

Emile Claus (Sint-Eloois-Vijve 1849 - Astene 1924)

Return from school / Young girls in the field
Circa: 1892
1892

Oil on canvas

132 x 99 cm

Signed lower left: Emile Claus

‘He is a Realist marching towards light’

Painted in 1892, Girls in the Fields is a dazzling example of Claus’s Luminist style. A group of girls, perhaps returning home from school, their clogs, or sabots in hand, and backlit by the golden light of a summer’s afternoon, process along the border of a field of ripe wheat. The expressions of the two leading girls are tenderly and naturalistically observed, while the effects of light and colour clearly show the influence of the French Impressionists, and particularly the work of Claude Monet whose work Claus had seen during his stay in Paris three years earlier, in 1889.

Breaking defiantly with the academic method of his teacher at the Antwerp Academy Nicaise de Keyser, Claus wrote 'Je ne sais pas, je ne veux pas peindre les Grecs et Romains' (‘I don’t know, but I don’t want to paint the Greeks and the Romans’), and after leaving the Academy began painting pictures of everyday peasant life, inspired by the French naturalist Jules Bastien Lepage. From 1883,

he settled in Astene, on the banks of the Lys, in an old hunting pavilion which he later converted into his home, Zonneschijn. It was here that, at the encouragement of writer, poet, and champion of peasant life Camille Lemonnier, he began tempering his naturalism with a more colourful and luminous palette.

The present work belongs to the series of large-format paintings Claus embarked on in the 1890s of the peasant community of Flanders, depicting harvesters, communicants, fishermen, and haymakers. In many, the figures are backlit and cast long shadows, testament to Claus's interest in the effects of light and shadow. However, the light coming from behind also served to heighten the subtle symbolism implicit in these paintings. The sun catching on the girls' hair adds a quasi-holy aura to their already angelic expressions, making them truly God's creatures. Like Jean-François and Jules Bastien-Lepage before him, Claus celebrated the honest, innocent, hard-working men, women and children of the local rural community, elevating them high above their humble station in life.

Exhibitions

1929, Brussels, Galerie George Giroux, no. 29.

1974, Ghent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, *Retrospective Exhibition Emile Claus 1849-1924*, no. 49.

1982, Antwerp, Guillaume Campo, no. 25.

1991, Deinze, Museum van Deinze en de Leiestreek, *Schilders van het Leieland,* no. 144.

2004, Deurle, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, In de lente van mijn land. Karel van de Woestijne en Latem, 14.03-25.05.

2009, Ghent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, *Emile Claus and Rural Life*, no. 93.

2010-2011, Himeji, City Museum of Art; Tokyo, The Bunkamura Museum of Art; Miyoshi, Okuda Genso Museum, *Light of Flanders. Images of a beautiful Belgian village*, no. 36.

2013, Himeji, City Museum of Art; Tokyo, Station Gallery; Ishikawa, Prefectural Museum of Art; Hekinan, City Tatsukichi Fuji Museum of Contemporary Art, *Emile Claus and Belgian Impressionism*, no. 6.

2021, Mechelen, Heilige Geestkapel, *Het Kunstuur.*

Literature

Catalogue de la Collection de Madame G.C. (Brussels: Galerie Georges Giroux, 1929), no. 29, ill. no. 12 (ill.).

Eeckhout, P., *Retrospectieve tentoonstelling Emile Claus 1849-1924*, cat. (Gent: MSK, 1974), 49, no. 49.

Bombeke, R. e.a., *Schilders van het Leieland*, cat. (Deinze: MuDeL, 1991), no. 144.

Boyens, P., *Sint-Martens-Latem. Kunstenaarsdorp in Vlaanderen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1992), 535 (ill.).

Ruyters, M., Campo 1897-1997 (Antwerpen: Stefan Campo, 1997), 85, no. 11 (ill.).

De Smet, J. e.a., *Emile Claus en het landleven*, cat. (Gent: MSK, 2009), 145, 93 (ill.).

