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Walther  
Vanbeselaere,  
Collector  
for the state  
1948-1973

Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens  
in cooperation with KMSKA

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# Artists in the exhibition

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For the enumeration of the  
artists presented in the  
exhibition, we have chosen to  
list them by generation, just  
as Walther Vanbeselaere did  
in his book *Moderne Vlaamse  
Schilderkunst (Flemish Modern  
Painting)*.

## Preface

The museum Dhondt-Dhaenens is particularly pleased this summer to present the exhibition *Walther Vanbeselaere, Collector for the state, 1948 – 1973*, which was realized in cooperation with the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA).

The presentation of the modern art collection assembled by Walther Vanbeselaere between 1948 and 1973 fits within the — historically grown — interest of the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in the significance of the committed art collector. An interest that also falls within the scope of the doctoral research of Tanguy Eeckhout, curator of the museum. With this exhibition, after the opening up of various private collections (the collection of Roger and Hilda Matthys-Colle in 2007; the collection Wilfried and Yannicke Cooreman in 2009; the Collection Tony Herbert in 2011 and the Collection Charles Vandenhove in 2013) and the Proximus corporate Art collection (in 2015), the MDD for the first time presents an important *Verzameling voor de staat* [Collection for the State]. In addition to the young art historians who provided a contemporary contribution to the publication, three contemporary artists — Jacqy duVal, Bart Lodewijks en Oleg Matrokhin — were invited to enter into dialog with the displayed works. This is in line with the research of the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens that seeks to update and disseminate scientific knowledge concerning Flemish modern art.

The ideas of Walther Vanbeselaere on modern Flemish art were particularly influential and have partly determined the Belgian art historiography and canon in the twentieth century. His influence on the creation of the collection Dhondt-Dhaenens was also very significant. The exhibition brings together works by top-level Belgian modern artists such as James Ensor, Henri Evenepoel, Léon Spilliaert, Edgard Tytgat and Jean Brusselmans — artists who are represented both in the collection of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp as well as in the collection Dhondt-Dhaenens. The conservator also had an eye for the international artistic context of his time. The collection of Belgian art was supplemented by Vanbeselaere with works by artists such as Edgar Degas, Ben Nicholson and Giacomo Manzù.

And finally, the exhibition and publication on the collector Walther Vanbeselaere would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment of curators Tanguy Eeckhout and Herwig Todts, conservator — scientific researcher at KMSKA. We are also particularly grateful to Manfred Sellink, managing director — chief conservator of the Museum, and the team of the KMSKA for their generous cooperation and the significant number of important loans from their collection.

Joost Declercq,  
Director museum Dhondt-Dhaenens

# From De Braeकेleer to Permeke. Walther Vanbeselaere, collector and source of inspiration

Tanguy Eeckhout

Since 2007, the policy of the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens focuses on the researching and making publicly available of social and art historical relevant collections. Until now, these were private collections and one corporate collection<sup>1</sup>. In cooperation with the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) this present initiative turned its attention to the collection policy of museum curator Walther Vanbeselaere, as well as its significance in the creation of the collection Dhondt-Dhaenens.

Collecting art for the community is something very different from collecting on the basis of a personal passion or interest. With its collection, a museum aims to give an overview of a certain period or movement and provide insight into the development of art history. A private collector, on the other hand, can radically choose to follow his own fascinations or express a personally motivated story with his collection. Walther Vanbeselaere formulated a very clear collection policy for “his” Royal Museum of Fine Arts. In a conversation with Joos Florquin for the public service broadcaster, he stated the following on this topic: “In my view, we must first be a national museum, a museum in which a major selection of the best of our own national art must be on view. It is more or less useless to buy insignificant work from foreigners, because abroad they will, in that sense, always have much more to offer. Our own past and present are very important.”<sup>2</sup> “With such a policy, personal taste

<sup>1</sup> Collection Roger & Hilda Matthys-Colle (2007), collection Wilfried & Yannique Cooreman (2009), Tony Herbert Collection (2011), Collection Jeanne & Charles Vandenhove (2013), Proximus Art collection (2015)

<sup>2</sup> Joos Florquin, Ten huize van... (part 18) (Louvain: Davidsfonds, 1982), 325. (the interview with Walther Vanbeselaere was broadcast on 15 January 1970 on the national television station BRT)

is of course less important, but both, the museum conservator and the private collector, must make choices that depend on the available budgets and the offer on the art market.

When Walther Vanbeselaere became conservator in 1948, the museum had a modest collection of modern art. Partly thanks to the association Kunst van Heden [Art of Today], there were works by Ensor, Evenepoel and Permeke in the collection, but Vanbeselaere sought to put together a complete overview of Flemish modern art and create important ensembles of the artists he considered key characters in the successive artists’ generations. The vast majority of the purchases of works of art during his tenure were therefore from the hands of Flemish modern artists. He considered the ancient art collection as completed and realized that the purchase budgets were such that they would not allow him to acquire many important art pieces from old masters.

For his canon of Flemish modern art, which was also the guiding principle for his collection policy, Vanbeselaere applied the “generation principle”: an artist belongs to a certain generation and reacts, with his work, against the previous generation. “The generation principle is a means of sharpening and clarifying the complex art historical image, the historical course. In a sense, it is a relative, yet reliable guide.”<sup>3</sup> Each generation represents a certain artistic position: the first generation is that of the realists (with artists who reached their artistic peak in the 1860s), the last generation that of the animists (artists born in around 1900 who reached their artistic maturity mostly in the 1930s). Vanbeselaere had a great sympathy for the artists he referred to as the “animists”, undoubtedly because he belonged to that same generation. These artists stood for a return to a style that never violated the realistic, perceptible form, unlike the previous generation of expressionists. Aside from artists such as Henri-Victor Wolvens, Albert Van Dyck and George Grard, he also included surrealists like Paul Delvaux and René Magritte in the generation of animists. However, he intentionally did

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 311.

not include this generation of artists in the canon he formulated in his book *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst*. He felt that there was not “enough distance” yet to look back on the “essence of their contribution”.<sup>4</sup> He would, however, consistently include their work in the KMSKA collection.

With the generation of artists that emerged after the Second World War, generally proponents of a mostly abstract or non-figurative approach, Vanbeselaere had much less affinity. In addition, he also disregarded the Belgian abstract artists who were active during the Interwar period. He considered abstraction as a foreign influence that was incompatible with the Flemish art tradition, which was thoroughly figurative. Nevertheless, works of several abstract artists active after 1945, including Jan Burssens, Louis Van Lint and Pierre Alechinsky, would be purchased under his tenure. Vanbeselaere also had not the least sympathy for the rapid successive innovations in the international contemporary art world of the 1960s (from Pop Art to Conceptual Art): “The mutual informing and exciting each other of artists and critics so as to not let pass unnoticed, en certainly not unimitated, the latest one-day-ism that emerged somewhere in Paris or New York, from fear of being called retarded, is all in all a questionable phenomenon.”<sup>5</sup>

Vanbeselaere considered Henri De Braekeleer and James Ensor as the greatest Flemish painters of the nineteenth century. The work of Henri De Braekeleer was in his eyes the authentic Flemish Impressionism, grown out of the typical Flemish Realism. De Braekeleer was able to capture the Flemish northern light and continue the Flemish painterly tradition in an authentic manner, unlike an artist such as Emile Claus, whom Vanbeselaere was very critical of. His work was solely based on the formula of the French impressionists, without capturing the Flemish nature of his subjects. Ensor, in turn, was the greatest of the next generation, evolving from Impressionism to Symbolism: “He never adheres to any

<sup>4</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst* (Brussels: De Arcade, 1961), 299.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

direction, and at the same time he brings the highest expression of everything through the superior freedom of his creative urge.”<sup>6</sup> Aside from Ensor, he considered Jakob Smits, Rik Wouters (mainly his sculptures) and Constant Permeke the most important exponents of Flemish modern art. These were the artists whose works he tried to compile into ensembles that were representative for their entire career.

It is striking how much Vanbeselaere in his discourse emphasized the Flemish nature of the artists and their fidelity to the Flemish art tradition while downplaying the importance of the relationships and positions of those artists in relation to the Western European artistic developments, which he sometimes even considered detrimental to their development. Because of this sometimes narrow view, Vanbeselaere would sometimes come to questionable conclusions: in this way, he felt that Gust. De Smet, for instance, had made his most authentic and best work after 1928, at a time when he resisted any external influences, since before he had been involved in an artistic revolution that went against his nature. In the years before 1928 he would have been too influenced by the Brussels art scene and would have worked “to please the urban snob”, in a decorative manner while playing with symbolic motifs.<sup>7</sup> This discourse, although rightly corrected or even contradicted by other art critics and historians throughout the twentieth century, has nevertheless had a lasting influence on the perception of many of these artists.

The book *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst* by Walther Vanbeselaere, published in 1961, was more than a coffee table book for the couple Dhondt-Dhaenens. It served in a sense as a guide for the creation of their collection. When the childless couple decided in 1960 to build a museum in the municipality where they had been living since 1937, their collection was far from completed. In the following years, they acquired even more works of art so as to compile a collection

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

that was in their eyes “worthy of a museum”. Their collection must originally have been rather representative of their unique taste, but when the idea of a museum arose, they wanted to provide a real overview of the development of modern Flemish art and acquire works of artists who belonged to the canon of modern art.

Of the thirty-two “canonical” artists discussed by Vanbeselaere in his book, only twelve artists, mainly the realists, are missing in the collection Dhondt-Dhaenens. All the 20th century artists who, according to Vanbeselaere, constitute the canon of Flemish modern art are represented in the collection Dhondt-Dhaenens. Just like Vanbeselaere, the couple Dhondt-Dhaenens disregarded the Flemish abstract art of the Interwar period: neither Georges Vantongerloo, Victor Servranckx, Felix De Boeck nor Jozef Peeters appear in the book, or in the collection. Nevertheless, the personal taste and friendships of the couple Dhondt-Dhaenens appear to be quite present in the collection: Servaes’s work is “disproportionately” represented, as well as the works of a number of “Leiestreek” [Lys region] artists who belonged to the circle of acquaintances of the couple, but whom Vanbeselaere did not include in his canon of Flemish modern art: Léon De Smet, Albert Saverys, Hubert Malfait and Albert Claeys.

It is quite possible that Vanbeselaere may have given advice to the couple Dhondt-Dhaenens and their architect Erik Van Biervliet on the construction of the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens. In the conversation with Joos Florquin, broadcast in 1970, Vanbeselaere talked about “the unique intimate character” of museums with an indoor patio because of the contact with greenery and the open sky. He did not understand that there were museums built in which the works of art were artificially lit: “All the works of art are made in daylight and one cannot appreciate a work of art in artificial light.”<sup>8</sup> In the speech he gave at the opening of the Museum Mrs Jules Dhondt-Dhaenens, Vanbeselaere praised the museum qualities of the building, which he described as unique in Flanders, and

<sup>8</sup> Joos Florquin, *Op.Cit.*, 341.

particularly the daylight that abundantly pours into the museum thanks, among other things, to the large inner patio.<sup>9</sup>

One can have a number of legitimate observations on the way in which Vanbeselaere construed the history of Flemish modern art, and especially on the way he viewed modern art developments almost exclusively from the narrow and one-sided perspective of the Flemish painting tradition. Other valuable developments were also largely disregarded; take for instance the very fruitful cross-fertilization between Belgian and Parisian art of around the turn of the century or the revolutionary innovations that abstract art brought with it in the years 1910 and 1920. Also the way in which he forced artists to fit into his generational theory created artificial subdivisions that sometimes did injustice to the artists. Yet his activities as art historian and collection manager evince a great and sincere affection for Flemish painting, an affection that invariably led to a valuable museum collection, and functioned as a source of inspiration for many art lovers in the second half of the twentieth century, such as the couple Dhondt-Dhaenens.

<sup>9</sup> Opening speech Museum Mrs Jules Dhondt-Dhaenens by Walther Vanbeselaere, 30 November 1968 (Archive Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens)

30.11.68

The life of Mr. and Mrs. Dhondt has been a hard life; a life of gain and of heavy trials. In this it is related to the lives of many of us. But when they decided to go live in the country at the age of 50 in the year 1937, and build the country house that was given the telling, romantic name 'Jodenhof' and thereby gave form to their attachment to the marvelous Lys country that they had known for years, and when it came to a friendly contact with the interior architect, Mr. Hees, who convinced Mr. Dhondt that such a house should also have paintings, then the couple Dhondt became infected with a microbe that is fatal to most because they were never lucky enough to meet a good advisor on their way or missed the feeling to gain advice from others and never had the courage, to surrender themselves like "believers" to their hobby and their advisors. Mr. Jules Dhondt has proved from that very moment that he, aside from being the tough businessman he naturally was, also had an extremely sensitive heart that was capable of weaknesses and that he could surrender to the soft but innately good in him, in a manner that could appear, in the eyes of many, as foolishness. I will never forget that Doctor Mertens, close friend of Mr. Dhondt, told me about his other friend, the pharmacist Jules Matthijs, who, during his life, donated his collection of paintings, furniture and porcelain to the city of Sint-Niklaas, only to live in two small rooms like a hermit: "that he was a fool!" I could not imagine that the couple Jules Dhondt would repeat this very same act, but with greater flair, because they had the resources, and would donate what they had collected through tenacious perseverance during thirty years, out of gratitude for the life in the community, the Flemish people, the Lys region, where they had been so happy. What does this collection of mainly Flemish work, mainly paintings signify? I must honestly admit that when I learned that this Museum would be built, I wondered whether that collection was worth being consecrated by a museum. I was

Speech of Mr. Dr. Walther Vanbese-laere at the opening of the Museum Mrs. Jules Dhondt-Dhaemens, November 30, 1968

familiar with this collection, but I never really saw it as a whole because it was spread throughout the house. I have to admit to you, and this is my sincere conviction, that now that I have seen the collection in this Museum, it has become something of a surprise to me. The fact that we have gained a museum in which, in addition, many cultural activities can be realized is definitely, according to current beliefs, — as a response to current needs —, a good thing, but that the collection can be shown and that even in some respects, for example, in connection with Serraes, it presents an ensemble that does not exist in any other Museum in our country, is of infinitely more importance to me. The collection Dhondt is eclectic, not linked to any particular approach. The only intention has been to collect good work, and in this the team Dhondt-Hees has certainly succeeded. The very special attractiveness of this collection is undoubtedly the appeal of the Lys country, the Laethem School, with excellent work by De Saedeleer and Van de Woestijne, George Minne and Serraes, of Permeke and Frits Van den Berghe and Gust De Smet, of Hubert Malfait and many others who are permanently connected with the Lys. The collection, moreover, also contains another wealth of other names, because the work of many other masters, who are a treasure for our country, was finally just as dear to him. I think of Meunier, Jakob Smits, Laermans, Ensor, Rik Wouters, Evenepoel, De Bruycker, Toorop, Spilliaert, Tjtgat, Daeye, Brusselman, and Wolvens: I don't mention them at all, but specifically those names that are represented in an excellent manner by one or more works and that make this museum a pearl in Flanders' crown. When you will enter through the large exhibition hall later, you may be surprised by this beautiful realization from a museographic point of view, by the good lighting, which you will not find in any other Museum in this prosperous country, and which will elevate Dourle-aan-de-Leie to the most important museum of the countryside by far, which,

through its collection and the excellence of the presentation, passes with flying colors the fire test of the comparison with other leading museums. But I would like to ask you not to be misled by your feelings. I would especially like to draw your attention to the painting that was intentionally given the place of honor by Mr. Heesop, the first work that you will get see, the "Enfant Matisse" (now known as "Fille Matisse" (A/V) by Evenepoel. In this work, which Mr Dhondt bought 15 years ago at Giroux in public auction for a very hard price, you will find, as it were, the heart of the donors most perfectly reflected: the pure intonation, the admiration for the child, the memory of the sharpest wound, the loss of an only child, and also the donation to the community of the most precious possession that the spouses Dhondt gathered in their lives. And I end with a sober, but urgent advice. Come back to this Museum, alone, during the day and preferably in sunny weather, because only then will you be able to take in every painting, brought to life by the blessing of the irreplaceable natural light, contained in a white environment and in living contact with the lovely landscape of the Lys which, eternally present, you can admire, from the hall, thanks to the vertical slit windows, together with the overarching sky, which spreads like a blessing high above the wonderful act of this donation.

*W. Vanbeselaere*

# Artists in the exhibition



# Jan Stobbaerts

Jan Stobbaerts debuted in around 1855 as an open-air painter in the surroundings of Antwerp. After 1860, he worked on his up-to-then anecdotal genre pieces of artisans which would develop into his renowned works of stable interiors and animals. With the raw-realistic painting *Slachterij (Slaughterhouse)*, the artist causes a scandal; the artist association *Les Vingt*, however, praise him as a pioneer of “living art”. By the end of the nineteenth century, Stobbaerts’s radical naturalism evolved towards a nebulous painting of light — a style which Vanbeselaere greatly appreciated. On the work *Dreggen in de Woluwe* he wrote: “Yet the rural peacefulness, the sweltering heat of a summer’s day, the refined rhythmic movement, the mildness of his heart, all of it is directly suggested through a volatile play of white, tender green and pink tones of great charm.” After 1900, Stobbaerts returns to his studio where he devotes himself to a series of paintings with mythological subjects. “A surprise,” which, according to the Antwerp chief conservator, “should be regarded as the crown on his work.”

° Antwerp, 1838

† Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe, 1914

# Henri De Braekeleer

De Braekeleer was trained by his father Ferdinand De Braekeleer who was a historical and genre painter. His oeuvre primarily consists of representations of everyday life and is characterized by a great sense of realism. Initially his work was considered banal because of its lack of political and social meaning. As products of intense study and observation, his creations nevertheless evince a great sense of detailed realism. De Braekeleer was very fascinated by the seventeenth-century Dutch masters, such as Johannes Vermeer and Jan Steen.

Vanbeselaere regarded Henri De Braekeleer, together with James Ensor, as the greatest painters of the nineteenth century. In 1956, Vanbeselaere devoted an important retrospective exhibition to De Braekeleer. The chief curator praised the way in which De Braekeleer, which he described as an “impressionist”, introduced light into his paintings. He stated: “His hymn to the light is much stronger than that of the realists. He is, as a painter of bright daylight, related to the French Impressionists, though he will never adopt the bright French-Impressionist palette. His Impressionism, his celebration of light is typically ‘Northern’ and moreover thoroughly Flemish.”

