

Mastering the Brush like a Singer his Voice

On Jean Brusselmans, the Painter

254

[J E F L A M B R E C H T]

North Sea, 1939. Horizontal grey brown strokes alternate with careful white lines that, without transition, unite in the middle to form a broad street: the reflection of light on water. The foaming waves curl against the bottom edge. Round shapes float in the air, ever bigger, more irregular, more quickly executed. Three boats sit on the horizon. The overwhelming sky, which extends over two-thirds of the canvas in forceful lanes of blue, white and a paler grey than the sea, is separated from the water not by a straight line but a confident curve. The sea – a challenging theme that implies both depth and perspective and which, in its emptiness, also resembles abstraction – is boldly set down in planes and stripes and without any unnecessary ceremony. The painting can be read as a lesson in composition by Mark Rothko, but without strata, impetuous, square. The clouds, tiny boats and the sea barely conceal the painter's pleasure. His name, written in proud calligraphy in the left hand corner, reads 'Jean Brusselmans, 1939'. It is reminiscent of the signature of another autodidact, Henri Rousseau '*le douanier*'. His name is the sign that the work is 'finished'. It is missing from some of his intriguing, complex works (*The Bathing Women* from 1935, for example), as though the painter is trespassing on forbidden terrain, or the canvas is not yet complete.

In another seascape, *Blue Sea* (1932), which contains the shadow of a single lost boat, the water and air are calm and the painting is yet more abstract. A beige strip, as wide as the blue of the high sea that it borders, floats between the water and the sky, a sky that is full of clouds and always moving. The beige area above the horizon divides the canvas into two equal rectangles. It suggests a foggy sunset but this is by no means certain. Two white streaks against the bottom edge also require an explanation: 'The painter must see nature in new ways. He must find the technique that expresses this way of seeing and will therefore be different than the previous one ... What the artist regards as a clear expression will remain a mystery for most of us.'

Brusselmans' seascapes are as immediately recognisable as all of his other work, even though they are so different. He painted the sea for thirty years, always including ships. Two of them dance on the rolling waves in *Storm* (1936).

A dramatic fan of sunlight, painted in rigid strokes of alternating light and dark yellow, falls upon the horizon from two heavy, yellow ringed clouds. The clouds drift off from a peaceful baby blue sky. The storm is almost over. Or is it approaching? Time and motion submit to the brush. On the grey-green sea, which is as stylised as wallpaper, broad foaming waves are juxtaposed with the harsh mountain of sunlight above. This fiery bundle of rays resembles the fan in some of his still lifes, another genre that Brusselmans constantly practised. In *Rainbow* (1932), the white waves roll up to the horizon, which is exceptional. The rainbow itself is drawn with firm hand, a few narrow, concentric half-circles in the uniformly dark air. The rainbow starts at the right hand side of the horizon and is suspended halfway above the left hand side. In this part of the picture, a curtain of rain in bold, sloping stripes shimmers overhead. Time and movement are once again united with air and water.

Jean Brusselmans, *North Sea*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 66.5 cm x 64 cm, Collection Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp. © Sabam Belgium 2013





Jean Brusselmans, *Large Interior*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 150 cm x 150 cm. Collection Groeningemuseum, Bruges. © Sabam Belgium 2013

By contrast, his interiors and busy still lifes are motionless. The four elements – Earth, Fire, Water and Air – animate the banal objects arranged neutrally next to each other in a cosmic rebus. Painting is the creation of an enigma. Brusselmans does this systematically. Yet it is also an adventure: 'I never know in advance how I'm going to start a painting and I never seem to manage to finish it: in that respect I'm like Titian.'