Hoozee, R. e.a., *Lights of Flanders. Images of a beautiful Belgian village*, cat. (Tokyo: The Mainichi

Newspapers, 2010), 71, no. 36 (ill.).

De Smet, J. e.a., *Emile Claus and Belgian Impressionism*, cat. (Kobe: The Kobe Shimbun, 2013), 46, no. 6 (ill.).

Artist description:

With the help of Peter Benoit, Emile Claus was able to study at the Antwerp Academy for the Fine Arts from 1869 to 1874. Claus came from a modest milieu with only limited appreciation for his artistic ambitions. Yet in a short period of time the young man would win a place in Antwerp's art life. In 1874, barely finished with his studies, he submitted work for the triennial exhibition in Ghent; his entry was immediately accepted. While during the initial years he was chiefly active as portrait painter, he gradually built up a name as landscape painter. Especially after his orientalist journey to North Africa and Spain, and a sojourn in Domburg, he spoke the language of nature. In the meantime, he was extremely active in the Antwerp art world, together with his academy friends Frans Hens and Théodore Verstraete. At the exhibitions of the local Cercle Artistique et Littéraire they reacted against the conservative Antwerp art scene. The artist gradually made a name for himself at the major exhibitions in Belgium and abroad, from Brussels to Paris; around 1889, he was well known in France, Great Britain and Germany.

Until his marriage in 1886, Claus kept a pied-à-terre in Antwerp. He demonstrated his creativity, however, especially in and around Astene, in the immediate surroundings of the country house he occupied from 1881. From this country house, which was later renamed Villa Zonneschijn, he had a panoramic view of the Leie and the forests around the castle of Ooidonk. The monumental paintings that he displayed at the Belgian and Paris exhibitions were created in Villa Zonneschijn. He enjoyed great success with these paintings, yet as artist he did not yet feel mature. He lived in Paris in the winters from 1889 to 1891, where he confronted modern painting head on. Plus, the leading novelist and art critic Camille Lemonnier introduced him to the Paris art milieu, and he made contact with artists residing in Paris such as Henri Duhem, Henri Le Sidaner, Frits Thaulow, Anders Zorn, et al. To his fellow local and friend Albijn Van den Abeele, he wrote from Paris: "Paris is certainly seductive and provides the painter with magnificent scenes: its teeming swarms of people on the streets and boulevards in the rain or in the sunshine, the Seine with its wide flow continuously transected by whistling steamboats, whose black, rusty vapour envelops the numerous bridges in a fog, the countless gigantic buildings. In short, all the churning life in this great world city is a treasure for him who makes of all of this his beloved creations."

From the moment that Claus opted for modernistic impressionism, he was taken note of by progressive circles in Belgium. From 1894, he was a fully-fledged member of the artists' association La Libre Esthétique, which continued the tradition of Les XX in the Brussels Musée Moderne. He was immediately no longer associated with the academicism of Antwerp, to which he was still considered a part in 1889.

Claus' unexpected choice for impressionism disturbed his Belgian clientele greatly. He nevertheless persevered, and his impressionism quite quickly met with success; in 1892, the Ghent Museum for the Fine Arts purchased the painting De Ijsvogels, one of the earliest mature impressionistic works of Claus. The Belgian public would reluctantly follow. Around 1900, Claus was the undisputed leader of Belgian impressionism, crowned with a gold medal at the Paris Exposition Universelle. In Paris, he also had access to the progressive milieus; from 1895, the prominent Galerie Georges Petit was Claus' representative in Paris. Claus had earlier taken up his place in the progressive Champs de Mars circle, the Paris exhibitions that had set themselves up against the official Paris exhibition.

In 1904, Claus was also co-founder of the artists' association Vie et Lumière that united the Belgian impressionists. Claus' domestic and foreign successes followed one another, and on the eve of the First World War, he was a celebrated artist in Europe.

At the beginning of the war, he fled to Great Britain. After a short stay in Wales, he returned to London where he would stay until the liberation. Claus also won approval in London, among others at the notable exhibition in the Goupil Gallery in 1917.