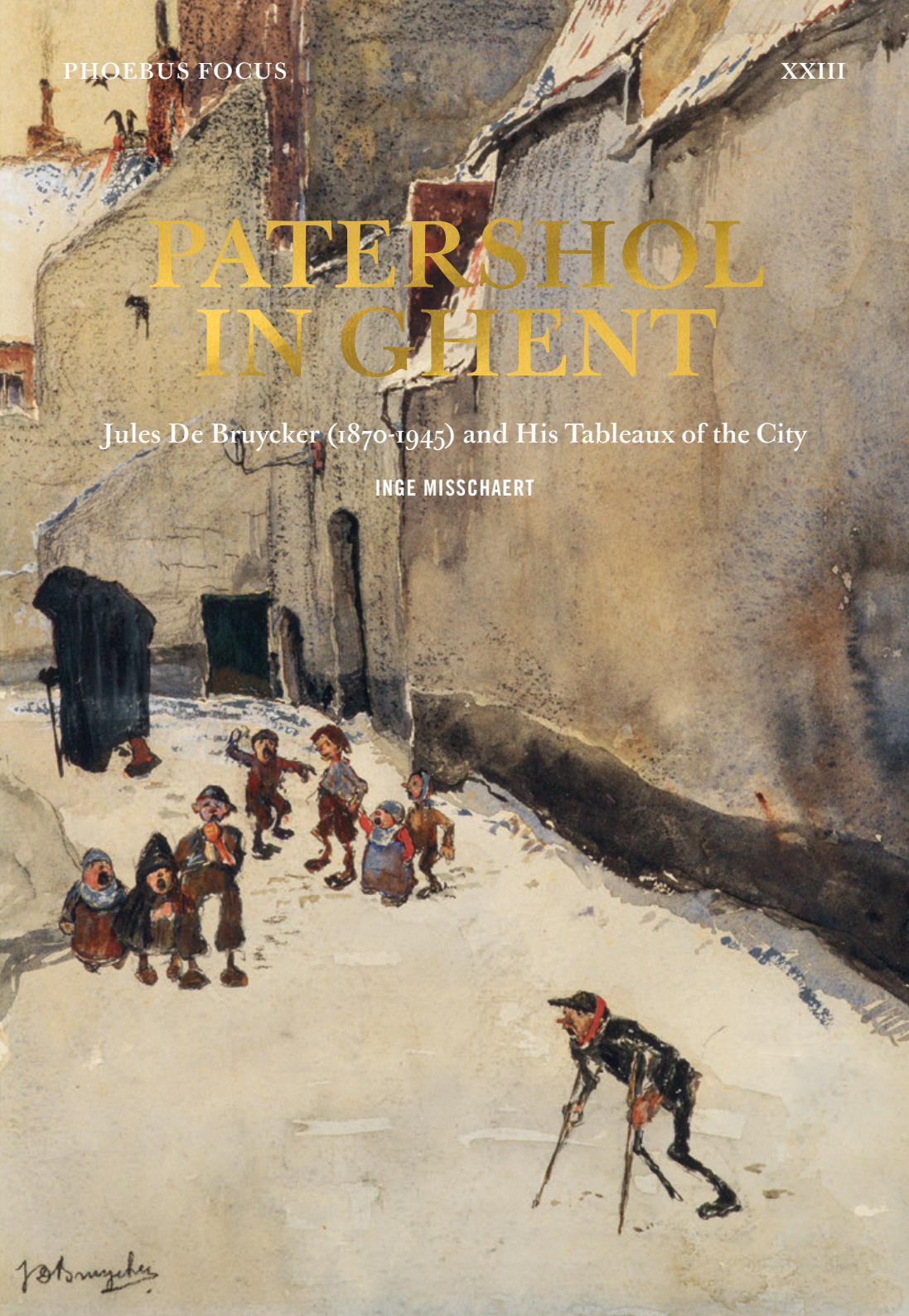


PATERSHOL IN GHENT

Jules De Bruycker (1870-1945) and His Tableaux of the City

INGE MISSCHAERT



The past sets the context for the present. Understanding the past gives us a better insight into who we are today, as individuals and as a society. That's something we at The Phoebus Foundation care about. One of the ways to access the past is through the artefacts and works of art our forebears created.