° Antwerp, 1840

† Antwerp, 1888

# Valerius De Saedeleer

Under the influence of Impressionism and the landscape painting of Franz Courtens, De Saedeleer paints his first canvases. His big turning point comes in 1904, in Sint-Martens-Latem, with his extremely personal interpretations of the landscape. Impressed by the art of the Flemish primitives and especially Bruegel, he simplifies his style: in thin, smooth paint layers and with calligraphic accuracy he paints a synthesis of the flat landscape of the Lys in changing of seasons. After returning from Wales, he captures the undulating landscape of Etikhove in many canvases. These are grand landscapes with small houses and finely drawn tree silhouettes, domed by an endless sky. His work is particularly recognizable through his use of a unique color palette in which whites, greens and grays dominate. In his landscapes, De Saedeleer unfailingly managed to create a timeless atmosphere which influenced Gustave Van de Woestyne, Albert Servaes and Constant Permeke, among others.

In his book *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst*, Vanbeselaere called De Saedeleer “the only notable landscape painter in this generation.” “In his best work,” stated Vanbeselaere, “the delicacy in the outline and the hesitation in the color scheme naturally complement the ‘content’ that is expressed.”

° Aalst, 1867  
† Leupegem, 1941

# Jakob Smits

In the town of Achterbos (Mol), Jakob Smits painted the life of farmers, the landscape, biblical scenes in a Campine setting, interiors and portraits. Before 1900, in the spirit of Symbolism, he depicts many biblical and profane scenes against a golden background. After the First World War, he creates large canvases that present a private world in which first man and later the light take central place. A thick, grainy layer of paint is saturated with light, creating an image of maximum intensity. With his desire for synthesis and austerity of form, Jakob Smits will become an important source of inspiration for later Flemish expressionists such as Albert Servaes. Over the years, Vanbeselaere dedicated himself to compiling a high-quality ensemble of works by Jakob Smits. In 1955, the curator organized a retrospective of the artist. Vanbeselaere regarded Smits, along with Van Gogh, Ensor, Munch and Hodler, as one of the European pinnacles of the generation of “Symbolists” born around 1860.

° Rotterdam, 1855  
† Mol, 1928

# James Ensor

The body of work that Ensor left behind is particularly diverse and varied. At the beginning of his career, he adhered to the then prevailing Pleinairism. Several marines and still lifes of his hand have been preserved. He was one of the founding members of the artists' group *Les Vingt*, but will, from 1885 on, follow his own path. His attention will increasingly go to experimentation with light and grotesque surreal motifs, an interest that also translates into his work. He is best known for his parodies and masquerades. To him, the mask — which he knew from his youth from his mother's store — was the instrument through which the true nature of man could be revealed. It was a way through which evilness and ridiculousness could be made visible. Ensor's fascination with death and religiosity made him an exponent of Symbolism, while his use of masks simultaneously anticipates both Expressionism and Surrealism.

The purchases, the exhibition politics and the publications of Vanbeselaere were decisive for the leading place that Ensor holds in the canon of Belgian art. With the purchase of works by Vincent Van Gogh, Edgar Degas and Odilon Redon, the curator also tried to place the Antwerp Ensor collection in an international context. After the Second World War, the collection of paintings by Ensor comprised 38 copies and included masterpieces such as *Daken in Oostende* (1884), *Dame met waaier* (1880) or the famous *Het schilderend geraamte* (1896 – 1897), a work Vanbeselaere bought at the end of his tenure as conservator. The creation of an accompanying and significant collection of drawings (more than 600 pieces) is at least as important. After a major retrospective of Ensor in 1951 in Antwerp, Vanbeselaere became the driving force behind the Ensor exhibitions in Paris (*Musée de l'Art Moderne*), London, Basel and Stuttgart.

° Ostend, 1860

† Ostend, 1949

# Léon Spilliaert

The oeuvre of Léon Spilliaert was formed during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. His work synthesizes the culture of the fin-de-siècle, while also incorporating the crisis of the individual, a typical phenomenon at the beginning of the twentieth century. The questioning of reality, doubt and loneliness play an important role in his work. With his distortions of facial expressions and the human body, he had a significant impact on Flemish modernists such as Constant Permeke. After the First World War, his work became more colorful and more playful, far removed from the mystery he managed to create in his pre-war work. In his book *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst — van 1850 tot 1950, van Leys tot Permeke*, Vanbeselaere suggested that Spilliaert, in his best works, starts from “strong sensations that he gained in life in which abandonment and fear are core notions.” In his text “*Léon Spilliaert en het (zelf)beeld van de kunstenaar in de negentiende eeuw*” (*Léon Spilliaert and the (self) image of the artist in the nineteenth century*), Thijs Dekeukeleire presents a concise lecture in this visitors guide on this particular view of Spilliaert as an artist-genius.

° Ostend, 1881

† Brussels, 1946

# Henri Evenepoel

Despite his early death, Henri Evenepoel left behind a very extensive oeuvre: thousands of drawings, 900-odd photographs and 300 paintings of his hand have been preserved. Many of his works depict a private and intimate atmosphere: aside from modern city life, he repeatedly portrayed his neighbors and surroundings. At the beginning of his career, Evenepoel settled in Paris, where he studied at the *École nationale des Beaux-Arts*. When he is admitted to the studio of the French symbolist Gustave Moreau in 1893, he comes into contact with Henri Matisse. The two painters maintained a close friendship which expressed itself in, among other things, *La Petite Matisse*: a portrait of Matisse's daughter. Édouard Manet's solid composition and use of color also greatly impressed him. In the works made in Algiers (1897 – 1898), the use of a brighter and more intense palette is apparent. With his sober approach to form and expressive use of color, Evenepoel explores the limits of Impressionism and seems to foreshadow Fauvism.

Vanbeselaere skillfully dedicated himself as chief conservator to the creation of a comprehensive ensemble of works by Evenepoel, to whom he devoted a retrospective exhibition in 1953, following the great Ensor retrospective of 1951. Vanbeselaere also recognized the potential of the artist as a forerunner and innovator. *Charles met streepjestrui* (1898), which Evenepoel painted a year before his death at the age of 26, is praised by Vanbeselaere in his book *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst* because of the painterly experiment in which “the purity of unbroken color, placed in clear, orderly planes opposite each other, is fully carried through (...).”

° Nice, 1872  
† Paris, 1899

# Rik Wouters

At merely 33, Rik Wouters died of jawbone cancer. Despite his short life, Rik Wouters succeeded in leaving behind a vast and high-quality oeuvre, consisting of paintings, sculptures and drawings. With his work he is considered both the pioneer and grand master of Brabant Fauvism. Characteristic for Wouters' style is the fast-painted brushwork in a fresh and vibrant color palette, whereby the sometimes unpainted parts enhance the vibrant light effects in the composition. Rik Wouters had the habit of making many sketches and ink drawings of his wife Nel while she was busy with her daily chores, or simply drinking coffee or reading a newspaper at the table. Some of those hundreds of sketches were later used as a basis for his sculptures and paintings. In his best works, Rik Wouters managed to transform, in a masterful manner, a massive mass of matter into a vital and powerful image.

Vanbeselaere considered Rik Wouters “even more complete and more important” as a sculptor than as a painter. About his watercolors, the conservator wrote: “In his watercolors, one gets to enjoy as much of the nature of the paper as the transparent or covering color of the deep, veiled black of the East Indian ink. (...) And what rare gift of royal retention has he found in the matte pastel material!”

° Mechelen, 1882  
† Amsterdam, 1916

# Hippolyte Daeye

Hippolyte Daeye only finds his definitive artistic language in around 1920, when he is almost fifty. During his stay in London (1914 – 1920) he becomes friends with Permeke, Tytgat and Gustave Van de Woestyne. It is also in London that his encounter with Modigliani's simple and sober children's portraits will help steer his direction. Daeye's models say more about the painter than about themselves, they have as it were a metaphysical quality. Their subtle appearance often evokes an unspeakable melancholy which is expressed in damp and often cold colors. The eyes of the women and children, usually without iris or pupil, reveal nothing of their inner life, but rather accentuate the "absence" of the model. In these sensitive portraits, the painter visibly distances himself from the coarse, rural roughness of the Flemish expressionists.

Vanbeselaere organized a retrospective dedicated to Daeye in 1964, accompanied by a major monograph on the artist in which the complete oeuvre of the artist was reproduced. Vanbeselaere expressed his admiration for Daeye as follows: "No one has ever revealed their aesthetic insight, to such a degree, in the creative act: his belief in the beauty of line and color, freed from any material weight in their (...) power to contain and exude the most elusive intonations of the soul."

° Ghent, 1873  
† Antwerp, 1952

# Gustave Van de Woestyne

Gustave Van de Woestyne was a symbolist with an oeuvre that speaks of a quest for the mystical and deeper meaning, characteristic of the early twentieth century. Each painting is a rendition of a personal experience. His body of work is, both in stylistically and thematically, quite broad. Religion, parables, peasant life and portraits were his main themes. His rather "primitive" painting style is reminiscent of Hans Memling and Jan van Eyck. He painted with a bright color palette and often made use of sharp contours, which gave a number of his works a modernist touch. After the death of his father, Van de Woestyne moves to Sint-Martens-Latem where he comes into contact with George Minne, Valerius De Saedeleer and Albijn Van den Abeele, among others. Vanbeselaere had a particular preference for Van de Woestyne's portraits. "He is at his best (...) when he works directly from nature, when the transposition of the observed image into art image occurs in an immediate and sustained confrontation with nature: in his portraits," wrote Vanbeselaere.

° Ghent, 1881  
† Uccle, 1947

# Jean Brusselmans

Jean Brusselmans was a late bloomer. Unlike his contemporaries, who made their best work in the 1920s, the work of Brusselmans only fully came into its own from the early 1930s onward, when he was almost 50 years old. The artist had a rigorous and straightforward approach with which he wanted to bring new life into Flemish painting. He banned every form of anecdote or sentiment in his quest for painterly essence. Not what he depicted was important, but the way in which he developed a compositional play of colors, lines, shapes and volumes. In his work he was able to both create a dramatic feeling, and develop a painterly sensibility for balance and order. This is why, in an essay of 1939, critic Paul Haesaerts associated the work and the temperament of Brusselmans with the four elements that make up everything: earth, water, air and fire.

Vanbeselaere considered Brusselmans as one of the main key figures in Flemish Expressionism and particularly appreciated the way the artist reduced “normal” observed reality to its essence. “It has taken a long time before it was clear to everyone that the deliberate austerity in composition, the rough-dry bread that Brusselmans offers us, has a rare, pure taste,” he wrote in his book *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst*.

° Brussels, 1884

† Dilbeek, 1953

# Edgard Tytgat

Edgard Tytgat devoted himself from the beginning of his career to painting, printmaking as well as wood engraving. Before the First World War, Edgard Tytgat belonged to the circle of friends of Rik Wouters and was considered to be an exponent of Brabant Fauvism. His work at that time, however, never reached the same painterly level as that of Wouters. It was only after 1922 that his work came to full development. He fully abandoned the impressionist brushstroke in favor of a naive-looking formal language, inspired by folk art. Although he was from then on included in the circle of Flemish expressionists, he remained, largely because of his anecdotal approach and mild irony, an outsider within the Belgian modern art movement. His most important influences were folk life, the circus, Oriental fantasies, the artist’s life and his own biography. Frans Baudouin, who came into contact with Vanbeselaere as chief curator of the Rubens House, said that, to a certain extent, Vanbeselaere himself possessed that what he admired in Tytgat: “the gift of perpetual wonder and elation that had remained with him from his childhood.”

° Brussels, 1879

† Woluwe-Saint-Lambert,, 1957

# Gust. De Smet

Gust. De Smet, much like artists such as Constant Permeke, Frits Van den Berghe and his brother Léon De Smet, painted in an impressionistic style. During his stay in The Netherlands, during and shortly after the First World War, he developed a very personal style, a synthesis of the expressionist and especially cubist formal language. Using warm earth tones, Gust. De Smet would from then on depict his own living environment in simple volumes and proportions, while omitting unnecessary details. Gust. De Smet, who lived in Deurle from 1927 until his death, liked to paint the village life: the inn, the circus, the fair, the town dance, ... Despite his thoroughly schematic depiction of man and his environment, the paintings of Gust. De Smet are never soulless representations. His art remains deeply human and testifies to his great love of life. After 1930, he steadily abandoned his schematic approach in favor of more intuitive brushwork and a darker color palette. At the end of his life, he mainly made drawings and paintings of female models or painted landscapes in a small format.

Vanbeselaere devoted a retrospective to Gust. De Smet in 1961. He himself owned a large *Stilleven* (*Still life*) which he considered the most beautiful painting in his private collection. The conservator suggested that De Smet, along with Daeye, was the only one among the Flemish expressionists who had been so committed to the problem of form, "with liberating the artistic form in a sustained confrontation with foreign work, with work by Braque, Picasso, Campendonk, Kandinsky, Marc and Schwitters."

° Ghent, 1877  
† Deurle, 1943

# Albert Servaes

From 1904 to 1945, Servaes lived in Sint-Martens-Latem, where he came into contact of a number of artists such as Gustave Van de Woestyne and George Minne. Their religious-symbolist oeuvre inspired Servaes, but at the same time he developed his own visual language that turned away from the work of this first Laethem artist group. A very dark color palette combined with expressive brushwork became his trademark. The expressive style Servaes developed from 1910 reached its highpoint in the series he made on the Passion and the Stations of the Cross in the period 1918 – 1922. Even though this work was rejected by the Roman Catholic Church, it confirmed his reputation as a modern artist reinterpreting religious themes, much like his contemporaries Emil Nolde in Germany and Georges Rouault in France. In the 1930s, Servaes abandoned his radical expressionism in favor of his so-called Orval style. Because of his sympathies for the German cultural policy, he was forced to emigrate to Switzerland after the Second World War, where he painted numerous portraits and mountain views, although stylistically less powerful and often more clichéd.

The work of Albert Servaes is widely represented in the collection of Mr and Mrs Dhondt-Dhaenens. The artist occupied a special place for Vanbeselaere as well. He explains how, at the age of thirteen, he saw an exhibition of Servaes and Permeke at the Sint-Salvator gallery in Bruges which left a lasting impression on him. It was his first exposure to Expressionism, for which he would cultivate a lasting interest. Vanbeselaere will actively try to contribute to Servaes' rehabilitation. In 1971, Vanbeselaere organized the exhibition *De Zwitserse periode in het werk van Albert Servaes* (*The Swiss Period in the work of Albert Servaes*), dedicated to the artist's period of "exile", and also wrote two monographs (1976, 1979) about him.

° Ghent, 1883  
† Luzern, 1966

# Frits Van den Berghe

Frits Van den Berghe's artistic career developed up until 1926 almost parallel to that of his friend Gust. De Smet. In the early 1920s, Frits Van den Berghe also depicted rural life in warm earth tones and schematized forms. Unlike Gust. De Smet however, Frits Van den Berghe, in many of his paintings, retained an eye for the human psyche or mysterious events. His fascination with the unconscious and the dream inspired the surrealistic visual language that he would use increasingly more often from 1926 onward, and which will ultimately culminate in the grotesque hallucinations he will paint from the late 1920s on. Despite the inventive qualities of these surrealistic works, Frits Van den Berghe will find little understanding in the art world during his life for this stylistic break with Flemish Expressionism.

Vanbeselaere finished his discussion on Van den Berghe in *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst* with the following words: "Was the world which he explored, and towards which he was instinctively driven from the beginning, one of monsters, abominations and deformities in which the night rules irresolvably, did it not bring him liberation, but rather, as a last experience, disgust, then he as an artist testified of implacable honesty and loyalty."

° Ghent, 1883

† Ghent, 1939

# Constant Permeke

Constant Permeke, like his friends Gust. De Smet and Frits Van den Berghe, preferred to depict the simple village life and the countryside. He lived in Jabbeke on the Belgian coast, which explains the prominent place of recurring themes such as the fisherman's life and the sea in his oeuvre. Permeke had an expressive and very powerful brushstroke and used a mainly dark color palette. It is especially in the large formats that his painterly qualities came to their fullest expression. In the work of Permeke, however, rural life is not a cheerful theme as in the works of Gust. De Smet or Frits Van den Berghe, but a matter of hard toil. The distortion and simplification of the human body emphasize the fierce primal force that is associated with the land and hard labor. A great number of Permeke's works evince a primitive energy and a search for the essence of life.

Vanbeselaere unfailingly regarded Permeke as the "greatest" under the Expressionists and praised him for his supposed "genius". "The direct expression, and the emotional content that encompasses the most essential, bare principles of emotive beauty, is the double principle upon which his whole way of working and vision are based, through which it also becomes possible to explain the very personal, expressionist presence of his work," wrote Vanbeselaere in his book *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst*.

° Antwerp, 1886

† Ostend, 1952



# Henri-Victor Wolvens

The work of Henri-Victor Wolvens fully developed in the waning days of Flemish Expressionism. Although Wolvens had an expressive painterly approach, he cannot be considered an epigone of Expressionism, but rather as an *einzelgänger* who — especially after the Second World War — created a very personal and idiosyncratic body of work. Wolvens' best known works are without doubt his beach and seascapes. They are very lively scenes, brought to life by the smooth and colorful brushstrokes. The thick layer of paint that Wolvens applies to the canvas is full of life and light and testifies of his zest for life and the joy of painting.

The generation from around 1900 ('the animists') was, upon the appointment of Vanbeselaere as chief curator, hardly represented in the collection. He, however, felt it was essential to enrich the collection with works by artists such as Wolvens. Vanbeselaere became personally acquainted with many of these artists when his wartime position at Ghent University was suspended between 1945 and 1948. In those years, he acted as advisor in the creation of private collections and came into contact with artists like Wolvens, Joseph Vinck, Albert Van Dyck, War Van Overstraeten and Jacques Le Mair.

° Brussels, 1896  
† Bruges, 1977

# George Grard

George Grard was trained at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Tournai and is widely recognized as an important Belgian sculptor. Throughout his life he remained faithful to the theme of the female nude, which he based on thorough studies from live models. His stay in 1957 in the then Belgian Congo served as a turning point in Grard's sculptural oeuvre. Unlike his previous voluptuous female figures, he will from then on create more elongated, slender figures of which *De Afrikaanse (de grote negerin)* (*The African [the large negress]*) is a representative example. He expressed his figures, static and distant, in bronze; the realism of Grard is characterized by a thorough idealization of his female figures. Grard belongs to a generation of artists called "the generation of 1900". This group of artists emerged in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 1929 and fully came into its own in the period between 1930 and 1945. A number of artists including Grard, reacted against Expressionism with a return to a more realistic view of their surroundings. They were referred to by Paul Haesaerts (a contemporary of Vanbeselaere) as 'the animists'.

