

E M I L E C L A U S

E M I L E

PRINCE
OF
LUMINISM

Johan De Smet

C L A U S

HANNIBAL



1. **Emile Claus painting on the bank of the River Lys, April 1909**
Unidentified photographer
Private collection

FOREWORD	6
A PICTORIAL STORYTELLER: SHEDDING NEW LIGHT ON THE OEUVRE OF EMILE CLAUS	11
NOTES	178
BIOGRAPHY	185
BIBLIOGRAPHY & EXHIBITIONS	212
INDEX	218
COLOPHON	222

FOREWORD

Emile Claus lived from 1849 to 1924. Starting from his teenage works in 1866 at the local art school in Waregem to his final years after World War I, his painting career spanned more than half a century.

This is the story of a boy whose exceptional talent was noticed early on – not a matter of course in a small village in the middle of rural West Flanders, such as Vive-Saint-Eloi. He was then given the chance to study painting and to grow into the artist we now call Belgium's foremost impressionist. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Claus had become an accomplished painter, ready to showcase his virtuosity.

Due to the invention of the paint tube in 1841, paint no longer had to be mixed in the studio, allowing painters to more easily venture outdoors into nature. Around the mid-nineteenth century, painting *en plein air* was common practice among the French landscapists of the Barbizon School south of Paris. The Ghent painter Xavier De Cock travelled to France in 1852, joining this group of artists the following year; his brother César followed in 1855. On his return home around 1861, Xavier De Cock introduced open-air painting to the region around the river Lys (or Leie, as it is known in Flanders). He was the first to depict the area in a realistic manner, as is clearly seen in his masterpiece, *Cows Crossing the River Lys at Sint-Martens-Latem*, which he produced quite soon after his return (albeit in a style that is still rather romantic-realist). De Cock can rightly be considered a Belgian pioneer of painting in nature. However, it was mainly the French impressionists, later on, who wanted to experience at first hand and capture on canvas the ever-changing light and its effects in the landscape.

At the same time, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a new kind of realism was emerging in the art world. It represented contemporary daily life in both the city and the countryside. In part, this was a reaction against the traditional depiction of religious, historical and/or heroic scenes; sometimes it developed into social realism, which showed, for example, the rawness of labour and poverty. The statements that artists were making by portraying such scenes in large format were not always well received within established art circles, which considered such themes banal and undeserving of close attention. Consider, for instance, Gustave Courbet's iconic painting *The Stone Breakers* (1849 – destroyed during World War II). Emile Claus's monumental *Beet Harvest* (1890) is in the same vein. In it, Claus expresses his utter respect for the rigours of agricultural work, for a simple existence and for the way agricultural workers lived in dialogue with nature and their surroundings.

In 1882, after he had closed down his studio in Antwerp, Emile Claus settled in the Lys region in the village of Astene. He moved into a former hunting pavilion, which he would later name 'Villa Sunshine', inspired by his friend, the critic-poet Pol de Mont, who wrote the fairy-tale play *Princess Sunshine* (1896).

In this new-found environment, Emile Claus responded wonderfully to the changing art milieu. He blended the spontaneity of the impressionists with the reality of life as he observed it in local villages and on and around the river Lys. The local farm workers were no longer distracted when painters turned up in the fields to capture them in their bucolic setting. Claus also went out regularly with his easel, but he intervened as little as possible; he cherished the scenes and in no way wanted to disturb them.

“We come from the same soil,” wrote Claus’s friend, the writer Cyriel Buysse. In saying this, he not only emphasised their close friendship but also reminded us how the habitat and roots of the two friends were inextricably linked to their work, and how deeply the Lys region had got under their skin. Painters, writers and poets often evoked this mode of feeling, a sensation of such intensity that at times it took on almost religious dimensions.

The river Lys played an enduring and crucial role in the unique artistic climate that developed in the area. It was by the river that Emile Claus discovered and explored the unique qualities of light. No one captured better than him the specific atmosphere of the region. Claus the luminist managed, through his characteristic treatment of light, to elevate and even sacralize his subjects.

The year 2024 marks a double anniversary for Emile Claus: 100 years since he died and 175 years since he was born. Even during his lifetime, he was a prominent figure, a celebrated and respected painter, invited to serve on juries, who took on various students, and counted members of the cultural elite among his network and circle of friends. His death in 1924 was rather unexpected. Belgium’s Queen Elisabeth, who was passionate about the arts, was due to pay him a visit that week; in anticipation, he had painted a pastel of flowers for her.

