

The English Years
1914-1919

Constant Permeke

**The English Years
1914-1919**

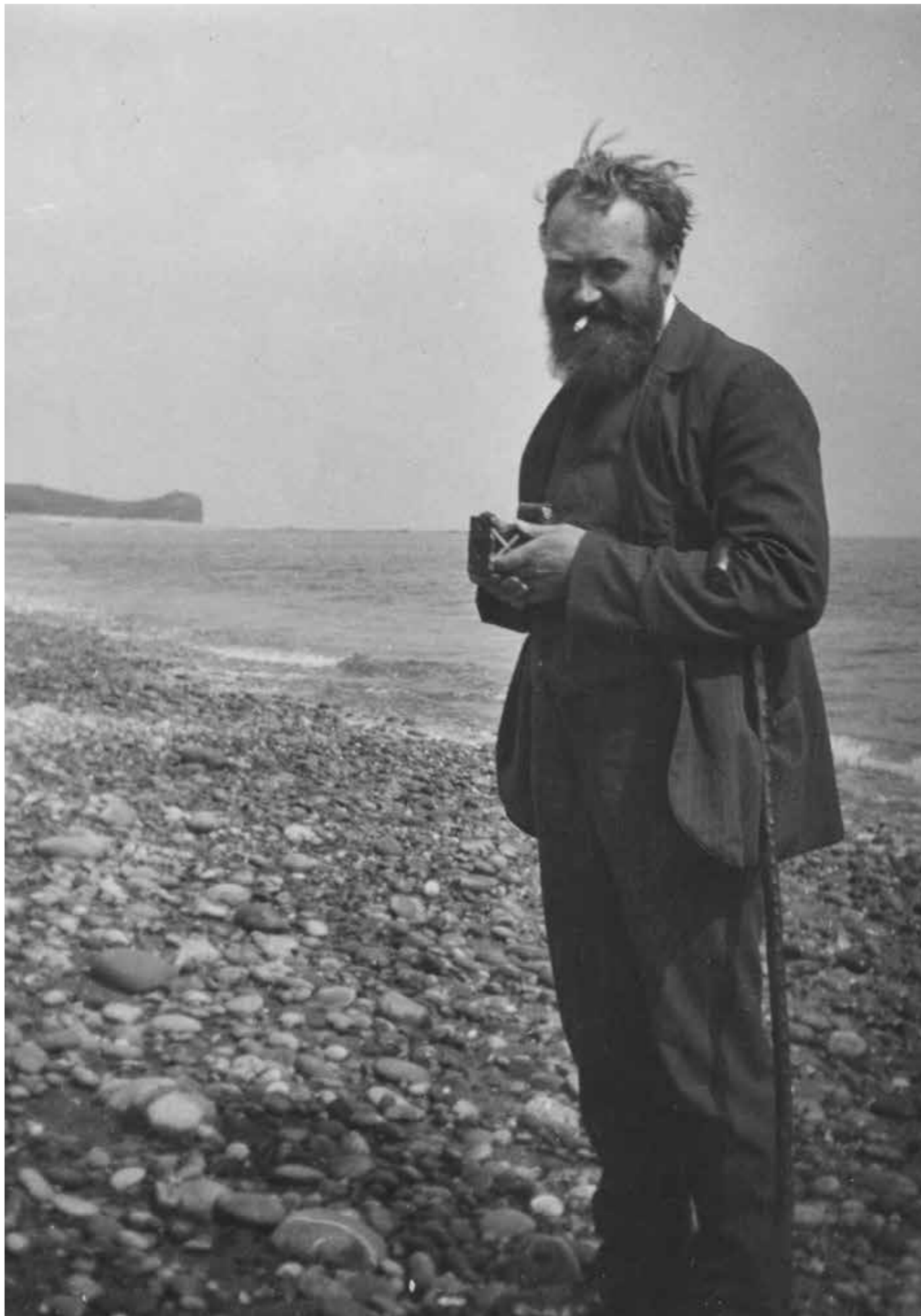


FIG.1 Constant Permeke, 1917, Mu.ZEE - Permeke Museum

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What alliance can do

BRUNO VERBERGT AND INNE GHEERAERT

You turned 28 a few days ago. Your wife is six months pregnant with your first child. It is now six years since you left the art academy. You are a painter, that is your calling. You have had the chance to exhibit work here and there in salons alongside the work of international painters whom you admire. And then – perhaps it was only inevitable – it happens. War breaks out. Germany invades your country, people flee. The first stories of what the occupiers are doing with those who stayed behind are anything but pleasant. You live in the west of your country but are called up, and of course, you defend your country. A few weeks later, you are wounded by shrapnel on the front line. Great Britain, which immediately saw the invasion as crossing a red line, took you in as a war refugee. There was a possibility that your wounded leg might have to be amputated. After a few hellish weeks your heavily pregnant wife arrives in this friendly neighbouring country. Your son is born, surrounded by refugees.

How Constant Permeke felt during the summer and autumn of 1914 can probably be compared to how a Ukrainian artist from Lviv felt in February 2022 when Russia invaded. What they had deemed impossible had in fact happened. Unfortunately, because of the war in Ukraine, we now have a much clearer idea as to what Permeke and his wife Marietje went through in 1914 than from the many commemorations of the First World War between 2014–2018.

The art of living is not only the hope of a better future but also resilience – taking fate into one's own hands as best one can, being thankful for fresh chances whenever they arise. Which is what Constant Permeke and his family did. In England, they moved after a while to rural Wiltshire, just east of Bath, and later to lovely Devon. They withdrew, away from the city, but also away from other artist colonies. The painter painted and gradually changed his style, colouring and language. Seclusion offered a chance for revitalisation and experimentation.