Vanbeselaere harbored a particular preference for this generation of artists, who were incidentally also from "his" generation. In 1966, Vanbeselaere paid an important tribute to these artists with the group exhibition *De generatie van 1900, animisten en surrealisten* (The generation of 1900, animists and surrealists). Vanbeselaere, who, like the German art historian Wilhelm Pinder, forwards the idea of the generation, placed in this exhibition work of "surrealists" like Delvaux and Magritte next to his beloved "animists" like George Grard, Henri-Victor Wolvens, Joseph Vinck and Albert Van Dyck.

° Tournai, 1901  
† Sint-Idesbald, 1984

# Jan Burssens

After the Second World War, Jan Burssens was one of the first artists in Belgium who tried to find, through his non-figurative painting, a new direction after the Nazi horror, which had also greatly affected the artistic world. In this, he was strongly influenced by the Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, and the advent of Abstract Expressionism and *Action Painting* in America in the mid-1940s. In his work, the connection with Expressionism and Surrealism remains present to a certain extent. Burssens experimented already in 1947 with material effects by mixing unusual materials such as sand and gravel in his colorful layers of paint.

In 1967, Vanbeselaere pays attention to abstract art for the first time in the history of the museum with the exhibition *Contrasten. 1947-1967. Schilderkunst in België* (*Contrasts. 1947 - 1967. Painting in Belgium.*) Some thirty works were presented by contemporary Belgian artists, including Jan Burssens, E.L.T. Mesens, Dan Van Severen, Luc Peire and Louis Van Lint. Vanbeselaere expressed his disinterest in the Belgian “abstracts” several times.” The fact that the abstracts only gradually gained popularity after 1945, is proof that our deepest nature is not abstract,” he said in an interview with Joos Florquin. Nevertheless, a number of purchases of both Belgian and European post-war abstract artists indicate a certain openness to contemporary abstract tendencies.

° Mechelen, 1925

† Nevele, 2002

# Edgar Degas

With his extensive oeuvre of paintings and sculptures, Edgar Degas is seen as one of the founders of French Impressionism. Degas rejected the typical scenes that were prevalent amongst Parisian academics such as history paintings and mythical scenes, and instead explored scenes from modern city life. Like many of the Impressionists, Degas was heavily influenced by Japanese prints, which stimulated new approaches in his compositions. Degas’ academic training nevertheless infused his art with a classicist tenor. Whereas Degas mainly preferred the line to capture his contours, most of the Impressionists used color and surface texture. The artist was particularly intrigued by the human figure and in his numerous representations of women — dancers, singers and laundresses — he tried to capture the body in unusual positions. While the critics of the Impressionists focused their attacks on the formal innovations, it was, in the case of Degas, especially his choice of “lower” class figures that was frowned upon.

Despite Vanbeselaere’s conviction of the existence of an autonomous Flemish art, he had, as museum curator, an eye for the international aspects of the collection. With the purchase of works of, among others, Edgar Degas, Odilon Redon, Vincent Van Gogh and Jan Toorop, he tried to create a context for the art of the Flemish “greats” like James Ensor and Jakob Smits.

° Paris, 1834

† Paris, 1917

# Marino Marini & Giacomo Manzù

Marino Marini studied painting and sculpture at the Academy of Firenze in Italy. Like many other Italian artists, he also frequented Paris often. Between 1930 and 1950, he dedicated himself almost exclusively to making sculptures. He was inspired by the archaic period in Greece and by Etruscan art. The majority of his subjects consist of portrait busts, female nudes and horsemen on horseback. What is remarkable is that, throughout his career, his work becomes increasingly more abstract.

During his military service, Giacomo Manzù studied art at the Academy of Verona in Italy. Because of the artistic assignment he carried out at the chapel of the University of Milan, he was appointed Professor at the Art Academy. In 1948 he won the prize for sculpture at the Venice Biennale and in 1950 he was asked to create the bronze doors of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Most of his oeuvre, which is very extensive, is religiously inspired.

During his tenure as conservator, Vanbeselaere bought a considerable number of modern sculptures. The reason for these purchases, often of European sculptors, was the creation of the Middelheim museum in Antwerp at the beginning of Vanbeselaere's career. From 1951 onward, it became the site of an international biennial for sculpture, organized during the summer months. This gave the Museum an opportunity to purchase sculptures of exceptional quality, such as *Danspas* by Giacomo Manzù and *De grote danseres* by Marino Marini.

MM: ° Pistoia, 1901  
† Viareggio, 1980

GM: ° Bergamo, 1908  
† Rome, 1991

# Ben Nicholson

Ben Nicholson is one of the most important English abstract artists. He created both reliefs and linear, abstract paintings. Under the influence of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Henri Matisse, he developed, through Cubism, a unique style. In his reliefs, different colored, geometric fiberboards are glued on top of each other. In addition to these geometric abstractions, he also painted landscapes and still lifes in which the image is reduced to a sketchy composition of colors and lines.

Vanbeselaere deplored the fact that painting since the end of World War II had been reduced to nothing more than “a play of line and color”, which would, according to the former chief conservator, lead to the demise of painting. Curiously enough, this conviction seems not to have hindered the purchase of a major work by Nicholson, entitled *Halfmond ovaal*, which was bought at the exhibition of the artist at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels in 1955.

° Denham, 1894  
† London, 1982

# Walther Vanbeselaere: a museum director and the canon of modern art in Belgium.

Herwig Todts

*“The museum, which is, all things considered, only categorized according to the quality of its collections, according to the number of works of exceptional quality that it can offer visitors.”*

On April 7, 1948, Walther Vanbeselaere was appointed by Decree of the Regent as conservator of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp. In September 1948, chief conservator Ary Delen (1883 – 1960) was retired by the then Minister of Education, Camille Huysmans. He was immediately succeeded by Vanbeselaere. On July 1, 1973, he in turn, goes into retirement, and is succeeded by Gilberte Gepts. In the course of his 25-year career as chief conservator, Vanbeselaere will enrich the museum collection with more than 500 acquisitions, including works by Edgar Degas, Auguste Rodin, Georges Breitner, Jan Toorop, Vincent Van Gogh, Odilon Redon, Aristide Maillol, Georges Rouault, Maurice Utrillo, Othon Friesz, Charles Dufresne, Henri Le Fauconnier, Maurice de Vlaminck, Ben Nicholson, Carel Willink, Raoul Hynckes, Pyke Koch, Karel Appel, Giacomo Manzù, Marcello Mascherini, Marino Marini, Hans Hartung, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Julio Le Parc en Guenther Uecker, to name only the most important modern European artists amongst them. This is a remarkable group in light of the fact that Walther Vanbeselaere deplored the fact that painting since the end of World War II had been reduced to nothing more than “a play of line and color”, which would, according to the former chief conservator, lead to the demise of painting.<sup>1</sup>

*“The hardest crisis of my life: become painter or art historian?”*

Walther Vanbeselaere was born on June 4, 1908. His father was a civil servant with the excise department, and the family moved from the tiny village of Zevekote to Poperinge, where Walther spent his childhood, and then on to Bruges, where he studied at the athe-naeum. Yet Vanbeselaere never obtained his high school diploma. He wanted to become a painter and attended classes at the Ghent academy. His parents, however, considered this a choice with an uncertain future, so he decided to take an entrance examination at the State University of Ghent and study art history.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, from 1923 to 1930, Ghent University adopted the so-called bilingual education system — the professors taught classes in French or Dutch. In 1930, both the administration and curriculum at the State University became fully Dutch-speaking. August Vermeylen, pro-Flemish co-opted senator for the *Parti Ouvrier Belge / Belgische Werkliedenpartij* (Belgian Workers Party) (from 1921 to 1940) became the first rector of the now Dutch speaking university.<sup>3</sup> The conversion to Dutch of the university education in Ghent did not happen without a struggle: the renowned expert on the Flemish primitives, George Hulin de Loo, for instance, refused to teach in Dutch.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, ‘Interview’, handwriting, 6 pages, May 3, 1975, private collection Sint-Pauwels. Vanbeselaere answers 5 questions on his activities as art historian, his view on contemporary art and the social utility of art.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem.* Joos Florquin, ‘Walther Vanbeselaere’, *Ten huize van...*, Deel 18, Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1982, pp. 295- 342. Also online: [www.dbnl.org/tekst/flor007tenh18\\_01/flor007tenh18\\_01\\_0012.php](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/flor007tenh18_01/flor007tenh18_01_0012.php) (consulted 8/05/2017). The interview was recorded in the course of 1969 for the television series *Ten huize van...* and broadcast by the BRT on January 15, 1970. Florquin (1930-1974) made transcripts of the interviews, which were however not included in their entirety by the publisher. The original manuscripts are kept in the Kadoc, Leuven, Personal Archives, Archive Joos Florquin. Also: Frans Baudouin, ‘Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere (1908-1988), een levensschets’, *Vlaanderen*, Jg. 37 (1988), p. 270-271.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Vervliet, ‘Vermeylen, August’, in: Reginald De Schrijver & Bruno De Wever (red.), *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tiel: Lannoo 1998, p. 3264-3269

<sup>4</sup> Fien Danniau, ‘1930 De universiteit vernederlandst’, [www.ugentmemorie.be/gebeurtenissen/1930-de-universiteit-vernederlandst](http://www.ugentmemorie.be/gebeurtenissen/1930-de-universiteit-vernederlandst) (consulted 4/05/2017)

Vanbeselaere studied at the university from 1926 to 1929. In later autobiographical testimonies, he does not mention Hulin de Loo at all but has much praise for Professor Vermeulen, who taught history of visual arts in Europe. He looked back with mixed feelings at the one-sided manner in which Henry Van de Velde taught history of architecture: “Only the periods in which the ‘rational conception’ was central to the realization of the construction were deemed relevant by him! It was really based on a strong personal aesthetic bias. The Roman and Gothic periods were pinnacles: Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo were imitations and decay! “It was”, continued Vanbeselaere, “almost childishly one-sided, but it gave us a sharp artistic insight, very different from what was taught by Professor Stan Leurs, whose approach was more like archaeological rummaging (...). The professor of music history Floris Van der Mueren, equally as unscientific as a person can be (...) was a man who had a passion for things.”<sup>5</sup>

Years later, Vanbeselaere was a member of the editorial board that was involved with the edition of August Vermeulen’s *Verzameld Werk* (6 parts, Uitgeversmaatschappij A. Manteau, Brussels 1951 – 55<sup>6</sup>). Vanbeselaere wrote an afterword for the integral reissue of Vermeulen’s art historical handbook *Van de catacomben tot Greco* (parts 5 and 6 of the *Verzameld Werk*, initially, from 1921 to 1925, published in three parts as *Geschiedenis der Europeesche plastiek en schilderkunst*). Although Vanbeselaere did not fail to mention that Vermeulen was a covert follower of Heinrich Wölfflin’s style-critical *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, and that he had not conducted any important art historical research, he continues to admire the “unsurpassed” manner in which Vermeulen gave lectures and the records of those lectures in what Vanbeselaere calls “a masterfully written standard work”.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Joos Florquin, *O.c.*

<sup>6</sup> Available online [www.dbnl.org/tekst/verm036verz01\\_01/](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/verm036verz01_01/) (consulted 4/05/2017)

<sup>7</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, ‘Nawoord’, in: August Vermeulen, *Verzameld Werk, Vijfde Deel Van de catacomben tot Greco. Geschiedenis der Europeesche plastiek en schilderkunst in de Middeleeuwen en de Renaissance* (tekstgedeelte), Brussel: Uitgeversmaatschappij A. Manteau N.V., 1951, pp. 805-809

Under the guidance of Professor Vermeulen, Vanbeselaere had been working on a doctoral dissertation on *De Hollandsche periode in het werk van Vincent Van Gogh* [The Dutch period in the work of Vincent Van Gogh]. However, it was a bit of a challenge to convince Vermeulen of the importance of his subject. Had Van Gogh not died in 1890, then he would indeed have been considered a “contemporary artist” in the 1930s. In 1929, Vanbeselaere, as one of the very first young researchers,<sup>8</sup> was able to continue his studies at the University of Utrecht with a grant from the *Vlaamse Wetenschappelijke Stichting* [Flemish Scientific Foundation]. This made it possible for him to visit important public and private art collections and to fully explore Van Gogh’s work. Vanbeselaere successfully defended his dissertation in 1934. The work was published in 1937 by the Antwerp-based publishing house De Sikkel with a foreword by Vermeulen.

Vanbeselaere’s dissertation again earned him the means to visit the most important art collections during a journey through Germany, Austria and Italy. In addition, he was awarded a scholarship to follow the lectures of Henri Focillon at the Sorbonne in Paris for 6 months, “a European celebrity (...) a brilliant scholar and a true art historian (!)”. Years later, Vanbeselaere will remark that Focillon, commenting on the self-portrait by Frits Van den Berghe (from 1933) in *De Vlaamse Schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950*, van Leys tot Permeke [Brussels, Uitgeverij De Arcade, 1961], told him once: “il a une tête d’évêque” [he has the head of a bishop]. And in the margins of his author’s copy Vanbeselaere wrote — wounded in his vanity? — “Langui quotes it but does not say that Focillon told me”.<sup>9</sup> In 1934, Vanbeselaere married Camilla Van Hecke in the church of her hometown of Moerkerke. The couple settled in Sint Amandsberg near Ghent. A good year later Jan, their only child, was born. Vanbeselaere earned a living as study master at the athenaeum in Ghent, “the hardest time of my life: 37 hours attendance at the

<sup>8</sup> Frans Baudouin, ‘Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere (1908-1988) een levensschets’, *Vlaanderen*, Jg. 37 (1988), p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Private collection Sint-Pauwels: Annotated author’s copy, Walther Vanbeselaere, *De Vlaamse Schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950, van Leys tot Permeke*, Brussels: Uitgeverij De Arcade, 1961, p. 260.

Athenaeum, and then study in the evening!”, Vanbeselaere will later remark. It was allegedly Vermeylen who had arranged the appointment and it was again Vermeylen who invited his former student, from 1938 onward, to teach the course “19th century and contemporary painting in Western Europe” at Ghent University, an initially unpaid position. At the same time, he reluctantly taught the “History of architecture” to the architects at the Antwerp Academy.<sup>10</sup>

The German army invaded Belgium on May 10, 1940, and 18 days later King Leopold III capitulated and Belgium came under the military governance of National-Socialist Germany. The occupier decided to relieve Vermeylen from all public functions and deny him access to the university. Vanbeselaere would, upon the recommendation of Vermeylen, be appointed from 1941 to 1945 as Professor of the History of the Visual Arts in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present Day.

During World War II, Vanbeselaere worked on a second ambitious publication: *Pieter Bruegel en het Nederlandse maniërisme* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1944). A book that “(is) not only intended for the very limited circle of peers, but especially for the broad circle of intellectuals and art lovers, to whom Bruegel lies close to heart. We intentionally did not include any foot notes in the text (...)”.<sup>11</sup> In 1950, the publication was awarded the Interprovinciale prijs voor Monografie [Interprovincial Prize for Monograph]. Yet unlike his Van Gogh-study, the Bruegel book was less favorably received among his peers.<sup>12</sup> In a footnote to his study of the art of Henri De Braekeleer, Vanbeselaere announced the publication of “a comprehensive work *Stroomingen en Persoonlijkheden in de XIXde eeuwse Schilderkunst*” in which he promised to explain “his view on that unusually complex century”.<sup>13</sup> This book, however, never saw the light, Vanbeselaere’s art historical labor remained limited to the introductions he wrote for exhibition catalogs, the previously mentioned *De Vlaamse schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950, van Leys*

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Dewaele, *Met pen en penseel. Adriaan Vandewalle en Walther Vanbeselaere. Hun visie op de kunst (1925-1975)*, S.l. 2006, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> *Pieter Bruegel en het Nederlandse maniërisme*, Tielt: Lannoo, 1944, p. 8 (preface).

tot Permeke and a number of loose studies on his favorite artists: Jacques Le Mair, Albert Van Dyck, Han Wezelaar, Frits Van den Berghe, Jakob Smits and Albert Servaes.

In a letter of October 6, 1934 Vanbeselaere confided to his bosom friend and painter Adriaan Vandewalle: “I haven’t been painting for quite a while now. I don’t think it is my calling or that I am talented enough. I’ve thought about it long and hard. You see, what I have painted came about within a relatively short period. Suddenly something shifted in my heart, something changed in my thinking. I don’t know what. It seemed to emerge spontaneously. I don’t know if the will has anything to do with it, maybe a little. I spent hours and hours in front of my easel, a kind of self-imposed discipline. There was no intellectual effort involved; at least I don’t think so, because I was not aware of it. I felt very concentrated and yet almost passive. Perhaps the effort was too great. Many painters experienced something similar. I think this happened to me as well. My spontaneous dreams had suddenly perished, I was exhausted, extinct. Painting was my goal and my ideal, painting was my life but it has deceived me. I am still wondering how and why that happened. My lonely moments give me time to agonize over it. Because it is agony!

You Adriaan, hold on boy! You have the gift. Jacques Le Mair also. Don’t give up under any circumstances. Because the teacher-adviser position is a job that I would not wish on you. The athenaeum here in Ghent is a disgusting affair, nothing but private

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Scheewe, ‘Forschungsberichte’, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 9 Bd., H. 4/6 (1940), p. 244; Douglas Cooper, Vincent van Gogh by Carl Nordenfalk & Vincent Van Gogh: Antwerpsche periode by Mark Edo Tralbaut, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 91, nr. 555 (Jan. 1949) p. 177-178, and Ronald Pickvance, The new De la Faille; *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 115, nr. 840 (March 1973), p. 223 testify to the authority that Vanbeselaere enjoyed as a Van Gogh-scholar. Otto Kurz, Recent Research, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 90, nr. 540 (March 1948), pp. 84-85, rather laconically dismissed Vanbeselaere’s Bruegel expertise: “What exactly constitutes the ‘undeniable’ similarity of the two pictures (Bruegel’s *Aanbidding door de koningen* and the *Monforte altaar* by Hugo Van der Goes, N/A.) remains the author’s secret (...). A new interpretation of Bruegel’s *Birds Nest* (Vanbeselaere thought of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jezus preaches the moral of the splinter in the other’s eye and the beam in the own eye, N/A) is equally unconvincing.”