Stubbornly figurative

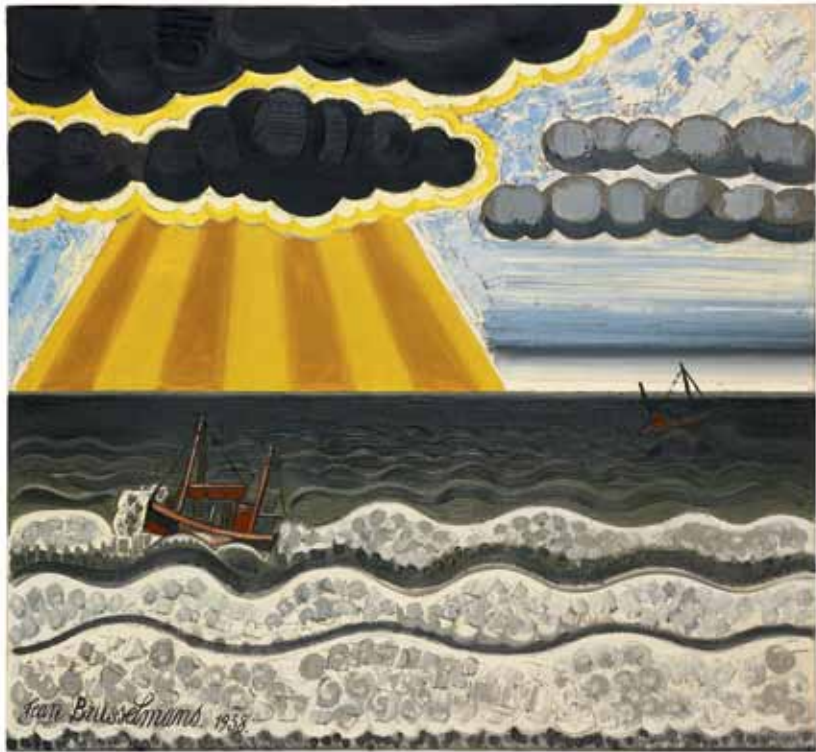
His idiosyncratic exploration of the no man's land between figuration, abstraction and idea, makes Jean Brusselmans (1884-1953) an *artist's artist*. He seeks geometric patterns in seascapes and landscapes. His approach to interiors and still lifes is conceptual and he chooses everyday objects not just for their material, but also their metaphorical, significance. He remains stubbornly figurative and always shows things just as they are. A vase is a vase, a shell is a shell, a house is a house and a field – ideally the undulating Brabant field – be it a square, a rectangle or a diamond, remains a field. He paints the horse or the human figure as though with a stencil. He never succumbs to the temptation of virtuosity. The trivial objects in his still lifes, which recur so persistently, come from his immediate environment. The brass oil lamp is one of his earliest motifs. He associates himself with the petroleum can with its broken spout, one of his best-known fetishes. The matchbox speaks for itself. With these symbols for Fire he combines those for Water. Herrings refer to poverty but perhaps also to Catholic rituals, although Brusselmans was born an anarchist. Scallops allude to restlessness and the pink conch shell evokes exotic dreams. The fan refers to Air and the wicker basket, the fruit and the flowers to the Earth. The chessboard, the vase, the painted china and the few sticks of furniture belong to the little man that he himself is, and from whose perspective he paints the world.

Sometimes he juxtaposes these objects with a complicated Oriental textile pattern – a piece of the original covering of his sofa. It must have cost the

painter a great deal of time and patience, relatively speaking, to depict this object amongst the familiar simplicity of the others. As a consequence, there is something particularly mysterious about it. Over the years, Brusselmans detached the textile fragment from the sofa, which finally got a new cover, and it became an independent part of his large still lifes. According to his friend, the critic Paul Haesaerts, the discovery of the 'embroidery' was a revelation. 'The painter seems to be saying: 'so is the inner composition of my universe' and it's not only through this piece of embroidery that he speaks to us in this way...' In *Still Life with Slices of Sausage* (1936) the carpet pattern conquers the entire upper half of the canvas like a kind of wallpaper or firmament, but when he paints his renowned *Lady on a Sofa* the following year, the upholstery on the sofa is plain. The attention is drawn to another piece of fabric: the black and white checked dress of Mrs Brusselmans who, like *Olympia* by Manet or *Madame Récamier* by David, is reclining on the day bed. Her face is schematic and still. There is no expression in Brusselmans' portraits. The rhythm of her dress is quietly continued in the dotted linoleum of the floor. Perhaps the most



Jean Brusselmans, *Woman at the window*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 90 cm. Collection Groeningemuseum, Bruges. © Sabam Belgium 2013



Jean Brusselmans, *Storm*,
1938. Oil on canvas, Mu.ZEE,
Ostend.
© Sabam Belgium 2013

enigmatic thing of all in this painting is the 'mirror' on the wall behind her. Like an abstract painting, it is divided into two unequal, even rectangles.