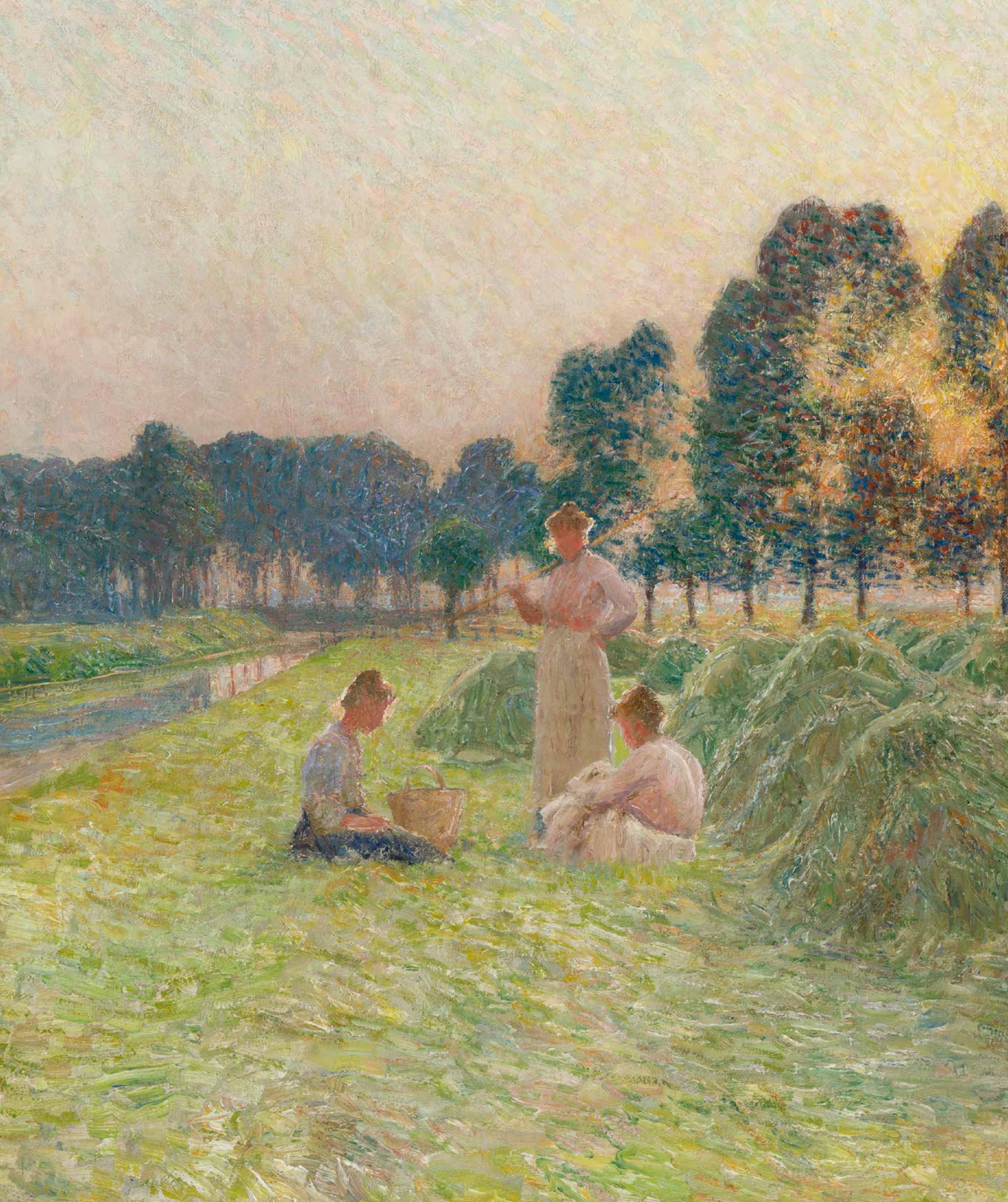
In an age when impressionism had long ceased to be the prevailing trend, Claus’s death was another symbolic end to an era. A new generation of artists had emerged in Flanders after World War I. Although they were familiar with Emile Claus’s work and certainly respected it, they took a different direction. Gustave De Smet, Frits Van den Berghe, Hubert Malfait, Constant Permeke and others, who stayed in this region for different lengths of time, were pioneers of what came to be called Flemish expressionism. The villages of Sint-Martens-Latem and Deurle, and the banks of the Lys – virtually unexplored territory for the artists from Ghent who formed the First Latem Group – had already achieved a kind of cult status by the 1920s. Just after Claus’s death, a retrospective exhibition of the Latem artists’ colony was organised locally. It featured work by both the old and new generation. The divide between old and young was undeniable; only on rare occasions would they be shown together again. More difficult times also dawned for female artists such as Jenny Montigny and Anna De Weert, both of whom had taken lessons from the ‘Master of Astene’ at the end of the nineteenth century and remained stylistically very close to him. Léon De Smet (Gustave’s brother), who somewhat reluctantly had gone along with his contemporaries in embracing expressionism, increasingly returned to his first love, impressionism.

Good art and quality always prevail, however. A hundred and fifty years of impressionism is celebrated internationally, and 100 years after his death, we can fully enjoy the paintings Emile Claus produced. Even today, the Lys region is a never-ending source of inspiration for the artists living or working there. They help to emphasise the relevance of yesterday’s painters to today. The current wave of enthusiasm for the art of the region, generated by exhibitions, activities and publications, underlines yet again its value within the history of art.

Wim Lammertijn

Director, mudel – Museum of Deinze and the River Lys Region

2. (pages 8–9)
Emile Claus, *The Rest during Haymaking, June 1902*
 Oil on canvas, 80 × 115 cm
 Private collection, courtesy Galerie Oscar De Vos, Laethem-Saint-Martin





Amle Kous



A PICTORIAL STORYTELLER: SHEDDING NEW LIGHT ON THE OEUVRE OF EMILE CLAUS

The career of painter, draughtsman and graphic artist Emile Claus (1849–1924) spanned half a century and unfolded in a rapidly changing artistic environment. Claus was formed by the Antwerp art scene around 1875, but he broadened his horizons by leaving the metropolis, settling in the countryside and making rural life the focus of his art. Even after he had become a prominent figure in the art world of his time, around 1887–88, he did not let himself be blinded by that success, instead seeking and finding renewed inspiration over the next decade. It is precisely this suppleness of mind that forms a cornerstone of his oeuvre. It will become clear in this publication to what extent Claus continued to challenge himself and kept looking for new means of expression and innovative motifs – although he was certainly not immune to some measure of opportunism. By throwing light on his key works, we can see how he helped to colour and enrich the art of the Belgian fin de siècle, both as an artist and as a human being.