<sup>13</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, ‘Henri De Braekeleer (1840-1888)’, in: *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen, 1939-41*, p. 136 note 2. The text of a lecture given at the Royal Museum in Antwerp, on February 9, 1941.

interests and intrigue. Fortunately I get to occasionally teach some Dutch lessons in the class of Dr. Goosenaerts who is sympathetic towards me. I am referring to Marcel Matthijs' *De Ruitentikker* and Schendels' *Het Fregatschip Johanna Maria*. Next week, I also get to talk about paintings to the juniors and even the prefect has shown interest.

Professor Knuttel is coming by for a visit on October 18th. He would like to see your work and that of Le Mair. Berten Calmeyn told me that you have created some nice works lately. Bring them along, and ask Le Mair to show a few things as well. Have them bring the whole lot to Ghent in a truck from the Gistfabriek. And include a list with your prices. Did you know that I received a painting by Jamar from the hands of Doctor De Winter? Sweet of him, and a nice frame ... But it is poorly painted, and I fail to see any sentiment — which is what doctor Winter is so fond of — in it.

This is my plan: I invite De Winter, he looks at your works at my place, make sure there is some sentiment in it, I know this was brought to the foreground in your last canvases. A warm handshake. / Walther."<sup>14</sup>

In a handwritten, autobiographical note, Vanbeselaere pointed out that, for him, initially, art history was a side issue. After his university studies, having returned to Bruges, he dedicated himself in 1931 "fully and exclusively to painting. But then I experienced, in 1931, the worst crisis of my life: the doubt about what I would finally do: become a painter or an art historian. At the end of 1931, I chose the second option and have since then never again touched a brush. Through art history I had discovered the pinnacles of painting and realized that I myself was not a chosen one, possessed no exceptional ability as a painter and so I decided to make myself serviceable in other ways; and this by writing about art; by testifying to the meaning and joy that art can bring, by making a personal contribution and being useful to the community. From that moment on, I have dedicated myself exclusively to the history of art (...)." <sup>15</sup> The only work

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Dewaele, *Met pen en penseel. Adriaan Vandewalle en Walther Vanbeselaere. Hun visie op de kunst (1925-1975)*, S.l. 2006, p. 66. The style of the letter seems to indicate that it was edited by Dewaele. The place where the original documents are kept is unknown to me.

from Vanbeselaere's hand I am familiar with, is a large landscape with a view of a hill (in the Flemish Heuvelland near Poperinge?), from October 1931. On the basis of this one work, it is impossible to determine whether Vanbeselaere correctly assessed his own artistic talents. Was there some regret because of this unfulfilled dream that persisted throughout Vanbeselaere's life? Marcel De Maeyer, former assistant conservator under Vanbeselaere, professor of European art history at the State University of Ghent (from 1961 to 1986) and, from a very young age, also active as a visual artist (Marcel Maeyer<sup>16</sup>), once told me that Vanbeselaere never agreed with De Maeyer's choice to be both an academic and a visual artist.

### Albert Servaes

The Ghent artist Albert Servaes (1883 – 1966) was chairman of the *Oost-Vlaamse Federatie voor Kunstenaars* [East Flemish Federation for Artists], *member of the Kultuurkamer* [Culture Chamber], member of the *Federatie van Vlaamsche Kunstenaars* [Federation of Flemish Artists] and member of the *Duitsch-Vlaamsche Arbeidsgemeenschap* [German-Flemish Working Group] during the Second World War. He maintained good relations with the German occupier and was an undeserved admirer of the "Führer of all Germans".<sup>17</sup> At the end of 1944, Servaes fled to Switzerland and in July 1947 he was sentenced by default to 10 years in prison.<sup>18</sup> For many people, Servaes was and remained a matter for outrage. Vanbeselaere will, as an organizer of exhibitions, art historian, and also as a museum

<sup>15</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, 'Interview', handwriting, 6 pages, May 3, 1975, private collection Sint-Pauwels. Yet in a letter of May 18, 1937 from Paris to Adriaan Vandewalle (Jacques Dewaele, *Met pen en penseel. Adriaan Vandewalle en Walther Vanbeselaere. Hun visie op de kunst (1925-1975)*, S.l. 2006, p. p. 54-55) Vanbeselaere states that he has taken up drawing again. "For five years, I haven't touched a thing. Just think what that means: complete maladroitness in all respects. The discouragement to overcome that is even greater. But I hope not to let go of it anymore. Dabbling ... (...) I follow the lectures of Professor Henry Focillon, (...). He advises me to continue painting: "Moi aussi your peins" he says, "mais je peins comme un cochon!" [I paint too, but I paint like a pig!].

<sup>16</sup> Claire Van Damme, Herwig Todts, *Marcel Maeyer*, (exhibition catalog), Antwerp: Royal Museum of Fine Arts, 1986

<sup>17</sup> Virginie Devillez, *Kunst aan de orde. Kunst en politiek in België*, Gent: Snoeck, 2003, p. 225 e.v.

<sup>18</sup> Nico Wouters, 'Servaes, Albert', in: Reginald De Schrijver & Bruno De Wever (red.), *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tiel: Lannoo, 1998, p. 2735-2736.

conservator, actively seek to promote Servaes' rehabilitation. This led, less than a year after his appointment as chief conservator, to a conflict with some members of the Special Commission of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp. At the meeting of June 27, 1949, commission member Cléomir Jussiant, a leading Antwerp art collector, announced that "some artists would be opposed to the presentation of the work of Albert Servaes in our Museum." The case was kept under consideration until the meeting of January 30, 1950, in which the chairman of the Special Commission, the Antwerp socialist mayor Lode Craeybeckx, "requests the chief conservator" not to exhibit "the Zelfportret van E. Tytgat" (for which a ministerial approval for purchase had been obtained), "on the basis of the painter's incivism." Because of Servaes' conviction by default, Craeybeckx also demands that "the two paintings of peasant life, which are exhibited in hall IV dedicated to the Laethem School, should be sent back to storage. "Vanbeselaere points out to the commission that Servaes is exhibited in the museums of Brussels, Ghent and Deinze and proposes to ask the advice of the minister (of education and culture) with regards to the year in which the exhibition ban on Tytgat and Servaes will be lifted. The members of the Special Commission do not support Vanbeselaere but look forward to the advice of the competent minister. The matter will be discussed repeatedly in the Special Commission. At the meeting of June 13, 1950, it is stated that the competent Minister Mundeleer has no objection to the exhibition of the work of Tytgat or Servaes "if this is necessary for the historical and pedagogical image of the exhibited series and on the condition that this work is not given a place of honor." On July 7, 1950, an extraordinary meeting is held in which Craeybeckx argues that the Special Commission may decide autonomously on this case, that Servaes was severely faulted and that the quality of his work is not even "of such pronounced quality that its not being exhibited would create an unjustifiable gap in our Museum." Against the votes of chief conservator Vanbeselaere and commission member Valvekens, the Special Commission decides that Servaes must be removed from the exhibition halls, but that Tytgat can be exhibited "since it appears that his case is less severe." In 1960, the issue is discussed in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives in response to

a question from former minister and CVP-senator August De Boodt, who asks the Minister of Public Education whether it is justified to systematically keep the works of A. Servaes out of the exhibition halls of the museums, and rigorously keep his name out of every publication of the Belgian museums? The answer of the Minister of Public Education to reconsider Servaes' case is discussed in the Special Committee (in the presence of Mayor Craeybeckx) and the commission considers that there are indeed no longer any decisive objections to the exhibition of the work of Servaes. One year later, during the session of February 3, 1962, the same committee will agree with the purchase of an important drawing by Servaes for the museum.<sup>19</sup> In 1970 Vanbeselaere ("je persiste et signe" [I persist and sign]) organized an exhibition in the Royal Museum entitled *Albert Servaes: de Zwitserse periode* [Albert Servaes: the Swiss period]. In other words, devoted to the "exile" years of the father of Flemish expressionism.

Vanbeselaere has never explained his loyalty to Servaes. Yet both men at least shared a penchant for the mystical experience of Christianity, which they both owed to a meeting with the Ghent Father Hieronymus (1870 – 1954). Vanbeselaere told Joos Florquin that, as a 16-year-old in the athenaeum of Bruges, he was a member of a study circle for believers. "In this regard, I have to mention someone who, as far as my religious conviction goes, has strongly influenced me, and that is the Carmelite Father Jeroom, who has had a great influence on Servaes. It is under his influence that I started reading St. John of the Cross and it is through him that I came into contact with Servaes. It was the time when the dispute around De Luithaagse Kruisweg and Servaes was fully raging. At the time, there was an exhibition of Servaes and Permeke at the Sint-Salvator gallery in Bruges. It was a first initiation to the art of the expressionists and an important moment in our youth."<sup>20</sup> Someone close to Vanbeselaere told me that every day, well into his old age, he would dedicate one hour to spiritual practice, i.e. reading and

<sup>19</sup> The reports of the Special Committee of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, are preserved as bundled manuscripts in the archive of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp.

<sup>20</sup> Joos Florquin, *o.c.*



rereading the writings of inspirational believers. In order to give us an idea of what this penchant for the mystical experience of faith meant to Vanbeselaere, it might be useful to quote a passage on the matter of Servaes' religiosity, which Vanbeselaere entrusted to paper in 1959. "In 1908, Servaes met the man whom he would accept (rather than Karel van de Woestijne, A/N) as a spiritual guide, the Ghent Father Hieronymus. This discolored Carmelite, former pupil of the Royal Athenaeum, was an exceptional man: a thoroughly healthy character with a physically imposing appearance, passionate and active, spiritual and cheerful, extraordinarily intellectually gifted and a true mystic. He had entered into a monastic order whose highest goal was the contemplative life and he would live in the spirit of Elias and the reformers of the order, Theresia of Avilla and St. John of the Cross: lead a life of unconditional abnegation, of sacrifice in humility and love to achieve, through Nothing, Everything. He pointed Servaes the way he was instinctively looking for. Until 1940, when Hieronymus would move to southern France and despite temporary tensions in which the father would inexorably assume the role of the upright one, the reproving witness-for-truth, the guide, they would remain intimate friends. Even now, Servaes gratefully remembers him.

Hieronymus had an artist's soul, was philosophically excellently educated and fully conscious of the role he had to fulfill. He left the purely artistic matters, the questions of form, to the painter. He brought Servaes this insight: that faith, consistently lived in a Christian-mystical sense, purifies the soul to a rebirth which each work, born from this highly favored state of divine experience, must inevitably emanate. Servaes went even further and drew the ultimate conclusions: the religious experience does not only become his first concern, but also the content, the themes he explores are implicitly and generally of a religious nature. Many of his work speak of the Divine experience as an indisputable reality. This makes him the only authentic religious painter in Flanders since the Middle Ages. In a European context, perhaps together with Rouault, the only one."<sup>21</sup> In Europe, Christianity and the Catholic Church have since the 18th century, apart from apparent rebirths of public devotion or Christian

<sup>21</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, *De Vlaamse schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950, van Leys tot Permeke*, Brussel: Uitgeverij De Arcade, 1961, p. 243-244.

spirituality, been subjected to a lengthy, apparently inevitable process of deterioration. In the long term, church attendance has steadily declined; today no more than 5% of the Belgian population still takes part, in a more or less consistent manner, in the experience of the Christian faith. Since more than 50 years there is, according to the words of Hans Boutellier, a unique secular experiment under way in large parts of the Western-European society.<sup>22</sup> To the extent that Terry Eagleton or Martha Nussbaum fear for the religious tolerance in Western societies. Apart from our openness to religious tolerance, I suspect that we just barely understand what Vanbeselaere actually means. Can we replace the name of father Hieronymus with the name of any current guru or sect leader? And can we simply replace the name of Servaes with Vanbeselaere's?

At the end of the Second World War, the special bond between Servaes and Vanbeselaere will become apparent in another way as well. In the course of September 1944, the Allied troops liberate most of Belgium. The Belgian government in exile in London returned to Belgium on September 8. On November 30, 1944, Vanbeselaere wrote an alarming letter to his friend Vandewalle. "Dear Adriaan, I really find myself in a desperate situation. *La Flandre libérale* and *Vooruit* are spreading rumors about collaborations by certain persons, there are arrests, and everybody is stumbling around in the dark. (The professors, N/A) Roggen and Van der Mueren also gave lectures, in Germany of all places. De Keyser was a well-known advocate for a "corporate adaptation of the professional artistic practice" and those three are left alone! (...) At the university, 22 or 23 were suspended, of which 9 without pay because they really went too far. In the meantime, Vermeylen does everything for me. (...) Since I'm not suspended, the Investigation Committee will not summon me. (...) I have prepared my defense to refute a series of lies. What do they ask? Have you been a member of the V.N.V, Rex, DeVlag, Waffen SS. etc? Have you participated in meetings and manifestations of those organizations? Did you travel to Germany?"

<sup>22</sup> On the demise of the religious: Bert Altena and Dick Van Lente, *Vrijheid en Rede. Geschiedenis van de Westerse samenlevingen, 1750-1989*, Hilversum: Verloren, 2003, and Hans Boutellier, *Het seculiere experiment. Hoe we van God los gingen samenleven*, Amsterdam: Boom, 2016.

Did you carry weapons and wear uniforms of the above-mentioned organizations? Have you conducted anti-Belgian propaganda? My answer to each of these five questions is “no”! I am accused of being the founder and chairman of the *DzKamer van schilders en beeldhouwersdz* [Chamber of painters and sculptors] in Ghent. I was neither founder nor chairman, but only secretary at the request of Servaes. (...) Then they claim I held the celebratory speech in the auditorium on the occasion of the 60th birthday of Servaes. This is also not true; it was Marlier (Georges, N/A). (...) “Do not threaten with political action in case of suspension because those gentlemen would be offended if you question their sense of justice”, Vermeylen writes me. And all of this because I was involved in matters that had nothing to do at all with politics. And all of this despite my neutral attitude, my utmost caution.”<sup>23</sup>

A short letter from Vermeylen to Vanbeselaere (of December 1, 1944) seems to clarify the matter somewhat: “Dear Vanbeselaere, The Research Commission (...) I addressed them and assured them that you never had or expressed any German sympathies. It is unfortunate that you were active as secretary of the “Chamber” which was part of the national socialist corporatism. If only you had left when Servaes started acting foolish! Vermeylen.”<sup>24</sup>

In the subsequent letters, Vanbeselaere’s obduracy grows: “The more I ponder my sins, the less I find myself guilty. Even a blame is too much!”<sup>25</sup> According to Vanbeselaere, Vermeylen would eventually have testified in favor of his successor before the Epuration Committee (literally: purification committee) at the University of Ghent, had he not died of a heart attack the night before. According to Vanbeselaere, the decision to suspend him was as follows: “Deemed unworthy to fulfill his university function because of far-reaching patriotic indifference, which may at least be considered despicable.”<sup>26</sup> Further investigation was to clarify the full facts and course of events, but the fact remains that Vanbeselaere was rehabilitated a few years later and was able, in

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Dewaele, *Met pen en penseel. Adriaan Vandewalle en Walther Vanbeselaere. Hun visie op de kunst (1925-1975)*, S.l. 2006, p. 89-90

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*, p. 91

<sup>26</sup> Joos Florquin, *O.c.*

1948, to propose his candidacy for head conservator and work, as a senior public servant, for the Belgian government. We can perhaps now better understand Vanbeselaere’s persistent loyalty to Servaes.

#### Museum Director.

After his dismissal, Vanbeselaere had to look for a new source of income. His wife successfully went on the road with the Bruegel book. Vanbeselaere himself attempted to earn money as a dealer of works of contemporary artists. “In the workshops of painters I thought were important I selected 2 to 3 works and went looking for buyers. A hard and thankless affair that was; however, useful to me in the end: lasting friendships were forged both with painters and clients — and knowledge of current affairs and artistic auctions.” —<sup>27</sup>

Before the war, Vanbeselaere applied via August Vermeylen for a position at the Rijksuniversiteit<sup>28</sup>, yet he simultaneously also applied, unsuccessfully, for the open position of assistant conservator at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, in Brussels.<sup>29</sup> Vanbeselaere also did not obtain the position of chief curator of the Royal Museum of fine arts in Antwerp without a struggle. Chief curator Arthur Cornette (1880 – 1945) was succeeded by Ary Delen (1883 – 1960), who had led the Museum Plantin-Moretus / Stedelijk Prentenkabinet in Antwerp until the end of the Second World War. Delen undertook his new assignment with enthusiasm and was requested to retire in 1948, at the age of 65. In the Minutes of the meetings of the Special Committee of the Royal Museum Antwerp, Delen has recorded that “according to regulation, [he] should retire” in March. “The difficult question of who should succeed him, how-

<sup>27</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, ‘Interview’, handwriting, 6 pages, May 3, 1975, private collection Sint-Pauwels. Joos Florquin, *O.c.*

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Dewaele, *Met pen en penseel. Adriaan Vandewalle en Walther Vanbeselaere. Hun visie op de kunst (1925-1975)*, S.l. 2006, p. 56: “September 14, 1937 / Dear Adriaan, I don’t know if I’ve told you, but last year I asked Vermeylen if he did not see me as his possible successor. I told him that I would continue in his spirit so that his work would not be cut off after him. I would, when it would come to it, present my candidacy. In the past, he had already alluded to his succession. I must say that after my tour of Europe and my stay in Paris, I regained my self-esteem, just like before when a painting of mine worked out ...

