

RA

Royal Academy of Arts

Léon Spilliaert

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The Jillian and Arthur M. Sackler Wing of Galleries

23 February – 25 May 2020

Supported by:



**Government
of Flanders**

In February 2020, the Royal Academy of Arts will present the first major exhibition of Belgian artist Léon Spilliaert (1881–1946) to be held in the UK. Bringing together around 80 works drawn from public and private collections across Belgium, France, Great Britain and the USA, the exhibition will offer a rare opportunity to discover this intriguing, singular artist who left an indelible mark on the twentieth century art of Belgium.

Born in Ostend, the seaside resort on the North Sea coast patronised by the Belgian royal family, Spilliaert was a self-taught artist. Eschewing oil paint, he worked in combinations of Indian ink wash, Conté crayon, watercolour, gouache, pastel, chalk, pencil and pen on paper or cardboard, to create atmospheric works that are often imbued with mystery and melancholy. As a young man, plagued by insomnia and a chronic stomach condition, Spilliaert regularly walked along the deserted promenade and through the streets of Ostend in the dead of night, afterwards capturing the emptiness of the beach and town in a sequence of dynamic views defined by unusual perspectives and reflected light. Fuelled by existential angst, Spilliaert also created a series of visionary self-portraits that reveal his preoccupation with his identity as an artist. These potent images of solitude align Spilliaert with Nordic artists such as Edvard Munch, Vilhelm Hammershøi and Helene Schjerfbeck, who likewise wrestled with visual explorations of the self at the turn of the twentieth century.

A love of literature and philosophy, in particular the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Friedrich Nietzsche, shaped much of Spilliaert's early work, which has a brooding and at times romantic intensity to it. In 1902, Spilliaert started working for the Brussels publisher Edmond Deman, illustrating works by the playwright, poet and essayist Maurice Maeterlinck (who, in 1911, became the only ever Belgian recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature) and the poet Emile Verhaeren, with whom he formed a close

friendship. Verhaeren would be responsible for introducing the artist to numerous art and literary figures, including the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig and the Belgian playwright Fernand Crommelynck.

Fleeing Ostend in 1917 to escape the German occupation, Spilliaert and his new wife Rachel Vergison set off for Geneva, where they planned to join a pacifist movement. But with little money and a new baby, they got no further than Brussels. Spilliaert would move between Ostend and Brussels for the rest of his life. Always fascinated by the natural world, his later work developed a softer focus, and he produced contemplative, tranquil works that conjure evening light or the shadows of beech trees in the Forêt de Soignes in Brussels, where he walked regularly.

The exhibition will be organised in four thematic sections, presenting a journey through the lifetime of this remarkably insightful and unusual artist. Entitled *Illumination*, section one will focus on Spilliaert's engagement with literature, theatre and book illustration and introduce his poetic visions of nature, including *Beech Trunks*, 1945 (Private Collection). Section two, *Crepuscule*, will explore Spilliaert's expressions of emptiness and loneliness in the twilight world he inhabited. Still-lives and interior scenes transmit a quiet glow in the depths of night, and, as in *Young Woman on a Stool*, 1909 (the Hearn Family Trust) solitary women wait for their husbands to return from sea at the end of the day. This section will also include examples of a commission to illustrate *Belgique II*, one of the first airships in Belgium. Section three, *Littoral*, examines Spilliaert's fascination with the liminal areas between land and sea, and, as seen in *A Gust of Wind*, 1904 (Mu.ZEE) and *Dike at night. Reflected lights*, 1908 (Musée d'Orsay), his depictions of the streets, beach and promenade of Ostend. The final section, *Reflections*, brings together an important group of self-portraits.

Organisation

The exhibition will be presented at the Royal Academy of Arts and then travel to the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. It will be curated by Dr Anne Adriaens-Pannier (Honorary Curator, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels and Artistic Director of Het Spilliaert Hus, Ostend) and Dr Adrian Locke (Senior Curator, Royal Academy of Arts, London). Exhibition organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, London in collaboration with the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Exhibition Tour

Royal Academy of Arts, London, 23 February – 25 May 2020

Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 15 June – 13 September 2020

Accompanying Publication

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue produced by the Royal Academy of Arts, with essays by the curators and leading scholars in the field and a foreword by the artist Luc Tuymans.

Dates and Opening Hours

Press Day 19 February 2020, 10am – 1pm

Open to public: Sunday 23 February – Monday 25 May 2020
10am – 6pm daily (last admission 5.30pm)

Late night opening: Fridays until 10pm (last admission 9.30pm)

Admission

Full price £14 (£12 excluding Gift Aid donation); concessions available; under 16s go free ([T&Cs apply](#)); Friends of the RA go free.

Tickets

Tickets are available daily at the RA or visit royalacademy.org.uk.

Group bookings: Groups of 10+ are asked to book in advance. Telephone 020 7300 8027 or email <mailto:groupbookings@royalacademy.org.uk>

Images

Publicity images for *Léon Spilliaert* can be downloaded via this [link](#).

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#Spilliaert

Government of Flanders

The Government of Flanders is pleased and proud to return to the Royal Academy in London after the successful partnership for the Ensor/Tuymans exhibition in 2016. Similar partnerships have existed with major museums in Vienna, Madrid, Paris, New York City and San Francisco.

Flanders has long been an inspirational force for innovative thinking and artistic experimentation which continue to thrive in the region today. The combination of world- renowned seaports, an extensive railway and road network, a productive and highly educated population, excellent healthcare and an R&D-friendly environment makes Flanders unique.

Due to their proximity and the strategic location of major Flemish cities such as Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp, Flanders and the United Kingdom have always had close ties. The Government of Flanders wishes to maintain and strengthen these relations and regards the UK as a priority country in its foreign

policy. For press enquiries and more information on the policies of the Government of Flanders, please visit <https://www.flandersintheuk.be/en/homepage>.

About the Royal Academy of Arts

The Royal Academy of Arts was founded by King George III in 1768. It has a unique position in being an independent, privately funded institution led by eminent artists and architects whose purpose is to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. Its public programme promotes the creation, enjoyment and appreciation of the visual arts through exhibitions, education and debate.

The Royal Academy launched a new campus as part of the celebrations of its 250th anniversary year in 2018. Following this transformative redevelopment, designed by the internationally-acclaimed architect Sir David Chipperfield RA and supported by the National Lottery, the new Royal Academy of Arts reveals more of the elements that make the RA unique – sharing with the public historic treasures from its Collection, the work of its Royal Academicians and the Royal Academy Schools, and its role as a centre for learning and debate about art and architecture – alongside its world-class exhibitions programme. Royalacademy.org.uk

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