The Phoebus Foundation art collection is structured around five diverse clusters that have evolved over time. They range from archaeological textiles of the pharaonic period and twentieth-century Latin American art to works from the CoBrA movement and even to port heritage. And to a collection of works of art from our own part of the world – the Low Countries – by masters of the Middle Ages with resounding names like Memling and Van der Goes and celebrity artists of the Baroque such as Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens. The list of local lads made good continues with late-nineteenth-century originals like Emile Claus, Léon Spilliaert, James Ensor and Edgard Tytgat, and the artists of the Sint-Martens-Latem schools – Gustave Van de Woestyne, Valerius De Saedeleer and George Minne, Frits Van den Berghe, Constant Permeke and Gust. De Smet. And thus, via the winding ways of art history, we arrive at the present.

Whether it's an early-Christian tunic, a Bruegel drawing, or a Karel Appel painting, every object attests in its own unique way to the context in which it was made. Each volume in the *Phoebus Focus* series tells the story behind the artefact or work of art, bringing what might seem merely a relic of the dim and distant past back to vivid and often surprising life.



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FOREWORD

Jules De Bruycker embodies nostalgia. He confronts us with a purportedly lost Ghent of the past. He usually achieves this through the medium of graphic art. He creates the visual equivalent of the old Ghent dialect with the clan of a Gustave Doré and the irony of James Ensor. After all, De Bruycker belongs to Ghent as much as *Klokke Roeland*, *Gerard de Duivel* and Marc Sleen's *Nero*. His cityscapes and local scenes earned him home-grown world fame. Meanwhile, De Bruycker has also acquired a place in the classic canon of graphic art. Nevertheless, in art-historical terms he is still underestimated. This is because Jules De Bruycker is an unparalleled graphic storyteller.

His work, even when he paints, is imbued with this talent. At first glance his depiction of Patershol in Ghent is little more than a charming testimony of life in the working class neighbourhood. Patershol was once a castle hamlet in the shadow of the Gravensteen. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it grew into a rather grand district, to subsequently lapse back into a working-class, impoverished neighbourhood. Patershol became synonymous with the deep human misery suffered by the masses. In his watercolour De Bruycker confronts the viewer with this reality. He does so with a directness that makes Ensor's aloof cynicism pale by comparison. Jules De Bruycker is, just like Pieter Bruegel, sneering and profoundly emotional, and sarcastically engaged all at the same time. What's more, his composition is bathed in a masterly nineteenth-century luminism, with the light as the mood key. The snow, the wintry sky and grey walls become means of expression that underline the message. This makes *Patershol in Ghent* a *document humain*, with De Bruycker playing a dual role of attentive reporter of his social environment, and artist, who is able to translate what he sees into artistic values worthy of Bruegel.

In this edition of *Phoebus Focus* Inge Misschaert affords Jules De Bruycker the attention he deserves. She takes the reader on a journey through the alleys of early twentieth-century Ghent and adds a touch of colour to the dismal poverty of the time.

I hope you enjoy reading this *Phoebus Focus* as much as I have.