A similar abstract composition is integrated into *Woman with Lamp* (1938). Brusselmans quotes abstract art almost carelessly. The Persian pattern jostles with the checked dress of his wife, which he continued to paint until long after her death in the famine of 1943. Brusselmans is not on a quest. He makes sovereign use of what life hands him and gives each new element its place in an ordered world. Within it, the focus is derived from the tangible to the invisible, which is as abstract as the tiled floor, the dress, or the mirror in *Lady on a Sofa*. It is a world in which poverty reigns, although he doesn't stress this. The deprivation is not a theme but more of a reservoir of motifs that have a deeper meaning. The human figure is a decorative object, the shell a world. The Persian textile motif in the 'wallpaper' of a still life foreshadows the black and white dress, but also the abstraction of the trees and shrubs in his landscapes, or the stylised bustle of *Gulls* (1949), which prefigures Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). In the same way that an Easterner knots a carpet or paints a miniature, Jean Brusselmans is consciously two-dimensional. And it is because of this that he comes into conflict with the Western pictorial tradition. The influence of the Orient is not to be excluded by this voracious autodidact. Hanging in *Large Interior* (1936) is the almost life-size portrait of a Chinese official that the artist was given by Luc Haesaerts. The Chinese man is the only 'presence' in the room. Three years later he paints his wife, amongst his familiar objects, reading against the same wall. She is wearing the famous dress, which reduces her, like the print of the Chinese official or the cast of Michelangelo's *Head of a*

Slave facing her, to part of the collection of flowers, vases, displayed plates and jugs, the fruit basket and the large hinged shell from the Caribbean. There is no hierarchy, emotion or emphasis.

One can trace the spots where Brusselmans placed his easel. For his landscapes, this was at the window on the first floor of his house in the then still rural outskirts of Brussels. As 'painter of the Brabant landscape', he was incorporated into the Flemish Expressionists, albeit struggling. His favourite interiors are the attic, with its imposing triangle of roof timbers, and the living room. In Ostend, he painted opposite the lighthouse at the harbour channel or straight in front of the anonymous, universal sea. Sticking to the same viewpoint, the reduction and the repetition of his subjects suggests that what he paints is subordinate to a metaphysical message. 'In my paintings a line remains a line and touches of colour and impasto stay what they are. The true painter renounces *trompe l'oeil* in search of a higher truth. What counts is the inner colour of a painting, which reveals its whole meaning. That colour is not only the result of inspiration but also of a mental process. Making art is giving light to all kinds of things, including the most ungrateful and pernicious.'

Angular and obstinate

A pedestrian bridge in Anderlecht, whether or not with naked swimmers, inspired him for at least twenty years and is another persistent motif. It is his most important cityscape and relates closely to a late group of mythological and religious paintings, the themes of which are rather surprising. The anarchist Brusselmans doesn't flatter. He is angular and obstinate. He refuses to meet expectations. As a consequence, there were no ovations for his work. He was reproached for painting too flatly, too stiffly and without depth, content or atmosphere. To some of his contemporaries, his work was no better than the wallpaper of his interiors. There were attempts to link him with the Brabant Fauvists, an ill-defined group, or, to his horror, with the Flemish Expressionists. Brusselmans, who saw himself as a Flemish painter, remained unruly and wanted to fit in nowhere: 'Initially, I was influenced by Gustave Courbet and Van Gogh. It was only later that I understood Van Eyck, the Greeks and the Egyptians. However it is thanks to the so-called folk art that I've found the path that leads to the true tradition of Flemish art and the essence of our people.'

To this folk art belonged the prints of Epinal, which he copied in his youth. Brusselmans had only attended primary school and never learned to write without mistakes. This reinforced the headstrong stubbornness that he had inherited from the modest but artistic environment in which he was raised. He came from a very musical family and had sung in the children's choir of the Brussels Opera House, La Monnaie / De Munt. He was averse to pathos and chose the implicit over the explicit, suggestion over caricature: painting was a matter of 'mastering the brush like a singer his voice.'

The components of his landscapes are equivalent, in the same way that those of his still lifes and seascapes are. Brusselmans depicts the simple, new, interchangeable homes on the Kapellekensbaan that he saw from his window. After the First World War, Belgium was filled with these uniform working men's houses that always tended to stand in rows. The novelist Louis Paul Boon evoked



Jean Brusselmans, *Grey Winterlandscape*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 86 cm x 57 cm. Collection Groeningemuseum, Bruges. © Sabam Belgium 2013

them in his famous *Chapel Road* (Dutch title: *Kapellekensbaan*). Brusselmans bought one himself, after having moved ten times between 1911 and 1924. It was located in Dilbeek, near his hometown of Brussels, on a hill in the area of Koudenhaard. And it was this name that he adopted, with a sense of irony, for his residence [it literally means 'Cold Chimney']. For twenty years, denial and deprivation constantly haunted him there. Since nobody had a taste for Brusselmans' work, there was more than one occasion when he was forced to sell some of his modest furnishings in order to survive. He didn't completely lack influential defenders – there were the Haesaerts brothers – and in the 1930s and 1940s he began to receive cautious acceptance. His diffidence stood in the way of success. This increased over the years instead of abating, but it also protected his radicalism. And this is precisely why, today, he is recognised as a pioneer.

