

GALERIE OSCAR DE VOS
S I N T - M A R T E N S - L A T E M



Léon De Smet (Ghent 1881 - Deurle 1966)

Interior of the artist's house

Circa: Ca. 1940-45

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Oil on canvas

81 x 100 cm (31 ⁷/₈ x 39 ³/₈ inches)

Signed lower right: LEON DE SMET

This rich and layered interior image of Léon De Smet is more than a simple representation of his home in Deurle. It is a visual summary of his life, work, circle of friends and preferences as an artist.

The composition opens up as a series of vistas: from the foreground to the rooms behind, in an almost theatrical mise-en-scène of everyday life. The different rooms, connected by open doors, create a sense of intimacy, seclusion and perspective.

Central in the foreground is the red tripod table with a vase of flowers; a floral still life within the painting itself, painted with the same attention to light and color as in his autonomous still lifes. To the right on the sideboard we find a rich collection of porcelain, miniature paintings and shells. These motifs regularly appear in his work with which he elevated domesticity and refinement to the subject.

On the left wall hangs a drawing of a seated nude, a work by Léon De Smet himself. It refers to his enduring interest in the human figure and the academic tradition in which he began his career.

Above the table is an icon of Christ on the cross, a religious motif that evokes memories of the sacred art of his youth and his acquaintance with the tradition of the first group of artists in Sint-Martens-Latem.

In the background we recognize the bedroom with green furniture, painted by the artist himself. Léon De Smet made a habit of coloring his own interior with painted furniture, creatively dissolving the boundaries between art and everyday life.

The colors are warm and gently modular: deep, saturated reds, green and red accents in the furniture, warm wood tones and the fragile white of the walls. All built up in short, vibrant touches that allude to his luminist-impressionist style, but also attest to a certain intimate calm.

The painting above the dresser

A special element in this composition is the still life above the dresser, the work of his brother Gustave De Smet (Still Life with Flowers and Fruit, 1915). In this powerful, expressionist-laden work, Léon himself added some flowers, making this painting a unique fraternal collaboration; a rare fusion of their different styles and sensibilities. This painting also figured prominently in interior views of Léon himself.

The artist's house as a mirror of Léon De Smet

Léon De Smet bought the house in Deurle in the 1920s after his return from England. In a 1961 interview, he speaks candidly about his love for this house: “out of the world and therefore cozy” and how he retreated there in his studio in winter. His home, hidden in the greenery, became not only his refuge, but also a canvas on which he gathered his life, memories and art.

London and the international career

During World War I, Léon stayed in London, where he not only made a name for himself as a portrait painter, but also as a confidant of such important writers as John Galsworthy, George Bernard Shaw and Joseph Conrad. Although he said he did not fundamentally change in style, this period brought him a firmer use of color, more vigorous touch and international recognition.

His work was appreciated there for its sophistication and intimacy. For example, he was praised for his portrait of Shaw, which critics considered the writer's best ever. Yet De Smet eventually returned to his Leie region: “I still don't know why” where he regained his place in the Latem tradition and his deep connection with the landscape.

Artistry as an attitude to life

De Smet was an independent painter, averse to movements or -isms. His work oscillated between luminism, impressionism and a brief flirtation with expressionism. But above all he remained true to himself, driven by an “enduring steady hand” and an indomitable zest for life.

The anecdotes from his life - the practical jokes with his brother Gustaaf and close friend Frits Van den Berghe, his meetings with Jean Cocteau and Gérard Philippe, his portraits of his lovers - breathe the same lightness and joie de vivre as this interior image.

This painting is not just an interior. It is a painterly autobiography in which Léon De Smet weaves together his love of everyday life, his friendships, his family ties and his taste in art. A still life, a portrait, an homage to his brother, an insight into his studio, his home and his life, all captured in one image. The work is thus a powerful testimony to De Smet's independent artistry: "Painting is expressing what you feel, and doing it the way you want to do it - spontaneously, enthusiastically and with passion."

Literature

- Boyens, P. & H. Bosschaert, Léon De Smet (Tielt-SML: Lannoo-Art Book Company, 1994).
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- D'Haese, J., Retrospectieve Leon De Smet 1881-1966 (Deurle: Museum Leon De Smet/ Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens), no. 23 (vgl.).
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Artist description:

Léon De Smet was born in 1881 as the son of a photographer, playwright and ornamental painter. From 1893, Léon was a brilliant student at the local Academy for the Fine Arts. From 1902, he shared an atelier on Rasphuisstraat in Ghent with among others Robert Aereens, Frits Van den Berghe and Albert Servaes. He had debuted a year earlier at the Antwerp exhibition; he would participate in these triennial exhibitions throughout his career, alternately organised at Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent. He was also exceptionally active in the local Cercle Artistique et Littéraire. Already in April of 1904, he-together with Maurice Sys-presented a double exhibition; six years later, the luminist Edmond Verstraeten kept him company. Shortly after his marriage in 1905, he went to France with his friend Modest Huys.