Dr Katharina Van Cauteren

Chief of Staff, Chancellery of The Phoebus Foundation

Jules De Bruycker

Patershol in Ghent, c.1915

Watercolour with pencil, 455 × 230 mm

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PATERSHOL TE GENT



J. B. M. 1895

A GHENT ALLEY

The alley is blanketed in snow. The scene is pure and white, but at the same time it cannot conceal the wretched neighbourhood. The wall is grey and drab, and in the background a dark house draws in all the light. The sky is wintry, whitish-yellow, heralding more snow is on the way. A small group of high-spirited children is playing on the snow-covered road, seemingly oblivious to the cold. In the foreground we see a figure walking on crutches; he has tied on his hat with a red scarf. We can barely make out his crippled leg. He appears to be in a hurry, perhaps to evade the children who look as though they are pelting him with snowballs. The children are shrieking, many of them depicted with mouths wide open. Are they shrieking with glee? Their actions suggest this is the case, but their shabby clothes hint at a different scenario. A figure wearing a dark, hooded cloak is walking out of the picture, in parallel to the drab wall. We cannot see if the alley comes to an end – perhaps the man is on his way home. However, on closer examination, the deceptive simplicity and purity of the work reveal an abundance of treasures.

This watercolour belongs to The Phoebus Foundation's collection, and depicts a view of Trommelstraat in Patershol, Ghent by Jules De Bruycker (1870-1945). The official title *Patershol in Ghent* is sometimes replaced by the more romantic *The Alley*, yet this seemingly peaceful scene is misleading. The artist was known for his anti-bourgeois views, which means his work can be considered as a condemnation.¹ No doubt these influences had something to do with his involvement in the Latem School. This *Phoebus Focus* is dedicated to an intriguing artist, who was considered the finest etcher of his time, to the working class and the tableaux of the city and its inhabitants. *Patershol in Ghent* stands out in De Bruycker's oeuvre, which predominantly consists of etchings, but reflects the same degree of skill by this talented artist.

Jules De Bruycker

Around the Gravensteen in Ghent (detail), 1913

Etching, 740 × 610 mm

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IVAN DE WOESTIJNE
ANNO Dⁿⁱ MCMVII





THE LATEM SCHOOL

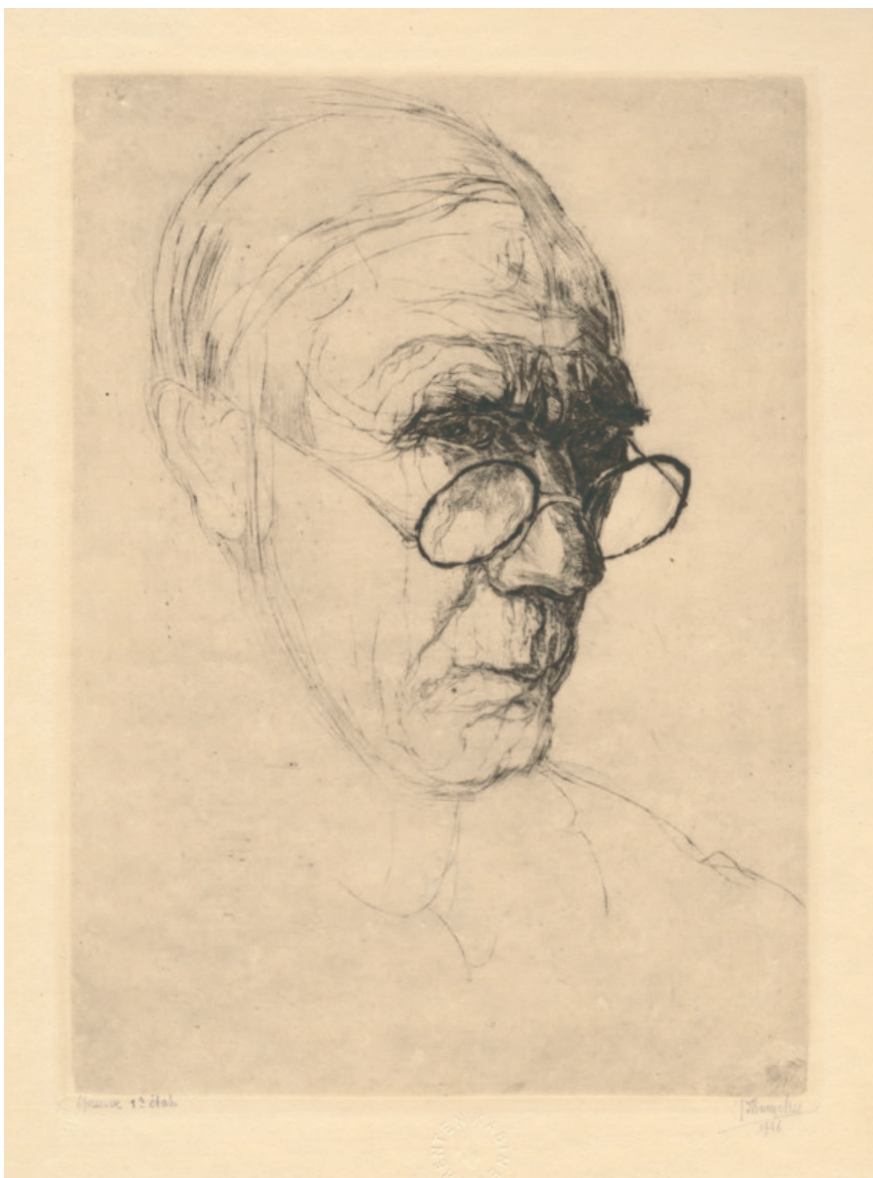
The Latem School refers to groups of artists mainly concentrated around the village of Sint-Martens-Latem and the surrounding area.² The artists who retreated there to paint in the midst of nature often stayed in nearby Ghent too. The first group primarily consisted of progressive young artists who had little regard for the imposed academic norms. They wanted to create paintings that were much more realistic. They included Albert Servaes (1883-1966), George Minne (1866-1941), Gustave Van de Woestyne (1881-1947), Valerius De Saedeleer (1867-1941) and Albijn Van den Abeele (1835-1918). The poet Karel Van de Woestyne (1878-1929) and painter Emile Claus (1849-1924), who worked in nearby Astene, were involved in this first 'school'. However, it wasn't a school as such; it was a group of artists who could identify with each other's realistic ideas. Jules De Bruycker came into contact with the group of artists through his friendship with the Van de Woestyne brothers, mainly when they were based in Ghent, in Patershol. A second 'school' adopted a more expressionist style and can be situated in around 1905, whose artists included Constant Permeke (1886-1952).