Brusselmans was not always a recluse. In his hopeful youth, he was a fellow student of other loners: Edgard Tytgat, with whom he shared his love of folk art, and Rik Wouters with whom he took an attic studio on the Twaalf Apostelenstraat in Brussels in 1907 (nine years before Wouters' untimely death). By that time, Brusselmans was twenty-three, and it was already obvious to him that his path would not be strewn with roses. His painting, *The Vale of Sorrow*, was refused for the Godecharle prize. He destroyed it. That same year, he met the woman whom he would marry in 1911, after she had become the mother of his only child, Armand. The musical Marie-Léonie Frisch shared his poverty and was his greatest model. During this promising time, Brusselmans searched for the support of artists' fellowships. Sometimes he founded these himself, like the *Clan du Parruck* in 1912, the year of his debut in *Les Bleus de la G.G.G.* This exhibition included, amongst others, Spilliaert, Tytgat and Permeke and was held at the Georges Giroux gallery, the new Brussels sensation on the Koningstraat. Giroux had recently opened its doors with a startlingly cutting edge exhibition of Italian Futurists. "*J'étais en plein enthousiasme, en pleine production et aussi en pleine misère.*" ['I was full of enthusiasm, in full production and also full of misery']. In 1914, he participated in the last exhibition of *La Libre Esthétique*, the successor of the famous artists' group *Les XX*, the members of which included Ensor, Rops, Khnopff, Rodin and Signac. The First World War quickly dispersed the young generation of Belgian artists. Permeke and Tytgat arrived in England and Wouters never returned from the Netherlands. Brusselmans moved around the outskirts of Brussels like a restless nomad.

No tralala

Three years after the war, he was given his first solo exhibition. It was not in the capital but at the Breckpot Gallery in Antwerp. For Breckpot, it was the first exhibition in a historical series, but it didn't prove to be a breakthrough for Brusselmans. He was twenty when he'd chosen to be a full-time artist. He was now thirty-seven. One after the other, his contemporaries from the School of Latem had all won recognition. This they owed to the critics André De Ridder and Paul-Gustave Van Hecke, who had established the *Sélection* gallery and the eponymous art journal in Brussels, and who had presented the Expressionists alongside Picasso, Matisse and Chagall. Belgian painting wouldn't be seen on such an international stage again until the Belgian World Expo of 1958, a

setback that is still felt today. For Brusselmans, the Sélection gallery was hardly a blessing. The Van Hecke-De Ridder duo considered him to be second class. Georges Giroux, who had exhibited him before the war, died two years after Brusselmans' solo debut. There was, however, one remaining influential friend from the pre-war period: Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert, the curator-in-chief of the Brussels museums between 1918 and 1926. But even this connection yielded little. His work became increasingly sober, his palette sparser, his position ever more isolated. He did odd jobs in advertising to keep his head above water.

But when the financial crisis of 1931 put an end to the boom in the Belgian art world, Brusselmans, who was nearly fifty, stood on the brink of the decade in which he was to flourish. The Fascist wave engulfed Europe, but the Nazis didn't find the Flemish Expressionists, Brusselmans included, 'degenerate'. On the contrary, they were 'interpreters of the fundamental traditions of the race'. Again, there was a protector: Robert-Louis Delevoy, who had opened the Gallery Apollo in Brussels in 1941. As the founder of the *Jeune Peinture Belge* prize and director of the Ecole Supérieure d'Architecture et des Arts Visuels (La Cambre) he had remained influential after the war. In 1972, he edited the *catalogue raisonné* of Brusselmans' work. Just as important was the interest of the art historian and senior civil servant, Emile Langui. Finally, there was the interest shown by Tony Herbert, a Kortrijk industrialist, supporter of the Flemish movement and member of the resistance. In a short period of just a few years, he had purchased sixty paintings and watercolours from Brusselmans. In 1952, a year before the artist's death, he threw a huge party for Brusselmans and invited three hundred prominent guests. Herbert saw many similarities between the wiry artist and himself. 'That hardness, the sharp line, the orthodoxy, no tralala', said his son Anton. Herbert could not understand why he was the only collector of Jean Brusselmans. In his eyes, he was even more important than the celebrated Constant Permeke, of whose work he also possessed a large collection.

At the end of his life, Jean Brusselmans saw the beginnings of recognition. Since his death, it has continued to grow in fits and starts but he is still virtually unknown abroad. It will therefore be many more years before he acquires the place in art history that he so rightfully deserves. ■