

The

## Quest for Sparkling Light

### *Emile Claus in a European Perspective*

The Flemish painter Emile Claus (1849-1924) already had a productive career behind him when he espoused Impressionism in 1889. He had graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp in 1874 and for 15 years participated in the cultural life of that city, which was invariably classified as a bastion of arch-conservatism by modernist circles in Brussels. However, he enjoyed success from the very start, as evidenced by his painting *Two Punished Friends*, which found its way into the highly diverse collection of King Leopold II as early as 1876. Like many of his contemporaries he was interested in orientalism and in late 1878 and early 1879 he travelled to North Africa and Spain, though this had little effect on his work. In fact until 1882 he confined himself to unadventurous romantic and realistic genre scenes, and made his name primarily as a portraitist.



Emile Claus, *Riches and Poverty*. 1880. Canvas, 110 x 165 cm. Private collection. Photo by Hugo Maertens.



But nature was to assume an increasingly important role in his work. In 1882 he rented a dilapidated country house on the banks of the River Leie in Astene in East Flanders. The wide landscapes surrounding Villa Zonneschijn were to beguile him from that moment on. In the meantime, he became acquainted with the rising tide of Naturalism at the Paris Salons in the eighties, and the confrontation with artists such as Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884) also led him down this path. *The Picnic*, also in King Leopold II's collection, displays to the full Claus' alliance with the naturalist movement. Man and nature come together in an informal scene, a monumental composition in which rural figures appear in bright light, true to life and with a gentle critical undertone of social criticism.

Emile Claus, *The Picnic*.  
c. 1887. Canvas,  
129 x 198 cm. Royal  
Collection, Brussels. Photo  
by Hugo Maertens.

## The call of light

Enthralled by the French Impressionists' controversial exhibitions and their participation in the salons of *Les XX* in Brussels, he rented a studio in Paris in the winters of 1889 to 1892. But Claus by no means developed into a thoroughbred Impressionist. Or as the prominent Parisian critic (and Claus' friend) Gabriel Mourey summarised it in *The Studio* in August 1899: '*He is an Impressionist to this extent – that he possesses the gift of feeling with the utmost keenness the true meaning of Nature in all her manifestations; while he is bound by no rule, subject to no formula, in his endeavour to interpret that meaning on his canvas. But, unlike most Impressionists, he has the rare capacity to know how to choose his impressions, to test them to the uttermost, and never to rest until he has translated them to his full satisfaction,*

*disdaining the haphazard attempts which are sufficient for the majority of modern landscapists.'*

The appreciative support Claus received from progressive art critics was in sharp contrast, however, to the lukewarm reaction of the Belgian public. As late as 1890 and 1891 many collectors still had reservations about Impressionism. In this period Claus' work drew a positive response from collectors in Paris and also in Britain. One such was John Maddocks from Bradford, who knew Claus' work from the Paris salons. Although his main interest was in the naturalism of such painters as George Clausen and Léon Lhermitte, he also owned early impressionist paintings by Claus. The artist himself actually mentions this in a letter to an English friend: *'Mr Maddocks has always strongly encouraged me, and had the courage to buy my work at a time when everybody in Belgium found me by far too audacious, because, as you may know, the leaders, the standard-bearers as it were, of the young Belgian school of painting are not at all in sympathy with the beautiful art of Monet and his school.'* The friend in question, Wynford Dewhurst, included the letter in a much-talked-about book, *Impressionist Painting. Its Genesis and Development*, published in London by George Newnes in 1904. In this book Dewhurst, a critic on *The Studio* and himself a painter, made a significant contribution to the theory that French Impressionism originated in part from the early nineteenth-century achievements of John Constable and William Turner, referring to Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro's stay in London in 1870 and 1871. In support of this thesis the author quoted Claus' account of his time in London: *'I have all too quickly glanced at the Turners and Constables of London, nevertheless it was a revelation to me, and those great artists Monet, Sisley and Pissarro continue simply what that giant Turner discovered.'* However, Dewhurst was also greatly impressed by the work of Claus himself: the first pages of chapter 10, *'La peinture claire'*, are devoted entirely to Claus and backed up by seven plates.



Emile Claus, c.1895.

Emile Claus, *Impression at Night*. Drawing on paper, 12 x 16 cm. Private collection. Photo by Hugo Maertens.