<sup>29</sup> *Idem*, p. 68. Leo Van Puyvelde wanted a Fleming. Vanbeselaere asked his former professors Vermeylen, Raoul Bauer, Domien Roggen, Henry van de Velde and Henri Facillon to send letters of recommendation to the competent minister.

ever, immediately presents itself. And at this time there is no one who qualifies.” On the one hand, the museum is facing the heavy task of repairing the war damage, and on the other hand, “there is still so much to do to turn the Museum into a cultural institution that emanates a beneficial influence. All this can only be achieved by someone who has many years of experience. The Chief Curator does not want to consider the issue from his personal point of view, but only has the interests of the museum in mind.” (February 16, 1948)<sup>30</sup> The members of the Special Committee agree with the chief curator. Yet in the meeting of April 20, 1948, they learn that the Minister of Public Education and Culture (Camille Huysmans, incidentally like Delen a socialist and pro-Flemish) has appointed Walther Vanbeselaere, doctor of art history and archeology as curator for two years on probation. The Commission keeps Vanbeselaere fruitlessly waiting for an introduction in the hallway three consecutive times because the Chairman of the meeting, Mayor Lode Craeybeckx, turns out to be absent. In a special meeting held on July 2, three months after the ministerial decision, Vanbeselaere is finally introduced to Craeybeckx and the other members of the Special Commission. In the meeting of the Special Commission of September 23, a “bitterly disappointed” Ary Delen will, upon the orders of the competent Minister, finally be replaced by Vanbeselaere at the head of the museum. Delen does not fail to insinuate that Vanbeselaere’s ambitions actually do not reach beyond the writing of a few more beautiful books.<sup>31</sup>

On October 13, 1944, the houses of the Schildersstraat next to the museum are hit by a German V-bomb. The museum is spared but the glass roof cupolas, the ceilings, wall coverings and a number of paintings which Cornette wanted to reexhibit, are heavily damaged. The full repair costs are estimated at 2,288,000 francs (57,200 euros). The first repairs are carried out under Delen but even at the time when Vanbeselaere takes office, there is still rain coming in in some of the rooms on the upper floor. As museum director, Vanbeselaere’s first concern is obviously the further repair

<sup>30</sup> See note xviii.

<sup>31</sup> Idem.

of the building. Delen’s proposal to set up some of the exhibition halls as auditorium and library is also realized by Vanbeselaere.<sup>32</sup> Yet unlike his predecessors and his successors, Vanbeselaere did not harbor any architectural ambitions at the end of his tenure. Upon Joos Florquin’s question, “If you were given carte blanche tomorrow to do whatever you wanted with the museum, what would you do? Burn it down or add a new floor?” Vanbeselaere answered: “Neither. The old pile of bricks from 1890 is a temple (...) and the longer I live in it, the more I love this old-fashioned building. It still has no artificial lighting and is in this respect sort of a backward case: during the darkest winter months, we are obliged to close at 3 pm. But with its system of (natural, N/A) overhead lighting it is still a wonderful museum, and nothing can match the (...) natural light: artificial light distorts every color harmony and prevents [visitors] from seeing and enjoying the painting in its actual bareness. (...) All the works of art are made in daylight and one cannot appreciate a work of art in artificial light. No expert will dare to do so: he will spontaneously ask for natural light.”<sup>33</sup>

In 1965, the museum becomes a scientific institution by Royal Decree, which will significantly improve its prestige. Vanbeselaere, who had successfully attracted Maurice Gilliams as a librarian — for a time assisted by Jan Broeckx, Marcel De Maeyer and Roger D’Hulst [all of which will become professor at the University of Ghent] — will from 1967, and mainly thanks to an extensive staff, be able to give a new impetus to the museum with extra attention to contemporary art and educational activities. Vanbeselaere was always willing to admit that he, despite the underdeveloped cultural interest of “our people”, in comparison with other countries such as The Netherlands, could always have initiated more public promotional efforts.

Vanbeselaere will look back on his museum years with mixed feelings. “A new chapter in my life”, he writes in 1975 in an autobiographical sketch. “The great disappointment: no more sustained,

<sup>32</sup> Leen de Jong, ‘Geschiedenis van de huisvesting’, *Het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. Een geschiedenis 1810-2007*, Oostkamp: Stichting Kunstboek, 2008, p. 103-105.

<sup>33</sup> Joos Florquin, *O.c.*

continuous study, because the management of a large museum demands total surrender to the hundreds of problems and does not leave any time for study. Positive in the Museum: tried for 25 years to enrich the collections by acquiring exceptional work. In that, I have partially succeeded.”<sup>34</sup> Amongst the approximately 500 works (drawings by Ensor not included) which Vanbeselaere acquired, not even 30 are by old masters. Not even one fifth of the acquisitions is 19th century. The vast majority is 20th century with approximately 160 pre-World War II works and 150 works from after 1945.

### Museums ‘consecrate’ yet a conservator must remain open to everything.

At the end of his museum career Vanbeselaere did look back on his work with some feeling of pride. The 1973 yearbook of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp gave a complete overview of the acquisitions during his tenure, with illustrations and brief comments by the chief curator. Vanbeselaere had previously, during one of the winter lectures which the museum had organized for many decades, talked “about a theme”, which, so he explained, “belongs to what I personally, at the end of the day, consider the core assignment of a chief curator, which is never mentioned and which, after his departure, no soul will ever remember: I mean the enrichment of the museum collection with works of a high aesthetic and art historical significance, which are as such also defining for the years of the museum which is, all things considered, only weighed on the quality of its collections, the number of works of art of exceptional quality that it can offer its visitors.”<sup>35</sup>

There is no thorough study of the collection policy of the Royal Museum during the first decades after World War II. Colleague Nanny Schrijvers concisely described the most striking aspects of the collection development throughout the 20th century<sup>36</sup>. Fortunately, Vanbeselaere himself compiled a commented list of his contribu-

<sup>34</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, ‘Interview’, handwriting, 6 pages, May 3, 1975, private collection Sint-Pauwels.

<sup>35</sup> Frans Baudouin, ‘Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere (1908-1988) een levensschets’, *Vlaanderen*, Jg. 37 (1988), p. 270.

tion to the collection of the Royal Museum. Today not all museum employees believe that “museums, all things considered, are only weighed on the quality of their collections, the number of works of art of exceptional quality that they can offer their visitors.” In this way, Francis-Noël Thomas (emeritus professor of humanities at the Harry Truman College in Chicago) might be a cultural dinosaur. A few years ago, Thomas followed his love for the Flemish primitives and ended up in the Royal Museum in Antwerp where he rediscovered the art of James Ensor and found, in the exhibition texts, the impetus to look at the art of Rogier van der Weyden with new eyes.<sup>37</sup>

In the television program *Ten huize Van*, Florquin asks Vanbeselaere the “disconcerting question” what he considers to be the “most beautiful painting” in the world. Vanbeselaere admits that this is a question that has long been of concern to him. He mentions the *Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon*. But which painting by Jan van Eyck: the *Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele*, the *Arnolfinis*, or *Adam and Eve* from the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Jeroen Bosch’s *Garden of earthly delights* or his *Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Bruegel’s *Parable of the Blind* (certainly one of the most beautiful paintings ever made). And “there is also Rubens with that delicious painting representing *The Three Graces — three naked women*”. Rembrandt’s *The Prodigal Son* or *The Jewish Bride*. *Las Meninas* by Velázquez or *L’Enseigne de Gersaint* by Antoine Watteau. “But which work by Goya”. What about Van der Goes? “And then” replies Vanbeselaere, “I suddenly realize that I haven’t mentioned any Italian.”<sup>38</sup>

On display since 1966 in the National Gallery in Washington, is a beautiful small panel (approx. 15 x 12 cm), attributed to Rogier Van

<sup>36</sup> Nanny Schrijvers, ‘Aangroei en collectievorming in de 20ste eeuw’, *Het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. Een geschiedenis 1810 - 2007*, Oostkamp: Stichting Kunstboek, 2008, p. 53-76.- Myrthe Wienese, *Van Vanbeselaere tot Huvenne. Het aankoopbeleid van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, [www.ethesis.net/antwerpen\\_museum/ant\\_mus\\_inhoud.htm](http://www.ethesis.net/antwerpen_museum/ant_mus_inhoud.htm) is the online publication of her not particularly useful master’s thesis for the academic year 2004-2005.

<sup>37</sup> Herwig Todts, ‘Hoe de Amerikaanse professor Francis Thomas Rogier van der Weyden en James Ensor ontdekte in het KMSKA, [kmskablog.wordpress.com/tag/ensor-research-project/](http://kmskablog.wordpress.com/tag/ensor-research-project/) (geconsulteerd 7/05/2017)

<sup>38</sup> Joos Florquin, *o.c.*

der Weyden depicting *Saint George and the Dragon*. Vanbeselaere made an attempt to acquire the painting for the museum: “Antwerp possesses two wonderful small panels by Van Eyck: *Madonna at the Fountain* and *Saint Barbara*, and that *Saint George* would have been a unique addition”. He managed to procure 23 million Belgian francs (575,000 euros) from the Belgian Government. “But at the auction I didn’t even get to raise my finger. In a few seconds it reached 30 million.” Colnaghi, who bought it for Mellon (who donated it to the National Gallery), was allowed to bid over 50 million Belgian francs.<sup>39</sup> The means to considerably enrich the department of ancient art of the museum were missing. Still, some important purchases were realized. In 1966, the museum purchased the excellently documented triptych which Antonius Tsgrooten, Abbot of the Norbertine Abbey in Tongerlo, had commissioned in 1507 from Goossen van der Weyden. In 1971, the museum acquired an extra-canonical example of female artistry, whose status has continued to grow: “The only ‘Enclosed Garden’ from Mechelen that was still in a private collection.”<sup>40</sup> During the great Van Dyck-retrospective of 1999, it was more than apparent that the purchase of the large life-size portrait of the rich Antwerp textile merchant Alexander Vinck, was one of Vanbeselaere’s particularly fortunate choices.<sup>41</sup>

Vanbeselaere told Joos Florquin that he wanted to make “our museum the most important museum of national art in our country”. “A museum where an important selection of our best national art should be on view. There is no sense in acquiring less important works by foreigners, because foreign countries will always have much more to offer in that respect. Our own past and present are very important. I have systematically tried to complete our collections of James Ensor, Henri De Braekeleer, Jakob Smits and Constant Permeke. As far as those four names are concerned, we now have the most important collections in the world. (...) When foreign visitors come to Belgium, they will find in our halls of honor of the 19th and 20th century our strongest names with an excellent choice

<sup>39</sup> *Idem*

<sup>40</sup> ‘Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere, 25 jaar hoofdconservator’, *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* 1973, p. 159

<sup>41</sup> *Idem*, p. 29.

of first class works. For them this is now a unique opportunity to get in touch with Flemish art.” And Vanbeselaere believed that to realize this, one had to proceed in a plan-based manner. This is why he organized almost systematically retrospective exhibitions of the most important modern Belgian artists. He turned the introductions in the accompanying catalogs (and Vanbeselaere rightly deplored that he had to write them in advance) into the coffee table book that was published in 1961 upon the initiative of the legendary Maurice Naessens, banker and art promoter: *De Vlaamse Schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950, van Leys tot Permeke*. A coinciding French-language version was published, written by art critic Paul Haesaerts: *L’Histoire de la peinture moderne and Flandre*. 2800 copies of each version were published. Marc Callewaert thought the book of Vanbeselaere was too sober, boring almost; he preferred Haesaerts’ more creative and playful approach.<sup>42</sup> But Albert Smeets refuted this appreciation: “what Vanbeselaere writes is in fact generally more substantial and more substantive, while Haesaerts sometimes gives the impression to sacrifice too much for the sake of style and the language.” Smeets also very strongly states his appreciation for the fact that both Vanbeselaere and Haesaerts “honestly recognize (...)” the significance of Servaes. Paul Haesaerts does so in a rather prudent manner and only includes a reproduction of Servaes, yet he wholeheartedly acknowledges the pioneering role of this painter. Vanbeselaere includes three reproductions of works by Servaes, discusses him extensively and places him among the three most important Expressionist artists [Haesaerts obviously was not so bold] (...) Haesaerts and Vanbeselaere did well not to submit to the post-war official conformism (...) When will there be a big Servaes retrospective we ask, together with Vanbeselaere, to bring to light the greatness and the limitations of this painter; but will Brussels ever allow such a retrospective?”<sup>43</sup> [Servaes spoke to the imagination of the Antwerp chief curators, from Pol De Mont (1905) to Lydia Schoonbaert (1995) but in the repeated discussions about his position there were undeniably extra-artistic issues involved.]

<sup>42</sup> Marc Callewaert, in *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 12 december 1960

<sup>43</sup> A.S., ‘Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst’, *Vlaanderen*, Jg. 9 (1960), p. 132-133

The 100 beautiful color images in both publications were chosen in consultation, yet both Vanbeselaere and Haesaerts place meaningful divergent accents, not only in the text, but also in the reproductions. The book, together with Vanbeselaere's acquisition policy and exhibition program, provides a clear image of "his" canon of modern art in Belgium. The number of images given to the one artist, and not the other, moreover, provides a very simple, quantitative approach to Vanbeselaere's art-historical vision and incidentally also corresponds with the number of indexed entries on these artists in both publications.<sup>44</sup> The following table gives an overview of the level of appreciation of a particular artist according to Vanbeselaere (resp. Haesaerts) on the basis of the number of images of his work in the publication, the exhibition program and the museum purchases.

Although Vanbeselaere's choice is not significantly different from Haesaerts, there are some interesting differences. Haesaerts holds Wouters, Gust De Smet, Gustave Van de Woestyne and Hippolyte Daeye in higher esteem than Vanbeselaere, who dedicates more space to Frits Van den Berghe, Henri De Braekeleer, Jakob Smits and Albert Servaes. Unlike Haesaerts, Vanbeselaere pays no attention to Floris Jaspers, Paul Delvaux, René Magritte or Victor Servranckx. Nor to younger artists such as Anne Bonnet, Albert Dasnoy or Louis Van Lint, who are mentioned in Haesaerts' publication. But also the art of the "first abstracts in Belgium", the Surrealists and the late Pleinairists whom Haesaerts called the "Animists", is only given a modest place in his publication. Vanbeselaere thought it was too early to attempt to formulate a definitive assessment of their work.

Vanbeselaere told Joos Florquin that the Special Committee of the museum was much too focused on Antwerp. "Even the Expressionists, which were by then recognized all across the country since many years, were seen (by the artists Committee members, N/A) more as competitors than as names that had to be purchased."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> David Galenson, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008 (originally 2006), successfully used the method of counting the images in art historical publications to quantify the canonization of artists.

<sup>45</sup> Joos Florquin, *0.c.*

This is a surprising remark because, without wanting to minimize Vanbeselaere's extraordinary efforts, we must recognize that, to some extent, his purchasing policy confirmed the taste of the Antwerp art lovers, people like François Franck, Cléomir Jussiant, Joseph De Lange or Ernest Van den Bossche, who were members of the exhibition association Kunst van Heden / L'Art contemporain (1905 - 1955).<sup>46</sup> Even before the tenure of Vanbeselaere, the museum owned strong ensembles of works by Henri De Braekeleer, Jan Stobbaerts and James Ensor, Henri Evenepoel, Jakob Smits, Rik Wouters, Gust De Smet and Constant Permeke.

Vanbeselaere grew up in the period that is referred to by An Paenhuyzen as "the wonder years of the Belgian avant-garde".<sup>47</sup> In 1927, the Musée de Grenoble organized an exhibition in which the first Belgian moderns (Ensor, Wouters, Jakob Smits, ...), together with the artists of, or connected with, the Galerie Sélection (Joseph Canté, Oscar Jaspers, Constant Permeke, Gust De Smet, Edgard Tytgat, Floris Jaspers, Frits Van den Berghe, Gustave Van de Woestyne) as well as René Magritte and Auguste Mambour, Victor Servranckx, Auguste De Boeck, Pierre Flouquet and Jean-Jacques Gaillard were united around *The Fall of Icarus*, attributed to Pieter Bruegel. Vanbeselaere was more strict: "The fact that, here, the abstracts only gradually gained popularity after 1945, is proof that our deepest nature is not abstract. In other countries there is no equivalent of the true autonomous Flemish expressionism. There have been attempts to prove that abstract art has been important in Flanders from approximately 1910 onward. Compare that with Flemish expressionism. Then there is qualitatively speaking virtually nothing that can hold its own against foreign art. In our painterly tradition, there is only one abstract painter who has been consistent: Servranckx. For the rest it was drivel that was blown up by some, especially the younger generation after 1950. I am, because I that statement, regarded contemptuously by many as a *vieille poire*

<sup>46</sup> Jean Buyck, Dorine Cardyn-Oomen, Herwig Todts e.a. *In dienst van de kunst: Antwerps meenaat rond 'Kunst van Heden' (1905 - 1955). Retrospectieve tentoonstelling*, (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen) 1991

<sup>47</sup> An Paenhuyzen, *De nieuwe wereld. De wonderjaren van de Belgische avant-garde (1918-1939)*, Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2010.

[old pear]. (...) I argue that the abstract does not suit us. If there are strong forces coming, then they will start the dialog with reality anew. That has already been proven by for instance Octave Landuyt, our strongest sculptor Roel d'Haese, even by a Vic Gentils.”<sup>48</sup>

The fact that these artists are given no prominent place in the canon of Vanbeselaere does, however, not mean that he overlooked them as museum curator. In a letter to his friend Adriaan Vandewalle, he states that War Van Overstraeten will come give a lecture in the museum on “The figurative painting since Expressionism”. “He is also furiously opposed to everything that is abstraction (...) as an artist it is his right and also his duty to express his conviction. As a historian I observe, ascertain, and keep my point of view to myself. A conservator must be open to everything.”<sup>49</sup> That openness is indeed characteristic of Vanbeselaere’s purchasing policy. In 1955, the museum buys *Halfmond ovaal* (1950) by the English artist Ben Nicholson (1950) and Vanbeselaere writes in his review of 25 years of acquisitions: “An excellent extremely refined work of the highly regarded English abstract painter; purchased at his exhibition at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels.” In 1957, the museum acquires René Magritte’s *Zestien september* (1956), and Paul Delvaux’s *De roze strikken* (1937). In 1961, an early *Compositie* by Jozef Peeters, and in 1968 *Het domein van het water* (opus 2, 1927) by Victor Servranckx. It is clear that Vanbeselaere could appreciate an autonomous play of shapes and colors. The vehemence of his opposition to abstract art is moreover not consistent with his preference for the simplicity of modernist architecture: when Florquin asks him “If you would build a new museum, what would it be like?” Vanbeselaere replies without hesitation: “I prefer, by far, the Kröller-Müller museum that Henry van de Velde has built and moreover with extremely limited resources. From the outside it looks like a closed brick mastaba, without a single window, but inside it has very good lighting. The inside patios give it a unique intimate character and provides contact with the outside greenery and the sky.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Joos Florquin, *O.c.*

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Dewaele, *Met pen en penseel. Adriaan Vandewalle en Walther Vanbeselaere. Hun visie op de kunst (1925-1975)*, S.l. 2006, p. 156.