3. **Emile Claus, *Self-Portrait*, 1874**
Oil on canvas, transferred
to panel, 21 × 16.5 cm
model, Deinze. Donated
by Carlo Vullers, 1984



11. **Emile Claus, *Two Punished Friends*, 1876**
Oil on canvas, 108 × 55 cm
Royal Collection Belgium
12. **Emile Claus, *Punished*, c. 1876–78**
Oil on canvas, 52 × 36 cm
Private collection



GENRE PAINTING

Mr Claus does not claim to innovate. He wants to sell and that is his right. However, he must beware not to give his admirers what they want too easily.¹⁸

During the first decade of his career (1874–85), Claus developed into a promising but market-oriented artist in the tradition of that bourgeois realism with which scores of romantic-realist contemporaries had achieved success across the salons of Europe.¹⁹ Until about 1885, Claus's oeuvre includes many charming scenes – children with their beloved pets or favourite toys (fig. 10), portraits of girls in an interior or outside in the garden, middle-class ladies in evening dress, dancers, equestrian portraits – all painted with a warm and differentiated palette. Critics soon noticed the close affinity with the work of, for example, Edouard Agneessens and the brothers Franz and Jan Verhas. Upon seeing the painting *Two Punished Friends* (fig. 11) at the 1876 Brussels Salon, Gustave Lagye, a critic who closely followed Claus's evolution in those years (and who was close to Claus's friend, musician Jan Blockx), wrote this amusing little piece:

Two Punished Friends shows a beautiful toddler sulking behind a curtain, along with his faithful dog, who is sharing his temporary exile. What has this little fellow done to be banished in this way to a forgotten corner in his dress while dessert might already have been served? Did he break a piece of china or was he cheeky to his mother? Perhaps he quarrelled with the beautiful *Colombine*, whom can be seen hugging her turtle dove a bit further off? Alas! Will his parents reject the proclamation of amnesty the same way the implacable leaders of the French Third Republic did? May he at least be allowed to join the girl whom Mr Jean Verhas has also been mean enough to make stand in the corner. They might end up consoling each other and their dogs might get to know each other.²⁰

Thanks to his growing popularity in the middle-class art world, Claus also managed to win over the purchasing committees of the salons, composed of members of the bourgeoisie, including acclaimed artists who, if not born into the middle class, had since joined it. For instance, the so-called *jury des récompenses* of the Brussels Salon, responsible for rewarding participating artists, purchased *Two Punished Friends* for the exhibition's lottery. The winning lot turned out to fall into the hands of King Leopold II, so that quite by chance Claus found himself represented in the king's collection. Around the same time, Claus also made a rural version of *Two Punished Friends*, namely *Punished* (fig. 12). The setting is now a simple village school. The boy has misbehaved and leans against the wall outside the classroom, where the lesson continues.

The more he entered grand collections with these kinds of “charming cabinet pieces”,²¹ the more Claus's renown in collector circles rose. Two years after *Two Punished Friends* in 1876, *The School Road* found a buyer at the Ghent Salon (1877; private collection), and three years later a would-be buyer presented themselves almost immediately for *Wealth and Poverty* (1880; private collection).²² In the latter painting, also known as *Scène de la vie moderne*, two child match-sellers sit with a street dog in front of the basement window of a *hôtel particulier* (a grand townhouse), where a cook is hard at work. In everyday city life, where the wrought-iron bars of a basement window mark the boundary between wealth and poverty, the children are literally out of sight of the main street. Contemporaries detected no denunciation of social conditions in the painting – no “repulsive realism”, which was still seen as inflammatory in conservative circles.²³ Instead, they were quick to judge the children:

The rich citizen has the right to own a carriage and horses and to eat fine meals in a luxurious palace. He is doing no harm in making use of his wealth in this way. The poor children who sit on the doorstep of an aristocratic kitchen are doing no good and have no merit in doing so. – These children should be in school; failing that, at home with their parents or in a workshop.²⁴



13. **Emile Claus, *Landscape in Tlemcen (Algeria)*, 1879**
Oil on canvas, 46.7 × 64 cm
model, Deinze. Donated by Mrs T. Bekaert, 1943



14. **Emile Claus, *Young Arabian in Oran*, 1879**
Watercolour on paper, 300 × 160 mm
Private collection

