

Modest Huys

Flemish landscape
Circa: Circa 1909
Circa 1909

Oil on canvas

65.5 x 77.5 cm

Framed: 97.5 x 85.5

Signed lower right: Modest Huys

Modeste Huys had much in common with his mentor, Emile Claus. From humble origins, inspired by his Flemish surroundings, Huys rose to become a highly successful and respected artist.

The clues to Huys' success can be found in his earliest exchanges with Claus, whom he met and consulted as an enthusiastic teenager. Huys was determined to succeed; Claus would stress the misery of the great masters, Rembrandt, Millet, Daumier, Rousseau, only to instill his own tenacity into the younger man. Huys, from the first, strove to reveal the unique properties of his Flemish surroundings. Claus wished him to capture the mood of their beloved region without relying simply on colour:

'Pas de peinture! Pas de peinture! Dessinez. Dessinez sans cesse. Dessinez à en perdre haleine. Copiez la nature ; ne fuyez pas le détail au début. Copiez sans aucune autre préoccupation que de rendre exactement et complètement ce que vous voyez...'

Huys more than satisfied Claus ; when the great counsellor told the young man that he had achieved in two months the progress of two years, or exclaimed 'Vous êtes un luministe né!' Huys' pleasure must have been supreme.

This ‘Flemish landscape (Koppenberg)’ was painted in c. 1909, after Huys had undergone a period of Academic training and by which time he was well established as a Flemish luminist artist. Yet the spontaneous, intimate quality of his earliest unschooled work that so excited Claus. It is clear why Claus was not concerned about the artist's eye for colour; his palette is ever bright, warm and optimistic. The mottled pink he used for this landscape and atmosphere was a rare colour scheme with Huys, perhaps indebted to the tall, pink roofs of Flemish houses. Nature and man's works combine amicably. The tempered daylight is thrown over the whole composition, expressed through the delicate brush strokes that reveal Huys' loose application of Neo-Impressionist techniques. Following Claus' advice, Huys always painted what he saw, with affection and veracity, using different Impressionistic techniques to further these ends. (Sarah Polden)

Literature

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- De Smet, J. & V. Van Doorne, *Modest Huys*, tent. cat. (Deinze/Gent: MuDeL/SD&Z-Pandora, 1999).

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Artist description:

Modest Huys was confronted with painting already at a young age. As the son of a house painter, he would exercise the profession of painter and decorator until the age of thirty. Shortly before the turn of the century, he was active in the surroundings of Tiegem, and became friends with the writer Stijn Streuvels.

From his debut, Huys was part of the successful luminist movement around Emile Claus. He was very active in the impressionistic association Vie et Lumière, and with the circle, he exhibited his works at La Libre Esthétique in 1906. He had exhibited a year earlier at the Antwerp modernistic association Kunst van Heden. In 1905, he confirmed his fame as luminist at the Liege World Fair. Around the same time Huys became friends with the brothers Gustave and Leon De Smet, with whom he travelled to Normandy.

This Ghent connection became increasingly important. Huys was indeed a welcome guest in the city. During the course of his career, he repeatedly displayed his works at individual and group exhibitions. He made his debut in the circle together with Gustave De Smet. Huys’ Belgian success also had echoes abroad. The occasion for this was his notable presence at the Venice Biennale in 1909. The Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh promptly decided to invite him to the annual exhibitions organised by it; important is the fact that these exhibitions toured throughout the United States. The biennale also opened the doors to the Royal Scottish Academy.

In contrast to many colleagues, he spent the war years in the land of the Leie. And this voluntary exile continued after the war. In fact, Huys closed this period only in 1927 when he received his own atelier-the Zonne-Huys-on the Leie in Zulte. The artist was never part of the Brussels’ avant-garde. He was active as exhibitor in the region between Ghent and Courtrai.

Somewhat lonely, Modest Huys died in his atelier in Zulte at the end of January 1932.