

Léon Spilliaert  
from the Depths of the Soul



# Spilliaert

from the Depths of the Soul

Anne Adriaens-Pannier

Ludion

In gratitude and with heartfelt appreciation, this book is dedicated to the memory of Madeleine Spilliaert, the artist's daughter; to Irmingarde van Rossum, Frederik van Rossum and Johan van Rossum, the artist's grandchildren and their children.

It is also dedicated, with love, to my parents and to Patrick, Laurence, Barnabé, Charline, Teo, Ugo and Lily.

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# Introduction

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This second edition of the English translation of Anne Adriaens-Pannier's major study on the work of Léon Spilliaert reflects the artist's growing international reputation thanks in large part to the determined and continued advocacy for the significance of his work by the author. He is already justly celebrated in Belgium with major museums and institutions boasting key holdings of his work in Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent and Ostend alongside many significant private collections, while his international reputation continues to grow steadily. Part of the reason for this is undoubtedly down to a lack of exposure. Monographic exhibitions were rare outside Belgium and publications in English were rarer still. Unsurprisingly, most studies are in French and Flemish and the very few originally published in English or that were made available with English translations have become collectors' items in their own right. The reprint of *Léon Spilliaert: Life and Work. From the Depths of the Soul* is, therefore, extremely welcome and demonstrates the increased interest in the artist; Spilliaert's profile is on the ascendancy. There can now be little doubt that this volume will remain *the* reference book in English on the artist.

That the work of Léon Spilliaert is better known and removed from the narrow constraints of the Belgian Symbolists – within whose ranks his placement is, in any case, questionable – is largely due to the pioneering work of two people, both of whom worked as curators at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels. Together, they have done much to change the way in which his work is evaluated both in Belgium and beyond. By championing Spilliaert in this way they have raised him to the height that his work deserves as well as providing him with far greater exposure than he had previously enjoyed. Francine-Claire Legrand started the ball rolling. Anne Adriaens-Pannier picked up that ball and has run with it ever since, completing her doctoral thesis on Spilliaert in 2003. Since then, it is fair to say that the author has made the world of Spilliaert her own, not least thanks to the more than eighty conversations she had with Madeleine, the only child of Léon and his wife Rachel (née Vergison), and the ongoing relationship she maintains with the artist's grandchildren and great-grandchildren as well as numerous private collectors. Their constant support over many years has been fundamental to raising the profile, and increasing our understanding, of the artist. This volume is, therefore, both a token of respect as well as a gesture of gratitude to them. In addition to preparing the catalogue raisonné of some 5,000 works, Adriaens-Pannier has been at the heart of every exhibition or publication on Spilliaert for the last twenty years. Her dedication and application have made her the world's foremost expert and consequently she is regularly consulted on his work and asked to authenticate it. There can be no doubt that she has done more than any single person to promote Spilliaert's legacy.

Although Spilliaert had exhibitions outside Belgium it is really only since the 1980s that his star has risen significantly, finally gaining traction abroad. In the intervening decades important works have been acquired not only by Belgian museums (including those secured for the nation by the Flemish Community and the King Baudouin Foundation which, in 2015, purchased *Absinthe Drinker*, 1907, currently on loan to the Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Ghent, and in 2022, acquired a unique, hand-illustrated copy of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Théâtre*, 1903, in three volumes (currently on loan to the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, in Brussels), but, significantly, also by international institutions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired *Self-Portrait*, (1907), in 1980 as a consequence of the first and thus far only monographic exhibition in North America, *Leon Spilliaert: Symbol and Expression in 20th Century Belgian Art* held at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC and then in New York that year. The Detroit Institute of Arts was gifted an important *Self-Portrait*, (1903), in 1989. The Menil Drawing Institute, Houston accessioned *Lunaria Annua*, 1912, in 2024. More recently, in 2025, the Art Institute of Chicago acquired *Self-Portrait on a Blue Background*, 1907.

