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Insurance and globalisation: an interview with Alexandre de Lisle, director at Eeckman Art & Insurance

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Chateau de Talcy interieur Image courtesy of Wikipedia

Eeckman Art & Insurance is a brokerage and insurance firm specialized in works of art. Present in Belgium, France and Switzerland, it is recognized by the insurance companies and international art experts. Art Media Agency went to meet Swiss-French director Alexandre de Lisle.

How did you arrive at Eeckman?

I was educated in a family passionate about furniture. My grandmother owned a gallery specialized in Flemish Primitives, where I spent a lot of time. So I grew up surrounded by Louis XV furniture, Louis XVI —les Boulle, les Hache—but also Renaissance works. Here is the origin of my passion for art.

Following this, I followed a course that deviated from this: I've been in business management —IT, management, accounting, etc. If I arrived to Eeckman, it is by a history of people. Eeckman is built like that: with individuals who love adventure.

In insurance, there are two ways to approach a market. Either through an expert, which sells insurance for works of art, or by mounting a business with a contractor. At Eeckman there is a desire for entrepreneurship. It takes a lot of energy to get into a market that way. We must wake up every morning with the desire to give everything we've got!

Eeckman operates in several countries. What about the globalization of the art market?

The art market is changing, that's undeniable. Currently, gallery owners and merchants — especially in big events like TEFAF —allow themselves to take risks. New trends appear and generally, these are the signs of globalization.

20 years ago, one side of contemporary art collectors was very sharp, and the other contained the ancient art collectors. There was always a separation between the two, but it's become more blurred. Globalization has brought integration, increasing the permeability between different segments of art.

However, semantically, contemporary art includes art after the war, which for me should be a separate section called contemporary art—first because the artists who compose it are generally alive. I would say that towards the end of the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation emerged. I think in five years, it will show in auction house sales catalogues, which have evolved.

The most important prices today are within contemporary art, especially in “liquid” artists. But how can you estimate the artists for whom there are fewer transactions?

It's difficult. I think this phenomenon is due to globalization. Yesterday, Europeans kept to themselves; buying a work in the United States was a challenge: we wrote for a long time, we sent pictures ... Today, with the Internet and its wacky modes of communication, it is clear that there is a uniform market—in the West anyway. At this level, there is also an increasing permeability.

This results in very strong sales, both in volume and in price for a number of artists. Like Warhol, for example: it is no coincidence that his enormous production contributed to his success. An American who hangs up a Warhol knows that the artist's price is high. This is a social effect.

What issues are responsible for the globalization of the art market? How does it materialize?

To me, globalization in the art market began in the 1970s. One of the first signs was when Sotheby's and Christie's started to buy back their U.S. competitors. To maintain symbiosis, the Guggenheim and the Louvre followed. This drew a global trend towards concentration—which insurance has not escaped.

In the world of insurance, there are a lot of mergers and it must be recognized that at present the largest insurers are Lloyds. They represent an unlimited heritage. Thus, Lloyds is a real symbol of globalization.

On the other hand, this merger creates new challenges. We must recognize that attitudes differ considerably between countries where we operate, which include Switzerland, Belgium, the U.S. and Holland. This has a significant impact on brokers and underwriters, who have to adapt. For example, they must translate contracts, correspondence, and take into account differences in mentalities. Today, the link between the global market and regional particularities is not yet perfect—in the art market.

Eeckman is trying to adopt this functionality. We want to make the link between the global and local mentality by offering innovative and tailored solutions. I think this will reveal Eeckman's succession of necessity: our customers, who are collectors, asset managers and professionals, are beginning to increase their places of residence in the world, settling in France, Belgium, and the United States. They latter therefore requires adapted interlocutors.

How do you see the evolution of your business in the global context?

The evolution of the trade is very significant in terms of lending between institutions and between institutions and collectors — they erupt.

Today, it is insured all over the world. On the other hand, a director of a Belgian museum, for example, may still prefer to opt for Belgian insurance. We must take this into account.

Most insurers are European. Now they have to answer to problems from different countries. How do you adapt to that?

For us, it is relatively easy. In general, it is the insurance companies that come to us because they need our highly specialized skills. If they want to develop a new market, e.g. for corporate collections, they come to us. Thus the machine is reversed. These insurance companies have international skills, but in order to address a local market, they need us. We also manage to create new products, which is an added value of Eeckman.

Today, in response to globalization in the field of insurance, we must find a form of expression that is understandable in any country—which does not mean that it must be generic, but specific and clear.

At Eeckman, we rely on the general conditions, and from there, we accept special conditions depending on the countries where we work. Indeed, the Geneva gallerist does not manage its insurance the same way as the gallery from Brussels or Paris.

Is Switzerland a new market for you?

Yes, it's been a little over a year since we began to work here.

It works well, but slowly. We have a very qualitative approach to which our customers are sensitive. We've also had to adapt to the local specificity, for example by taking a formulation in the risk so that our customers understand what we are talking about. Our conditions are very clear, but the semantics used as part of a contract in Switzerland are very precise. Eeckman's mentality is to work neatly.

Culturally, Switzerland varies widely— between German and French-speaking Switzerland in particular. What do you do to adapt?

There are three aspects. First, it must be known that in Switzerland there is an internal tax competition. Each township has its own way of working. For now, we do not touch German Switzerland —only when they call us. Rather, it is in French-speaking Switzerland that we work.

It is clear that Switzerland is a small country, but it is very concentrated. Artistically, Switzerland is classified in 4th position while its territory is microscopic. In Germany, each *ländler* has a different mentality. Here, it's easier because the country is smaller.

If we reduce the problems of globalization in Switzerland, the country is renowned for its fiscal aspect, but what is interesting is mainly the very fast and efficient exchange. In terms of artistic transactions, a lot of things happen because everything is simplified.

How is the Swiss market structured in terms of access to insurance?

I would say that the Swiss market is structured as follows: some brokers, from live insurances —AXA and Nationale Suisse being big players in the Swiss market — and few people who have had access to Lloyds, which has had mixed reactions.

The concept of brokerage is very new in Switzerland. Today, the available space is reserved for specialized brokers, who provide added value in terms of technicality and especially in terms of expertise in a particular little known area. Artwork insurance is very complex, because of the material it processes. That is to say, a lot of value in a highly concentrated and very mobile space.

One of the best working approaches is the sinister approach; that is to say that they call us when a problem occurs. The Swiss justice system is excessively expensive and people can become poor in a situation of conflict.

The role of the broker or underwriter is to be able to distinguish the wrong partner. It is not because we are an insurer that we are necessarily a good insurance broker for art. We see the quality of the broker in the heat of the moment, when there is a disaster. Finally, to work in an international market, we must understand what will take place from start to finish.

Who are your clients in Switzerland?

We have galleries, new forms of private foundations and some institutions. For our galleries, they are not only Swiss galleries, but also galleries based in other European countries.

Do you have development objectives?

We cannot speak of goals yet, it is too early. For now, we have a goal of realization. We wish to have the opportunity to propose a market—a vision that is our own—in Belgium and France. There is a real intellectualization of the functioning of our society, which we welcome.

Afterwards, we want to avoid dispersing too quickly, and continue to provide the necessary support to our customers.

Tags: [*Alexandre de Lisle*](#), [*Eeckman Art & Insurance*](#), [*globalisation*](#), [*insurance*](#)