





Views on the Collection
Flemish Community

RE FLEC TIONS

Koenraad Jonckheere & Lien Vandenberghe

HANNIBAL

PREFACE

It is with particular pride that I introduce this book on the exceptionally rich and diverse Collection Flemish Community. We can all share in that pride. After all, this collection belongs to all of us. And that is precisely why its public accessibility is so important. That is what this work achieves in such a wonderful and original way. It provides an insight into Flanders' rich artistic heritage. In doing so, it is not afraid to look over the border.

The significance and richness of the Collection Flemish Community symbolise the importance that the Flemish government attaches to art and heritage and the resources we are willing to make available for it. That is why in recent years we have invested heavily in increasing the share of contemporary art. The resources of the Masterpieces Fund have also increased exponentially, allowing us to keep precious artworks in Flanders. This has already led to some remarkable and prominent acquisitions that have enriched the collections of our museums. The funding for the Masterpieces Fund will be increased to 1.5 million euros from 2025 (triple the annual funding of 500,000 euros for 2023 and previous years). The rule according to how taxpayers can pay less inheritance tax by donating cultural goods has also been updated and made more accessible. The aim of this rule is the same: to keep valuable works of art and collections in Flanders, thus enriching museum holdings.

Strengthening our Flemish museum and heritage sector fits into a broader framework: from 2024 onwards, the entire sector, and thus also our museums, will receive substantially more resources, an increase the sector has rightly been asking for. This will enable them to focus even more strongly on their core functions: conservation and management, research and (digital) accessibility. Since September 2022, we also have a symbol of this fundamental investment in art and culture made by the Flemish government, a flagship even: the renovated Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), home to a great many masterpieces. Our finest museum has been widely acclaimed, including far beyond our borders. There will soon be a nice addition to this physical temple of culture in Antwerp: the new virtual museum, which will allow you to discover the rich Flemish heritage from your armchair. The tremendous success of both the book *De canon van Vlaanderen* ('The Canon of Flanders') and the TV series *Het verhaal van Vlaanderen* ('The Story of Flanders') proves that a very wide audience is particularly interested in the history and heritage of our region.

That journey of discovery can begin with this book, which in a special way provides a surprising insight into the diverse and uncommonly large Collection Flemish Community. I am very grateful to the authors, Koenraad Jonckheere and Lien Vandenberghe, and to the publisher Hannibal for this work, as well as to all the contributors.

Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and
Flemish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Culture, Digitalisation and Facility Management

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PAINTING THE ACT OF PAINTING



Hugo Duchateau, *Schilderij met schilderesezel* [Painting with Easel], s.d., mixed media, painting: 138 × 100 cm, easel: 198 × 60 × 60 cm

In his early work, Hugo Duchateau (b. 1938) liked to explore the materiality of painting. Wet brushes, dripping paint and pencils are part of that spectrum, but so are canvases and easels. Here is a panel on an easel. Attached to it is a sheet containing the image of, yes, a panel on an easel, with, attached to it, indeed, a panel... This visual spectacle is a *mise en abyme*, in which an image is itself repeated over and over again, endlessly. In mathematical terms, such *mises en abyme* are called 'fractals'. Dutch artist M.C. Escher (1898–1972) made them immensely popular in the 1950s.

In theory, this repetition could go on indefinitely. Duchateau uses the effect to literally highlight the materiality of painting, in particular the tools used by the painter. Indeed, when a painting hangs in a museum, it is often disconnected from the long process of diligent work that preceded it. In this case, the ongoingness of the repetition makes that impossible. It shows how artists are always revisiting and reworking, how an image haunts the mind, endlessly.

Léon Spilliaert (1881–1946) painted almost all his works at night. The colours are dull, faded, as in old photographs. They lack light. The self-taught artist from Ostend reduces his self-portrait to an unending repetition of strokes. He is mirrored again and again. Like Duchateau, Spilliaert reminds viewers of the imperative context of every artistic creation: endless repetition leads to craft.

Léon Spilliaert, *Zelfportret* [Self-Portrait], 20th century, watercolour on paper, 75 × 59 cm



DARK OCHRES

The work of Constant Permeke (1886–1952) once graced the 1,000 Belgian franc note. At the time, the artist's figures were seen as a symbol of the national character of people 'drawn' from the Flemish soil. Permeke was part of a group of artists who had settled in and near Sint-Martens-Latem, then a rural village on the Leie river, in the early twentieth century. They turned to the everyday to express their malaise with the world. Permeke recorded country life in a way that seemed childishly naive, as something harsh and ruthless. The abundant use of bitumen – a black paint extracted from tar – and dark ochres does not make his work any more cheerful.