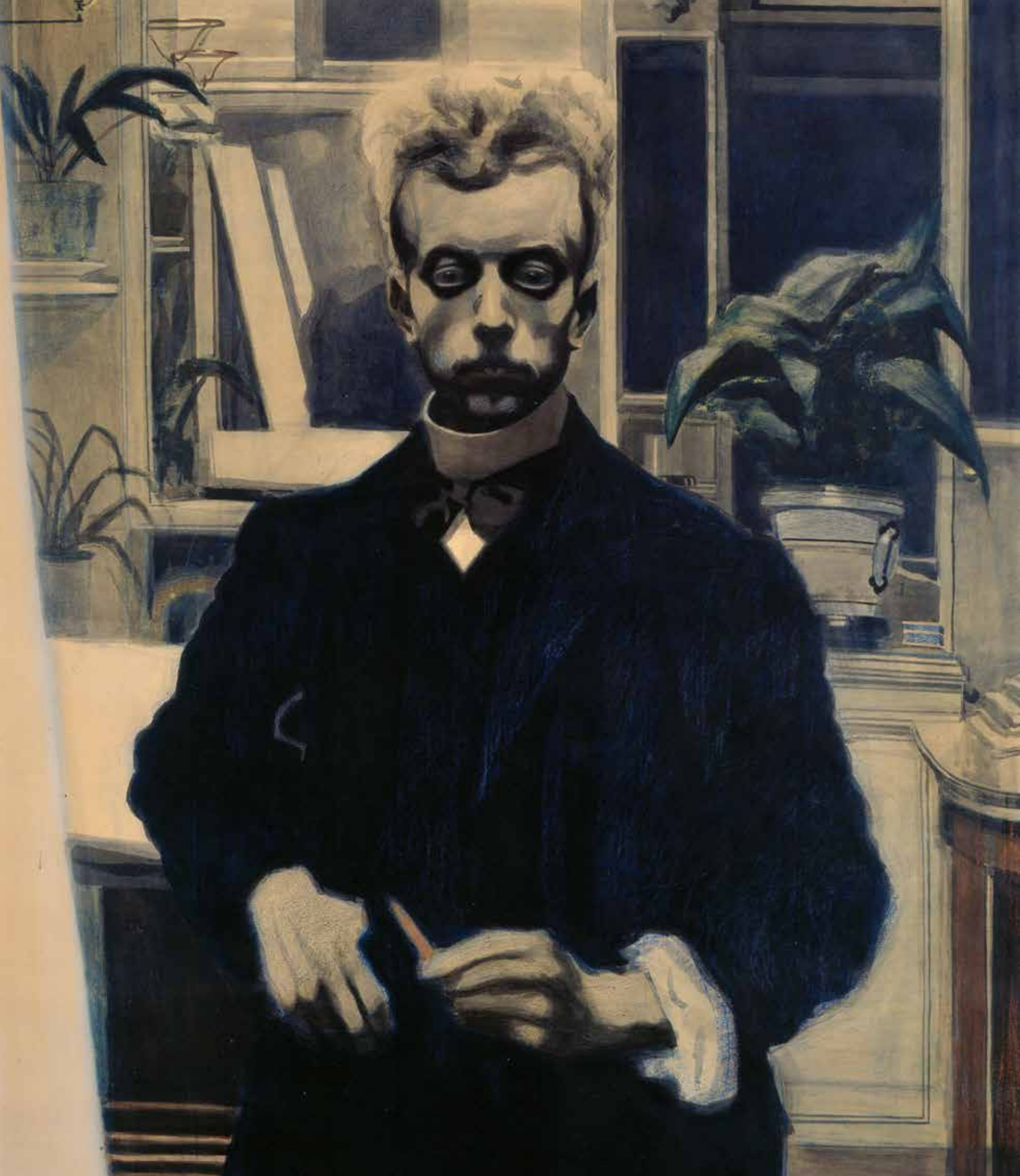
In terms of exhibitions, *Léon Spilliaert* at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in 1981 were important milestones. In 2003, the Himeji City Museum of Art, Japan, which has two important works by Spilliaert, hosted *Léon Spilliaert*, while in 2007, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, which has also been acquiring works by the artist for their permanent collection, held the focused exhibition *Léon Spilliaert: Self-Portraits*. Rather surprisingly, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London has one of only fifteen *Sites brabançons*, a set of ten hand-coloured lithographs, acquired in the year of their production, 1919.