Vanbeselaere remained his whole life a stubborn adherent of the not particularly relevant art historical theory of the German art historian Wilhelm Pinder, who in 1926 published *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas*. Artistic styles were the expression of the *Zeitgeist*, although there is a constant simultaneous coinciding of many artistic styles. In line with Pinder, Vanbeselaere advances the idea of the “generation”. In this way, Henri Leys, Charles De Groux and Constantin Meunier, because of their birth dates, belong to the Western European generation of realists. Félicien Rops, Henri De Braekeleer and Emile Claus belong together with Claude Monet to the generation of impressionists.<sup>51</sup> In 1966, Vanbeselaere will, true to his idea, organize the exhibition *De generatie van 1900* [The generation of 1900] with — very surprised to find themselves together — work by the “surrealists” Delvaux and Magritte along with works of his beloved late Pleinairists: Albert Van Dyck, Henri-Victor Wolvens, and others.

To paraphrase August Vermeylen: for an art historian, the theory of artistic generations is not very convenient. Vermeylen used the same expression to express his aversion to a “racial” approach to the history of art and culture. Vanbeselaere and Vermeylen were both pro-Flemish. For Vermeylen, the Dutchification of Flanders (the government and the primary, secondary and higher education system) was a necessary part in the socio-economic and cultural emancipation of the working class.<sup>52</sup> Vanbeselaere called himself pro-Flemish but we can only guess as to his political beliefs. In his “Afterword” in the reissue of the art historical writings in Vermeylen’s *Verzameld Werk*, he does express his surprise at the vehemence with which Vermeylen “strikes out against the narrow nationalism”. Between the lines he reads how Vermeylen himself “provides evidence that

<sup>50</sup> Joos Florquin, *O.c.* Vanbeselaere shares this remarkable preference for modernist architecture combined with a dislike of modernist painting and sculpture with Urbain Van de Voorde.

<sup>51</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, *De Vlaamse schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950, van Leys tot Permeke*, Brussel: Uitgeverij De Arcade, 1961. But Vanbeselaere always returns to this theory. See also Joos Florquin, *O.c.*, among others

<sup>52</sup> Raymond Vervliet, ‘Vermeylen, August’, in: Reginald De Schrijver & Bruno De Wever (red.), *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tiel: Lannoo 1998, p. 3264-3269

the national (...) is an equally lasting — or equally relative! — factor as that of a common, Western European evolution.”<sup>53</sup> In *De Vlaamse schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950*, he declares to want to “attest to the undeniable life force of the Flemish painterly genius”, which is, as far as he is concerned, “of world significance”. Yet he uses the traditional name “Flemish art” for the entire painterly production in Belgium and considers “the Flemish disposition” of this art as a “constant” that protects the art in Belgium against foreign influence.<sup>54</sup> Vanbeselaere’s belief in the existence of an autonomous Flemish painterly tradition did not, as we saw earlier, prevent him, as a museum curator, to similarly recognize the international aspects of the museum collection. With the purchase of works by Edgar Degas, Odilon Redon, Vincent Van Gogh, Jan Toorop, Aristide Maillol and Georges Rouault (and the failed purchase of a nude by Edvard Munch) he tried to create a context for the art of James Ensor and Jakob Smits. Othon Friesz, Maurice de Vlaminck, Charles Dufresne and Henri Le Fauconnier provided a context for the art of the Flemish expressionists.

Even before Walther Vanbeselaere succeeded Ary Delen as chief curator, Lode Craeybeckx requested the special Museum Commission to acquire works of young artists. The matter was again discussed during the Committee meeting of December 27, 1948. Vanbeselaere remarks that the mission of a museum consists in “consecrating (...) the young usually make their debut as the more or less brilliant epigones of some personality or movement and usually one must wait until they reach the age of around forty to find a clearly defined personal character in a work. Since the purchases of a museum mainly imply the acquisition of as many undeniable works of art as possible, we must proceed, albeit with the greatest sympathy for the healthy principle of the Lord Mayor, with the greatest trepidation.” Lode Craeybeckx indeed may have been

<sup>53</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, “Nawoord”, in: August Vermeylen, *Verzamelde Werk, Vijfde Deel Van de catacomben tot Greco. Geschiedenis der Europeesche plastiek en schilderkunst in de Middeleeuwen en de Renaissance* (tekstgedeelte), Brussel: Uitgeversmaatschappij A. Manteau N.V., 1951, pp. 805-809

<sup>54</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, *De Vlaamse schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950, van Leys tot Permeke*, Brussel: Uitgeverij De Arcade, 1961, p. 21.

the driving force behind the purchase of the work of young artists — Craeybeckx was Mayor of Antwerp and thus President of the Special Committee of the museum, from 1947 to 1976. But the list of young artists is impressive and in the overview of the acquisitions of 1973 Vanbeselaere repeatedly and enthusiastically provided commentary on the *Vliegende man* by Karel Appel (“First purchase of the extremely vital painter of the Cobra group who came to the fore after the war.”), Francesco Somaini’s *Grote Gewonde* (“Spirited and, both technically as well as formally, an outstanding example of the innate resourcefulness of expressive power of the Italians”), a small bronze sculpture by Erzsébet Schaár, *Deur* (“Music of inner voices? In any case a poetic soul, expressing itself in an unequivocal plastic language, whose charm and stimulus emerges from the three-dimensional and not, as somehow secretly expected, from the more ephemeral language of a drawn shape.”), Luc Peire’s *Vertigo* (“From our first geometric-abstract one, who follows, with never faltering consistency and extreme sensitivity, his path of purification and strive for perfection.”) or a nail-object by the Zero-artist Guenther Uecker, *Spiraal* (“Undeniably compelling, aesthetic charm and a decisive rhythm emerge from those countless nails, well-driven with perfect craftsmanship. The white paint with which everything was machine-sprayed generates a happy and intense sense of life.”).

Frans Baudouin, whom Walther Vanbeselaere became acquainted with as new chief curator of the Royal Museum, claimed that Vanbeselaere “possessed that what he himself to some extent admired in Edgard Tytgat: Dztthe gift of unremitting wonder and admiration and elation.”<sup>55</sup> Evidenced in the openness with which he allowed himself to be carried away by art forms which he initially approached with many reservations.

Ultimately, this epicurean with a longing for mystical revelations was in the first place more an art lover than an art historian. An art lover who was not guided by the innovative character of the art of Ensor, Brusselmans or Permeke, but who sought in their work

<sup>55</sup> Frans Baudouin, ‘Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere (1908-1988) een levensschets’, *Vlaanderen*, Jg. 37 (1988), p. 270.



in the first place that which connects this art with “the deepest needs and stirrings of life”. “The depth” of Ensor’s “emotion “[...] the power of certain people to feel in life a secret active pulse and also the irresistible and insatiable urge to express that secret life.”<sup>56</sup> Vanbeselaere’s canon of modern painting in Belgium was of course already called into question during the course of the 1960s, (a.o. by Marc Callewaert) and has in the meantime been fundamentally corrected by the publication of Robert Hoozee and the team that worked together with him on *Moderne kunst in België 1900 – 1945* (Mercatorfonds 1992).

<sup>56</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, *De Vlaamse schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950, van Leys tot Permeke*, Brussel: Uitgeverij De Arcade, 1961, p. 114

## A museum for the past and present. Vanbeselaere, Dhondt-Dhaenens and the importance of the “contemporaries”

Charlotte Crevits

For the presentation of the exhibition *Walther Vanbeselaere, Verzamelaar voor de staat 1948 – 1973* in the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, three contemporary artists were invited to transform the museum space to their liking. Artists Oleg Matrokhin, Bart Lodewijks and Jacqy duVal enter into dialogue with the presented works using specific architectural, coloristic and graphical interventions and cast a contemporary eye on the collection. A conscious choice for a dialog between past and present, whose approach is not only in line with the historically grown policy of the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, but also with the motivations of Walther Vanbeselaere.<sup>1</sup>

Already during the creation of the museum in 1968, the couple Jules Dhondt and Irma Dhaenens not only focused on the public display of their art collection, which mainly includes the Laethem artists’ group, but also on showing contemporary work. While the large space with the outdoor patio was reserved for the permanent collection, the smaller space was intended for changing exhibitions of contemporary, local or international artists. Less than a year after the opening, the museum presented work by, among others, Bram Bogart, Paul Van Hoeydonck and Valerio Adami. The founders clearly opted, right from the beginning, to keep the doors of their museum open to the then often “maligned” contemporary art. Walther Vanbeselaere, who was, in the first place, convinced of the paramount importance of the collection Dhondt-Dhaenens,

<sup>1</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, *Toespraak van dhr. Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere bij de openstelling van het Museum Mevr. Jules Dhondt-Dhaenens*, 30 November 1968, Archive museum Dhondt-Dhaenens.

could nonetheless appreciate the focus on contemporary artists. In his opening speech at the inauguration of the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Vanbeselaere stated:

*“The fact that we have gained a museum in which, in addition, many cultural activities can be realized is definitely, according to current beliefs, — as a response to current needs —, a good thing, but that the collection can be shown and even in some respects, for example, in connection with Serraes, presents an ensemble that does not exist in any other Museum in our country, is of infinitely greater importance to me.”<sup>1</sup>*

Since then, the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens has continued to focus on this dual approach in its policy; as a museum, focused on the research and presentation of modern art of the twentieth century, and as a contemporary arts center. As a museum, the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens today is particularly committed to updating our view of the work of artists represented in the museum’s own collection. It is striking that many artists who visit the collection Dhondt-Dhaenens — either because of the subject matter, the painterly qualities or for purely aesthetic reasons — express their admiration for the Flemish Modernists. All point to the undeniable “contemporaneity” of artists such as James Ensor, Constant Permeke, Valerius De Saedeleer, Frits Van den Berghe and Gust. De Smet. The lack of an efficient cultural policy makes that today these artists are often disregarded by the “general public” and only sporadically enjoy international interest.

More than half a century ago, Walther Vanbeselaere already defended the Flemish expressionists at a time when the artists enjoyed little appreciation. In an interview with Joos Florquin for the television series *Ten Huize van...* Vanbeselaere expressed his displeasure on this subject: “It is actually regrettable that so few of our

critics have any interest in the valuable heritage of our very recent past.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, it is striking that, in his art historical studies, the Antwerp conservator repeatedly emphasized the contemporaneity of an old or modern master. In the preface to his study on *Pieter Bruegel (Pieter Bruegel en het Nederlandsche maniërisme, Tielt, 1945)* he fervently concludes with a paragraph in which he describes Bruegel as “extraordinary topical” in “our days of hopeless divisions that suggest a self-destruction of the West [...]. May Bruegel be the paragon of the man, who, at a time when Europe was similarly at a crossroads, in full awareness of his own relativity, ploughed his furrow, alone and unperturbed.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, Vanbeselaere tried to situate the Belgian art history in an international frame. In the preamble of his book *Moderne Vlaamse schilderkunst*, he wrote:

*“We want to demonstrate to our compatriots, how in the period 1850-1950 Flemish painting not only enjoyed a revival, yet also, in its best production kept pace with art movements abroad; remained true in this production to its long-established values and that the very best contribution can be considered of European, and this immediately implies: of world significance.”<sup>4</sup>*

Although Vanbeselaere’s personal preference as a collector went in the first place to the Flemish modernists, as chief curator he clearly emphasized the importance of an own past and present — a museum should, according to Vanbeselaere be “eclectic-broad”.<sup>5</sup> Since the beginning of his tenure, works by young artists were acquired on a regular basis. Mayor Craeybeckx, the then President of the purchase Commission, who also had a predilection for

<sup>2</sup> Joos Florquin, *Walther Vanbeselaere, Ten Huize Van...*, Deel 18, Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1982, 332.

<sup>3</sup> Vanbeselaere, *Bruegel leren zien*. Enkele alinea’s uit *Woord Vooraf*, in *VWS-Cahiers*, jr. 10, nr. 4 (winter 1975): 10.

<sup>4</sup> Vanbeselaere, *Moderne Vlaamse schilderkunst, Van 1850 tot 1950, Van Leys tot Permeke* (Brussels: De Arcade, 1959), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Florquin, *Walther Vanbeselaere*, 327.

young artists, played an important role in these purchase policies. The creation of the Middelheim museum in 1950 upon the initiative of Craeybeckx, for example, led to the purchase of progressive, international sculptural art, such as *Danspas* by Giacomo Manzù and *De grote danseres* by Marino Marini. During the meetings, however, Vanbeselaere felt that the emphasis should in the first place lie on the quality of the work, rather than on its contemporaneity. The purchase of young work implied greater risk and should be approached with the necessary caution.<sup>6</sup>

The emphatic focus on contemporary art only came to the fore in the last years of his tenure as conservator. In the mid-1960s, Vanbeselaere organized two group exhibitions with which he wanted “to break into the contemporary.”<sup>7</sup> The first exhibition *De generatie 1900, animisten en surrealisten* of 1966 was dedicated to artists from his generation, who followed in the wake of the expressionists. There was work by, among others, Paul Delvaux, René Magritte, George Grard, Jos Vis and Henri-Victor Wolvens — all artists with whom he maintained personal contacts. The second exhibition was entitled *Contrasten 1947 – 1967* and took place in 1968, the founding year of the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens. It gave an overview of the most important innovations and trends in the Belgian abstract art of the previous twenty years and was the first exhibition in the history of the museum dedicated to abstract art.

Vanbeselaere further turned the attention to contemporary art with subsequent exhibitions such as *Jos. Vinck* (1969), *Raoul De Keyser* (1970), *Facetten ‘Jonge Vlaamse kunst’* (1971) and under his tenure, one year before his retirement, another exhibition of international allure was organized: *Gilbert and George: ‘The Paintings’*. Despite his deliberate aim to create a museum of the past and the present, Vanbeselaere cannot be considered as a pioneer in the field of contemporary art. Although work of innovators from the 1950s (such

<sup>6</sup> Myrthe Wienese, *Van Vanbeselaere tot Huvenne. Het aankoopbeleid van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, 2005, [www.ethesis.net/antwerpen\\_museum/ant\\_mus\\_inhoud.htm](http://www.ethesis.net/antwerpen_museum/ant_mus_inhoud.htm), last accessed on 22.5.2017.

<sup>7</sup> Florquin, ‘Walther Vanbeselaere’, 329.

as Hans Hartung, Jan Burssens, Karel Appel, Pierre Alechinsky and Jan Cox) was purchased under his tenure, the preference of the conservator seemed to primarily go to contemporary figurative painting, which he could place, mainly because of its dialog with reality, within the “Flemish” art tradition. In the years 1950–60, little attention was paid to movements such as Pop Art, Minimal Art and Conceptual Art, which were up and coming in Europe and America at that time.<sup>8</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere was probably aware of this when he suggested to create an autonomous museum for contemporary art in Antwerp. “Yet the painful subject concerns: the fact that there must be a separate museum for contemporary art. Now we are still between two chairs: in ashes!” he told Florquin during the 1970 interview.<sup>9</sup> His wish partially came true that very same year with the creation of the I.C.C. (International Cultural Center) in the former Royal Palace on the Meir in Antwerp. As a public institution for contemporary art, it was the forerunner of the M HKA, which would finally open its doors fifteen years later.

In the exhibition, the Belgian artist duo **Jacqy duVal**, which consists of Jacqueline Dehond (b. 1965) and Koenraad Uyttendaele (b. 1962), set to work with color and geometric shapes on the exhibition walls. The artists use the exhibited works of art as a starting point. Some of the colors used are complementary with the color range of a particular exhibited work of art, while others echo the color tones of the work of art. In the practice of Jacqy duVal, much attention is paid to the creation process, which is invariably preceded by thorough research. The used pigments were carefully selected and the paints were produced by the artists themselves according to a traditional, artisanal process. In their exploration of the effect of color on our subconscious mind, artists like Josef Albers and Mark Rothko can be valuable sources of inspiration. With the creation of a dialog between a contemporary visual language and the works of previous generations, the artists seek to break through a particular time perspective. The spectator is invited to experience the “timeless” quality of the exhibited collection.

<sup>8</sup> Myrthe Wienese, *Van Vanbeselaere tot Huvenne*.  
<sup>9</sup> Florquin, *Walther Vanbeselaere*, 333.

“The works are a selection from an important period in the art from our regions. They are works by artists who influenced the subsequent generations through their groundbreaking character, innovation and creativity. They transcend, each in their own way, the time and place-related context in which they were created, and still move us by their aesthetic and artistic quality.” — Jacqy duVal

The artist **Bart Lodewijks** (b. 1972, The Netherlands) considers drawing a social act. By drawing chalk drawings on streets, walls and facades, the artist enters into dialog with a particular environment. The chalk drawings make that the place is seen and/or perceived (usually temporarily because of the weather conditions) in a different guise by local residents, owners or passers-by. For this exhibition, the artist drew with blackboard chalk on the interior and exterior walls of the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens. The drawing is inspired by the often garish frames of the exhibited paintings and forms a large visual “framework” that accentuates the parallels between the collection of the museum Dhondt-Dhaenens and those of the KMSKA. The work consists of straight chalk lines that together make up one drawing, but that can never be seen in its entirety from one particular point because it turns around corners and spreads across different rooms. The drawing also tries to find its way outside the museum, as the artist seeks to connect with relatives in the family of Walther Vanbeselaere. In this way, the artist hopes to give the drawing a personal dimension.

Artist **Oleg Matrokhin** (b. 1980, Russia) occupied the exhibition space in well-chosen places with very fine and detailed pencil drawings. Through his drawings, the artist brings a story about Walther Vanbeselaere as a collector rather than as museum curator. In his drawings that traverse the exhibited collection in a refined manner, Matrokhin uncovers contradictions between often biased concepts in art history, such as “old” and “new” or “bourgeoisie” and “aristocracy”. Vanbeselaere’s personal preferences, financial motivations and family intrigues are thematized in the drawings as well. Matrokhin constantly explores the boundaries

between reality and fiction. In addition to art historical sources, scenes from the controversial Italian-French film *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno* (1974) by Luchino Visconti, financial reports and illustrations from gossip and fashion magazines are used as sources of inspiration. The drawings on the walls are reminiscent of *toile de Jouy*, decorative patterns that were popular in sixteenth-century France and usually depicted pastoral scenes.