Permeke's popularity at the start of the twentieth century fitted the spirit of the times. That was also when the *Boerenbruegel*, the *peasants' Bruegel*, was rediscovered. This term, which refers to Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525/1530–1569) and was first used by the Meulebeek author Karel van Mander (1548–1606), has since become commonplace. It refers to a seemingly long tradition of Flemish artists who captured rural life in Flanders and Brabant with loving naivety. Nothing could be further from the truth. Both Permeke and the Bruegel family were intellectuals who used the seemingly mundane to address an uncomfortable socio-economic reality. Apparent naivety as a visual weapon.

Constant Permeke, *De Sjees [The Chaise]*, 1926,
oil on canvas, 182 x 145 cm





Jan Brueghel
the Elder, *Bezoek
aan de hoeve [The
Visit to the Farm]*,
17th century,
oil on panel, 41.5 × 58 cm

VALUE

Imagine a flat in a wonderful building in New York between Fifth and Park Avenue, near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A big dog skips around, happily wagging its tail. Occasionally the dog walks past a coffee table, his tail gently stroking the frame of a painting, a version of *Madonna bij de fontein* [*Madonna at the Fountain*] by Jan van Eyck (c. 1390–1441). And now imagine another version of the same painting, owned by the Flemish Community. It hangs in the KMSKA, behind glass. The highest security measures are in place. It can only be handled with velvet gloves.

That two versions of one composition by the same master exist is not unique, even within the limited scope of Van Eyck's oeuvre. What is exceptional, however, is that the two versions now exist in such different contexts and are treated so differently. In Western culture, the emphasis is often on originality and uniqueness. It is an important factor in valuation – including artistic value – and incites an attitude of great caution. What is irreplaceable must be safeguarded. The dog-owning New York collector mentioned above thought otherwise. He cherished the gem, not only as an aesthetic painting on the wall, but also as an object he could handle affectionately at dusk. People did the same in Van Eyck's time too. The experience of art becomes more intense through touch. Financial, historical or artistic value also destroys a lot, such as the pleasure of holding and cherishing something.

Jan van Eyck, *Madonna bij de fontein* [*Madonna at the Fountain*], 1439, oil on panel, 25 × 18.1 cm



MIRROR IMAGE

Authenticity, uniqueness, authorship. These nouns are part of the lexicon commonly used in art history. More to the point, they have a tremendous impact. What is put forward as unique and original generally acquires more material and immaterial value. Things are not always so easy, however. The mirror image that art creates of the world is itself often mirrored in copies, reproductions, prints, posters or books. This is what Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933) is playing on in this work. He uses the age-old metaphor of art as a mirror to show that a mirror is incapable of reflecting itself. Beautifully framed, but sawn into two reflective halves, the mirror almost literally shows off its limitations.

When such a mirror image is contrasted with painting, what the latter is capable of becomes clear, at least if it does not want to produce a mirror image. *Frituur Oud-Heverlee* [*Chip Shop in Oud-Heverlee*] by Gillis Houben (1933–2018) has been stripped of details and distracting light reflections. As a result, the structures stand out. Long before chip-shop culture was recognised as national heritage, Houben captured the phenomenon's formal impact in dozens of canvases. Art mirrors a lot of things, but not reality.

Gillis Houben, *Frituur Oud-Heverlee* [*Chip Shop in Oud-Heverlee*], 1999, oil on canvas, 82.4 × 92.4 cm



GILLIS HOUBEN 1999



Luc Deleu, *Red and Blue Barricade*, 2017,
paint on wood, variable dimensions

PERSONIFICATION



Jean Fouquet, *Madonna omringd door serafijnen en cherubijnen* [*Madonna Surrounded by Seraphim and Cherubim*], c. 1450, oil on panel, 112.7 × 104 cm

Agnès Sorel (1422–1450) was a French lady-in-waiting whose life story took on a life of its own. This is not uncommon. As the mistress of the French king Charles VII, she overshadowed the queen. She gave the king four daughters, but was poisoned with mercury at a young age by his heir, the future Louis XI. Her legendary beauty died with her.