Britain gave a lot of Belgians the same chances. It was a matter of course for the British, because the Germans had violated Belgium's neutrality: they invaded Belgium on the morning of 4 August 1914, while in fact they had no right whatsoever to pass through the country. That same day Britain declared war on Germany. Receiving and caring for victims of war was a given fact. It was not only a sign of steadfastness



CAT. 9 Constant Permeke, *True Stories*, c. 1916 (detail), oil on canvas, 77 x 102 cm, Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle and Heino/Wijhe



FIG. 12



FIG. 13



FIG. 17



FIG. 19



FIG. 15



FIG. 14



FIG. 18



FIG. 20



FIG. 16

FIG. 12
Marie Delaere with daughter Beatty, 1917,
Mu.ZEE – Permeke Museum

FIG. 13-14
The Permeke family's home,
Dunsters cottage, Chardstock, 1916,
PAWV – Willy Van den Bussche Archive

FIG. 15-16
Stephanie Buytaert, Constant
Permeke's mother, with her daughter-
in-law and grandchildren, 1917,
Mu.ZEE – Permeke Museum

FIG. 17
Marie Delaere with Beatty on the beach, 1917,
Mu.ZEE – Permeke Museum

FIG. 18
Marie Delaere in the sea, 1917,
Mu.ZEE – Permeke Museum

FIG. 19-20
Marie Delaere with children on the beach,
1917, PAWV – Willy Van den Bussche Archive

watercolour to him, depicting a child taking his first steps in a sunny garden, which may have been his son John.²⁶ In his turn, De Smet gifted his Ostend friend a watercolour depicting Marietje with a baby accompanied by another lady.²⁷ In an interview with the popular weekly magazine *Het Rijk der Vrouw* from 1957, Léon De Smet also recounts how apparently, at the time, he had helped Permeke to sell some of his expressionist works in intellectual London circles.²⁸ Whether Jules De Bruycker (1870–1945), who lived out the war in London, ever met Permeke in Chardstock is unclear, but he did have two watercolours by him from 1915 in his personal collection, one of which (*Mother and Child*) is inscribed: 'To J. Debruycker, England 1915'.²⁹

