

Léon Spilliaert

March 5–April 12, 2025
537 West 20th Street, New York



Léon Spilliaert, *Dame au pince-nez (Lady with Lorgnette)*, 1907. Private collection, Belgium. Courtesy of Agnews, Brussels and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition of works by Belgian artist Léon Spilliaert (1881–1946) at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York, organized in collaboration with Agnews, Brussels, and curated by its director, Dr. Noémie Goldman. This presentation will be a rare opportunity to view a significant number of the artist's works and marks the first dedicated Spilliaert show in New York in nearly five decades.

Spilliaert's distinctive and highly enigmatic compositions reveal the influence of symbolism, such as the works of French artist Odilon Redon (1840–1916), combined with elements of expressionism and surrealism. His career is often considered in tandem with that of his contemporary, the Belgian painter James Ensor (1860–1949), who, like the younger artist, was born and lived much of his life in the seaside city of Ostend, Belgium. Like Ensor, Spilliaert has been highly influential to subsequent generations of artists—most notably, Luc Tuymans (b. 1958)—who have observed the universal qualities in Spilliaert's depictions of the human condition.

On view in the exhibition will be a representative selection of works on paper that date primarily to the 1900s and 1910s—a creative and highly productive period in Spilliaert's early career—and epitomize his singular style. These works, many of which are among the largest and most iconic in Spilliaert's oeuvre, demonstrate the artist's development of his distinctive expressionist language and illustrate the range of his practice even in these early years. Spilliaert skillfully mixed watercolor, gouache, pastel, ink, wash, colored pencil, and more, using various techniques to produce uniquely resplendent surfaces. As the Belgian poet Henri Vandeputte noted during the artist's lifetime, "Although each one is different, when

seen in the context of the entire oeuvre, [his works] are also mutually dependent, and more fully understood as a whole. The spectator would be dazzled by his range of genius: works which are actually united by their distinctiveness, reflecting the indefatigable imagination of the artist.”¹

Often depicting solitary figures in dreamlike spaces or nocturnal coastal landscapes, Spilliaert’s compositions convey a sense of melancholy and stillness influenced by the artist’s life in Ostend, which is known for its long beachside promenade and prominent abutting architecture. Many figurative and landscape scenes in the exhibition are distinguished by his signature dark palette and the simplification—occasionally to the point of abstraction—of architectural forms. From 1908 to 1909 (the dates of several works on view), Spilliaert spent a few months working from a small rented studio in an attic on the fisherman’s quay of Ostend, from which he could peacefully observe the structures and activities of the port. His distinctive view of the sea and coastal promenade are exemplified in works from these years, with some scenes depicting a seascape eerily occupied by a lone silhouetted subject or a line of lyrically rendered mermaids while others show a barren landscape defined only by suggestive geometric forms and dramatic contrasts in light and shadow. In their striking, abstract quality and deconstruction of standard perspective, such compositions are considered among the more radical of Spilliaert’s body of work and of early twentieth-century Belgian art.

Additional highlights include two of the artist’s notable and brooding self-portraits, with the earliest dating to 1902, the first year he is known to have depicted himself. Other compositions showcase Spilliaert’s depictions of women, which, especially in works from 1907 to 1910, are defined by a sense of existential isolation that parallels the desolate solemnity of his landscapes. The melancholic, androgynous figures in *Dame au pince-nez (Lady with Lorgnette)* and *Dame au canapé (Lady on a sofa)*, both from 1907, demonstrate the modernity of Spilliaert’s female portraiture; other depictions range from scenes of domestic interiority, such as *La couture (Needlework)*, 1917, to more vibrant portrayals of youth and society life, as seen in *Fillette en blanc (Girl in white)*, 1912. As the exhibition’s curator Goldman and fellow Spilliaert expert Dr. Anne Adriaens-Pannier note, “Contemplation and meditation are essential components of Spilliaert’s artistic career. In his attempt to capture the essence of these fundamental values, he alternates the immensity of the sea and its horizon with the confinement of domestic space, the fragile representation of women with the austere solidity of monumental structures, the flayed image of himself with the secular tree watching mankind come and go.”²

Also exhibited are examples from Spilliaert’s important portfolio of lithographs, *Les serres chaudes (Hothouses)*, 1918. These beautifully hand-colored images, made when Spilliaert was living near the scenic Karreveld Castle near Brussels, are inspired by the poems of Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) and reflect the artist’s personal, often enigmatic interpretation of the now-iconic texts. Installed nearby, a 1917 drawing of the same title depicts the subject more directly, showing the spidery black vines of a towering plant as they reach toward the sunlight visible through the blue glass-paned greenhouse roof above.