ORIENTALISM

In the autumn of 1879, an opportunity presented itself that would mark an important step in the artist's development. Claus eagerly accepted the invitation from Jules Guiette, an amateur artist of independent means, to accompany him on a trip to North Africa; an enticing offer, in part because Guiette was willing to advance the travel expenses. The trip from December 1878 to May 1879 took them via France and Spain to Algeria and Morocco, where they stayed for some months, with Eugène Fromentin's books *Un été dans le Sahara* (1857) and *Une année dans le Sahel* (1859) serving as travel guides. We are well informed about this journey thanks to the many letters Claus sent to his friends Georges Eekhoud and Théodore Verstraete, as well as to August Cosyn, editor-in-chief of *De Vlaamsche Kunstbode*, who published some of them in that journal.²⁵ The letters draw a beautiful picture of the "wonderful figures" the artist came across on the journey (figs. 16 & 17). Claus aptly wrote about the walks "amid the Arabs, under the vaults of their mosques, or in groves of rough-stemmed olive trees, or among rocks and mountains" (fig. 13).²⁶ By his own admission, he had set off for the south as a "blind man". But once there, his approach changed to that of a pleinairist,²⁷ similar in terms of approach to what Frantz Charlet and Théo Van Rysselberghe would do a few years later – and during the next decade also Henri Evenepoel. Small oil studies produced on-site, along with Orientalist figure pieces made on a larger scale in his Antwerp studio, formed the core of two successive exhibitions in 1879-80, one in the Antwerp Verlat Hall (with his friend Jan Van Beers), the other in the Brussels *cercle*. These works were well received not only in conservative²⁸ but also progressive settings. Claus's direct and uncomplicated impressions won over critics such as Théo Hannon and Camille Lemonnier, who had been proponents of the 'young' Brussels art movement for decades. Hannon wrote:

Emile Claus saw this country with an open, unbiased gaze. He painted what he saw, as he saw it, without school reminiscences, with his nerves, his heart, his own emotion. An unmistakable aura of sincerity emanates from his motifs and his types.... Moreover, the young painter had, I believe, no other intention than to show us his travel notes, his memories, his impressions – and the latter word sums up precisely both the form and the essence of these works which he has not been afraid to show to critics.²⁹



Lemonnier had no doubt that the trip had opened up new avenues for the artist:

He dreamed a beautiful dream in the sun, a dream that loosened his mind, our somewhat languid Belgian spirit, and made his touch more supple. May he now return, with these new qualities, to the silky and blond light, to the clamminess of white Flemish skin, to the gentle melancholy of the skies of his home.³⁰

Claus was highly pleased with their analyses. In a thank-you letter to Lemonnier – the first of many letters he would address to the man who would become a close friend over the following decades – he expressed his appreciation for the influential dean of Belgian art critics:

The analysis you made of several of my impressions is especially interesting to me. You immediately identified my favourite impressions. How wonderful for me, because I can now tell myself, carry on, because someone is telling you – you are trying to capture colour as you see it, and that preserves you from that convention of bronze tones, and you have returned as Flemish as the day you left, the sun of the Orient has loosened your mind and made your touch more supple – and that someone is Camille Lemonnier: thank you, that gives me courage.³¹

15. **Emile Claus, *City at Night (Paris?)*, 1879 (?)**

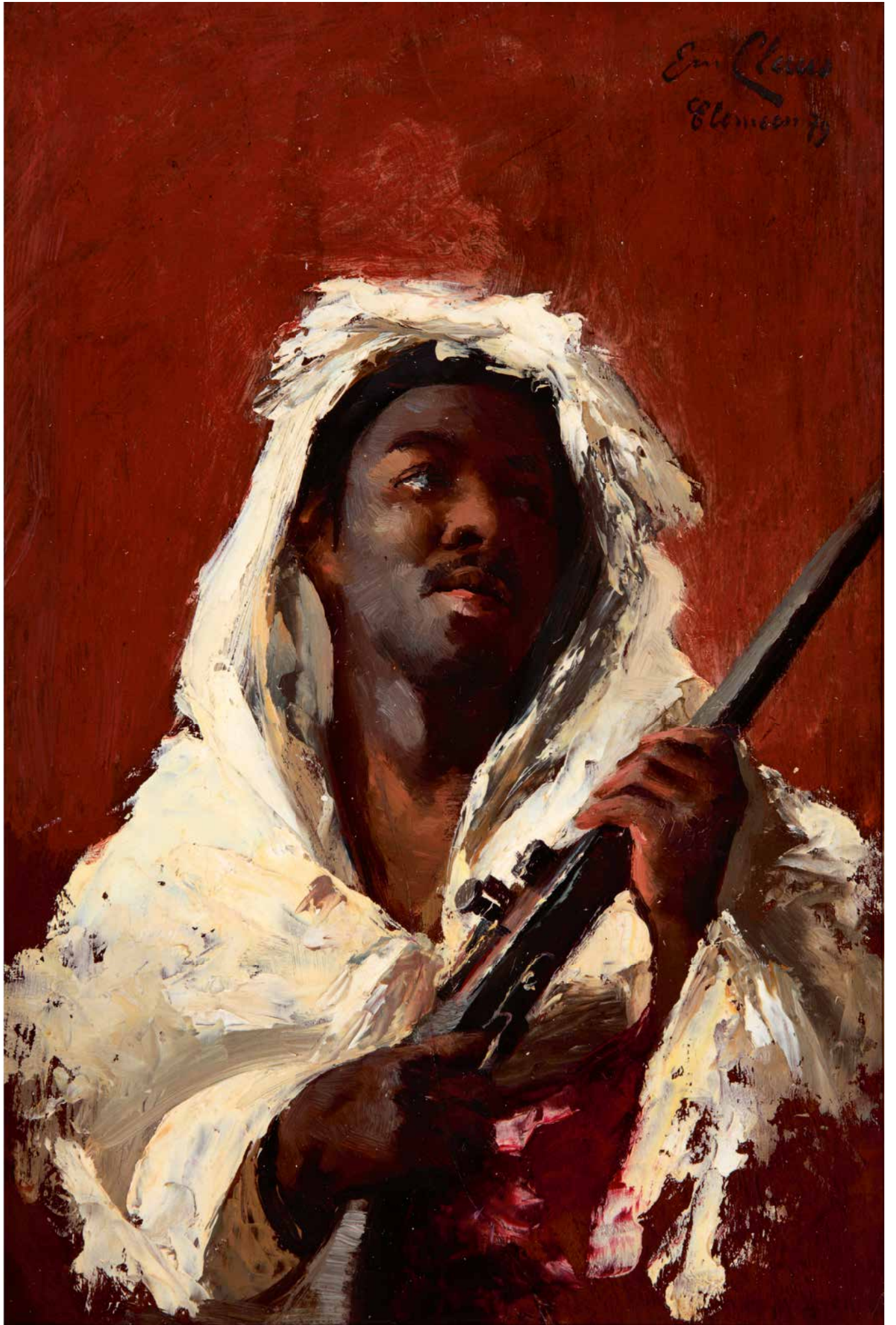
Oil on panel, 17.4 × 23.5 cm
mudel, Deinzee. Donated by Carlo Vullers, 1984

