

Gustave De Smet (Ghent 1877 - Deurle 1943)

Potato harvest
Circa: Circa 1930
Circa 1930

Oil on paper laid down on board

47 x 62 cm / 61 x 79.5 cm

Signed lower left: Gust. De Smet

Around 1929, Gustave De Smet was searching for new dimensions. He made a transition to a styl which consist of a more gentle form of what he did before. Colour became more important for the artist without neclecting the form. His paintings became more delicate. He was longing for openness, he stopped with the composition of clear planes although he never lost the contemplated composition; the influences of kubism and expressionism are still visible.

In 1930 he has moved to the countryside of Deurle. The life of farmers became his main inspiration. Although Gustave De Smet had a great respect for these farmers, there was no political or social commitment. Such can be found by Van Gogh or Eugène Laermans. His main interest was abovez all the pictural order on the canvas. *Potato harvest* is a typical example. The farm in 'potato harvest' is probably situated in or near Deurle, the new hometown of the artist. In this painting his new interest in colours are clearly visible. He used a broad palette of earth tones; the reds, yellows, greens, blues and browns are dominant, giving the painting a warm blaze. Although Gustave De Smet changed his harsh and angular style into a milder form, this painting didn't lose the strong expressions. The form of the figures ad the labour follow the earth curves; all together comes as a whole. 'Potato harvest' has a very strong radiance which makes it an exquisite painting.

Emanuel Hoffmann (1896-1932) was a Swiss jurist and art collector and the son of Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche, a founder of the pharmaceutical company Hoffmann-La Roche (also known as Roche). He attended the humanist gymnasium in Basel, Switzerland, and studied law at the Universities of Basel and Bern. In 1921 he married Maja Stehlin. Since 1921 he worked at the families company Roche in Basel, between 1925 and 1930 he was in charge of the companies branch in Brussels, Belgium. In Belgium, he and his wife began to collect art from painters like Joan

Miró, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Max Ernst or Gustave De Smet. From 1932 onwards he was a vice-director at the headquarters of Roche in Basel. In 1932 he was elected the president of the Art Association of Basel. The same year, he died from a car accident.

After his death, his surviving wife Maja Hoffmann established the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation which according to her, would continue what was important to her late husband.

Exhibitions

2026, Alkmaar, Stedelijk Museum, Gestel en De Smet. Kleurrijke Vriendschap, cat. 92.

Literature

Haesaerts, P. *L'Ecole de Laethem-St-Martin* (Bruxelles: Editions Formes, 1945), pl. 63, no. 1 (vgl. ill. 'Le travail aux champs').

D'Haese, Jan, *Aspekten van het Vlaams Expressionisme*, tent.cat. (Marke: Kunstkring Joost De Clercq, 1977), p. 20, no. 27 (vgl. De aardappelrooiers, 118x135cm) (ill.).

Pauwels, P.J.H., *Als een fonkelenden spiegel* (Sint-Martens-Latem: Galerie Oscar De Vos, 2019), 235 (ill.).

Van der Geer, K., Gestel en De Smet. Kleurrijke vriendschap, tent.cat. (Alkmaar/Zwolle: Stedelijk Museum/ Waanders Uitgeverij, 2026), 2-3, 75 (ill.), afb. 92.

Artist description:

Born in Ghent, Gust. De Smet became familiar with the painting profession via the house-painting atelier of his father. His brother, the artist Leon De Smet, was born four years later. In the 1890s, Gustave was involved with the decoration of the exterior of the Spitzner museum, a famous fairground attraction of the time. Between 1889 and 1897, the young man was given the opportunity to attend school at the Academy for the Fine Arts of his native city. In contrast to Valerius De Saedeleer and George Minne, he was not a part of the anarchistic and socialist movement. In these early years, he worked to earn a living, a living provided by the bourgeoisie. He married Augusta van Hoorebeke on 19 February 1898; their son Firmin would later die in a train accident during the First World War.

Around 1906, he became friends with Frits Van den Berghe and Constant Permeke in the Ghent working-class district of Patershol. These friendships would last for life. At the beginning of July 1908, he settled in Sint-Martens-Latem with wife and child. De Smet had worked in the region already in 1906, and he was undeniably lured to the village by his Ghent friends. Earlier the same year he had worked with Permeke in the harbour area of Ostend. He primarily spent his time in Sint-Martens-Latem; the young impressionist was a regular resident of the village until 1912.

In August 1914, the De Smet family fled to the Netherlands, in the company of Frits Van den Berghe. The confrontation with modern art in Amsterdam quickly brought about his affiliation with the international avant-garde and specifically with expressionism. Together with Van den Berghe, he lived in Amsterdam and then in Blaricum.

De Smet returned to Belgium only in 1922, where he lived for a time with Permeke. His following residences were in Bachte-Maria-Leerne and Afsnee. Especially Villa Malpertuis, the country house of Paul-Gustave van Hecke in Afsnee, met with his approval. In 1929-1930, he finally had a villa built on Pontstraat in Deurle, a house that he would be forced to sell in the crisis years.

When his most important source of income, the Galerie Le Centaure, went bankrupt in 1932, 10 years of history were squandered in a few days time. The gallery's collection was auctioned off without limit. With Hubert Malfait and Frits Van den Berghe, De Smet was among the worst affected. No less than one hundred and five top works by De Smet were auctioned for a trifle. In fact, the conservative press used the economic crisis and the bankruptcy of the modernistic galleries to announce the end of expressionism, the prevailing movement of the 1920s.

In 1936, he settled in a simple house in Deurle, the present Gust. De Smet Municipal Museum. It was there that he died on 8 October 1943.