Léon Spilliaert was born in the coastal city of Ostend, Belgium, in 1881. Raised in a prosperous family as one of seven children, the artist was plagued by periods of ill health throughout most of his life; he suffered from chronic stomach ulcers that resulted in bouts of insomnia and nightwalking that came to be

¹ Henri Vandeputte, cited in Frank Edebau, “Spilliaert: Artist of Oostende,” in *Léon Spilliaert: Symbol and Expression in 20th Century Belgian Art*. Exh. cat. (Washington, DC: The Phillips Collection, 1980), p. 17.

² Anne Adriaens-Pannier and Noémie Goldman, “Reality and Creation in the Sea Mists of Ostend,” in *Léon Spilliaert*. Exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2020), p. 29.

read in the physical and psychological darkness of his artwork. Spilliaert began his career as an illustrator for bookseller Edmond Deman (1857–1918), who published nineteenth-century symbolist writers including Stéphane Mallarmé and translations of Edgar Allan Poe, before initiating his own artistic practice, which would come to be defined by melancholic, moody color palettes influenced by artists like Odilon Redon. Predominantly self-taught, Spilliaert was enrolled for a short time at the Academy of Fine Arts Bruges; the brevity of his formal instruction allowed for the development of his highly unique style. His expressive compositions often depict solitary figures in dreamlike spaces, scenes of ordinary life, and the Belgian landscape, as well as self-portraits. Like his contemporary James Ensor, Spilliaert lived primarily in Ostend before settling in Brussels, and the city's coastal setting informed his seascapes late into his career.

As early as 1904, Spilliaert began exhibiting his work in group shows at a number of galleries in Paris and Brussels, including the Salon de Printemps (1909) and Bruxelles des Indépendants (1911). The artist's first solo exhibition was held in Paris in 1913, organized by Belgian poet and gallerist Henri Vandeputte. Spilliaert's work has since been the subject of several solo exhibitions at institutions including Galerie Sneyers, Brussels (1917, 1927); Center for Fine Arts, Brussels (1936, 1944, 1947, 1953); Museum voor Schone Kunsten Ghent, Belgium (1953-54); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1954); Museum voor Schone Kunsten Elsene, Brussels (1961, 1971); Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (1972); and Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo (1977), among others. In 1980, Spilliaert's work was featured in a solo exhibition that toured the United States: *Léon Spilliaert, Symbol and Expression in 20th Century Belgian Art* opened at The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, and traveled to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In 2007, the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, presented a solo exhibition of Spilliaert's self-portraits, and in 2020, together with the Royal Academy of Arts, London, the museum organized *Léon Spilliaert* (traveled to the Musée d'Orsay as *Léon Spilliaert: Lumière et solitude*). Also in 2020, Mu.ZEE, Ostend, presented *James Ensor and Léon Spilliaert: Two Masters of Ostend*. In 2023, Spilliaert's work was the subject of solo exhibitions at Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne, Switzerland; Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels; and Clemens Sels Museum Neuss, Germany.

Spilliaert's work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions at prominent institutions, including the 1920 Venice Biennale; *Belgian Artists of Today*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (1940); *One Hundred Years of Belgian Art*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (1959); *20th Century Sources: European Art 1884–1914*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris (1960–61); *From Ensor to Permeke*, Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris (1970); *Painters of the Imaginary: Belgian Symbolists and Surrealists*, Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris (1974); *Painters of the Mind's Eye*, New York Cultural Center and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1974); *Flemish Expressionists, from Ensor to Permeke*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome (1977); and *Belgian Art 1880–1914*, Brooklyn Museum, New York (1980). More recently, his work was included in *Nature's Mirror: Reality and Symbol in Belgian Landscape*, McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College (2017), and was selected by the Belgian artist Luc Tuymans (b. 1958) to appear his curated exhibitions *The Forbidden Empire: Visions of the World by Chinese and Flemish Masters*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, and Palace Museum, Beijing (2007); and *James Ensor by Luc Tuymans*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2016).

Work by the artist is included in public collections worldwide including Himeji City Museum of Art, Japan; Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (KMSKA), Antwerp; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Musée de Grenoble, France; Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels; Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Museum

Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium; Museum Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp; Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent; Mu.ZEE, Ostend, Belgium; and Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

A catalogue raisonné of the works of Léon Spilliaert is currently in preparation by Dr. Anne Adriaens-Pannier. A collection of the artist's letters is also forthcoming, edited by Adriaens-Pannier and Dr. Noémie Goldman, a specialist in nineteenth-century Belgian art.

For all press inquiries, contact
Julia Lukacher jlukacher@davidzwirner.com
Erin Pinover epinover@davidzwirner.com