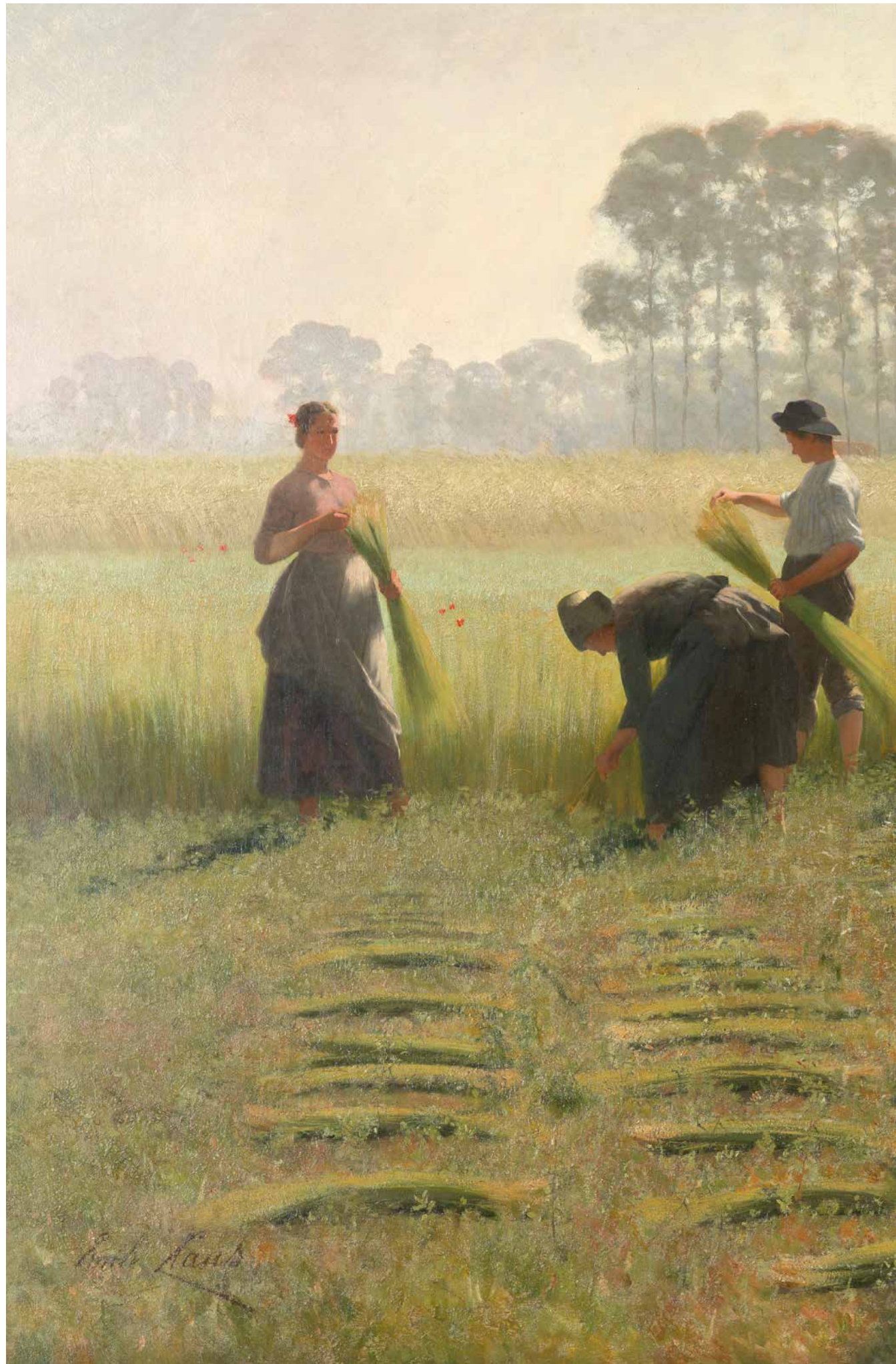


16

16. **Emile Claus, *Smoker in Tlemcen (Algeria)*, 1879**
Oil on panel, 21 × 17 cm
The Phoebus Foundation, Antwerp