# Léon Spilliaert and the (self) image of the artist in the nineteenth century

Thijs Dekeukeleire

Much ink has flown on the Ostend artist Léon Spilliaert (1881 – 1946). This has been the case since Spilliaert for the first time mingled with the Symbolist poets, when he was in his twenties. A musing artist promotes musing. Witness this passage on Spilliaert's self-portraits, from the catalog of the monographic exhibition that was held in 2006–07 at the KMSKB: "Beyond the borders of the visible [the nonetheless limited space that was dominated by the steel gaze in the frontal portrait], the gaze is brought back to its source: the yawning chasm that no longer embodies a lost golden age, but that reveals itself as an absolute beginning from which each action will continue to derive its meaning."<sup>1</sup> It is representative of essays on Spilliaert, which tend "to glisten", as art historian Patricia Farmer already aptly remarked.<sup>2</sup> What is striking is not the content of these writings, but the writing in itself. Spilliaert is without a doubt one of the most telling figures in the Belgian art history of the long nineteenth century [1789 – 1914 A/N], mainly because of his self-portraits. Over the course of his career, Spilliaert portrayed himself about thirty times.<sup>3</sup> Such a series of self-portraits is a determining factor in the perpetuation of the image of the artist. What follows is a reflection on Spilliaert-the-myth, in conjunction with his *Zelfportret met blauw schetsboek* [*Self Portrait with Blue Sketchbook*] of 1907.

<sup>1</sup> Michel Draguet, "Opgewassen tegen de muil van het donker" in *Léon Spilliaert: Een vrije geest*, Michel Draguet et al. (Antwerp: Ludion, 2007), 126.

<sup>2</sup> "Essays on Leon Spilliaert [...] have a tendency to shimmer [...]" Patricia Farmer, "The Master of the Solitary Figure" in *Léon Spilliaert: Symbol and Expression in 20th Century Belgian Art*, Frank Edebau, Patricia Farmer and Francine-Claire Legrand (Hamilton: The Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1980), 19.

<sup>3</sup> In the same exhibition catalog, Draguet mentions "about twenty" self-portraits, Dewulf about "thirty or so". Draguet, "Opgewassen" (see note 1), 126; Dewulf, "Spilliaert versus Spilliaert" in *Léon Spilliaert: Een vrije geest*, Michel Draguet et al. (Antwerp: Ludion, 2007), 131.

Spilliaert is not nearly the only prominent personality that came to the fore in the nineteenth-century Belgian art world. His fellow townsman James Ensor (1860 – 1949) was for example notorious for treading on the toes of the establishment, when he was not busy strolling on the boardwalk as a dandy. Misunderstood and undervalued, Ensor felt he was a martyr for his art. As such, he identified with the persecuted Christ, maybe more so than contemporaries such as Paul Gauguin (1848 – 1903) and Vincent Van Gogh (1853 – 1890). In his masterpiece *De intrede van Christus in Brussel in 1889* [*Christ's entry into Brussels in 1889*] (1888, J. Paul Getty Museum) he painted his own facial features onto a Christ, surrounded by a crowd of monsters, masks and caricatures: the populace, the critics, the fellow avant-gardists. At the same time, the Antwerp sculptor Jef Lambeaux (1852 – 1908) also brought his individuality to the fore. Following in the footsteps of the realist Gustave Courbet (1819 – 1877), Lambeaux embraced the image of the Bohemian: a free-spirited Bon Vivant and man of the people, who abhors civil conventions.<sup>5</sup> When he was not at work in his studio in Brussels, the artist could be found in the pub or amidst the audience of the wrestlers shack, where he indulged the urges and passions that are also expressed in his swirling, fleshy nudes.<sup>6</sup>

That such memorable artist figures presented themselves precisely in the nineteenth century, in Belgium and elsewhere in Western Europe, is by no means accidental. The mythification of the artist has deep roots, roots that directly hark back to the renaissance. The Italian Giorgio Vasari (1511 – 1574) garnered lasting fame with his *Vite* (1550, 1568): a collection of biographies of artists, peppered with fitting characterizations, colorful anecdotes and spicy details.<sup>7</sup> The volumes — which were widely read and

<sup>4</sup> Michael Wilson en Alexander Sturgis, "Priest, Seer, Martyr, Christ" in *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, Rupert Christiansen et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 139; Alexander Sturgis, "James Ensor" in *ibid.*, 154.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Wilson en Alexander Sturgis, "Bohemia" in *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, Rupert Christiansen et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Sander Pierron, *Etudes d'art* (Brussel: Xavier Havermans, 1903), 89, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Williams, "Vasari, Giorgio" in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, Oxford Art Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007–2017), last consulted on May 2nd 2017, [www.oxfordartonline.com](http://www.oxfordartonline.com).

commented on over the centuries — already contain some of the topoi [Classical trope in which cliché situations or locations are used] that have permeated the stories of artists' lives until today. It was only from the late eighteenth century and over the course of the nineteenth century that the artist's myth became widely popular. From Romanticism onward, artists for the first time consciously adopt personas that are rooted in myth, so that soon both — the artist's life and the depiction thereof — will perpetuate each other.<sup>8</sup>

Spilliaert, unlike the *enfant terrible* personas of Lambeaux and Ensor, presents himself as a melancholic. Narratives about the man and his work always make mention of melancholy and related qualities such as an introverted and reclusive nature, hypersensitivity, emotional dejection, a tendency for mood swings. These are also constants in Vasari's *Vite*. From the renaissance onward, the idea that artistic genius goes hand in hand with an unstable personality has never fully been abandoned; an idea that in the nineteenth century, moreover, was also attributed to a medical cause.<sup>9</sup> In Belgian art, Spilliaert fits the prototype of the melancholic artist, who is weighed down by the burden of his own gifts, who suffers from the urge to give expression to his inner vision and from the disregard of the 'philistine' (indifferent and hostile) public.<sup>10</sup> Not only is the greatest usually the most persecuted because of his talent, his courage, his perseverance, he is usually also exhausted and tormented by the burden of talent and imagination," went the exemplary statement of the great romantic painter Eugène Delacroix<sup>11</sup>, with whom Spilliaert felt a close affinity.<sup>12</sup>

In 1907, Spilliaert experienced a creative peak, which was ironically partly due to an ongoing personal crisis. The artist, it is said, was recovering from a big disappointment in love, experi-

<sup>8</sup> Michael Wilson, "Rebels and Martyrs" in *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, Rupert Christiansen et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Wittkower and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), 98-99, 104.

<sup>10</sup> The latter is a consequence of the ever-increasing distance between avant-garde artist and popular taste in the course of the nineteenth century. Wilson, "Rebels and Martyrs" (see note 8), 14-15; Michael Wilson, "Hero of the Establishment; Romantic Hero" in *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, Rupert Christiansen et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 45; Michael Wilson, "Romantic Myths" in *ibid.*, 71.

enced the greatest difficulty in maintaining social relationships, and was tormented by ulcers and insomnia.<sup>13</sup> "Oh! If only I could be delivered from my troubled and feverish character, if only I life would not have me in its grasp," he had written in a letter in 1904, overcome by doubts over his artistic path.<sup>14</sup> "Until now my life has been lonely and sad, with a huge coldness surrounding me. I have always been afraid, never have I dared. Never been completely sincere," he would lament in 1909.<sup>15</sup> Spilliaert's wandering through the empty seaside resort found its expression in a series of alienating city and sea views. In the confines of his parental house, he explores his own bony facial features in an equally eerie series of self-portraits. "He is definitely a soul in need, someone weighed down by fear psychosis which he expresses in a direct manner [...]," confirmed Walther Vanbeselaere in his assessment of Spilliaert's artistic production. "In his best work he starts from strong sensations that he experienced in life and in which abandonment and fear constitute a living pulse."<sup>16</sup>

The image of Spilliaert as essentially abandoned and anxious, however, provides only part of the story, which becomes clear if we take a closer look at his career. Spilliaert rather quickly managed to connect with national and international avant-garde circles, through a determination and entrepreneurship that belies the image of the artist as an incorrigible melancholic. In 1902, at

<sup>11</sup> "Non seulement le plus grand par le talent, par l'audace, par la constance, est ordinairement le plus persécuté, mais il est lui-même fatigué et tourmenté de ce fardeau du talent et de l'imagination." Eugène Delacroix and Paul Flat, *Journal d'Eugène Delacroix: 1823-1850* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie, 1926), 437 (1 May 1850). Own translation. Cited in English translation in: Wilson, *Rebels and Martyrs* (see note 8), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Adriaens-Pannier, *Léon Spilliaert: Het literair en kritisch portret van een kunstenaar* (Brughes: Uitgeverij Van de Wiele, 2016), 24.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Michel Draguet, *Het symbolisme in België* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2010), 328; Anne Adriaens-Pannier, *Spilliaert: De regard de l'âme* (Gent: Ludion, 2006), 302; Adriaens-Pannier, *Literair en kritisch* (see note 12), 12.

<sup>14</sup> "Ah ! Si j'étais débarrassé de mon caractère inquiet et fiévreux, si la vie ne m'avait pas dans ses serres." Léon Spilliaert, cited in: Adriaens-Pannier, *Le regard* (see note 13), 64. Own translation.

<sup>15</sup> "Jusqu'à présent ma vie s'est passée, seule et triste, avec un immense froid autour de moi. J'ai toujours eu peur, jamais osé. Jamais été complètement sincère." Léon Spilliaert, cited in: Adriaens-Pannier, *Literair en kritisch* (see note 12), 20. Own translation.

<sup>16</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, *De Vlaamsche schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950 van Leys tot Permeke* (Brussels: Uitgeverij De Arcade, 1961), 156. Own emphasis.

the age of just 21, Spilliaert approached, upon his own initiative, the Brussels publisher and patron Edmond Deman (1857 – 1918). His portfolio aroused Deman's interest, and soon Spilliaert was making illustrations commissioned by him for literary giants like Maurice Maeterlinck (1862 – 1949) and Emile Verhaeren (1855 – 1916).<sup>17</sup> With Verhaeren, Spilliaert established — despite the age difference of almost thirty years — one of the closest of his many friendships. “It is him that I have loved most, it is he who has loved me most,” mused Spilliaert several years after Verhaeren's death, in terms that were quite common at the time in the context of close friendships between men.<sup>18</sup> Under the encouragement of Deman and Verhaeren — which he immortalized together with his own image in a triple portrait (1908, Royal Library of Belgium, Prentenkabinet, Brussels) — Spilliaert went to try his luck in Paris. His stay in the cultural mecca earned him a small clientele, as well as a chance to exhibit: among other places, in the gallery of the art dealer Clovis Sagot (? – 1913), who presented his work alongside that of none other than a Spanish contemporary called Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973).<sup>19</sup> Back in his hometown, Spilliaert managed to win the friendship of both Ensor and Constant Permeke (1886 – 1952). If Ensor initially complained that Spilliaert would tirelessly be waiting for him every time he wanted to stretch his legs,<sup>20</sup> he would, many years later, enjoy their numerous discussions about the state of modern art.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Anne Adriaens-Pannier, *Le regard* (see note 13), 302; Anne Adriaens-Pannier, “Woord en beeld in dialoog: Spilliaert als illustrator van Emile Verhaeren en Maurice Maeterlinck” in *Léon Spilliaert: Een vrije geest*, Michel Draguet et al. (Antwerp: Ludion, 2007), 20 ff.

<sup>18</sup> “[C'est] lui que j'ai plus aimé, c'est lui qui m'a le plus aimé [...]” Léon Spilliaert, getranscribeerd in: Adriaens-Pannier, *Le regard* (see note 13), 325. Own translation. There is a wealth of literature on male friendships – homosexuality – in the (long) nineteenth century. Of particular interest for the nineteenth-century Belgian artistic literary context are: Henk de Smaele, “De onmachtigen: Mannelijkheid en de idealen van de literaire avant-garde in Vlaanderen” in *Niet onder één vlag: Van Nu en Straks en de paradoxen van het fin de siècle*, red. Raf de Bont, Gerald Reyemnants and Hans Vandevoorde (Ghent: Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde, 2005), 181-194.

<sup>19</sup> Farmer, “The Master” (see note 2), 21; Adriaens-Pannier, *Le regard* (see note 13), 302. The name of Picasso can still be found in Spilliaert's address book from 1919-20: Adriaens-Pannier, *Le regard* (see note 13), 306.

<sup>20</sup> Ensor, cited in: Norbert Hostyn, “Documenten” in *Léon Spilliaert*, Anne Adriaens-Pannier and Norbert Hostyn (Ghent: Ludion, 1996), 47.

The self-portrait in the current exhibition can be seen in the same light: it testifies both to the assertiveness that the young artist displayed as well as to his clever manipulating of the image that was forming around him. It is part of the second phase into which his self-portraits are traditionally categorized: that of the self-portraits from 1907 – 1908, which are characterized by the paraphernalia of art and bourgeois living.<sup>22</sup> Vanbeselaere, who strongly defended the work before the purchase commission of the KMSKA, regarded it — in accordance with the myth — as “focused exclusively on the expression of inner states, full of turned inwardness (sic), listening to inner voices”.<sup>23</sup> A self-portrait is indeed the result of introspection, but by definition it is also an expression, which implies choices as to the representation towards the outside world. The work in question suggests that the then 26-year-old artist claimed the respectability of a gentleman, with “youthful bravado and little restraint,” as Farmer also remarked.<sup>24</sup> Spilliaert portrayed himself in a bourgeois interior, dressed in a black tailored suit whose sober elegance is a testimony to the severity of his pursuits. It is a world of difference from the self-portraits of the Austrian Egon Schiele (1890 – 1918), who from 1910 also played with the expressive power of his bony face and lush head of hair, yet who portrayed himself many times naked, standing in tormented poses, dramatically lit against a neutral background. In addition, Spilliaert not only portrays himself as a gentleman, but as a gentleman in the capacity of an artist — more specifically, a draughtsman.<sup>25</sup> His self-portraits as burgher and creative genius are all the more interesting knowing that Spilliaert struggled with difficulties in love and health during this period. The claimed identity

<sup>21</sup> For the friendship between Spilliaert and Ensor, see: Adriaens-Pannier, *Le regard* (see note 13), 264-274; for the friendship between Spilliaert and Permeke: Adriaens-Pannier, *Le regard* (see note 13), 286-298.

<sup>22</sup> Dewulf, *Spilliaert versus Spilliaert* (see note 3), 131-132.

<sup>23</sup> Gilberte Gepts, “Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere: 25 jaar hoofdconservator,” *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten* (1973), 6, 32.

<sup>24</sup> “[...] his self-portraits suggest youthful bravado and very little reticence.” Farmer, “The Master” (see note 2), 21.

<sup>25</sup> That it concerns a sketchbook (in which Spilliaert obviously sketches his own image) becomes more evident when compared with the similar self-portrait of the same year, now in private collection, known as *Zelfportret met schetsboek* and published in: Michel Draguet et al., *Léon Spilliaert: Een vrije geest* (Antwerpen: Ludion, 2007), 140 (nr. 149).

compensates for the virility that failed him elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> In other self-portraits, Spilliaert seems to have accentuated the oppressive nocturnal atmosphere, by dramatizing the cracks in the self-image in a self-conscious manner. That is the case, first and foremost, in the much-discussed and decidedly Munchian *Zelfportret voor de spiegel* (1908, Kunstmuseum aan zee, Ostend).<sup>27</sup>

By deflating Spilliaert's image and allowing other aspects to come to the fore, a richer image of the artist and his place in society appears. In the same way that Spilliaert as an individual conquered his place in artistic circles, he also gained a place in art history with his oeuvre and this against the prevailing myth. In line with several authors before him, Vanbeselaere characterized Spilliaert as an "exceptional case" and "in his own generation [...] an outsider".<sup>28</sup> Rather than being indeterminable, Spilliaert's works specifically evince the fertile exchanges that occurred in the artist's circles of Ostend, Brussels and Paris in he moved. As such, Spilliaert constitutes a significant link that throws light on the interaction between, and overlapping of, the artistic movements in Belgium. In particular, his friendships with Ensor and Permeke are reflected in his role as a transitional figure between late Symbolism and early Expressionism.<sup>29</sup> Interpretation and delineation do not affect Spilliaert's unique work. Aside from a fascinating poetic force, it evinces an exceptional technical virtuosity. Spilliaert made maximum use of the flowing and subtle effects of mixed media —

<sup>26</sup> For a fascinating discussion of civil masculinity — replete with the obligatory black suit — and in particular as evinced by the French impressionist Gustave Caillebotte, see: Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 33-40.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance: Adriaens-Pannier, *Le regard* (see note 13), 76; Draguet, "Opgewassen" (see note 1), 128-129; Draguet, *Symbolisme* (see note 13), 329-330.

<sup>28</sup> Vanbeselaere, *De Vlaamse schilderkunst* (see note 16), 156. Vanbeselaere echoed the considerations of the likes of for instance Georges Marlier: "Het werk van den Oostendschen schilder Leo Spillaert (sic) [...] is zeer moeillijk te classeeren (sic). Geen kunst is bescheidener dan de zijne, maar geen ook is meer intimeerend, meer onbepaalbaar." [The work of the Ostend painter Leo Spillaert (sic) [...] is very difficult to classify. No art is more modest than his, but none is more intimidating, more indeterminable.] Georges Marlier, *Hedendaagse Vlaamse schilderkunst* (Brussels: De Lage Landen, 1944), 89.

<sup>29</sup> Farmer, "The Master" (see note 2), 19; Francine-Claire Legrand, "Spilliaert, Léon" in *Dictionnaire des peintres belges* (1999-2011), last consulted on May 2, 2017, [balat.kikirpa.be/peintres](http://balat.kikirpa.be/peintres).

East Indian ink, crayon, pastel, chalk and watercolors — and often opted for a monochrome treatment that evinces his masterful sense of play with positive and negative form, with light and dark.<sup>30</sup> His mythification contributes to the legacy, and helps to make Spilliaert one of the most paradigmatic artistic figures in the history of Belgian art.

<sup>30</sup> Hoozee, "Spilliaert en de nadagen van het symbolisme" in *Léon Spilliaert: Een vrije geest*, Michel Draguet et al. (Antwerp: Ludion, 2007), 12; Farmer, "The Master" (see note 2), 24.



# Longing for and after Tytgat

Eline Stoop

In the contemporary literature on Edgard Tytgat (Brussels, 1879 – Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, 1957), it is above all his individuality (which makes him, as an artist, unique among his contemporaries) that is brought to the fore.<sup>1</sup> His paintings are rather stereotypically described as poetic translations of his naive view of the world, laced with humor and a touch of eroticism, and often attesting to his interest in colored folk prints. Folk prints are woodcuts that are characterized by their narrative character, their simple, sometimes awkward design, their large color planes and their clear contours (all characteristics which also apply on Tytgat's art). In the literature one will find hardly any other approach to Tytgat's oeuvre. This makes the question whether he should be seen as a naive artist a much-discussed topic.<sup>2</sup> From a contemporary point of view, this seems rather beside the point. What makes his work today so relevant is not so much determined by the way he depicts his subjects, whether in a naive manner or otherwise, but by his choice of a limited number of subjects that remain recognizable even today.

