

Friday

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Curating Culture

HAVING WORKED IN television, film and theatre, Brian Haughton is a cultural tour de force. With the support of the UAE's Ministry of Culture, he has brought his signature brand of dramatic panache to Dubai. **Veathika Raina** meets the perfectionist. Photos by **Kishore Kumar**

On meeting sexagenarian Brian Haughton, I realise that he is a very knowledgeable man on art and antiques. I soon discover that his interest in art and theatre has been strong right from his childhood: "My parents had their business, my brother was a great horseman and my sister a great sportswoman. But I was different. Art and theatre have been

the most important things in my life for as long as I can remember." Haughton grew up in Dublin, Ireland. He was involved in his school's drama society and was always busy in some production or another. "My father was an excellent businessman but he also wrote plays for a hobby. He once took me to a play written by him which was staged

at the National Theatre in Ireland, so in a way it would not be wrong to say that acting is in my genes." Haughton says that he grew up in a wonderful home environment. He was surrounded by art and antiques at home. "My father was the most well-read man I have ever known and his broad knowledge of everything - art included - was reflected in

the décor of our house. We grew up surrounded by art and antiques in our home, so I was quite aware of decor trends from an early age." After pursuing a career in acting for over two decades, Haughton and his wife set up the Brian Haughton Gallery in London which deals primarily in ceramics. After some time, they started expanding their business by having fairs and exhibitions with the aim of creating an international community of interest in art, antiques and design - one in which commerce and academia combine to promote an appreciation of fine and decorative arts.

The first fair they participated in was The International Ceramics Fair and Seminar, held annually in London

every June since 1982. They later forayed into the American fair arena in 1989 with The International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show. Then came The International Fine Art Fair (1994), The International Asian Art Fair (1996) and The International Art and Design Fair (1999) held in New York. The most recent has been the Dubai International Fine Arts and Antiques Fair, which started in February 2007. Haughton's interest in art dominated his involvement in dramatics but he still feels that he's very much an actor. "If you ask my children, they'll tell you that their father has never stopped acting."

I, ME, MYSELF

I jumped in where many feared to. I went to London as I didn't want to train anywhere else. London for me is the centre of theatre. At the time, there were four major drama schools in London and I was lucky enough to be accepted to The Webber-Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London after my audition. Those three years were the most exciting years of my life. I learnt so much about theatre. I was involved in dramatics at school but when you are studying one specific thing, you can expand by focusing on the details.

I was snatched up fresh out of drama school by an agent from a big theatre company and I was fortunate to be offered the juvenile lead, which is the young male lead. I did 26 plays in 26 weeks while I was with that company. It was a lot of hard work as we rehearsed during the day and played at night. Imagine doing 26 plays like that - every week we had to rehearse for a new play, so I really learnt the craft. When I returned to London after eight months, I was offered a role in a play called *Porters of the Queen*, which is about Queen Victoria. One after the other I was offered roles in good plays with great actors.

I had the opportunity to work with whom I believe to be some of the most legendary actors of my time. When I became a professional actor, I met Dame Dorothy Newton. An actress of that calibre was an absolute idol for me. To witness her skills and performances was a real treat.

Working with her was a great eye-opener. When you work with such great actors you learn a lot from the ways in which they do things. You learn a lot by observing the subtle nuances in their art.

Later on when I ventured into the film industry, I had a minute role in the film *Brief Encounter* which starred Sophia Loren. She is the ultimate movie star! I learnt so much just from watching her. I also learnt the difference between how a camera can convey emotion on a set and how a thespian conveys the same on stage.

I believe that theatre is the most exciting medium to work in. Having worked in television, film and theatre, I know the different crafts. But at the end of the day, theatre offers the most exciting atmosphere because it's a live performance. The actor has to build a relationship between himself and the audience. If the audience is with you then what follows is amazing - you as the actor in turn give the same back to the audience. In the movies, the camera is your tool for interacting with the audience. It's not as exciting as the wave that comes from the audience when you are performing a play.