17. **Emile Claus, *Warrior in Tlemcen (Algeria)*, 1879**
Oil on panel, 24 × 16 cm
Private collection, courtesy Galerie Oscar De Vos, Laethem-Saint-Martin





23. **Emile Claus,**
***The Flax Harvest*, 1883**
Oil on canvas, 110 × 150 cm
Private collection, courtesy
Francis Maere Fine Arts
Gallery, Ghent





24. **Emile Claus, *A Passing Boat*, 1883**
Oil on canvas, 75.5 × 116 cm
Private collection, courtesy Sotheby's, London



25. **Emile Claus, *The Thistles (The River Lys in Astene)*, 1884–85**
Oil on canvas, 73.5 × 115 cm
Musea Bruges. Bequest of Auguste Beernaert, 1912



26. **Emile Claus, *Flaxweeding in Flanders*, 1887–88**
Oil on canvas, 129 × 198.7 cm
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerp



are depicted from behind as they watch a boat being towed along the Lys in an evening landscape; in *The Flax Harvest*, a young peasant couple, shown from the front, are seen caring for their young children. The influence of French painter Jules Bastien-Lepage's naturalism is manifest in both paintings. This artist, who died young, had made a sensation at various art exhibitions in Europe around 1880 with a polished, socially acceptable version of realism – neither the brutality of Gustave Courbet and his Belgian friend Louis Dubois, nor the miserabilism of Alexandre Antigna and Charles Degroux from 1850–70, but a form of history painting of its own time, descriptive and veristic in nature, “*la réalité vraie*” (“the true reality”).⁵¹

The best-known work from Claus's naturalist years is *Flaxweeding in Flanders* (fig. 26). The conformist, even rigid plan of the canvas means it fits seamlessly into the pattern, tried and tested since Bastien-Lepage, of a wide and long foreground; in Claus's case, the foreground is cut off by a row of figures set out in an elongated S-shape obscuring the shortened depth effect, a movement reinforced by the curved line at the edge of the field. Like the standing figures, the kneeling ones, some resting on their elbows in the foreground, are also rendered in profile, which heightens the inward movement in the composition.⁵² Here, Claus was emphasising the distinctive weakness of ‘Bastienism’ – the term was common at the time – for objectivity and immobility; the basic lines of the composition, in which sky and land divide the composition almost equally, heighten the overall sense of immobility. A remarkable feature (and unlike the figures involved in Flemish cockfights at the time): flaxweeding was apparently mainly a woman's business...

The 1888 Ghent Salon, at which Claus presented *Flaxweeding in Flanders*, also featured *The Procession Is There (Procession Day)* (fig. 27).⁵³ While the artist set the figures in the former painting side by side without establishing any connection between them, in the latter work it is unmistakably Claus the storyteller who is at work. The painting contains several scenes that are discreetly connected. After careful consideration, Claus deliberately positioned the kneeling figures in the fore-, middle- and background as they prepare successive flower carpets on the village road, all the way to the outskirts of the hamlet. The centre of the composition is occupied by small groups of bystanders; they look both at the kneeling figures on the earthen road and at the woman setting up a house altar on which vases with flowers are arranged, with figures of saints under bell jars beside them. To the left, a young woman on the ground is arranging the fruits of the land, which, like the altar, will soon be given a blessing. The procession can be seen approaching on the horizon. To underline the unusual splendour of the feast day, the summer sun lights up everything. Pol de Mont described the painting as freshly coloured, “that daring azure blue, aglow with light, resting on the insolent vermilion, made cheerful by the summer sun, of the red roof tiles, and the light-purple shadow of the farmhouses on the yellow dirt road”.⁵⁴ In all its simplicity, the picture is one of the earliest expressions of Claus's pronounced empathy for country people.



27. **Emile Claus, *The Procession Is There (Procession Day)*, 1887-88**
Oil on canvas, 82 × 116 cm
Private collection, courtesy Galerie
Oscar De Vos, Laethem-Saint-Martin





THE GARDENER

“a mistake by a man of talent”⁵⁵

“the sun-drenched caricature”⁵⁶

“there is nothing more to be found in it than the bold and honest depiction in all its vulgarity of a type of little interest”⁵⁷

“the highlight of the salon”⁵⁸

At the Paris Salon of 1887, Claus presented *The Old Gardener* (fig. 28), one of the most penetrating character portraits in his oeuvre. The painting is wonderfully vivid: the artist seems to have surprised his gardener upon entering the house. Cautiously, the old man takes a step forward while making a parallel movement with his right arm, a movement that accentuates the momentary nature of the scene. On closer inspection, the composition of the painting is very well balanced, with the imposing figure in the centre, the shutter and one of the columns flanking the portal on the left, and the neatly juxtaposed clogs and the view through to the garden on the right. The tawny face – one commentator wrote: “[il] paraît avoir diablement chaud”⁵⁹ (‘he seems to be awfully hot’) – and the gardener’s big-boned body – “d’une anatomie superbe”⁶⁰ (‘such wonderful anatomy’) – together with the broad shoulders and slightly opened arms, form an imaginary triangle: starting from the head of the old man, the triangle descends via his right shoulder to his right wrist and extends via his left shoulder into the shadow line at the level of the garden table. The pyramidal depth effect is enhanced by the angled position of the clogs on the right and the base of the column. The gardener’s head is surrounded by foliage of trees and shrubs, providing a halo effect.