Sorel became a muse for artists. French painter and miniaturist Jean Fouquet (1415/1420–c. 1480) immortalised her in his *Madonna omringd door serafijnen en cherubijnen* [*Madonna Surrounded by Seraphim and Cherubim*], the right panel of what was originally a diptych. The left panel (now in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) depicts the king's treasurer, Étienne Chevalier (1410–1474), and Chevalier's patron saint, St Stephen. Both worship the Madonna, aka Agnès Sorel. The beauty became an immortal icon.

After Fouquet, Voltaire (1694–1778) and Tchaikovsky (1840–1893), among others, dedicated literature and music to Agnès Sorel. Jan Vercruyse (1948–2018) also found inspiration in her life story. The reproduction of a postcard with an anonymous portrait of the lady-in-waiting comes with a fill-in-the-blank exercise for a caption.



AGNES SOREL II FAVORITE DE CHARLES VIII
 AGNES SOREL III FAVORITE DE CHARLES IX
 AGNES SOREL IV FAVORITE DE CHARLES X
 AGNES SOREL V FAVORITE DE CHARLES XI
 AGNES SOREL VI FAVORITE DE CHARLES XII
 AGNES SOREL VII FAVORITE DE CHARLES XIII
 AGNES SOREL VIII FAVORITE DE _____
 _____ FAVORITE DE LOUIS XIX
 AGNES SOREL XII _____ CHARLES XVIII
 AGNES SOREL XXIII FAVORITE DE CHARLES XXIII

Jan Vercruyse, *Agnès Sorel ou Les Avant-Gardes* [*Agnès Sorel or the Avant-Gardes*], 1988–90, offset print on paper, 89 × 58 cm

CONTEXT

The (political) meaning of an artwork is not necessarily hidden in the image itself. Between 1992 and 2002, Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra (b. 1959) travelled the beaches of Europe. She captured bathers on film: standing, in beachwear, with the sea in the background. Due to their simplicity, her portraits do not read like complicated psychoanalyses. They subtly reveal the differences between cultures and sections of society.

Odessa, Oekraïne, 11 augustus 1993 [Odessa, Ukraine, 11 August 1993] is one of the best-known photographs in the series. The historic port city on the Black Sea was then a popular holiday resort for Ukrainians and Russians. Since bombs started falling on Odessa (also Odesa) in 2022, this image has taken on a whole new dimension. The gaze of the young boy with his red swimming trunks pulled up high feels different. Swimming is still possible, but war lurks around the corner. Meaning also lies outside the image.

Rineke Dijkstra, *Odessa, Oekraïne, 11 augustus 1993*
[Odessa, Ukraine, 11 August 1993], 1993,
chromogenic print on photo paper, 94 × 75.5 cm