And then there is the correspondence that Permeke maintained with, among others, the author André De Ridder (1888–1961), who kept him up to date on what was happening at that time in the artistic world in the Netherlands. De Ridder was a firm believer in Gust De Smet (1877–1943) and Frits Van den Berghe (1883–1939). To promote those artists living in the Netherlands, and contemporary art in general, he founded the *Open Wegen* association in 1916 in Amsterdam. Right from the start, De Ridder also invited Permeke to join the association.³⁰ Consequently, there are several elements that can qualify Roger Avermaete's assertion, namely that Permeke, 'the solitary one', lives in Stanton and subsequently in Chardstock 'in total seclusion' and 'knows nothing about what happens in the world except that there is a war raging'.³¹ On the other hand, the many reflections on Permeke's art, which are often linked to this supposed solitude, should possibly be considered with some reservation.

Following on from Croydon, Permeke, with two works (landscapes), was able to take part in the *Exposición de arte belga a beneficio de los artistas víctimas de la guerra* that Paul Lambotte organised at the end of 1916 in Madrid.³² In the course of 1916, Permeke thus appears to have found a more established place in the active community of Belgian artists in Great Britain.

'THE PIÈCE DE RÉSISTANCE OF THE EXHIBITION'

In Chardstock, colourfulness reappeared once again in Permeke's work. The landscapes that he painted in 1916 and 1917 were initially idyllic-looking, optimistic scenes in soft colours that gradually evolve into restless, quite abstract works that seem to be ablaze, in which yellow and red dominate. For the two successive exhibitions in the Dowdeswell Galleries in London, in May and June of 1917, he exhibited a series of large works on cardboard. Unfortunately, up until now the catalogues remain untraceable, although in a report on the first exhibition, where no fewer than 174 works were shown,³³ Jean de Bosschère wrote that Permeke's *Landscape*

CAT. 2, p. 31



FIG. 31 Saint Andrew's School in Chardstock, with Constant Permeke's studio under the roof, 1916, PAWV – Willy Van den Bussche Archive

FIG. 37, p. 35



FIG. 32 Marie Delaere and daughter Beatty, 1917, Mu.ZEE – Permeke Museum Archive



CAT. 1 Constant Permeke, *Motherhood (Woman from Ostend)*, 1913, oil on canvas, 74 × 55 cm, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen St 69



FIG. 33 Constant Permeke, *The Three Generations*, 1915, current collection unknown



FIG. 34 Constant Permeke's mother with Marie Delaere and grandchildren, 1917, Sidford, Mu.ZEE – Permeke Museum

with *Rider* was sufficient 'to mark him as an extraordinary painter'. It can be assumed that this refers to the work printed in colour on page 12 of Avermaete's *Permeke*, which after the war would become part of the art collection of the later head curator of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, Arthur Cornette (1880–1945). In the second exhibition, De Bosschère was particularly struck by 'Permeke's delightful green'. In the absence of a catalogue, it cannot be said with any certainty which work or works are referred to here, but the – indeed delightful green – works *English Landscape* and *Devonshire Landscape* from 1916–1917 might well be eligible.³⁴

One exhibited canvas – and it is by no means a small work – that strangely enough seems to have escaped De Bosschère's attention is *The Butcher*. The London *Weekly Dispatch* correspondent, Bernard B. Falk, did, however, notice it. In his review of the exhibition, he underlined how well the Belgian artists in Britain had managed to adapt to the circumstances, and 'in spite of the deep-rooted conservatism of the English people when it comes to artistic ideal and preferences', had slowly but surely gained recognition. Although Jules De Bruycker's harrowing war drawings made a great impression on Falk, it was the 'remarkable art' of Constant Permeke in particular that fascinated him, and especially *The Butcher*. It was certainly not a work, according to Falk, that appealed to the average public taste, but 'the art lovers who demand that their art, like their whisky, shall be strong and undiluted, will welcome the canvas'. Falk considered it to be the most original work on display and 'certainly the pièce de résistance of the exhibition'.³⁵