Tytgat depicts in his paintings the small everyday things that make us human: the social interaction with others (family, friends or other portrayed people), engaged in leisurely activities (at the county fair, in the circus and the theatre) and once back at home, looking reflectively through the window (as evidenced by his many interior pieces). But Tytgat also has attention for another side of man, a side that he is not inclined to share with many and

even suppresses: his sexual desires. Walther Vanbeselaere, who purchased a remarkably large number of paintings and sculptures of female nudes for the collection of the KMSKA, explains this in his book *Moderne Vlaamse schilderkunst* (1960, p. 232) as follows: "He [Tytgat] reveals things which anyone sometimes secretly enjoys." The mostly nude woman is a constant in Tytgat's oeuvre, but it is especially in his later work that his erotic, sometimes even sadistic desires come to the fore. Cloaked in references to ancient myths and legends, he manages to express the desires, repressed by many, in a timeless manner and it is precisely therein that lies the strength of his work, as evidenced in *De beeldhouwer vereeuwigt zijn liefdes*.

The painting, which bathes in pink and gray-blue hues, evokes a surreal world, a dream world in which the repressed desires of man are given free reign. In that world, the artist is given the freedom to tether his naked lovers, women of flesh and blood, and place them in his favorite position, and consequently knead them into eternal, ideal lovers of stone. Tytgat simultaneously depicts the different stages of the realization process of the artist: in the distance, the sculptor sails with one of his naked lovers towards his "dream" island. Once arrived, he blindfolds or gags his beloved, to then literally place her on a pedestal and immortalizing her in stone through his touches.

Just like the title, this story immediately evokes associations with the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. In the myth, Pygmalion, a sculptor who has renounced women because they seem to live only in sin, falls in love with his own, extremely realistic, ivory sculpture of a young, beautiful woman. At the feast of Venus, Pygmalion asks the goddess of love to give him a woman that resembles his ivory statue. Back home from the feast, Pygmalion kisses and caresses his ivory woman, who is transformed at the hands of Venus into a living girl, Galatea, with whom he will later marry.

The myth, like all myths, presents man with a way to deal with reality. This particular myth was used in the past to define what good (sculpture) art implied: good art was art that mimicked reality

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Milo, *Tytgat*, 9; Jozef Muls, *Edgard Tytgat* (Brussels: Apollo, 1943), 14; Maurice Roelants, *Edgard Tytgat* (Antwerp: De Sikkels, 1948), 10; Vanbeselaere and Teirlinck, *De Vlaamse schilderkunst van 1850 tot 1950*, 230; *Tytgat: een levensschets*, 9; Roland De Wulf, Walther Vanbeselaere, J.P. Van Langenhove, and Jan D'Haese, *Moderne Vlaamse schilderkunst* (Gent: Kredietbank, 1980), n.p.; Hoozee, Henneman, and Boyens, *Vlaams expressionisme in Europese context 1900-1930*, 176; Boyens, *Catalogus Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens*, 75; Van den Bussche, Boenders and Buyck, *Edgard Tytgat*, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Milo, *Tytgat*, 8, 14; Dasnoy and Ollinger-Zinque, *Edgard Tytgat; beschrijvende catalogus van zijn geschilderd oeuvre*, 18-22; Oto Bihalji-Merin, *Moderne Primitieven: Naïeve schilderkunst van de late zeventiende eeuw tot heden* (Sassenheim: Rebo Productions, 1971), 274. *Edgard Tytgat: een levensschets*, 9; Van den Bussche, Boenders and Buyck, *Edgard Tytgat*, 8-9, 31.

as closely as possible, so that the distinction between the two could hardly be made (Pygmalion falls in love with his own sculpture, because it looks so realistic). Art was in other words something that deceived us because it looked real, even though it was “only” an image of reality. Tytgat’s painting, however, seems to completely reverse the myth of Pygmalion (here the sculptor turns several loved ones of flesh and blood into stone by touching them), which gives his painting a reverse meaning: it is not art that deceives man, but man who deceives himself. Tytgat reveals in his art the erotic desires that man prefers to suppress. The desires exist in our subconscious and are expressed through our imagination and our dreams. Tytgat’s art, however, still complies with the definition of good art that is derived from this myth: he depicts the dreams of man as another reality, the reality of imagination.

The Pygmalion myth, moreover, offers an interesting take on male-female relationships; a theme which Tytgat explores in various works, including in *De beeldhouwer vereeuwigd zijn liefdes*. In the myth, Pygmalion creates his ideal woman because he is not satisfied with (the behavior of) the women around him. Subjected to his male gaze, all women are reduced to objects that are compared to his ideal, yet unrealistic woman (which no real woman can compare with). In Tytgat’s painting, women are also reduced to helpless, even pinioned objects, so that they can literally be kneaded according to the image the male sculptor has of them. Both in the myth as well as in Tytgat’s painting, women are given ideal, yet unrealistic proportions and properties by men, a practice which even today is still quite common in the male-dominated advertising industry, for example. In a society that continuously seeks to bring about more gender equality, this painting by Tytgat (and by extension his other erotic works as well) is particularly relevant. In the exploration and interpretation of these works, the viewer can be encouraged to reflect on male-female relationships; How are women and men depicted? From which point of view are they depicted: how do men see women and how do women see themselves and vice versa? What does this say about the position of both sexes? The spectator, through the questions raised by this painting,

can gain more insight into certain gender roles and patterns, and possibly also come to see other images, such as for instance advertisements, with new eyes. To further fuel the debate on male-female relationships and the ways in which they are depicted, we may also look into who wrote what about certain artworks. On the purchase of *De beeldhouwer vereeuwigd zijn liefdes*, Vanbeselaere wrote the following in his notes: “A characteristic work from his last period, in which he, in an inimitable poetic narrative style, playfully expresses his humor and light erotic endearment in a subtle, discreet color palette<sup>3</sup>.” The fact that Vanbeselaere describes this work as “light erotically endearing”, may in this way give rise to a debate about male-female relationships.

From the above statement it appears that Tytgat’s paintings today are not only pleasant to look at, but are still highly topical. He shows the humanity in his subjects: the little everyday things that shape our lives, but also our (sexual) desires that we like to keep to ourselves. Desires which he often conceals in mythological scenes, which in turn can be used to interpret his work. In addition, his erotically tinted works give us an opportunity to discuss male-female relationships, which can, in a society that strives for more gender equality, only be welcomed.

<sup>3</sup> Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen (KMSKA), Dr. Walther Vanbeselaere 25 jaar hoofdconservator (Antwerp: KMSKA, 1973), 46.

# The richness of restriction

Pepa De Maesschalck

*"In my view, we must in the first place be a national museum, a museum where a major selection of the best of our own national painting is on view. In addition, I am convinced that in our past we have always been strong when we were free from foreign influences. In our tradition, we have remained Flemish."*<sup>1</sup>

Gert Verhoeven [b. 1964, Leuven, lives and works in Brussels] is a visual artist. His work plays with staging, classification, interpretation models, the positioning of the artist and the relationship between art and life. In 2003, Verhoeven made a remarkable installation with the collection in the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens. I have a conversation with Verhoeven in the archives of the KMSKA, about the exhibition *Walther Vanbeselaere, Verzamelaar voor de staat 1948 – 1973*, about possible approaches to collections, scenography, locality and the position of the artist.

Pepa De Maesschalck: For your exhibition in the MDD in 2003, you set to work with the collection of the museum, a collection that shows great parallels with that of Walther Vanbeselaere. How did you approach this collection as an artist?

Gert Verhoeven: I saw the scenography as a kind of theater play that featured all the protagonists, the *Dramatis Personae*; including those who usually stand in the wings.

PDM: You mean that you wanted to show both the top pieces and the so-called 'second-rate' works?

1 Joos Florquin, "Walther Vanbeselaere Grote Steenweg 628, 2600 Berchem," in *Ten huize van...* 18. (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1982), 325.

GV: Yes, I created a kind of stage where all the protagonists had their place without distinction between top pieces of internationally successful artists and unsuccessful artists, works with art historical importance and without, ...

PDM: So you placed all the works on the same level? In theater plays, there are also main roles.

GV: In the theater you have the main roles, but when they finally come onto the stage to greet the audience, they are there together.

PDM: In your installation, you have grouped the works according to a banal categorization: women, men, children, groups, still lifes and landscapes. Why did you choose this atypical staging?

GV: Art history is always written as a story. It always starts and ends well, but that is of course nonsense. You can compare it with a fairy tale: the artist was born and died. You have the mom, the dad and the baby. He was born there, he studied there, he met that person, ... You almost always have to choose a particular viewpoint. I have chosen these categories because these things always reoccur.

Marcel Broodthaers said about René Magritte: "C'était un père qui mangeait ses enfants." [It was a father who ate his children] Art historians always try to determine the roots of artists to create interpretation models on the basis of that background. By reducing an artist like Magritte to a Belgian surrealist, you restrict a rich artist so that he becomes "interpretable".

PDM: You mean that art history is always guilty of such categorization?

GV: Yes. I think that's a great story: "It's a dad who eats his children." You can see that in big companies too. The grandfather establishes something, the son makes it big and the third

generation destroys it. I have something against art history; it is very restrictive how it tries to make everything understandable. That is also what I find so annoying about contemporary conceptual art, a kind of academic perversity that was not previously present. I was at a lecture at an exhibition of Jef Geys' *!Vrouwenvragen?* in New York.<sup>2</sup> There was a reference made to a work by Geys in which he had put cucurbita (ornamental pumpkins) in women's lingerie. On the right side of the room, a New York feminist jumped out of the audience and said "Excuse me, are we talking about the same artist who made these Women's Questions?" Then Dan Graham stood up from the audience and said, "Yes, for us, the fathers of conceptual art, Marcel Broodthaers, Lawrence Weiner, ... and Jef Geys, humor is a very important tool." If you interpret the work solely as being women-unfriendly, then you kill it.

Humor is very important because it disempowers things. It is a kind of desacralization of the object itself. Art is always an escape. We have to work with a certain agreed coding to understand each other, but art works differently. Art history always works with the same codes, while the artist always creates new codes. That is why I think Gilles Deleuze is one of the most important philosophers in art, because he is talking about creating convergence lines.

According to the current academic trend, everything has to be just right, and that is very unfortunate. That is why I think Hippolyte Daeye's *Het kind met groene mouwen* is so fantastic for example. It's a poetic work: the sick baby with the green sleeves, not red but green. It has something unfinished. It has to do with potential. Auguste Rodin, for example, has this also: the walking man, without arms. He has no arms, this to indicate the action of moving. The step is also *becoming*. If you finish something completely, it is often closed. It's good to have that layeredness.

<sup>2</sup> *!Vrouwenvragen?* [*Women's questions?*] (1965) is a project by Jef Geys that consists of a series of questionnaires about the position of women. Geys created the list of questions as a starting point for discussions in his aesthetics classes about the social position of women. Geys made these lists in different versions and in different languages.

PDM: Through the banal grouping of the works in the 2003 exhibition, you take the works, in one way or another, out of their familiar environment.

GV: Yes, I could have grouped them according to color, that is also a category, but with a completely different context. In this way you give the works a totally different value, which I find interesting. You disempower the values they were given and open new doors. I think that is also the task of the artist. Also, a work of art is made in a certain time period, but a good work of art lives with the times and changes. Not physically but also as to its context. Louise Lawler, I think, is a great artist. She shows works from private collections that end up in a completely different environment, such as a Jackson Pollock above a chest of drawers with an eighteenth-century ceramic soup terrine (*Pollock and Tureen*, 1984). She shows the skewed context, a kind of eclecticism. The Pollock is another work when it hangs in a museum, above the chest of drawers or in the toilet.

PDM: The same probably applies to the Vanbeselaere collection. The archive images of the KMSKA also show a different kind of staging.

GV: Now there is a completely different approach to the hanging of works. In the past everything was hung together, like in a gathering place. In the KMSKA, works were still hung above one another. In the end, it is about cataloging.

What I also find interesting is that some artists were highly valued in the past and later completely forgotten about.

PDM: Can you give an example?

GV: Take Jean Brusselmans for example. He was a tragic figure. He lived in a small attic room where, after all, he painted a whole oeuvre that is very original.

This has always 'fascinated' me as an artist: why is the one pulled out of oblivion and not the other. What are the

mechanisms behind it, and what is the local background. I have a big problem with the 'international artists' of sorts. 'Home-kitchen-garden artists' often go further because they manage to get closest to themselves. The current spirit of time calls for international thinking. It's all about positioning: you have to dare to return to yourself to find your position. I'm not against 'international' as such, but it's such an abstract concept. In the way the term 'God' is abstract. What is international? James Ensor was an international artist, but also a local artist: he was from Ostend, he almost didn't travel and was often inspired by the sea. That was his world. Sometimes an artist, by making his world even smaller, makes it bigger.

PDM: You could argue that Vanbeselaere played an important role for these Belgian artists by bringing them into the institute, giving them publicity and eventually including them in the canon.

GV: That's possible, I'm not familiar enough with the stories. I do know that there is a big difference between the works in the Vanbeselaere collection, namely really top level, and the collection of the MDD. The couple Dhondt-Dhaenens have, aside from a number of top pieces, also bought a lot of junk, which you cannot say much more about. Like Valerius De Saedeleer, for example.

PDM: Vanbeselaere obviously bought works in the name of the state, he had another responsibility.

GV: It's a different responsibility but it's associated with greater risk. The couple Dhondt-Dhaenens were private collectors, they were free to buy according to their personal taste, which probably happened quite often. It's a typical process for collectors: they start with what they like and gradually update the collection. It's a growth process like you have a growth process in everything. Just like in literature: when you start reading, you don't immediately go for top literature; you start somewhere and begin to notice qualities that did not reveal themselves at first sight.

Sometimes collections are simply good because they

are a collection, which can be better than a collection of five top pieces. I regret that you rarely see anything local in a collection or museum anymore. If I were to go to Mexico, I would probably not get to see works of local artists that I don't know, but mainly works by artists I see everywhere.

The exhibition that I conceived at the MDD really dealt with one's position as an artist in a museum: what do you do there as a +/- 'beginning' artist? The MDD was actually a *non-space*, which I considered a quality. In major institutes like the Tate Modern, they are sometimes so organized and doing everything the right way that they no longer notice what is growing and exists. A bit like in the cinema where Hollywood has dominated film, well this is now happening in art as well. I really believe in the strength of locality. In Mu.ZEE (Ostend) they just opened two sections with Ensor and Léon Spilliaert, and I'm really happy about that. They were both, each in their own way, closely linked to Ostend: Ensor with his mother's shell shop and Spilliaert with his father's hairdresser's salon/perfume store. It's really fantastic when you, as an artist, simply open a closet, look what's in it and do something with it. That limitation is good. The same goes for the creativity of children. They say, "Children are no longer creative." Why: because children today have too many activities, which makes that they are no longer bored. Creation is often associated with the lack of something engaging, so you have to turn it into something fascinating.

PDM: Both the collection of the MDD and the Vanbeselaere collection largely contain works by artists who remained faithful to the so-called local, something that is already apparent in the titles: *Dreggen in de Woluwe*, *Grijze Zee*, *De Leie te Latem*, *Winter te Dilbeek*, ... Do you see that as a strength in the collections?

GV: Yes, I think that's very cool. I sometimes find it more interesting when someone collects locally. Nowadays, this has changed dramatically with collectors, today they tend to go more for an 'international art collection'. That's why everyone now has more or less the same collection. Before, one could still focus on

collecting, let's say, the Laethem School. Now, they don't dare do that anymore. Nobody dares to say, "I collect Belgian art". There are still collectors who focus on conceptual art or painting. An artist has to specialize but a collector apparently doesn't.

PDM: If you were given the opportunity to create a setting with Vanbeselaere's collection, would you handle it in the same way as the MDD collection?

GV: No, absolutely not. Because I find it to be of a completely different level. Moreover, I wouldn't do the same thing twice. For me, the physical aspect is very important. I remain a visual artist, I work with shapes and the presence of something in the space. The size of the works, the size of the space, ... are very important in this respect. It's not just what you show but also how you show it.

I would give an interpretation, something which curators also do. Working with existing things is part of my practice.

PDM: How would you present the collection then?

GV: The first idea that enters my mind is to work with the environment, for example, by creating a kind of installation that feels like a domestic scene. I would start from the settings in KMSKA's archive photos, with floral pieces, carpets, etc. Try to reintroduce museum into a kind of homely context by adding something that generates a completely different context, for example, by placing a large kitchen in the space. I don't want to snub artists, or distort them. I just want to let them be. But by placing something besides it, you create new lines of convergence. Sometimes you're more a person because there's another person standing next to you. That would be a nice project.

I would work with that very rigid classical way of displaying, with the rhythm of the wires of the suspension system. One of my favorite artists is Robert Ryman. He was originally a jazz musician, but he worked as a guard at the MoMa. Stimulated by the great artists in the museum, he wanted to give being an artist a try. He

initially bought only a little paint because it could turn out to be just a whim. He bought orange and white paint, and he's never gone beyond those two colors. Because he had to make countless choices: where are you going to paint on, how large should it be, what kind of white (because there are different shades), what kind of brushes, what kind of layerings, how and where do you sign your work, hang it using large or small hooks, ... So he painted only white paintings. Most painters think about what they are going to paint: a pear or an apple. Ryman, on the other hand, thought about how he was going to paint.

I find it interesting to work with those elements. You don't only look at a painting: you see the space, you see the carpet, the vase, the chair, ... I would work with those elements to somewhat shift the meaning of those paintings. I think that's great, to somewhat unsettle things.

PDM: Which works from the collection of Vanbeselaere would you definitely want to include in the (fictional) staging?

GV: *De schilderijenliefhebber* by Henri De Braekeleer. It's about the spectator and looking. The gaze of the character seems to hesitate between the paintings in the museum and the outside world on the other side of the window. It's a very conceptual work.

PDM: This might bring us to your concept of scenography as theatre?

GV: You can try (laughs) ... Those art historians can sometimes really go at it!

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