

Freda Matassa (left) and Julia Toffolo (right) at Purdy Hicks Gallery, London, with paintings by Pierre Bergian. © Justin Piperger

Custodians of beauty

Amanda Stücklin discusses the complex issues at the heart of art collections management with Freda Matassa and Julia Toffolo, the faces of Matassa Toffolo

'Print Hall' installation project at the UK Ambassador's residence, Washington DC, by Julia Toffolo © Eric Sander from *The Architecture of Diplomacy: The British Ambassador's residence in Washington DC* by Anthony Seldon and Dan Collings, 2014



Meet Freda Matassa and Julia Toffolo, the duo behind the new Art Collections Management partnership Matassa Toffolo in the Café at Sotheby's on New Bond Street, one of the centres of the London art market. Here, only a few weeks before an evening auction of Impressionist and modern art achieved a total of £178.6 million with the star lot, Gustav Klimt's breathtaking 1902 *Portrait of Gertrud Loew* selling for £24.8 million.

Given where we are the conversation inevitably turns to art, and who better to discuss the subject with than Freda and Julia. Both have blue-chip art backgrounds. Freda, who has been named one of the top '50 Women to Watch in the Arts', was previously Head of Collections Management at the Tate, and Registrar at the Royal Academy. Julia was formerly Deputy Director and Senior

Registrar of the UK Government Art Collection, managing and displaying its large fine-art collection in British embassies around the world, as well as 10 Downing Street and numerous high-profile government buildings in London.

Over coffee, we discuss how the art market has evolved into a billion-dollar global business with artworks being traded like commodities – albeit high-end commodities. I ask if it is right that art should be put into such a category.

"To many, 'Art', in the broadest use of the word, may appear to be a commodity", says Freda "but in reality it's not. Art is quite different. More often than not you are dealing with something that is absolutely unique, that isn't mass-produced and can't be replicated. There are so many facets to a work of art. Yes, there is always a value, be it intrinsic or otherwise, and when that value starts to creep up into the millions then sometimes things can get difficult."

Freda notes that quite aside from any cultural associations and connections, there can also be family





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considerations, with art often becoming subject to financial and legal processes. And then, finally, what so many people forget – most works of art are produced from sensitive materials. “Essentially, at the end of the day we are all simply custodians of art. It’s our duty and responsibility to ensure that we maintain artworks from previous generations, as well as ensure that the art of our own time is preserved for longevity.”

So clearly art isn’t just the glamour, glitz and champagne so many of us now associate it with. Julia explains: “The art market is a very serious business, and as a collector or would-be collector there are lots of things to consider that can be a little daunting. Our combined art backgrounds and experience of working in

collections management, installation, display, cataloguing and transport has taught us the gold standard in managing cultural objects. It became clear to us that the same quality of care was not always in place in private and corporate collections, so we decided to go into partnership and set up an art collections management business that would provide advice and guidance on all aspects of collections management to museum-quality standard.”

At risk of sounding a little dim I ask what art collections management is. “In a nutshell,” answers Freda, “it’s knowing what you have, where it is and caring for it responsibly. That might sound pretty simple, but you would be surprised how many people get it wrong!” It appears that even when large amounts of money have been spent, very few really consider the after-care – the importance of inventories, conservation, rationalisation, display and storage, quite aside from appropriate insurance. I equate it to buying an expensive car and not keeping it in a garage or having it serviced regularly. Julia agrees, observing that “Collectors enjoy the thrill of the chase and the purchase but think the maintenance is boring – luckily that’s the bit we enjoy! And besides, an up-to-date, full inventory is vital for insurance purposes, quite aside from peace of mind.”

Both go on to explain how with the vast range of galleries, art fairs and websites available today, anyone can now afford to acquire art – there are so many different entry levels. Added to which, markets all over the world are expanding, but collectors rarely know the right questions to ask before they make a purchase. For example, where the art in question has come from, what it is made of, and, if they are buying a contemporary work, what are the artist’s intentions in terms of maintenance and display?

An indication of the duo’s standing in the art world is the fact that they were asked by Parliament to propose a list of artists from which the Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art could select the 2015 General Election Artist. The artist finally chosen for the commission was Adam Dant. The resulting work, a monumental drawing in ink entitled *The Government Stable* recording the Election was unveiled to the public for the first time at Portcullis House during London’s annual Open House Weekend in September. Dant’s picture now joins the Parliamentary Art Collection.

Finally, before we part company, I ask what is the most important reason for collecting and owning art. Both unanimously agree that it should be quite simply pleasure. But as they have carefully explained, we have to remember we are simply short-term custodians, so it’s our responsibility to respect and care for the things we love. ■

(matassa-toffolo.com)

FORTHCOMING LONDON ART FAIRS

Winter Olympia Art & Antiques Fair, Olympia
2-8 November, olympia-antiques.com

Asian Art in London
5-14 November, asianartinlondon.com