The fact that a painting such as *The Butcher* was exhibited in the Dowdeswell Galleries implies that the Belgian exhibitions were not intentionally curated in a conservative manner, such as is sometimes implied in the literature.³⁶ Whatever was available was shown: pre-war work and work that had been created in the United Kingdom, regardless of the artistic orientation of the artist. Indeed, this led to not everything that was to be seen at the exhibition being equally inspired or of a high standard. However, the idea was to showcase the art of occupied Belgium to the British public and to give Belgian artists a forum, and there was certainly room for innovative insights as well. Permeke's *The Butcher* was perhaps one of the most remarkable works created by a Belgian artist in Britain during the First World War.

Whether Permeke exhibited later in 1917 or in 1918 cannot be stated with any certainty given the absence of some catalogues. In any case, Paul Lambotte, in an article in *The Connoisseur* in April 1918, bemoaned the fact that some Belgian artists 'whose personality and talent are extremely interesting', including Jenny Montigny (1875–1937) and Constant Permeke, were seen far too little at exhibitions to gain a proper understanding of the evolution of their work in the past three years.³⁷ However, it is certain that Permeke spent some time in London in April and May of 1918.³⁸

CAT. 6, p. 38
FIG. 38, p. 39

In late 1917, Permeke and his family moved to the coastal town of Sidmouth, which was still along the same railway line that connects the southwest of England to the capital. Marietje Permeke had already stayed there in 1916 and 1917 a few times on her own, perhaps to earn a living, because from January 1916 Constant was no longer considered to be on active service and his monthly pay of 75 francs had been reduced to half-pay, 50 francs.

By May 1918, the family had already exchanged their small terraced house in New Town, Sidmouth, for accommodation in Comus Villas in the neighbouring village of Sidford. Permeke named this new home Den Braekel, which was also the name of the house in Sint-Martens-Latem where he had lived before the war.³⁹ In August he was finally demobilised. Later, he would be awarded a 15 per cent invalidity allowance and corresponding pension for the injuries he had sustained in 1914.⁴⁰

Permeke carried on painting, yet his production in 1918 appears to be less extensive than in Chardstock. Perhaps the lack of a studio is the reason behind that. From this period, it is the fiery landscapes that are best known, which include works that he produced for clients whom he had met through Jacob de Graaff.⁴¹ The autumn of 1918 was however an eventful time. On 20 October a third child was born into the family (Paul) and on 11 November the guns finally fell silent. Permeke didn't escape the Spanish flu and there were even fears for his life, but by late January 1919 the worst had past.⁴² On 2 April 1919, the Permekes returned to Ostend aboard a Russian cargo ship.⁴³