An increase in interest in the artist resulted in *Léon Spilliaert* at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 2020, curated by the author and me. This was followed by *Léon Spilliaert: lumière et solitude*, at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2020–21, curated by the author and Leïla Jarbouai. Both were unfortunately adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic but their respective catalogues serve as important and lasting contributions to the literature available on the artist. Works by Spilliaert featured in the exhibition *Painting Flanders: Flemish Art 1880–1914* at Gainsborough House, Sudbury, UK, highlights from the Phoebus Foundation, Antwerp in 2022–23. *Léon Spilliaert: avec la Mer du Nord...*, curated by the author was held at the Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2023. Spilliaert will also feature in a group exhibition *Close to Léon Spilliaert. A Dialogue with Contemporary Art* at Native, Brussels, Belgium, and in a monographic thematic exhibition: *Through Half-Open Doors* at the Patrick Derom Gallery in Brussels in 2026, again curated by the author.

Having featured in two group exhibitions at the Charles S. and Isabella V. McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, Massachusetts, both curated by Jeffery Howe, namely *A New Key: Modern Belgian Art from the Simon Collection*, 2007, and *Nature's Mirror: Reality and Symbolism in Belgian Landscape*, 2017, a further show is also being developed for 2026: *Shadows and Light. Symbolist Art in Belgium. Works from the Hearn Family Trust*. Spilliaert will feature in a future monographic exhibition at the Menil Drawing Institute, Houston, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2027 and 2028 respectively. Further into the future, a touring monographic show will be presented in Japan at the Tokyo Station Gallery and Kyoto City KYOCERA Museum of Art in 2029 curated by the author and me.

In recent years, there has been a concerted effort in Belgium to increase the number of the artist's works on view. In late 2013, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium opened the Musée Fin-de-Siècle which showcased the work of James Ensor, Fernand Khnopff and Spilliaert among others so that work of this period could be seen in a much broader historical and artistic context. More recently in Spilliaert's birthplace, Ostend, Mu.ZEE remodelled some of their galleries to create a new space dedicated to the art of the two most famous artists from the city, Ensor and Spilliaert. This opened in 2016, the same year that a private initiative saw the creation of 'Het Spilliaert Huis', also in Ostend. Although his original family home was destroyed during the Second World War this space, set in a wing of the Thermae Hotel between 2016 and 2021, had an important programme of eight thematic exhibitions sponsored by Mark Vanmoerkerke; Adriaens-Pannier was the artistic director. In New York, an important collector of Dutch and Flemish art, the real estate investor Charles Hack, who continues to expand his collection (the Hearn Family Trust), has also added welcome impetus to the promotion of Spilliaert by regularly lending important works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the McMullen Museum, Boston.

Taken together it is evident that there has been a sustained increase in interest in the life and work of Spilliaert, an artist who has for many years defied categorisation, but whose singular body of work is being (re)discovered and (re)interpreted by new audiences. Like many artists of the period, such as Edvard Munch, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Helene Schjerfbeck, Odilon Redon and Félix Vallotton, he explored the unconscious and captured existential angst at a crucial moment in the understanding of the self. As the study of modern art continues to broaden its international scope and incorporate artists that were unjustly overlooked or simply forgotten, the reprint of this book in English could not be more welcome or timely.



# Léon Spilliaert's oeuvre

See page 318 for the endnotes

In Léon Spilliaert's first dated watercolour<sup>1</sup> *Father Spilliaert's Laboratory*, 1899, an open door invites the viewer's gaze to glide into an existing world. It is an attic room, whose meaning for the unsuspecting viewer is unremarkable. A more detailed study reveals a virtual realm within the actual representation. The image of a simple room, a small laboratory in which creative work is underway, implies a second dimension that foretells an enigmatic development and perhaps a mysterious end. Upon closer inspection, the ambiguous presence of several objects makes them stand out. A dark devil's mask grins from behind the opened door. Spilliaert drew a monumental mortar in the foreground and a compact, rickety set of weighing scales in the background. This small, early work conveys an ominous mood while betraying the longing to bring order to reality and give free rein to the imagination.