Gustave Van de Woestyne

Bad Sower, 1908

Oil on panel, 56.2 × 45.5 cm

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Jules De Bruycker

Portrait of the Artist, 1926

Etching, 217 × 160 mm

ANTWERP, PLANTIN-MORETUS MUSEUM

THE ROOTS OF A WALLPAPERER'S SON

Jules-François De Bruycker was born in 1870 in Jan Breydelstraat in Ghent. His father had a wallpapering-upholstering business. De Bruycker's talent for drawing became apparent at an early age and he already attended lessons at the academy at the tender age of ten. When his father died in 1884, he was forced to abandon his training and earn a living as an assistant upholsterer. In 1893, he picked up where he had left off and followed lessons given by Théodore Canneel (1817-1892), Louis Tytgadt (1841-1918) and Jean Delvin (1853-1922), among others. He combined his studies with his work in order to make ends meet. From the beginning, De Bruycker focused on the ordinary man in his own habitat.³ His observation was as sharp as a pin and he often portrayed his figures as caricatures, sometimes making them look a little ridiculous. Their awkward and scrawny demeanour is utterly compelling.

His first successful exhibition was at the salon in Ghent in 1903. It resulted in the purchase of his *Flea Market (Voddenmarkt)* watercolour for the Brussels Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Through his collaboration with Franz Hellens for the novel *En ville morte* (1905), which is set entirely in Ghent, he also began to delve deeper into the city's architecture, which from then on would play a prominent role in his work.⁴