FIG. 35 Sidmouth, Devon

- 1 The author thanks Dr Christophe Declercq for proofreading this contribution and for his additions and remarks.
- 2 Military dossier Constant Permeke, Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History Brussels (KMLKB), Mil. No. 102.53926 – File 6304091; The Central Register of War Refugees, Central Register of Belgian Refugees (AGR, CR), 1914–1919, no. 527.
- 3 Creswick 1915, p. 17–22.
- 4 Avermaete 1970, p. 70.
- 5 In November 1914 there were some 320,000 Belgians who fled to neutral Holland, though more than 200,000 fellow countrymen returned home in the months afterwards. By far the largest number of refugees could be found in France, where at the end of 1918 still some 325,000 Belgians remained. From 1915 up until the end of the war there were roughly 200,000 Belgian refugees in the United Kingdom. Figures in Amara 2008, p. 81, 161, 243, 249.
- 6 Vermeir 2022, p. 55–59.
- 7 Kerremans 1989, p. 33–35.
- 8 De Visscher-D'Haeye 1989, p. 27–28.
- 9 Verdickt 2002, p. 74–78.
- 10 De Smet 2009, p. 339.
- 11 London 1915.
- 12 Van den Bussche 1986, p. 20–21; KMLKB, Mil. No. 102.53926 – File 6304091, and AGR, CR, no. 527 (Certificate of Registration Constantinus Permeke, 23 December 1914).
- 13 Kingston upon Thames 1915.
- 14 Lambotte 1916b, p. 199–204; Cardiff 1915, p. 7; Brighton 1915; Oxford 1915.
- 15 Vermeir 2022, p. 55; Verdickt 2002, p. 59.
- 16 London 1917a; London 1917b.
- 17 See recently Jan Ceuleers, in: Ceuleers 2024, p. 9.
- 18 KMLKB, Mil. No. 102.53926 – File 6304091.
- 19 Van den Bussche 1986, p. 23.
- 20 AGR, CR, no. 527.
- 21 *The Artist's Cottage*, Christie's auction in Amsterdam, 28 May 2002, lot 211. Portrait of Jos Van Wassenhove, Christie's auction in Amsterdam, 3 June 2003, lot 294.
- 22 Also evidenced from a photograph kept in the Permeke Museum in Jabbeke (ref. 1917_03).
- 23 *Croydon Times*, 25 October 1916, p. 5.
- 24 Kraayenga 2002, p. 23; Avermaete 1970, p. 87.
- 25 De Bosschère 1917b, p. 33–34; Willy Van den Bussche 1986, p. 23, identified *True Stories* with the works *Landscape*, *Evening* (no. 70) or *Evening* (no. 104) mentioned in the Croydon catalogue. It is plausible that the painting was exhibited in Croydon under a different title (also given by the artist), but it is perhaps more likely that it refers to the work *Invalid* (no. 72), criticised by De Bosschère.
- 26 *Landscape with Trees and Little Boy*, Vanderkindere auction (Brussels), 23 May 2023, lot 61.
- 27 Van den Bussche 1986, p. 24.
- 28 Bosschaert 1989, p. 48.
- 29 *Cottage in Stanton St Bernard, Wiltshire* (private collection) and *Mother and Child* (private collection).
- 30 De Ridder 1946, p. 418–419.
- 31 Avermaete 1970, p. 72.
- 32 Madrid 1916a, p. 3; Madrid 1916b.
- 33 *The Westminster Gazette*, 5 May 1917, p. 5. The proceeds from this sales exhibition were divided among the exhibitors and the British Red Cross.
- 34 De Bosschère 1917b, p. 131.
- 35 Falk 1917, p. 5.
- 36 Verdickt 2002, p. 57.
- 37 Lambotte 1918, p. 187.
- 38 AGR, CR, no. 527.
- 39 Van den Bussche 1986, p. 28.
- 40 KMLKB, Mil. No. 102.53926 – File 6304091.
- 41 Constant Permeke to Jacob de Graaff, 5 November 1918, KMSKB, Archive for Contemporary Art (AHK), num. 40.169.
- 42 'I have just recovered from a near fatal illness – and it gives me great pleasure to inform you that it has restored my courage and gives me hope of a full recovery.' Constant Permeke to Jacob de Graaff, 26 January 1919 (AHK, num. 40.170).
- 43 Avermaete 1970, p. 87.



CAT. 2 Constant Permeke, *Mother and Child*, 1915, watercolour and ink on paper, 22 × 13 cm, private collection