## Creating order out of chaos

As a young artist, Spilliaert turned his back on academic education<sup>2</sup> and the heroic scenes in which mythological figures and heroes from legends and sagas played the leading role. Aside from the classical art theories, he experienced a more natural mental evolution. In short, he underwent the spiritual development experienced by every human being. According to the French philosopher Auguste Comte, the pursuit of order in society and the sciences progressed in three stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the scientific or positive stage.<sup>3</sup> Comte further postulated that these stages not only applied to the history of humankind, but also to the development of every individual. The child finds a theological explanation for everything, the adolescent looks for a metaphysical solution, and the adult takes refuge in science.<sup>4</sup> The works that Spilliaert created between 1899 and 1909 largely belong to the first two stages.

In his narrative compositions, Spilliaert chose subjects that immediately moved and intrigued him. The ordering of primal chaos, the explanation for natural phenomena, the relationship between the Creator and mankind, and the pain and sorrow that human beings are obliged to endure. Furthermore, he continued to dwell upon the relationships between humans, those between men and women, and on feelings such as love, loneliness, longing and shame. As a product of Western thinking and culture, he generally built upon the myths and Bible stories with which he was familiar, rather than on unfamiliar sources. The primal myths were usually religious in character. They related to the cosmos, the gods or the relationship between God and man. However, this religious aspect is less clear in Spilliaert's works, in which the deity himself is not addressed. Spilliaert's preferred option was to use woman as an intermediary figure between God and humans: the Holy Virgin or her counterpart Eve.

Spilliaert generally opted to draw a solitary figure that embodied the core of his idea. People are usually depicted from the front and emerge as dark shadows against an illuminated backdrop. In juxtaposition to this luminous environment, where an

<sup>1</sup> Self-Portrait with Red Pencil  
1908, Indian ink wash, brush, gouache,  
coloured pencil on paper, 645 × 682 mm (day),  
Ostend, Mu.ZEE, inv. 1953/5



2 Father Spilliaert's Laboratory  
1899, pencil, Indian ink wash, brush, pen, watercolour,  
varnish on paper, 299 × 277 mm (day)

otherworldly spirituality seems to shimmer in the air, the silhouettes of earthly beings appear like compact bundles of energy. Indeed, some figures are almost imperceptibly surrounded by a vibrating circle of light. To emphasise the expressiveness of the image, he used an extremely simple technique. Above a summary underdrawing in pencil, pure contour lines give form to a thought. The shapes are filled in with veils of Indian ink wash, in which the brushstrokes remain visible, creating powerful outlines. Discrete interventions with colour sometimes create a stronger evocation of mood. Greater still is the impact created by the contrast between darker and brighter areas. In this first series of works, Spilliaert modulated the quality and intensity of the light, and the highlights, by either delicately obscuring or exposing areas of the paper. This is mostly about the radiation of a spiritual light, rather than about the illumination of something real.

In the early compositions with figures, the quality and colour of the paper do not play a role.<sup>5</sup> Spilliaert generally uses white or light-cream paper, although due to the passage of time, it is not always possible to determine the exact nuance of the original colour. As a rule, the paper is of a very modest size, rarely being larger than 350 × 250 mm. It is the very smallness of these highly meditative works, as well as the fact that the artist consciously treated them as old-fashioned votive images, that makes them so haunting.

### The creation of man

In the beginning, there was chaos. The Greek creation myth gives a highly pragmatic arrangement to this chaos. Out of Mother Earth sprang Father Heaven, or Uranus. He allowed copious amounts of sun and rain to fall on the hidden hollows of the earth, and out of these grew grass, trees and animals.<sup>6</sup> The young Spilliaert did not look at the overwhelming natural world that surrounded him; its everyday nature failed to move him. In his mind, he designed an alternative visual world in which trees grow alongside one another peacefully and with restraint. He composes them as well-considered scenic elements which, as it were, form decorative hedges and conceal a horizon where eternal light shines. Or as a harmonious entity of elegant tree species that escape from the threat of capricious natural phenomena such as a threatening stormy sky. Majestic columns of trees dominate his compositions. In his fantasy world, polder landscapes and pyramids merge into an imposing worldview that controls the universe.

