

## **Albert Baertsoen**

03.09.2022-27.11-2022

**Starting in 2022, the MSK Ghent will host a year-long party in celebration of two milestone anniversaries: 225 years for the MSK Ghent and 125 for the Friends of the Museum. In the exhibition that opens this festive year, the focus is on the oeuvre of painter, illustrator and graphic artist Albert Baertsoen, who played a pivotal role in turn-of-the-century art circles in Ghent as well as the rest of Belgium and abroad.**

### **Ghent**

Around the turn of the 20th century, no other artist was as closely associated with Ghent as Albert Baertsoen (1866-1922). Hailing from a wealthy family of free-thinking textile producers, he was able to develop his talents in the rich environment of Ghent during its period as a leading textile centre. His serene yet melancholy impressions of his home city in the throes of transformation earned him international recognition. Rather than highlighting picturesque scenes, Baertsoen depicted the ethereal gloom that he perceived in situations of dissolution and change. He was sensitive to the air of unease that suffused the *fin de siècle*, and it wasn't long before he became the artist most particularly associated with the idea of the dead city, a prominent feature in literary works of the era. As such, Baertsoen was considered to be the artistic counterpart of writers such as Georges Rodenbach and Maurice Maeterlinck.

### **An impressionist like no other**

The international press of his era endowed Baertsoen with the honorary title of 'the Ghent painter', but he also worked outside the city. A proponent of outdoor painting, he spent the latter half of the 1880s working around Doel, in the Schelde estuary. He also painted impressionist scenes in the Leie region around 1892, the year in which he, Emile Claus and Constantin Meunier organised their noteworthy exhibition at Pulchri Studio in The Hague. From 1893 on he produced a striking series of city views in Diksmuide, Nieuwpoort and Bruges. In 1897, Baertsoen commissioned a luxurious houseboat from a shipbuilder in Amay (near Hoei). Naming it *Fafner*, he spent many years travelling around Zeeland and enjoying summer holiday visits to Terneuzen, Middelburg and particularly Veere; he also visited Dordrecht and Amsterdam. The industrial landscapes that he produced around Luik between 1906 and 1908 were as surprising as any of his other works, and no other period saw him working as intensely in the open air as this.

### **Baertsoen's laboratory**

The complex creative process that was the foundation for Baertsoen's work is an essential focus of this exhibition. He kept a supply drawing paper to hand at all times, not only recording his subjects in pencil but also working them out in impressive oil sketches. The purpose of this, as he put it, was to learn his subjects 'by heart'; the sketches served as reminders that later helped him develop his larger studies, either in oil on canvas or in charcoal on paper. Even after a work had been completed and exhibited, he would continue to work on new versions of the theme on a monumental scale. But Baertsoen enjoyed just as

much international success with his etchings as with his paintings, and in fact he is perhaps best known today for his work as a graphic artist.

### **London**

Baertsoen sought shelter in London during World War I, and in contrast to many other refugee artists he felt at home there, having visited the city regularly since 1890. True to form, he was less interested in the city centre than in Bankside and the River Thames, along with the immediate vicinity of the massive bridges that linked the city's two halves. He looked at the area from unusual perspectives, as well as in misty and rainy weather and at dusk, all of which contributed to the sombre and even threatening atmosphere that his works exude.

### **Friends**

To illustrate not only the uniqueness of Baertsoen's work but also its relationship to works by other artists, the exhibition also looks at some of his contemporaries, including Emile Claus, James Ensor, Henri Le Sidaner, Théo Van Rysselberghe and others. Baertsoen was a generous friend to his fellow artists, even those of younger generations, and they in turn held him in great esteem. For them, he was a committed advocate who was famous for his organisational talent and fierce sense of autonomy, which he employed freely to the benefit of promising young artists. As a popular exhibitor in progressive circles such as La Libre Esthétique in Brussels, the Vienna Secession and the Venice Biennale, he was a well-informed intermediary on the exhibition circuit. He was also a benevolent figure with an impressive international network, counting among his friends the most prominent artists of his time both in Belgium and abroad.

### **Exhibition: Albert Baertsoen**

Curators: Dr Johan De Smet, Dr Stefan Huygebaert and Professor René Vermeir

Book: Dr Johan De Smet, Dr Stefan Huygebaert and Professor René Vermeir, with additional contributions from Yann Farinaux-Le Sidaner and Dr Stephen Goddard

Publisher: Snoeck Publishers; 300 pages, 350 colour illustrations

This exhibition was developed in collaboration with Ghent University

### **Website: Albert Baertsoen**

This exhibition and the accompanying book are the result of years of intensive research in museums, libraries, archives and private collections in Belgium and abroad. All of this information on Baertsoen's oeuvre has been collated in an online catalogue that is accessible via [www.albertbaertsoen.be](http://www.albertbaertsoen.be). The catalogue provides a list of Baertsoen's works in the exhibition, information on provenance, and a bibliography.

### **Contact**

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