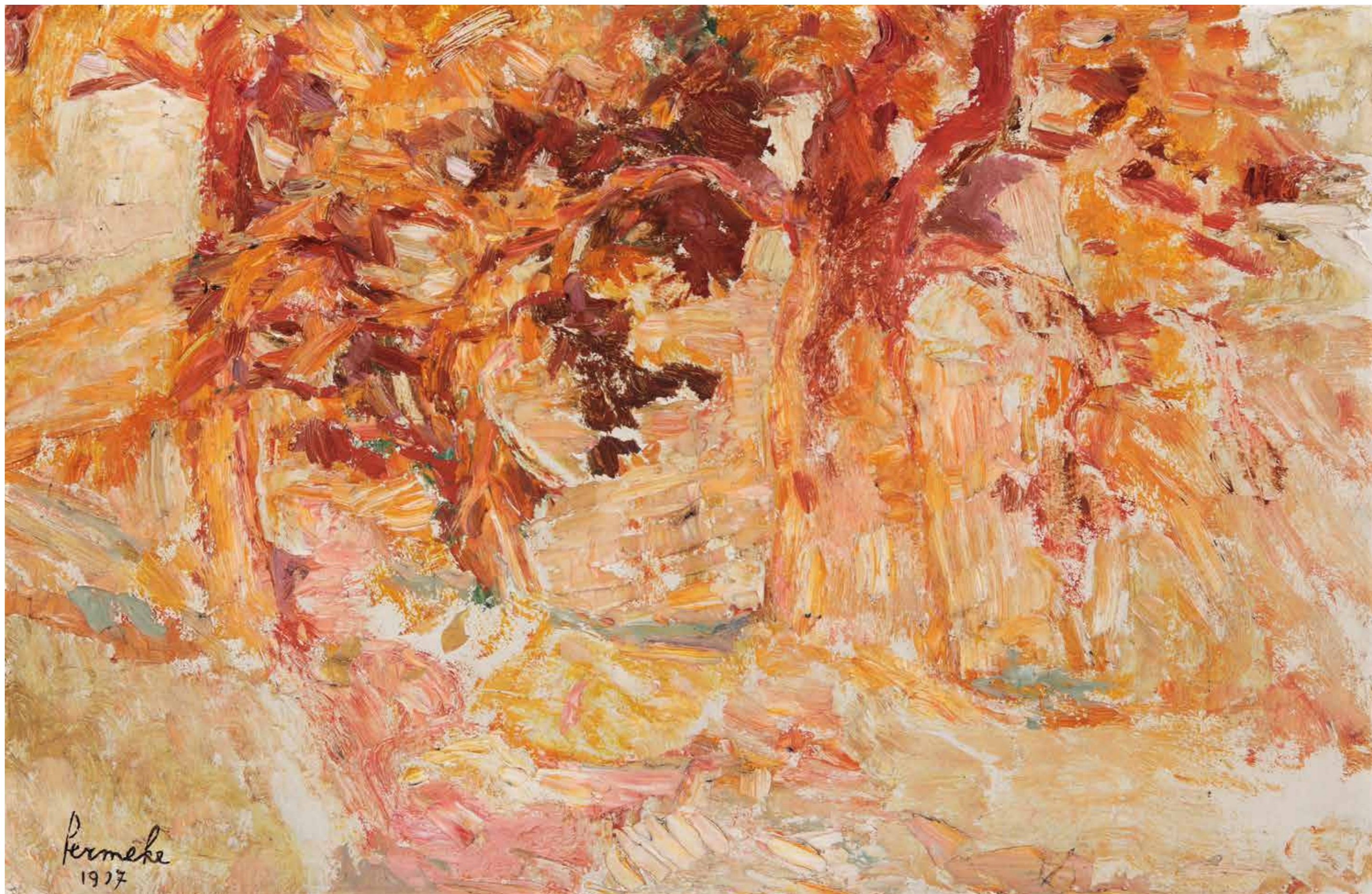
FIG. 36 Constant Permeke, *[Stanton St Bernard]*, 1915, watercolour on paper, current collection unknown



FIG. 37 Constant Permeke, *Landscape with Rider*, 1916-1917, current collection unknown



CAT. 5 Constant Permeke, *The Butcher*, 1916, oil on canvas, 116 × 147 cm, Museum van Elsene – Musée d'Ixelles, Flemish Community collection



CAT.20 Constant Permeke, *Trees in the Sun, Devonshire*, 1917, oil on panel, 31 × 47 cm, private collection



CAT. 21 Constant Permeke, *View of Devonshire*, 1917, oil on plywood, 45.5 × 31 cm, private collection