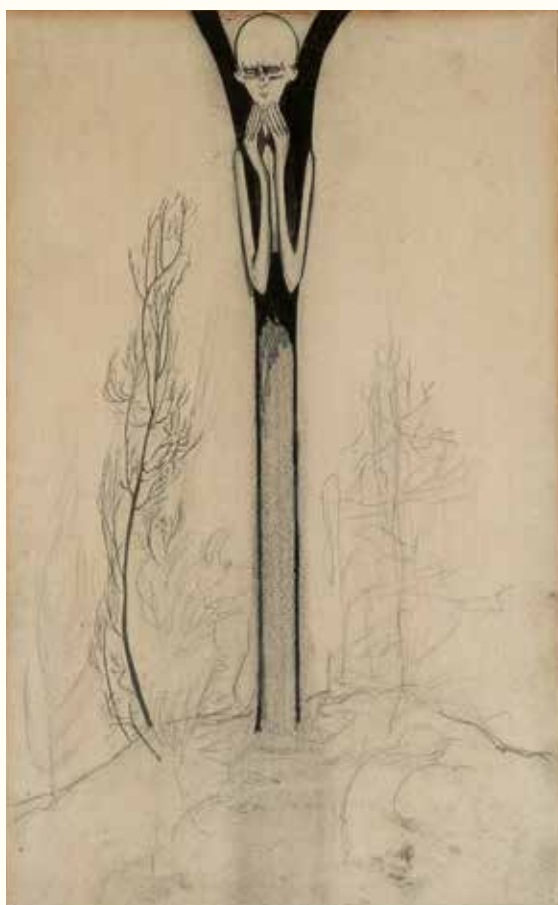
And yet, in a deserted spot there sojourns a being that seemingly stems from the earth's soil. Rising from the ashes left by the battle of the gods is Man, who possesses both the faults of the titans and the spark of their divine origins.<sup>7</sup> This is also true of the first being – *Adam* (1900) – as depicted by Spilliaert.<sup>8</sup> Adam suffers from the angst, uncertainty and resignation of the primordial man, but a glow lights up his eyes. Thanks to the divine power inside him, he can brave the light, and he rises as a conqueror and ruler. In the myth, Prometheus created man from clay and running water, upon which the goddess Athena breathed life into him.<sup>9</sup> In the Bible, God creates man in his own image from dust, and blows the breath of life into him.<sup>10</sup> Spilliaert depicts an Adam without obvious sexual characteristics. Neither man nor woman, he stands with a windblown tangle of hair on the banks of the stream that symbolises life and fertility. The light of the sun casts a long shadow in front of his feet. Fearless, with his hands in front of his chest, he challenges unknown forces in the distance. His proud posture is in sharp contrast to his loneliness, because alone he is incapable of carrying out a single task.

- 3 **Landscape with Slender Trees**  
(1900–1920), Indian ink wash, brush, pen,  
Conté crayon on paper, 259 × 358 mm (day)
- 4 **Contemplation**  
(1900), Indian ink, brush, pen, coloured pencil  
on paper, 288 × 184 mm (day)



- » 5 **Adam**  
(1900), pencil, Indian ink wash, brush,  
coloured pencil on paper, 385 × 309 mm
- 6 **Tree Woman**  
(1900–1902), pencil, Indian ink,  
pen on paper, 304 × 190 mm (day)
- 7 **Hallucination**  
(1901), Indian ink wash, pencil,  
pen on paper (restoration), 250 × 376 mm
- 8 **Autumn**  
1900, Indian ink, brush, pen, watercolour,  
gouache on paper, 297 × 206 mm (day)