While he was already familiar with the area through his brother, only in 1906 did he first go to Deurle, then to Sint-Martens-Latem, where he lived until November of 1913. In Latem, in addition to his brother Gustave, he renewed acquaintances with the other members of the second group: Maurice Sys, Constant Permeke and Frits Van den Berghe. Especially the relationship with Sys must be emphasised, as Sys-like Leon De Smet-would be a lifelong defender of impressionism. On the other hand, the artist was also on good terms with critic and later gallery owner Paul-Gustave van Hecke, of whom he painted a portrait in charcoal in 1911. Still in 1911, he-together with Gustave De Smet, Permeke and Gustave Van de Woestyne-participated in the of Kunst van Heden exhibition. In 1913, with Sys he also participated in the poster contest for the Ghent World Fair; the artist promptly won first prize.

De Smet fled to Great Britain at the beginning of the First World War. He initially lived in Devonshire. Already in 1915, we find him in London, where he was quickly able to count influential cultural figures among his friends such as the writers Joseph Conrad, John Galsworthy, Bernard Shaw; he was also on good terms with Frank Brangwyn, an artist who was an immense help to scores of Belgian exiles (including Edgar Gevaert). In St John's Wood, De Smet moved into a spacious atelier in the middle of the artists' quarter. In the cafes popular with artists, he also met avant-guards such as Jacob Epstein and Ossip Zadkine. He gradually emerged as a welcome society figure. Like Hippolyte Daeye and Van de Woestyne, De Smet could also count on the support of the De Graaff-Bachiene couple, who concerned themselves in London with the fate of the Belgian artists in exile. A first London triumph followed in January of 1917 with a noteworthy individual exhibition at the Leicester Gallery.

An end to carefree London existence came when he was called to arms at the end of 1917. But the superb portrait painter knew how to bend fate to his will, painting primarily portraits of his superiors. He was stationed in Normandy, as assistant to the medical services. After the Armistice, he again went to London and joined his family in South Kensington; De Smet would keep the house in London as his pied-à-terre until 1925.

The Belgian public was able to become extensively familiar with De Smet's wartime work only in April of 1920. His exhibition at the illustrious Brussels Galerie Georges Giroux was well received. At the end of the year, he went to Paris, where he lived until the spring of 1921.

In the meantime, the Sélection movement had been born in Brussels. Strangely enough, the explicitly modernistic movement-which was diametrically opposed to the impressionistic virtuosity of Leon De Smet-did not stand in the way of cooperation. Of course, the friendly bonds De Smet had with De Ridder on the one hand and van Hecke on the other made this trust possible. He was even a guest of the gallery in 1921.

For the time being, London held the greatest attraction for the artist. The London public-more than that of the European mainland-was persuaded by his work. Prominent newspapers like The Observer, The Globe and The Daily Mirror spoke highly of these exhibitions. His individual exhibition at the Leicester Galleries one year later enjoyed the same level of success.

In spite of this success, however, from 1925 De Smet focused entirely on Belgium. During the course of 1926, he rented an atelier in the same building as the Galerie Le Centaure, which dedicated an exhibition to his work the following year. But these Brussels years brought little comfort. Only when he settled again in Deurle in 1930, did his artistic talent find its way. He lived on Pontstraat in the garden house of Hotel Saint-Christophe.

Beginning in 1932, the artist was especially active in the group Vlaanderen, which tried to support Belgian contemporary art in a time of deep crisis. In the association, of which Gustave De Smet was also a member, he discovered old friends such as Jozef Cantré, Valerius De Saedeleer, Jules De Sutter, Hubert Malfait, Constant Permeke, Frits Van den Berghe and Gustave Van de Woestyne. The initiative, however, was doomed to die a silent death.

His work remained widely represented especially in the Ghent art scene. Together with Albert Claeys, he organised an exhibition at the Cercle Artistique et Littéraire in April 1933. He also remained active in the circle in the coming years. The artist could also be seen at the Ars Gallery in Ghent, and from 1939 especially at the Vyncke-van Eyck Gallery, a branch of the Ars Gallery.

Around this time, De Smet also worked on a series of portraits of leading public figures. The Portrait of Queen Astrid (1935) was behind numerous official commissions.

The war years hardly affected the artist. The Brussels Galeries de l'Art Belge twice organised an individual exhibition. In Ghent, Vynck-van Eyck continued to exhibit its Deurle gold mine. After the war, one prominent individual exhibition also followed the other. The Ghent Museum for the Fine Arts organised an extremely noteworthy personal exhibition in 1953; Paul-Gustave van Hecke opened the exhibition.

De Smet died on 9 September 1966 during the exhibition at the Museum of Deinze and the Leie Region, the final major accolade granted him during his lifetime.