CAT. 22 Constant Permeke, *Landscape in Devonshire*, 1917, oil on panel, 41.5 × 55 cm, Mu.ZEE – Permeke Museum, inv. K002034, Flemish Community collection

Jacob and Louise de Graaff

Early collectors of Permeke

JAN CEULEERS

On 23 April 1919, Gustave van de Woestyne wrote about the De Graaffs from the seaside resort of Littlehampton in West Sussex to his brother Karel, who had spent the war in Belgium:

Here in London, I had to make a solemn promise to some very good friends of mine, a Dutch lady and gentleman, that every quarter I would come to London for a few days. And a promise is a promise. I have also been asked to urge you to go and meet them. They are the finest people in the world. They live in a lovely house with a lovely, beautiful garden. They have 2 cars, not to be sneezed at, and are devotees of museums and beautiful concerts. If there is anything beautiful to see or hear in London they are there, and I can assure you that there is plenty to see and hear, and of course we would be obliged to accompany them by car driven by a dignified and competent chauffeur who had fought the krauts for 4 years. I'm sure you'd feel right at home there and have a good time.¹

Van de Woestyne was one of the Belgian artists who, during the war, could count on the De Graaffs buying their work as well as their generous support.² His letter gives a good idea of their social status and their interest in art. Jacob de Graaff (1873–1947), son of a wealthy family from Rotterdam, married Louise Bachiene (1870–1963), who was born on the island of Java, in August 1899 in The Hague. Shortly after their marriage, the couple left for London where Jacob set up De Graaff & Baker, a company dealing in foodstuffs with a branch in Sydney. After a while, business was going so well that the couple moved into a large residence in Highgate, an exclusive area in North London. Louise had met Jacob through his sister Marie de Graaff (1871–1961) with whom she had studied drawing at the Hague Art Academy. Louise made illustrations and designed bindings; together with Marie, who was a batik artist, she made, among other things, panel decorations for the *National Exhibition of Women's Work* in 1898.³ The fact that Jacob and Louise were a lot more active in collecting art than was customary among the well-to-do middle classes certainly had a lot to do with Louise's artistic activity, which, after the move to London, basically came to a stop. The earliest acquisitions – Marius Bauer, George Hendrik Breitner, Johannes Hendrik Weissenbruch, Gerrit Willem Dijsselhof, Isaac Israels, Adolphe Monticelli and Charles-François Daubigny – testify



FIG. 52 Constant Permeke, *True Stories*, with in the foreground *Dance IV* (1956) by Lynn Chadwick, in Bouwhuis, an annex of Het Nijenhuis, opened as exhibition space on 23 June 1969. Archive inv. no. 16, Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle and Heino/Wijhe



Places where Constant Permeke stayed in England

List of the artworks of Constant Permeke's English period

INNE GHEERAERT AND RENÉ VERMEIR

Constant Permeke didn't usually give his artworks a title, which led to owners, auctioneers, galleries and authors naming them themselves. The fact that these artworks were often given different titles doesn't facilitate identifying them. The following overview of Permeke's work from his English period has been compiled on the basis of museum collections, private collections, book publications, exhibitions and auctioneers' catalogues.



FIG. 27, p. 22

Grandmother, 1915

Watercolour on paper

Exhibited at the *Belgian Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kingston upon Thames, 15–27 March 1915, cat. no. 56 *Grandmother*
Signed lower left
Current collection unknown (published in Van den Bussche 1986, p. 23, *Seamstress*)



FIG. 28, p. 22

Woman and Child, 1915

Watercolour on paper

Exhibited at the *Belgian Exhibition of Modern Art* in Kingston upon Thames, 15–27 March 1915, cat. no. 55 *Woman and Child*
Signed lower left
Current collection unknown (published in Van den Bussche 1986, p. 23, *Grandmother and Child*)