The garden is not bordered by a green wall, however: in the background, the artist provided a view through to the road (now called Emile Clauslaan). Claus frequently applied the perspectivist use of geometric structures and vistas in later works. For this painting, he positioned himself in the small, dark vestibule of his country house, looking into the light as he peers out into the sun-splashed garden. By contrast, the protagonist steps through the entranceway with the sun at his back, squinting as he looks for the artist (and us) with his eyes squeezed almost shut. His shadow, and that of the column on the left of the painting, continue, as it were, beyond the canvas, adding to the lifelike nature of the scene. Finally, this study of light also contains remarkable colouristic choices. The sunlight plays on the gardener’s thin, tousled hair in tones ranging from grey and brown to white gold; it also radiates through his blue-cotton apron, making the fiery red haze of the earthen path shine while also suggesting volumes.

The combination of colour and light, of light and backlight, of light and volume would become Claus’s pictorial trademark in the 1890s. The painting is certainly reminiscent of such naturalists as Jules Bastien-Lepage as well as Hubert von Herkomer, Jean-François Raffaëlli and Eugène Laermans.⁶¹ But Claus did not force the model into a pose that manifestly goes against his daily routine. Impressionist ambitions here supersede the naturalistic straitjacket. Claus’s decision to exhibit the painting as late as 1892 in

Liège alongside mostly recent work – including *The Skaters* (fig. 32) – suggests that he considered it a substantial turn in his artistic development. While it had initially been received dismissively, critics had since revised their opinions. The fact that this kind of work could now charm the conservative element of a salon environment certainly had to do with the evolution of the artist’s career, but also with the acceptance of impressionism. At the time, *The Old Gardener* was almost seen as the main attraction of the salon in Liège and was acquired for the museum there.⁶² What has been ignored until now is that for this painting Claus built on a watercolour he had exhibited at the Société royale belge des aquarellistes in Brussels in April 1887; the newspaper *L’Indépendance belge* wrote: “Cette aquarelle vaut un tableau” (‘This watercolour is worth a painting’).⁶³

TWO WORLDS IN ONE LANDSCAPE

While in the spring of 1887 he reserved *The Old Gardener* for the Paris Salon, Claus exhibited the painting at the Brussels Salon a few months later, together with *The Picnic* (fig. 29). For that canvas, too, he took Bastien-Lepage’s painterly principles as his starting point, but gave them a new modernist twist. Claus’s growing interest in nature is evident in the detailed way he depicted the wild flowers and grasses in the foreground. Compared to paintings such as *The Thistles* (fig. 25), the landscape here is rendered with greater panoramic width, a generous skyline and more suggestive shades of colour in the sky and clouds. Claus’s empathy seems to herald a passage from a letter to his pupil George Morren: “...love Nature as a true lover. Listen to her, she is neither untruthful nor pretentious, and if your love for her (nature) is neither obscure nor feigned, you will be happy in your art.”⁶⁴

While the artist demonstrated remarkably detailed realism in the wild vegetation in the foreground, he rendered the characters on the other bank using small touches. Along with the clean effect of light, bright colours and evocative technique, this illustrates Claus’s growing interest in Claude Monet’s French impressionism. Besides nature, he also observed the human figures in the painting. He has placed a row of country dwellers in the foreground, as if on a stage. They are spending their day of rest chatting. Only a few of them are looking at the scene across the river, where city dwellers are having a picnic while a ‘cooking boat’ on the water provides them with hot treats. The river forms the boundary between the two worlds, a barrier that not only separates them literally, but also symbolises their social distance. The fact that the middle-class people on the other bank are looking for shade, in contrast to the peasant figures in the foreground, did not escape contemporary critics. The peasant figures stood

...right in the sun, like people who are not afraid to let their skin tan and who look curiously from afar, perhaps with envy, at the diners on the opposite bank. Outstanding types of real farmers, not more beautiful than in real life, bathed in air and light.⁶⁵

28. Emile Claus, *The Old Gardener*, 1886–87

Oil on canvas, 214 × 138 cm

La Boverie, Liège





29. **Emile Claus,**
The Picnic, 1886-87
Oil on canvas,
129 × 198 cm
Royal Collection
Belgium



30. **Emile Claus, *Summer Evening*, August 1895**
Oil on canvas, 98 × 131 cm
Private collection

At the vernissage of the salon, Claus was approached by members of the purchasing committee of the Brussels museum. Their interest in the painting led him to write a letter to his former fellow student Frans Van Kuyck, who was now a teacher at the Antwerp academy and an influential figure in the official art milieu. At the end of October 1887, the press reported the purchase of the canvas.⁶⁶ Less than a week later, it was revealed that the canvas had been acquired not by the Belgian state, but by a private individual, King Leopold II.⁶⁷ Headstrong as he was, the sovereign, with his private fortune, could outpace the Fine Arts administration and act quickly. Before Claus had even received a reply from Van Kuyck, he accepted the royal offer.⁶⁸

The duality of clearly distinct worlds living side by side continued to occupy Claus. He returned to the theme around 1895–97, for instance, in two paintings in which the same bend in the river Lys forms the scene of diametrically opposed worlds. In one work, we see a young woman at sunset gathering the laundry laid out earlier in the day to dry in the sun (*The Laundress*, 1897; private collection).⁶⁹ The other, *Summer Evening* (fig. 30), shows two young middle-class women having their coffee or tea at the same spot a little later in the day – the moon has now risen. No doubt, servants set up the table, chairs, tablecloths and napkins as well as the necessary china – perhaps it was even the laundress from the first painting. While the young members of the bourgeoisie enjoy the cool of the evening and each other's company, their servants are nowhere to be seen. Strangely enough, these two women seem somewhat out of place. Our expectations have been so conditioned that we assume we will see peasants and farmers' wives, not dolled-up women – although that too was the reality in the Lys region, albeit for only the happy few.

