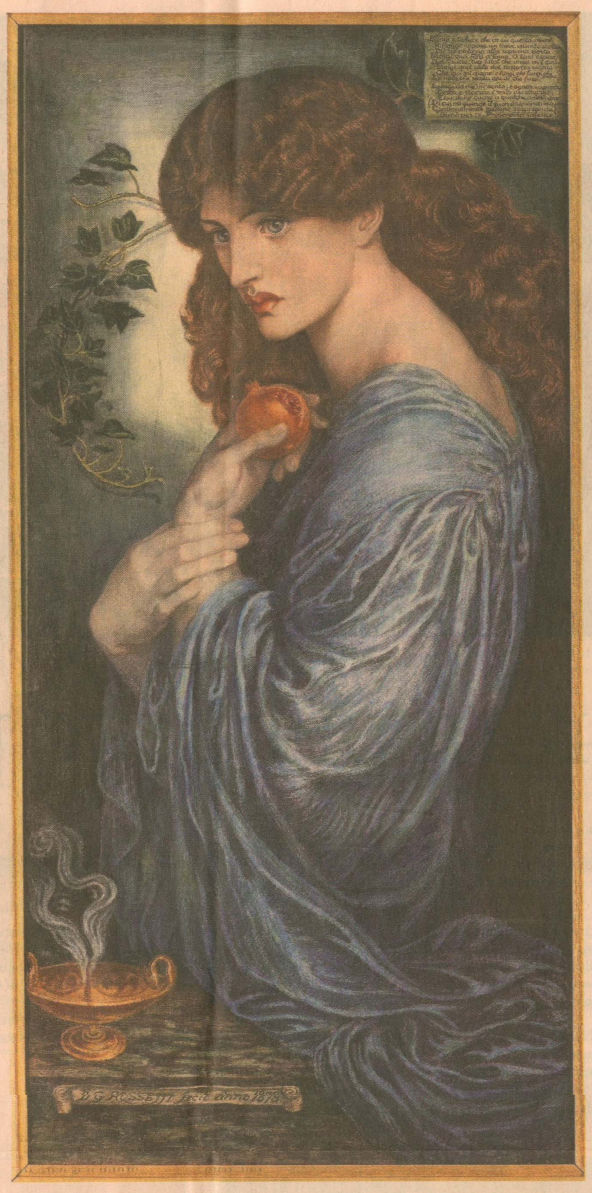
For a start he is a long-time collector in niche, varied fields. His Jersey home and adjacent hillside gallery are filled with art and furniture from across the centuries. These include silver, porcelain and gilt-bronze objects from the collections of the Regency-period aesthetes Thomas Hope and William Beckford, as well as fragments from ancient Egypt and Rome, and a large collection of works in coloured ornamental stones.

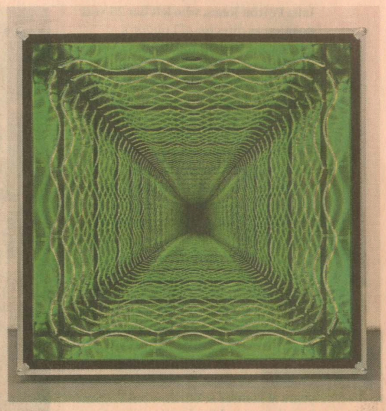
Hewat-Jaboor has a thirst for old-fashioned connoisseurship, something that can seem at odds with today's fast-moving, highly transactional art market. "I believe in taste and having an eye; some might think I'm a bit prudish," he says. At the same time, he places great emphasis on re-contextualising art as part of daily life. "People need to remember to live with what they buy, to enhance their surroundings. I can see everything, I use everything. I sit on a [Georges and François Henri Georges] Jacob sofa, I eat off 18th-century porcelain. Sometimes a plate breaks, which is awful, but it's better than if it was still stored in a box out of sight," he says.

Variety characterises Hewat-Jaboor's fair. Masterpiece's 150 exhibitors are specialists in areas ranging from ancient antiquities (Rupert Wace brings a 4,000-year-old Egyptian sarcophagus panel) to the present decade (Pangolin has an eye-catching 2015 ceramic by Merete Rasmussen), with furniture, rare books and jewellery also in the mix. Specialists in individual fields are deliberately dotted apart from each other. Not all cross-category fairs have the same approach — Tefaf Maastricht is a zoned affair — though London's Frieze Masters also juxtaposes specialists from different fields.

Hewat-Jaboor highlights the booths that are shared between dealers in different but, he believes, complementary areas. These include New York's Safani and Washington DC's Geoffrey Diner galleries, who are bringing antiquities and Modern design pieces respectively, and newcomers Berwald and MD Flacks, who will combine Modern British art and Chinese antiques. "The art world is not so delineated any more," Hewat-Jaboor says.

It's an attitude that Masterpiece's exhibitors appreciate. "It helps all the booths stand out," says Toby Kidd, head of communications at Blain|Southern, one of the first contemporary galleries to show at the fair in 2013. This year, the gallery is again bringing just one work to the fair, a 2017 glass Bubble Cabinet by the Dutch designer Jeroen Verhoeven. It looks rather fragile and untouchable, but in fact can be used as a cabinet: it is made with borosilicate, one of the strongest types of glass. Kidd describes it as "on the boundary between contemporary sculpture, design and technological innovation". The work will be flanked by Old Masters to 20th-century fine art at Richard Green's booth and antique to contemporary ceramics on Adrian Sassoon's stand.





From far left: the chairman of Masterpiece fair Philip Hewat-Jaboor; a watercolour of 'Proserpine' (1878) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti on sale at Agnews; 'Impenetrable Room' (2017) by Iván Navarro at Paul Kasmin Gallery
Andy Barnham

Making the fair accessible — "even though I don't like the word" — is key for Hewatt-Jaboor. Price points are lower than many people might expect in such a luxurious-looking fair and can begin in three figures. "Objects don't need to be expensive to be good," he says. He highlights sculpture dealer William Agnew who "always has numerous wonderful objects in this area".

As can be expected at a varied fair that promises exceptional works, there are some big-ticket items too. This year, London antique jewels and silver dealer SJ Phillips is bringing a diamond necklace that was given as a wedding present to the American heiress Helen Hay in 1902 and is now priced at about £5m.

Whatever the level, Hewat-Jaboor is keen that exhibitors put prices on their booths — something of a rarity on the art fair circuit — which could overcome a significant hurdle for would-be buyers.

Many of the booth-based talks at the fair are hands on; they include a guide to collecting photography (Peter Fetterman, July 3) and a workshop on how to light art (TM Lighting, July 5). Author Maria-Christina Sayn-Wittgenstein Nottebohm will talk about how to look at art with children (which youngsters are encouraged to join), on the back of her book *Old Masters Rock* (July 5).

All the same, accessibility is a relative term in the high-end art world. Tickets for Wednesday's VIP preview are £100 — although at other fairs these are something that money can't buy.

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It's a careful balance to strike in a conservative art world. In its earlier days, the fair was criticised for being too accessible. The high-end fashion and limited-edition cars were dismissed in fine art circles and quickly minimised at later editions — although both categories now seem to be so integrated into the art world that perhaps the fair's organisers were ahead of their time. This year, the luxury goods come courtesy of partnership and sponsorship arrangements and seem to be of the Masterpiece order.

Ultimately Hewat-Jaboor says, "I want to keep Masterpiece fun and lovely, glamorous and gorgeous — and all about beauty, whether it's a Sèvres plate or a powerboat."

June 29-July 5, masterpiecefair.com