According to Dewhurst, public access to Maddocks' collection and its inclusion of paintings by Claus were 'a revelation to those artists who found themselves in Bradford at that period. Unknown and a stranger, Claus received in spirit silent congratulations for his splendid achievement, which aroused in several breasts a keen feeling of emulation'. That Emile Claus also had a soft spot for this British author is clearly apparent from his dedication of *La ferme 'en souvenir au peintre Wynford Dewhurst'* in October 1904.

The trendsetting periodical *The Studio* also kept a close eye on Claus' development from his beginnings in 1893. This meant that the English public was familiar with his striking entries for avant-garde exhibitions in Europe and the United States. In fact Claus was also invited to exhibit in Britain, by the Pastel Society and The International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers in London, among others. *The Studio* saw him as more than just a dot on the artistic map of Europe. As a consequence of the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900, where Claus snapped up the gold medal, Gabriel Mourey covered the Belgian section in the November issue of *The Studio*. Only two Belgian artists stood out with distinction in the face of international competition, and they were Albert Baertsoen and Claus. But Mourey was charmed primarily by the monumental *Passage des vaches*, which has still lost none of its seductive powers in its present home at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels: 'It is a large canvas of extraordinary luminosity, intensely powerful, and admirably rich in colour. I do not think any open-air picture of equal importance has yet been produced.' In this work Claus attained a literally dazzling mastery of the pictorial depiction of the country life surrounding him. 'It is wonderful to observe the play of light

Emile Claus, *Villa Zonneschijn*. 1899. Canvas. 80,5 x 116,5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo Réunion des Musées Nationaux – Jean Schormans, Paris.

on the sparkling waters, the contrasts between the patches of sunshine piercing through the trees, and the clear shady places around; to note the difference in the colouring of the superb animals, ... the exactitude of their movements and their various expressions, if one may say so'. The *Studio* included a plate of *Passage des vaches* to back up the writer's superlatives. Mourey had in fact already written extensive articles on the two artists: on Claus in August 1899 and on Baertsoen the previous September. The Belgian correspondents Fernand Khnopff (in Brussels) and Pol de Mont (1857-1931) repeatedly brought Claus' work to the attention of their English readers.

### Exile in London

On the outbreak of the First World War Claus fled to Britain, where he stayed until 1919. After a short time in Rhubina in Wales his artistic activity only really reached full flow when he rented a studio in Norfolk Street in London. He replaced his cheerful pre-war luminism with a colour harmony of subdued, soft half-tints. The subject was no longer dominant: the constantly changing panoramic view over the Thames and Victoria Embankment, under clouds, sun, mist or rain, time and again provided marvelous ephemeral river views that came close to the true spirit of Impressionism. This mettlesome sixty-year-old rarely appeared in London society, but took part all the more in the round of exhibitions. He was a notable guest in group exhibitions at the Goupil Gallery, The Royal Academy, The Grosvenor Galleries, the Grafton Galleries and the Dowdeswell Galle-

Emile Claus, *Passage des vaches*, 1899. Canvas, 67 X 100 cm. Private collection. Photo by Hugo Maertens.



ries, but his high point came in May and June 1917 when the Goupil Gallery mounted a one-man show of his work.

### **The latter days of a luminist**

Claus was active as a painter until his death in 1924. In its August issue of that year *The Studio* published a commemorative article about him. 'The death of Emile Claus, the great Belgian artist, is another cruel loss for the country,' wrote Paul Lambotte, who as director of the government's Fine Arts Department was later to exclude Claus' work from retrospectives abroad! Nevertheless, Claus' work was highly successful in exhibitions at home and abroad during his lifetime, at the Belgian and Paris salons to start with, but equally in dozens of exhibitions in Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands and the United States. But the lack of appreciation for his work after 1924 had its roots in Belgium, and was due to the overpowering rise of Flemish Expressionism and to a lesser extent abstract art, as well as the first shoots of the successful Belgian Surrealist school. James Ensor was the only artist to be absorbed by avant-garde circles; such artists as Claus, Léon Frédéric, Fernand Khnopff and Theo van Rysselberghe, who had given Belgian art just as much of a guiding impulse in the early 1890s, were doomed to utter contempt. But nowadays we can give Claus his full due.

Emile Claus, *Sunset (London)*. 1918. Canvas, 59 x 49.5 cm. Private collection. Photo by Hugo Maertens.

JOHAN DE SMET

*Translated by Gregory Ball.*