I am a perfectionist. Be it in acting or in the business that I am in now, I believe that everything should be perfect. I don't like musicals, I like the art of pure acting. Even when it comes to selecting the music for my own productions, my preferred choice is classical. I'm very particular. I like pure forms of art and the intricacies of it. I hate bad productions of plays or a bad production of anything for that matter. When it comes to work, I can be quite a task master. In my line of work, it's important to strive for perfection in our administration and organisation for everyone's benefit. I personally check everything prior to each and every fair. I examine the set-up the night before the opening day to make certain there are no loose ends.

I have an eye for art. While I was involved in theatre and touring, I used to be in the south England for one week and in Yorkshire in the north the next. When you move around so much doing the same play, you do end up having a lot of time on your hands. So I had time to explore



I, ME, MYSELF

The fairs set up by Brian Haughton play host to various genres of art.

and peruse the nearby markets. I found myself going to art and antique shops and before I knew it, I was buying items and returning to London with them.

As I started collecting and buying more and more, we decided to start a business – a small shop of antique ceramics. And that was the beginning of the Brian Haughton Gallery. I soon realised that I had a good eye for spotting interesting items as the pieces in the gallery were selling. Just by looking at an item I can tell you whether it's good or average. I can distinguish between two similar pieces produced in the same factory. I am lucky that I am considered one of the top dealers in ceramics in the world. We deal in English and continental porcelain from the 18th and 19th centuries. Collecting soon took over my love for acting. I became very selective with the roles I took on. We worked at expanding the gallery and then started the fairs.

I hate selfish and rude people. Some people actually believe that life owes them a favour and therefore feel that they have a right to walk over other people. I absolutely hate that. I loathe the fact that somebody who possesses a position of power tries to use it to overwhelm someone.

I always try and keep away from people with these two traits. We have been hosting the ceramics fair for over 29 years now where we bring in top collectors, dealers and academics. As an organiser, it's of utmost importance for me to ensure that my fairs are an equal platform for everyone – including the audience. We don't tolerate any rude or selfish behaviour by anyone in our company or at our fairs.

I, ME, MYSELF

Me and my family

My wife Anna and I met when we were 18 years old. I was still in drama school and she used to work at Lloyds. She used to come and see my plays. We actually got married very young. She is my absolute soulmate. It's a partnership beyond belief.

We're not only business partners but also life partners. We have quite opposite personalities and this comes to the fore in the business. But we complement each other too. I can't think of life without her and we have two great children who also work with us. Together as a family we love to go to the theatre – be it in London or New York. I appreciate my family more than anything else in the world.

I don't consider my children as children – they are my friends. My daughter's married and brought an amazing young man into the family, so our relationships are growing and the family is expanding.

Me and education

I have been incredibly lucky to have been educated. I graduated from St Andrew's College in Ireland and The Webber-Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London. It's sometimes difficult determining where you want to go in life and my father backed me completely when I told my parents that I wanted to pursue dramatics. Education is extremely important. Knowledge is power and if people don't have knowledge there's no future.

It has always been our endeavour in all our fairs to get curators from museums and art colleges to give lectures and to educate the audience about arts and antiques. I strongly

believe that we must educate our youth otherwise there's going to be darkness in the future.

Me and criticism

One has to listen to criticism, whether you like it or not. We have an open door policy at work. Any dealer or colleague can come and tell us what they think or believe in. I listen to everything because if you don't, then you can't expand as a person or as a business.

However, I always gauge whether there's any truth in the criticism. If it's true – or substantiated – then we change and adapt accordingly. I think I take criticism quite well but sometimes there are people who look at things from only their perspective and criticise. You got to see the criticism as a whole and not just in one way.

Me and my definition of life

Life is about the way you lead it. I have always been as honest with myself as I can be.