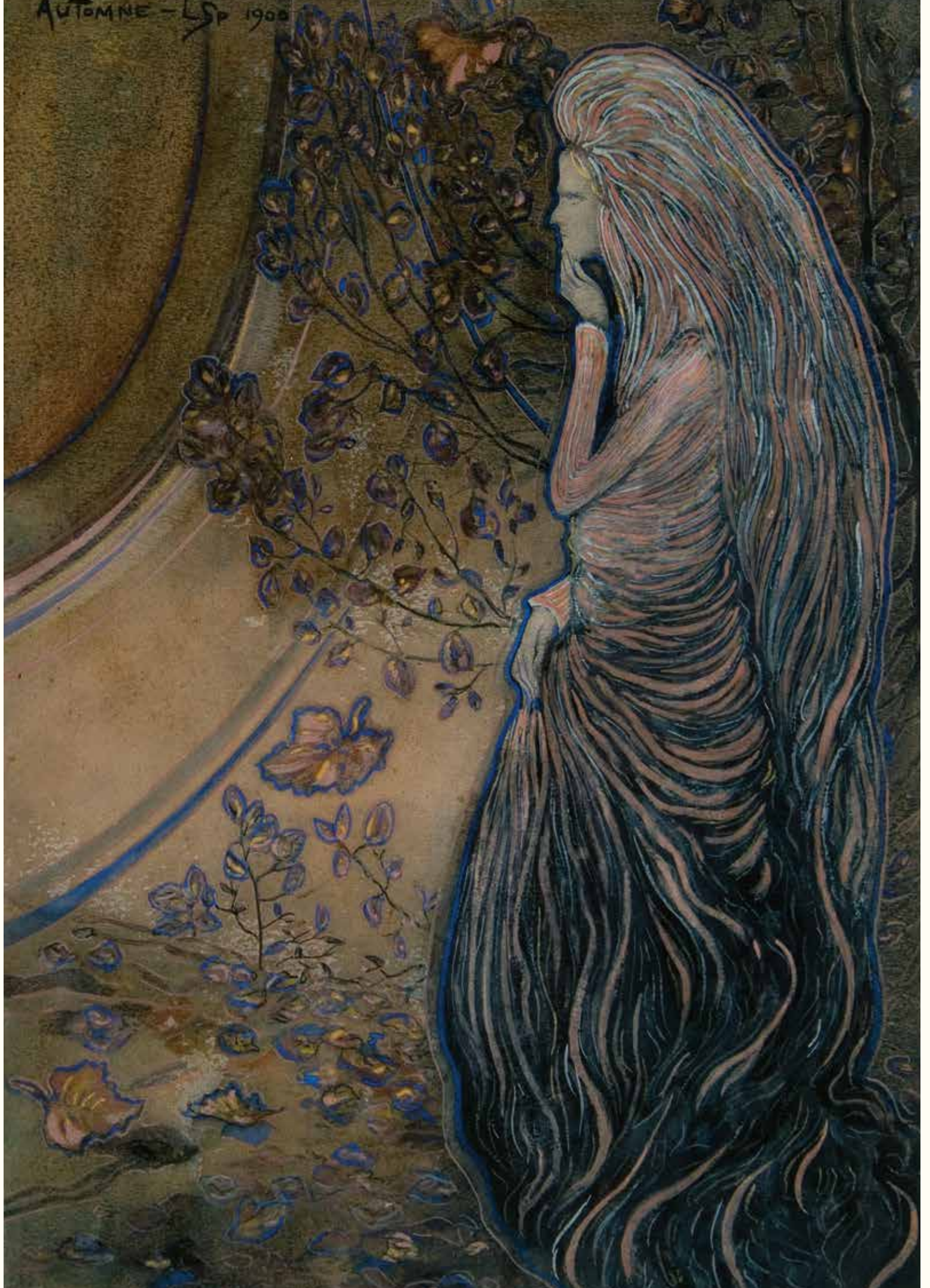


The light of the solar disc reveals the woman to the man. In contrast to Adam, who is made of primal dust, Spilliaert suggests a female being who has been woven from vegetal structures. Her slender appearance, shrouded in an organic robe, suggests a limited cycle of life that is subject to time and the seasons. As a spring figure, she is already showing signs of decay; the red glow of her clothing and her hair reflects the dying light of the celestial body. She certainly possesses her own soul, an ability to think that will make her strong should she decide to continue living. To this pensive Eve – at once arch-mother and the human race’s first mortal woman – who he draws as ‘une unité pensante’, he gives the name *Automne*.