He was drawn to artists such as Albert Baertsoen (1866-1922), Jean-Louis Forain (1852-1931), Gustave Doré (1832-1883) and Rembrandt (1606-1669). He was fascinated by the chiaroscuro in Rembrandt's work and Doré's elongated figures. The fact that he was inspired by their work more than once, without compromising his own talent, is evident in many of his etchings and drawings. He was successful at the Venice Biennale in 1914, with, for example, *House of Jan Palfijn in Ghent*. He looked for a studio in Patershol, where he drew and etched the neighbourhood's many alleys and their residents.⁵

During the First World War, many artists fled to London. De Bruycker stayed in the studio of James McNeil Whistler (1834-1903), where he predominantly worked from his imagination. It was not possible to draw in the street for fear of being arrested for alleged espionage.⁶ In London he also met Raphaëlle De Leyn, from Ghent, whom he married in 1919.

The following year he returned to Ghent and continued to work, but focused more on the emotion instead of the purely caricatural. He illustrated the well-known book by Charles De Coster *La légende d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak* (1867) and in Paris he met Frans Masereel (1889-1972), whose portrait he also produced. However, monuments and urbanity continued to play a major role in his work, perhaps even the greatest, as revealed below. De Bruycker continued his work for a long time, despite the fact that his deteriorating health eventually meant he could no longer etch, a technique that requires considerable physical exertion. Nevertheless, he drew and created watercolours, mainly solitary figures, including a large number of intriguing self-portraits, until his death in 1945.

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Albert Baertsoen

Thaw in Ghent, c.1902

Oil on canvas, 118.5 × 167 cm

GHENT, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Jules De Bruycker

House of Jan Palfijn in Ghent (detail), 1912

Etching, 606 × 480 mm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION









Jules De Bruycker

Beggar, 1921

Etching, 400 × 300 mm

GHENT, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

ARTISTS IN GHENT IN AROUND 1900

The negative aspects of industrialisation were felt throughout Europe circa 1900. A revolutionary mood reigned in Ghent. Labourers had few rights and there was no social safety net. There was great social inequality and the linguistic battle between the Flemish and French speaking parts of Belgium raged.⁷ The well-known writer Karel Van de Woestyne, who was a friend of Jules De Bruycker, aptly described the mood:

‘In Flanders Ghent was the focal point for what radiated as a black, searing light that intended to purge but caused destruction in the process. Strike after strike broke out, the strikers thronging the streets and squares, which the police swept clean of citizens, with the slow lingering, but densely packed body of the unemployed...’⁸

The arrows of the young and frenzied guard were aimed at the cause of all that misery. ‘And the bourgeoisie, full of hate and venom, afraid to walk the streets, grumbled and cursed behind closed doors, where the atmosphere of fear hung thicker and was more oppressive than on the streets.’⁹ It is no wonder that the artists saw this bourgeois morality as a threat.¹⁰ De Bruycker too, who was born working class, keenly felt this inequality and judged them harshly in his art. This is reflected in the mood of his etchings and watercolours, which exude a sense of bleakness, especially when you look at what plays out in the shadows.

The artists of the Latem School divided their time between Sint-Martens-Latem and Patershol in Ghent. George Minne and Valerius De Saedeleer, among others, were very socio-critical in their artworks. They abandoned the academy's established values. Minne's sculptures testify to this view: the expression is created as a result of the figures' distortion.¹¹ This is also discernible in De Bruycker's etchings: the caricatural and elongated figures, which afford them a ridiculous air, means that we see man in the urban fabric in all his vulnerability: impoverished, dirty, crushed by the system and, in many cases, not able to break through the impasse.