I wake up in the morning and say that I am blessed to be alive. I love what I do; my work gives me a lot of pleasure. I also take life as a challenge because I love new challenges. For me life is incomplete and dull without trying out a new challenge. When we first went to the US to start our fair, it was a huge challenge to rope in the dealers and the museums as we didn't even live in the US. Similarly, taking on Dubai was a huge challenge. No one knew what it was going to be like. We were unsure of what the response to our kind of work would be.

I think that what came through was an amazement that we work as a family. So I define life with the

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I, ME, MYSELF

challenges that it brings to me and the way I take them on.

Me and charity

I am a great believer in returning something to the society and we do this with our business. At Haughton Fairs, we are involved with a great number of charities. All our big fairs in the US have an opening night for charity. The opening night of our biggest fair - The International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show - channels its proceeds to The Society of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. They collaborate with a hospital in London. It gives me immense satisfaction that the funds are used for this cause. Our business is the biggest provider in funds for their research and each year it has brought in about a million dollars for the research. Proceeds from The International Fine Art Fair go to The Frick Collection - a museum in New York. For our Art and Design Fair in New York, funds go towards The Bard Graduate Center - a learning institute for decorative arts. Our fourth fair is The International Asian Art Fair, whose proceeds go to the Asia Society.

I, ME, MYSELF

As a dealer and an organiser of fairs, how important are brands?

You should buy what you feel instinctively attracted to. I have always bought pieces with which I can make a connection. However, in any form of art - be it sculpture, ceramics or painting - there are three things that object must possess: quality, precision and passion. Art must possess these qualities. Personally, I buy things which touch me when I buy them. At my home in London, I have some Meissen figures which were sculpted by Kaendler. They are from the 'Commedia dell Arte'. I see them and I think of how they were produced at a time when there was no control of the fire in the kiln. How the movement and their expressions were sculpted to seem so real is remarkable to me.

What tips would you give to people who would like to know more about art but are afraid to step into galleries?

First of all, don't be scared of entering



an art gallery or an exhibition. Even if you don't have an understanding of art, go in and just soak it up. You must simply open yourself to art - the more you see, the more you will learn. Never be afraid to ask questions. I know for a fact that whatever fair you go to, every dealer there will take immense pleasure in discussing what he has and where it comes from. You can learn a lot by questioning dealers and curators. Walk into shows, museums and galleries and learn of some part of each place thoroughly. Don't go to a museum and see all the floors. Take one room at a time, see it, absorb what's in there and read about it. I still do this.

What has the response been to the Dubai fair and what does the future hold?

We had a strong feeling that Dubai would work and our first year saw an incredible response. We wouldn't have taken Dubai on if we didn't think there was a market for it. Dubai is a major player in the financial world. 2008 was great. This year, in spite of the credit crunch, we were still well received. I feel the market is opening up here and our patron, The Ministry of Culture, wants it here, so it's definitely growing. We started a new project this year which was a Ladies Day. In the future, we are planning to get world-renowned curators to lecture and some great art and antiques for the people in Dubai to appreciate and buy.

How important is it for you to network in your line of business?


In today's day and age I think you

need to network in any business.

In my business it is very important because we not only deal in arts and antiques, we also set up international fairs. We need to network with dealers, curators, academics, charity organisations and museums. It's a logistical challenge to put up shows and we have always tried to make everyone comfortable by doing things according to their requirements. Networking goes hand-in-hand with communications and good communication is the key to networking.

What drives you - the past, the present or the future?

Poet T.S. Elliot wrote that 'time present and time past are all together in time future'. I completely agree with that. I feel the past and the present bring you forward to the future. It has to be an amalgamation of all three because you can't do anything in the future without knowing what happened in the past. For example, about 28 years ago, our business went up in fire. We lost everything. My children were about three and six at the time and they had to be clothed and fed. It made me think about where we could go from there. The insurance company was unbelievably dreadful and it was a matter of fighting for everything. It made me realise that life is so fragile - you have to fight.

If the fire hadn't happened, I wouldn't have pushed as hard. So it was the past which actually determined our future. 

- Veethika Raina is a Dubai-based freelance writer



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