FIG. 29, p. 23

Remembrance of My Cottage, 1915

Watercolour on paper, 35.5 × 25 cm

Signed, dated (1915) and titled lower left
Current collection unknown (Christie's auction, Amsterdam, 28 May 2002, lot 210)



Winter, 1916

No image

Work exhibited at the *Exhibition of Belgian art, painting and sculpture, for the benefit of the Croydon General Hospital* in Croydon, 21 October – 11 November 1916, cat. no. 105
Current collection unknown

Landscape in Chardstock, 1916

Watercolour on paper, 22 × 28 cm

Mu.ZEE, Ostend – Permeke Museum, Jabbeke, inv.onb0031

Farm Workers, 1916

Watercolour on paper, 30 × 35 cm

Signed and dated (1916) lower right
Current collection unknown
(Campo & Campo auction, Antwerp, 19 October 1999 and 24 October 2000, lot 235 and lot 224)



CAT. 12, p. 62

Devonshire Landscape, 1916

Watercolour and gouache/tempera on paper, 53 × 74 cm

Signed, dated and localised (Chardstock, Devon 1916) lower right
HUON & KAURI Collection



Tree and Two Poplars, 1916

Oil on canvas, 45 × 35 cm

Signed lower right
Private collection



CAT. 5, p. 36–37

The Butcher, 1916

Oil on canvas, 116 × 147 cm

Signed and dated (1916) lower left
Museum van Elsene – Musée d'Ixelles



CAT. 17, p. 85

English Landscape, 1916–1917

Oil on panel, 63 × 75 cm

Signed lower left, title on verso
Galerie Oscar De Vos, Sint-Martens-Latem



FIG. 37, p. 35

Landscape with Rider, 1916–1917

Technique and dimensions unknown

Signed lower right
Current collection unknown (previously Arthur Cornette collection, Antwerp – published in Avermaete 1970, p. 12)



FIG. 38, p. 39

Devonshire Landscape, 1916–1917

Gouache/tempera on cardboard, 65 × 77.5 cm

Signed lower right
Centre Pompidou, Paris



CAT. 15, p. 65

English Landscape, 1916–1917

Oil on panel, 62 × 74 cm

Signed lower left
Private collection



CAT. 14, p. 64

Landscape with Tree, 1916–1917

Oil on canvas, 79 × 90 cm

Signed lower left
Private collection



CAT. 9, p. 56–57

True Stories, c. 1916

Oil on canvas, 77 × 102 cm

Signed lower right
Possibly relates to the work exhibited at the *Exhibition of Belgian art, painting and sculpture, for the benefit of the Croydon General Hospital* in Croydon, 21 October – 11 November 1916, cat. no. 72 *Invalid*
Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle and Heino/Wijhe, inv. 0-2193



FIG. 49, p. 84

The Stranger, 1916

Oil on canvas, 173 × 180 cm

Signed, dated and localised (1916 Chardstock) lower left
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, inv. 4655



Landscape with Trees and Little Boy, 1916

Oil on paper on panel, 33.5 × 50.5 cm

Signed and dated (1916) lower right, dedicated: *With great affection to Léon Smet*
Current collection unknown (Vanderkindere auction, Brussels, 23 May 2023, lot 61)



CAT. 13, p. 63

Landscape in Devonshire, 1916–1917

Watercolour and tempera/gouache on cardboard, 62 × 74 cm

Signed lower right
KMSKA, Antwerp, inv. 3118



FIG. 42, p. 51

The Cider Drinker, 1917

Oil on canvas, 127 × 102 cm

Signed, dated (1917) and localised (Chardstock) lower left
Private collection, Switzerland



CAT. 22, p. 93

Landscape in Devonshire, 1917

Oil on panel, 41.5 × 55 cm

Signed lower left
Mu.ZEE, Ostend – Permeke Museum, Jabbeke, inv. K002034



CAT. 6, p. 38

English Landscape, 1917

Tempera on cardboard, 64 × 76 cm

Signed lower left
Museum van Elsene – Musée d'Ixelles