

AXEL VERVOORDT

BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER



“THE ATTITUDE OF A *WABI* SPACE IS ALWAYS A VERY GENTLE APPROACH . . . WE’RE NOT HARMING ANYTHING”

Ever heard of Gutai? What about the Zero Group? Heck, *arte povera*? These major movements of recent art history—nary 50 years have passed—have been enjoying a renaissance, on the walls in private collections, and even making their way into major museums restlessly mounting shows, such as the Guggenheim’s recent surveys on the Japanese Gutai and Mitteleuropean Zero. There’s no shortage of market fascination with the periods either. From Art Basel to the Biennale des Antiquaires, booths teem with Kazuo Shiraga’s textured brush paintings, Otto Piene’s silver experiments, and Lucio Fontana’s slashed canvases, with prices skyrocketing for works that even five years ago might have been called a hard sell. So, what happened?

Axel Vervoordt. The Belgian behemoth of inspired living, that is, not only stunned audiences with his ethereal interiors, but his collecting prowess became a touchstone of taste. He discovered Fontana when Vervoordt was aged 26, and his persuasion for the unexpected and unfamiliar led him to voraciously acquire the masterpieces of these postwar Expressionist periods that he still maintains at a gentle and

spry 68. Since 1968, Vervoordt has stewarded and installed his favorite postwar art, along with his other passion, classical and Asian antiquities, into his design projects. For four decades, he has alchemically transformed the homes of the world’s most notable and exacting individuals, a list so private that it is protected by many a nondisclosure. And because of his patrons’ faith in his eye, art market fads have been born.

Curiously, he, along with his adult sons, only swooped openly into the dealing game with Axel Vervoordt Gallery in 2011—and added a Hong Kong outpost in May 2014 with an El Anatsui show explicitly timed to Art Basel. Yet, now mention Vervoordt and the younger generations assume he is a dealer first, and not a king of a castle—literally. After all, his manse, Kasteel van ’s-Gravenwezel, near Antwerp, a restoration project that took near four years to complete and is outfitted with his obsessions, including Egyptian stone vessels, Sung dynasty Buddhas, and Renaissance bronzes, was what began his ascent to decorative design nobility. Ironically, his most private space is what made him a public point of interest.

Over a recent dinner of foie gras and champagne, an industry insider—someone whose homes are coveted on Pinterest and Margaret Russell’s mood boards alike—leaned in and said, “Axel changed everything.” Although Belgium, a tiny country of great creative might, may now be garnering the international spotlight for its contemporary creativity, forget not that it has been known for few things—beer, chocolate, waffles and lace—meant to feed the senses, not enrich them. “What you feel is more important than what you see,” reflects Vervoordt.

In stark contrast, almost perhaps intentionally, Vervoordt has cultivated an aesthetic that both soothes and sparks curiosity. “The attitude of a *wabi* space is always a very gentle approach,” he purrs. “We’re not harming anything.” His work is so refined, it barely squeaks when one’s immersed in it. And yet, like its name, it, too, is bold. He labels his style as *wabi*, a personalized interpretation of *wabi-sabi*, an ancient Japanese Buddhist ideal that is a “concept we feel is very difficult to find words for it.” A rock is merely a rock, but also a source of resilient energy and a tableau of humility, which in