MERCILESS OBSERVATION

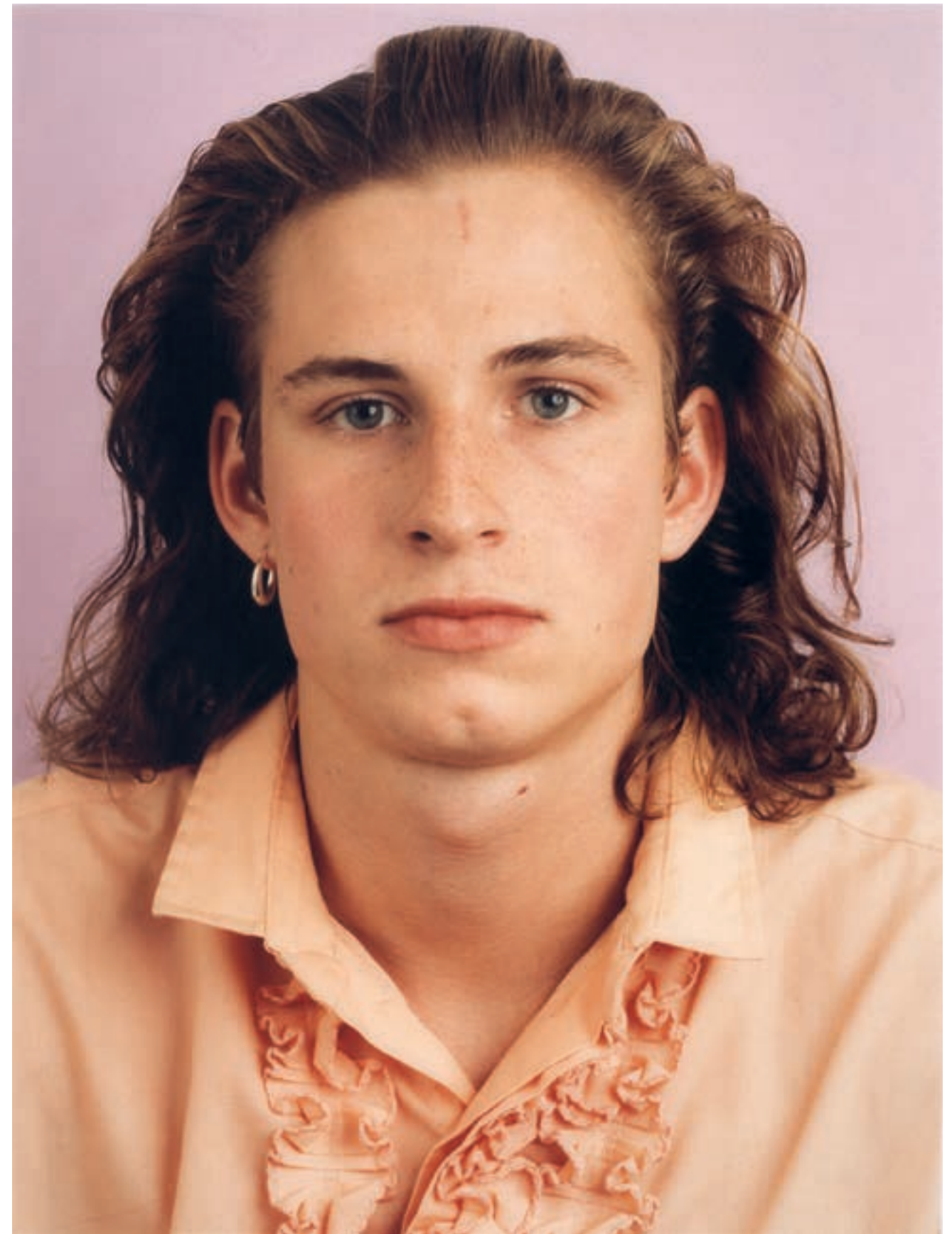
In early modern Europe, the artist's highest goal was to render reality as accurately as possible. *Portret van een vrouw* [Portrait of a Woman] by Jan van Scorel (1495–1562) shows no ostentatious traces of painterly ingenuity, while it is precisely that technical mastery that makes this portrait so admirable. The Utrecht painter manages to depict the lady as a mathematical fact: no emotion, no frivolity, just pure observation. His likeness is characteristic of the portraiture of the middle

and second half of the sixteenth century. At that time, psychological or anecdotal details were ruled out; a portrait was an objective, almost abstract observation. This is what made such portraits timeless.

With his portrait photography, Thomas Ruff (b. 1958) seeks to reinvent that unerring, neutral observation. The precision with which he captures faces is almost unparalleled. While photographers often try to draw out the sitter's inner self or add all kinds of touches, Ruff reduces his portraits to flawless, neutral faces. As such, his work actually shows much more. It is a pure, hard stare. This makes his work timeless too.



Jan van Scorel, *Portret van een vrouw* [Portrait of a Woman], 16th century, oil on canvas, 57.3 × 45.3 cm



Thomas Ruff, *Porträt (F. Müller)* [Portrait (F. Müller)], 1985, C-print on paper, 210 × 167 cm



Michaelina Wautier, *Twee meisjes als de heiligen Agnes en Dorothea* [Two Girls as St Agnes and St Dorothy], 17th century, oil on canvas, 110 × 142.3 cm

NUDE OR NAKED?

In 1975, British feminist Laura Mulvey coined the concept of 'the male gaze', a phrase now commonly used to refer to the normative framing applied by men to women in film, photography and the visual arts. The nudes of Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920) perfectly meet the criteria of the male gaze. His *Zittend naakt* [*Seated Nude*] from 1917 shows a woman passively surrendering to the perspective of the artist and his admirers. Her breasts have been bared. She tilts her head slightly, seductively. Her warm, orange-pink body stands out brightly against the dark background.

Paul Delvaux (1897–1994) captures women squarely, as isolated remnants of a classical ideal. The temple-like buildings against the dark background suggest the bygone glory of ancient architecture. Yet Delvaux's work is far from traditional. The perspective has been broken and the pale women's bodies, including their pubic hair, are on full display. Delvaux's women do not appear to be ashamed of their bodies, however, but rather indifferent.

Amedeo Modigliani, *Zittend naakt* [*Seated Nude*], c. 1917,
oil on canvas, 128 × 85 cm