BEET HARVEST

“A tremendous effort”, but we believe that a 70-centimetre canvas would have been a more appropriate size for the depiction of this supposedly realistic scene.⁷⁰

Well, this *Beet Harvest* has given me, to an extent that I cannot put into words, a sharp and surprisingly evocative impression of this land of the Lys, whose character and willpower the painter has beautifully rendered, along with its unspeakable and unsettling tranquillity.⁷¹

This extremely enthusiastic assessment by Gustave Vanzype contrasts sharply with many other, more scathing comments made when Claus presented the most ambitious painting of his career, *Beet Harvest* (fig. 31), at the Brussels Salon in 1890. Contemporary critics were divided over the imposing canvas, which to some seemed outdated. Many visitors judged the work positively, but others criticised not only the naturalistic but also unapologetically realistic tone of the work. Today, more than 125 years later, we look rather like Vanzype at this masterpiece, which continues to amaze and was even key to the creation of a museum.

In any case, the artist was well acquainted with the scene, which unfolded annually before his eyes in the boggy fields on the other side of the Lys diagonally across from his house. Given the monumental size of the painting, Claus must have worked on the painting for several years, hiring a local peasant family, the Van Laere's, and some day labourers as models over long periods. The careful, complex construction of the composition certainly betrays a considered approach. The group of five peasants draws the attention first. On the left, a peasant woman has straightened herself as she breathes on her cold hand. Next to her, three peasants dig away indefatigably. To the right, a fourth farmer stands at the end of the row. Unlike the woman, he does not seem lost in thought, but looks at what is going on in the middle ground, where a fellow farmer is trying to get a cart loaded with beets moving; his line of sight runs parallel to the horizon, which is largely screened off by trees and farm buildings (left) and the misty Lys wetlands (right). Other perspective lines enter the pictorial plane. An imaginary line starts from the beet to the right of centre and leads straight to the Lys; another starts at the same point and runs to the head of the draught animal; the heads of the standing female and male peasants form the top of the triangle. Claus played with vistas at different levels. This happens most obviously on the left, where the view extends furthest and various elements – the heaped beets, the farmer's cart – bridge the distinct planes. On the right, the bent backs of the digging peasants offer an opportunity to reveal a view of the bend of the Lys, making it possible to locate the scene precisely. Despite the heavy but loose touch and the muted colouring that glows brightly here and there, the above characterisation of the scene as being “realistic” is not beside the point, although in a different way that was intended at the time. Thus, there are striking similarities with the painting *Winter Work* by Claus's contemporary, George Clausen (1883–84; Tate, London). Apart from the thematic affinity, both artists emphasised the foreground. The plodding figures define the image; the view into the depth is reduced to misty, sketch-like contours. In each case, the scene also has the characteristics of a snapshot: Clausen is known to have worked from photographs;⁷² whether Claus was already using photography at that time is something we don't know. The question remains as to whether Claus was familiar with the British artist's original.⁷³

After the relatively recent sale, in September 1888, of *Flaxweeding in Flanders* (1887, fig. 26) to what is now the KMSKA, Claus hoped that *Beet Harvest* might also find its way into a museum collection. By painting it on his own initiative and not working on commission (as would have been usual for such large formats), the official art circuit was the only possible outlet – the work's colossal size curtailed interest from private collectors. However, despite pronounced interest from the government, the painting failed to sell at the 1890 Brussels Salon.⁷⁴ Claus did not give up and sent the canvas to prestigious exhibition forums in Munich (1892) and Paris (1895); in his own country, it was shown at the world exhibitions in Antwerp (1894) and Brussels (1897). At the same time, he appealed to his contacts at the Fine Arts administration in an attempt to persuade them



166. Painter's palette owned by Emile Claus, 1886–90
mudel, Deinze



ABBREVIATIONS

AAC: Archive for Contemporary Art. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

AML: Archives et Musée de la Littérature, Brussels

KASK: Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp

KBR: Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels

KMSKA: Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerp

MCL: Musée Camille Lemonnier, Brussels

MDL: Museum of Deinze and the River Lys Region, Deinze (mudel)

MdIC: Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai

MSK Ghent: Museum of Fine Arts Ghent

RMFAB: Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

RMN: Archives of National Museums - Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris

UGCB: University of Ghent, Central Library

VJW: *Verzameld journalistiek werk* (collected journalistic work)

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Cover Image

Emile Claus, *Cows Crossing the River Lys*, 1897–99



ASTENE, — LA LYS ET LA VILLA ZONNESCHIJN.

Em. Van Risseghem, Deynze.

167. View of the rear of Villa Sunshine and the artist's studio, c. 1925
Postcard
Unidentified photographer
mudel, Deinze