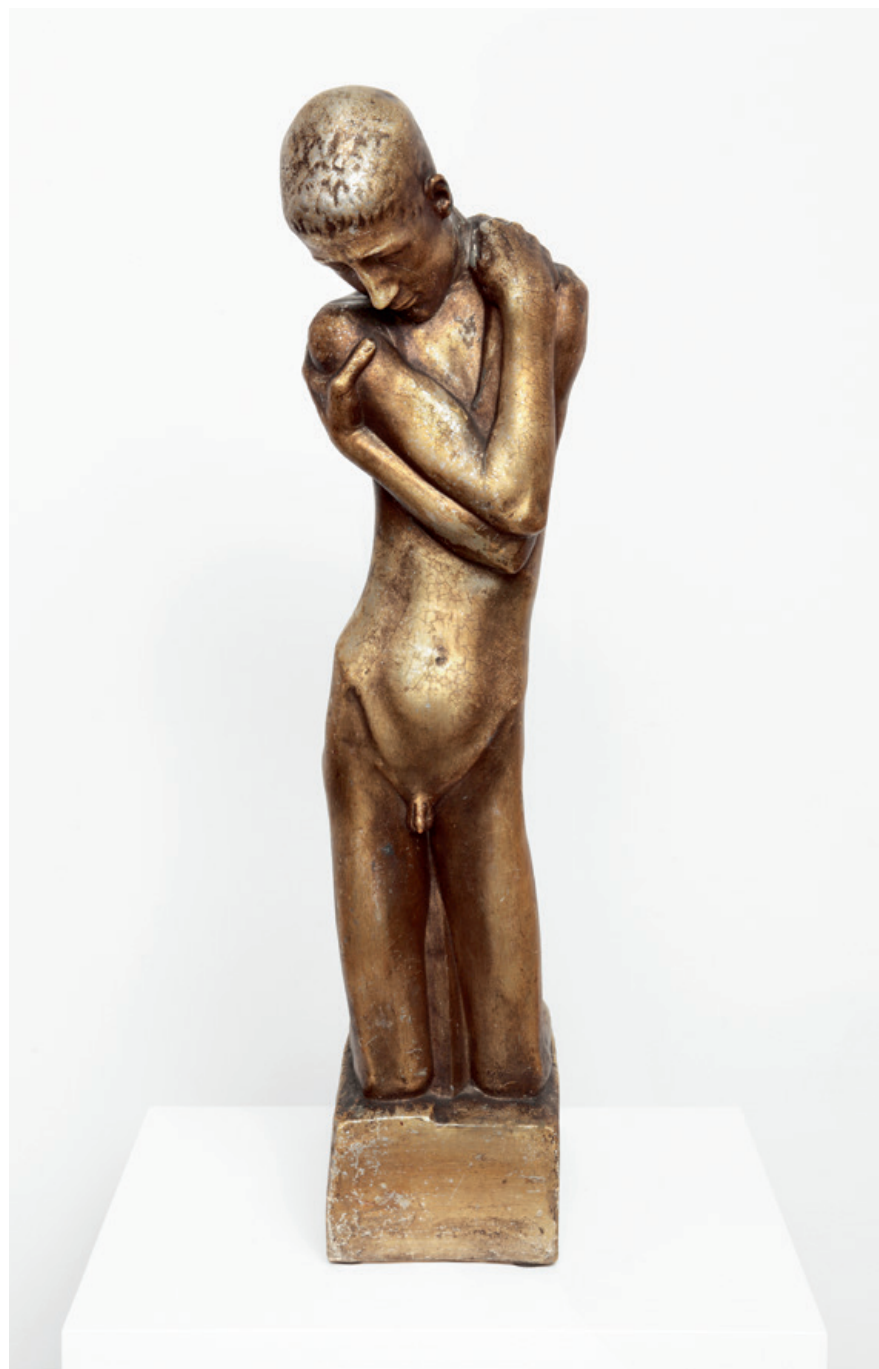
The young guard of artists convened in a former monastery in Patershol, gathered around a stove in a gloomy pub and read the work of writers such as Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) and Paul Verlaine (1844-1896).

George Minne

Kneeling Youth of the Fountain with Kneeling Youths, 1898

Plaster and silver patina, 80 × 40 × 19.5 cm

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Théo Van Rysselberghe

Lecture of Emile Verhaeren, 1903

Oil on canvas, 181 × 241 cm

GHENT, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Valerius De Saedeleer

Pear Tree, c.1926

Oil on paper inlaid on canvas, 230 × 190 cm

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