

Memory of a Summer

Art, Friendship and Innovation in the 1920s

In the years preceding the First World War, friendships start to form between an emerging group of artists that includes Gust De Smet, Frits Van den Berghe and Constant Permeke. They meet through the young art promoter Paul-Gustave Van Hecke, who likewise puts them in touch with the critic André De Ridder. During Ghent's harsh winters, they work in simple studios in the city's Patershol neighbourhood; in the summers, they move out to the picturesque banks of the Lys, like the symbolists Claus and Van de Woestyne before them.

A new wave on the River Lys

The war sees many flee to the neutral Netherlands or to the UK. There, a fruitful exchange of ideas and styles takes place. On their return to Belgium, these contacts grow into a lively network of innovators. With the support of leading galleries such as *Sélection* and *Le Centaure*, a new, unique formal language emerges in the 1920s, rooted in the Flemish tradition yet open to the international avant-garde.

What began as a coincidental crossing of paths, leads to the emergence of a close-knit community in the interbellum. Artists such as De Smet, Van den Berghe, Permeke and Tytgat all share a drive for innovation, which they find through their shared love of the landscape, life and art.

The River Lys as a meeting place

The artists' summers spent along the River Lys will come to be the epicentre of this artistic movement. Villa Malpertuis in Afsnee – owned by Van Hecke and fashion designer Honorine 'Norine' Deschrijver – becomes a hotbed of creativity. Artists, writers and collectors grow closer through shared boat trips, dinners under the trees and riverside conversations.

Edgard Tytgat's painting *Memory of a Sunday* (1926) is the point of departure for this exhibition. Tytgat depicts a colourful crowd of characters enjoying a summer afternoon on the River Lys: Frits Van den Berghe, Gust and Léon De Smet, Marc Chagall, Blanche Charlet, Floris Jespers and many others. Some recognisable, others shrouded in enigmatic anonymity. The scene radiates a combined sense of nostalgia, camaraderie and creative freedom.

The rural and the avant-garde

While the artists take inspiration from rural life along the Lys – villages, markets, fairs – they are by no means unworldly. Thanks to Van Hecke and De Ridder, they are in direct contact with the international art circuit. Galleries like *Sélection* (1920–1922) and *Le Centaure* in Brussels offer not only exhibition space, but also a place of encounter and exchange. A telling example is the banquet of 20 June 1926 under the trees of the rectory De Groene Boomgaard in Drongen. Wonderful photos have survived from this meeting, and Edgard Tytgat captured its atmosphere in his painting, in which numerous artists can be recognised.

A summer tableau: the network in pictures

At the back of the boat is Marc Chagall and his wife. The Russian artist is a guest at Villa Malpertuis at the invitation of Paul-Gustave Van Hecke and André De Ridder. In the years to follow, Chagall will exhibit several times at *Le Centaure* alongside Flemish artists such as Frits Van den Berghe, Edgard Tytgat, Gust De Smet and Hippolyte Daeye, and in the company of international luminaries such as Klee, Arp, Kandinsky and Miró.

In the middle of the painting, on the left side, we can identify Gust De Smet, bow in hand. Steering the boat is his brother Léon, who is sat beside his wife. After the war, Gust returns to the Lys region and is invited by Van Hecke to stay at Malpertuis. There he will stay a number of years together with Van den Berghe. In April 1926, he shows new work at *Le Centaure*, which is still located at its old premises on Museumplein. A year later, he settles permanently in the Lys region. By this point, Léon is living in Brussels, but regularly makes his way back to the Lys for summer visits. In November 1926, he will exhibit at the new gallery on Avenue Louise.

Sitting at the bow of the boat is Frits Van den Berghe, recognisable by his glasses. In the early 1920s, he draws inspiration from rural life. In his expressive, often caricatural style, he depicts plump figures, village scenes and Sunday tranquillity. He paints in series, with themes such as Flemish houses, views from along the Lys, and summer afternoons – often sharing a close visual kinship with the work of his housemate Gust De Smet. The summer of 1926 marks a turning point: in 1927, his work starts to shift toward symbolism.

In the painting, we see him in conversation with Floris Jespers, who is sat beside him. Jespers comes from an Antwerp family of artists; his father Emile was a painter, his brother Oscar a sculptor. In this period, Floris is building a reputation as a painter with his own style and is active within the network of *Sélection* and *Le Centaure*.

On the bank of the river, we see Paul-Gustave Van Hecke welcoming his guests, accompanied by the little dachshund who follows him and his partner Norine everywhere. Norine, depicted here with mirror in hand, is more than a fashion designer: in 1914, together with Van Hecke, she founded Couture Norine on Avenue Louise in Brussels. The couture fashion house became a hub of the avant-garde, with close links to the network of *Sélection* and *Le Centaure*.

At the edge of the boat we see gallery owner Blanche Charlet stepping ashore. A pivotal figure in the Brussels art world, she started her own gallery on Avenue Louise in the early 1920s. In 1926, she joins *Le Centaure*, which, together with Walter Schwarzenberger, she will develop into an international meeting place. During the Second World War, Charlet will be an active member of the Resistance, as a spy for the UK.

In the painting we can see Hippolyte Daeye helping her alight. He got to know Permeke, Léon De Smet and Tytgat during his exile in London. In the 1920s, while based out of his studio in Antwerp, he becomes part of the *Sélection* network, exhibiting regularly within the group.

Edgard Tytgat, the painter himself, can be spotted observing the whole scene from the window. While his background is the urban milieu of Brussels, he feels a strong connection to the artists affiliated with Van Hecke and De Ridder. Tytgat is known for his narrative, often folksy scenes full of lightness and irony – of which this painting offers a perfect example.

The young Hubert Malfait, from Astene, is also present. He joins the group in 1924, seeing himself as a natural successor to Gust De Smet. In the following years, he will move to Paris, where he will again cross paths with Chagall. Together with artists such as Jules De Sutter, he represents the younger generation within Flemish expressionism.

Noticeably absent here is Constant Permeke. Together with De Smet and Van den Berghe, he will come to be known as being part of the 'Divine Trinity' of Flemish expressionism. Although Permeke will continue to be a frequent guest to the Lys artists in the 1920s and maintain a close friendship with both, he will also guard his independence. He will not sign a contract with Van Hecke and *Sélection* and will eventually choose to settle down in Jabbeke.

A group in motion

Tytgat's work serves as a visual anchor in this exhibition – a poetic snapshot of a generation of artists, collectors and critics centred around *Sélection* and *Le Centaure*. The figures in the painting refer anecdotally to the artistic community that grew up around Van Hecke, De Ridder and Schwarzenberger. However, the question of exactly who is who remains partly shrouded in mystery. Art critic Paul Haesaerts was the first to attempt identification, but don't let this aspect of the painting become the sole focus. The joy of the work is in looking, searching, dreaming and reliving this summer afternoon on the River Lys.