With this autumnal evocation, Spilliaert appears once again to be referencing the primitive belief that the natural world is an animate thing. He imbued a tree with human characteristics in *Tree Woman* (1900–1902), and he once again identified the earth with Gaia, mother earth. Beneath the firmament, the languid figure rises like a grim totemic woman. Her feet rest upon a shapeless mass and her rounded belly suggests a pregnancy; she will soon give birth to the titans. Just as in fertility statues, the belly, which encompasses all future hope, is emphasised. However, the totemic woman’s face has a closed expression, an empty gaze and characteristics that appear to have been chiselled from wood. As an abused woman who has experienced a great deal, this mother earth personifies the bleakness of existence in general. There seems to be no place on earth for her descendants.

In the animistic belief, natural elements such as thunder, lightning, rain and wind are translated into images. Living on the coast, Spilliaert was familiar with the power of the wailing wind and the spectacle of the clouds scudding across the sea. With sucked-in cheeks and a whistling mouth, the wind, a woman, races through the space. It is through her intervention that water and land are separated on earth; and through her power that reckless seafarers lose their lives. Yet without her, there is no procreation, no life. To the formless mass Spilliaert gives the silhouette of a floating

AUTOMNE - Sp 1900





- 9 **The Wind**  
(1902), Indian ink wash, brush, pen on paper,  
384 × 309 mm, Brussels, Royal Museums of  
Fine Arts of Belgium, inv. 7853
- 10 **The Earth**  
19 July 1902, Indian ink wash, brush, gouache,  
watercolour on paper, 303 × 160 mm (day),  
New York, The Hearn Family Trust
- 11 **The Cloud**  
(1902), pencil, Indian ink wash, brush on paper,  
253 × 372 mm
- 12 **Breaking Cloud on a Beach**  
(1900–1902), Indian ink wash, brush, pen on paper,  
193 × 308 mm, Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium,  
Print Room, inv. SV 75052





female body which is poignantly drifting off towards the eternal, *The Cloud* (1902).<sup>11</sup> The constantly distorting mass elegantly unfolds in undulating curves. Like a cloud, the mythical figure escapes from the laws of gravity. On the border between land and sea, it remains suspended like a luminous heavenly guest and thus imploringly<sup>12</sup> holds the threat of the dark atmosphere at bay. In this drawing, Spilliaert made the play of form even more fascinating by using a pen to introduce turbulence into the unpainted shimmer of light, the latter of which adds human facial expressions to the floating mass of water.

### **The link between God and mankind**

The book of Genesis recounts how the universe was created, the world organised and humans made. Having escaped from the guardianship of the Creator, man evolves to become more self-sufficient. The freedom of action that he gains through his





- 13 **Mater Dei**  
(1901–1902), Indian ink, brush, watercolour,  
gouache on paper, 303 × 184 mm (day)
- 14 **Veiled Woman Holding a Cup**  
(1900–1902), pencil, Indian ink, brush,  
watercolour on paper, 225 × 104 mm (day)

exceptional cognitive ability and imagination offers more room for activity, but also goes hand in hand with a sense of uncertainty. Through this, man feels the need for a purpose that will serve to reduce his anxiety and unease.<sup>11</sup> To support the magic, there is often an intermediary figure between the Supreme Being and mankind, between man and the threatening natural world. Although there were no longer any shamans and wizards in Spilliaert's time, fortune-telling was still widely practised.<sup>12</sup> In the dark atmosphere of a mysterious cabinet, shrouded in veils and surrounded by magical paraphernalia, the fortune-teller challenged the future. Spilliaert also saw her as an envoy of a putative divine kingdom; as the voice that allows the divinity to speak. She can express her power by handing over a cup containing a redemptive or paralysing drink. Like a mythical goddess, she determines how life will evolve. 14

