

Léon De Smet (Ghent 1881 - Deurle 1966)

Summer morning in Sint-Martens-Latem
Circa: 1912
1912

Oil on canvas

63 x 67 cm / 79 x 83 cm

Signed and dated lower right: LDS / 1912

Leon De Smet (1881-1966) is among the most lyrical and technically sophisticated representatives of Flemish post-impressionism. In this superb 1912 painting, entitled Summer Morning, he shows himself at the height of his powers, just before the First World War would abruptly interrupt his Latem period. The work exemplifies the brief but crucial phase from around 1907 to 1914 in which De Smet created his most balanced and luminous paintings.

The canvas is bathed in an atmosphere of soft lightness: a summer meadow, shaded by a rising sun, is built up from vibrant touches in a delicate colour palette. The brightness of yellow, lilac, blue and pink combine to form a quasi-foggy veil that lends the motif a dreamy glow. In the shadow of a tree, a few figures are visible, small and subservient to nature, a theme that closely echoes the ideas of symbolism. Yet above all, the painting is a celebration of light, the “chiaroscuro” of dawn, placing De Smet in the tradition of artists such as Emile Claus and the Luminists.

But where Claus recorded reality in an impressionistic way, De Smet goes further in the direction of stylisation and abstraction. His treatment of paint in Summer Morning recalls divisionism, echoing the international search for light and colour around 1910. In France, Paul Signac and Henri Le Sidaner were experimenting with similar atmospheric techniques; in Austria, Gustav Klimt was engaged in his golden phase in which landscapes were supported by patterns and symbolism. The early works of Ferdinand

Hodler or the soft reflections of Vilhelm Hammershøi can also be mentioned in this context.

Summer morning is thus not only a highlight of Leon De Smet's oeuvre, but also a witness to his positioning within the broader European avant-garde of his time. He managed to link the pictorial tradition of his native region - the Leie region and Latem - with a cosmopolitan artistic discourse. This makes the painting one of the most balanced syntheses of Flemish light and international pictorial sophistication. A rare and harmonious masterpiece.

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 Aerens, 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-guarders 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 andThe 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.