In a far more elevated position in the hierarchy, on an equal footing with the deity, is the *Mater Dei* (1901–1902). In Spilliaert's mind, she fulfilled numerous roles, in parallel to the pagan figure of Athena. The godlessness of human beings gives her a wrathful expression. She appears to be bent on revenge and she personifies the punitive authority that wants to ensure that justice is done. In addition to this first personification, Spilliaert drew her again in a second apparition: with a beautiful expression, full of compassion and understanding and with a face that radiates goodness, the godly figure fulfils her motherly role. She is the comforter, the source of compassionate love. Spilliaert originally entitled this work *Love*, in an inscription that he later removed. The third apparition answers to the generally accepted role of the Mother of God in religious practice: *Virgin* (1901). She is the haloed virgin, strength incarnate, who rises from the darkness with great majesty to set an example to mankind. She has the power to act as a fully-fledged link between God and human beings. She is entrusted with the task of giving birth to the divine son of man. 13 335

Beyond her merciful role as a pure virgin, she also reveals herself to be a temptress who puts her body at the disposal of pleasure and reproduction. Her virginity does not always stand as a guarantor of pure pleasure, but can also be a way of protecting her from the outside world. An outside world in which the gender of man or woman is not always clearly differentiated. More than once, Spilliaert evokes this ambiguity. At the same time, the androgynous figure links characteristics of the dominating sex and the shy female sex in a provocative posture. He played out this dichotomy more clearly in roughly drawn images of washed-up figures. The bared torsos of the hermaphrodites reveal revoltingly large breasts or a hairy torso with pendulous nipples. Spilliaert's starting point was, in fact, *Studies of Women*, 1903, as he stated himself, but he emphasised the androgyny of the figures. He took his models from rough, everyday reality, and they are not derived, therefore, from the spiritually refined iconography of Symbolism, in which the theme of androgyny was strikingly successful.<sup>13</sup> In a certain sense, the misshapen figures were a response to the hermaphroditic figures from ancient myths that were forced to choose between godly or human status. They were doomed to belong neither to one kingdom or the other. 346

### The desire for love

One of the key purposes of myths is to explain to humans why they are as they are. Time and time again, myths express a human being's dual nature: he is both a child of the earth (a rational being) and the heavens (an irrational being) because ancient gods, or other extra-terrestrial beings, impregnated humans with their seed.<sup>14</sup> It was thus inevitable that this impregnation would find its way into the creation myth, and a desire for sexual congress and for passionate love was its biological and moral consequence. In the majority of stories, the male or strong sex takes the initiative and



15 **Virgin**  
1901, Indian ink wash, brush, pen, pastel,  
black chalk on paper, 324 × 243 mm (day)

16 **Desire**  
(1901–1902), pencil, Indian ink wash, brush,  
wiped away with cloth on paper, 267 × 178 mm



the woman willingly yields to the seduction. Her submissive role is emphasised and held up as an example. This pattern of love creates an environment in which order and reason reign. If they violate this unspoken rule, humans experience how chaos and division are created, and how passion and jealousy tear people apart.<sup>15</sup>

Uncertain in love himself,<sup>16</sup> Spilliaert puts the power of passion into the hands of the female. Not only does he depict women as seductresses and initiators, but he also brings feelings and passions to the fore as almost abstract concepts that drive behaviour. In *Desire* (1901–1902), the woman lacks a face and the slavish submission of the man does not induce her to make a loving gesture. From her dominant position towards her admirer, her reaction is rather one of repulsion. When the concept of ‘Love’ arises,<sup>17</sup> its depiction is hurtful and sarcastic, an ironic translation of togetherness where communication is not even possible. Either the woman towers above the man, whom she holds in a near-stranglehold, or she seems to want to free 330

17 **Life**

1902, Indian ink wash, brush, pen, gouache,  
coloured pencil, varnish on paper, 310 × 240 mm (day)

18 **Grave**

1904, pencil, Indian ink wash, watercolour,  
pastel on paper, 309 × 382 mm, Brussels,  
Royal Library of Belgium, Print Room, inv. S V 73611

