



Large  
Print

# Léon Spilliaert

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- Tap the upper right corner to choose the languages, select the voice, hit the button left to the play button to adjust the speed of the speaking rate.
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- First, download the free Voice Aloud app in the Google Play Store.
- Download the PDF version of the large print guide.
- Select the folder icon and navigate to the downloaded file.
- You will be prompted with a set of text import options.
- Click “Open file” once you have selected your settings and Voice Aloud will begin reading your file.

# Léon Spilliaert

The Jillian and Arthur M Sackler Wing  
of Galleries

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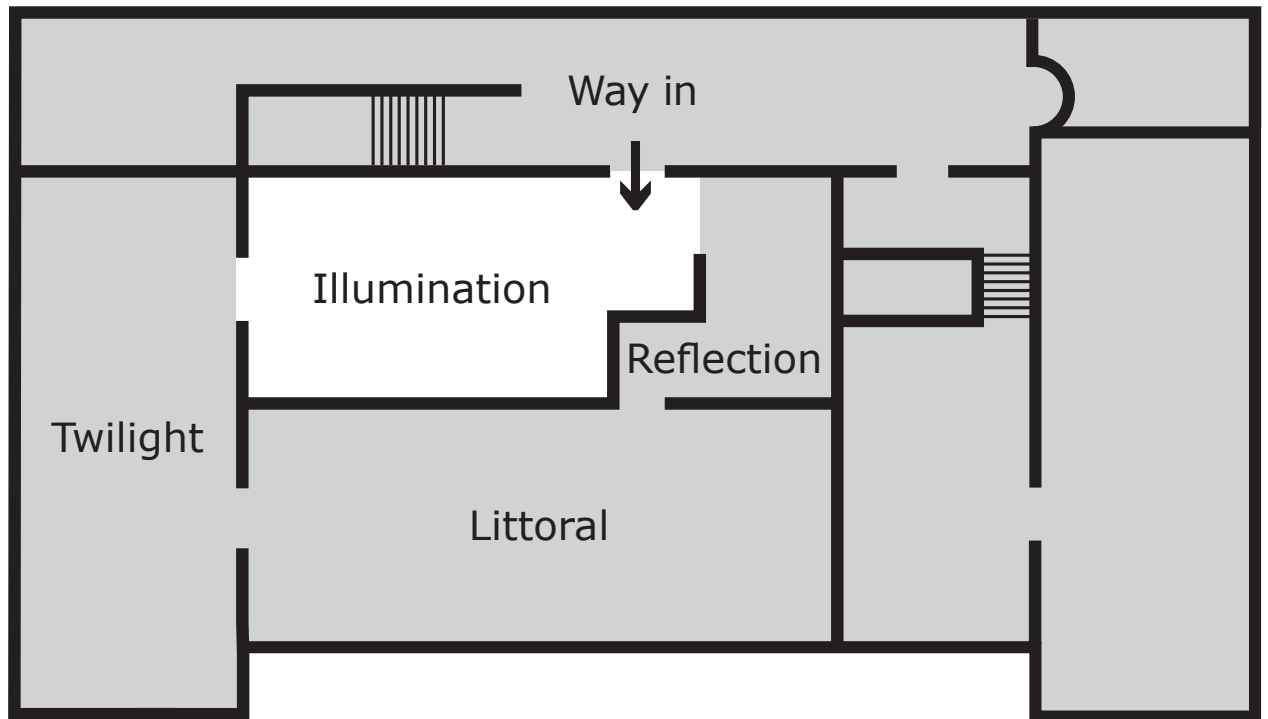


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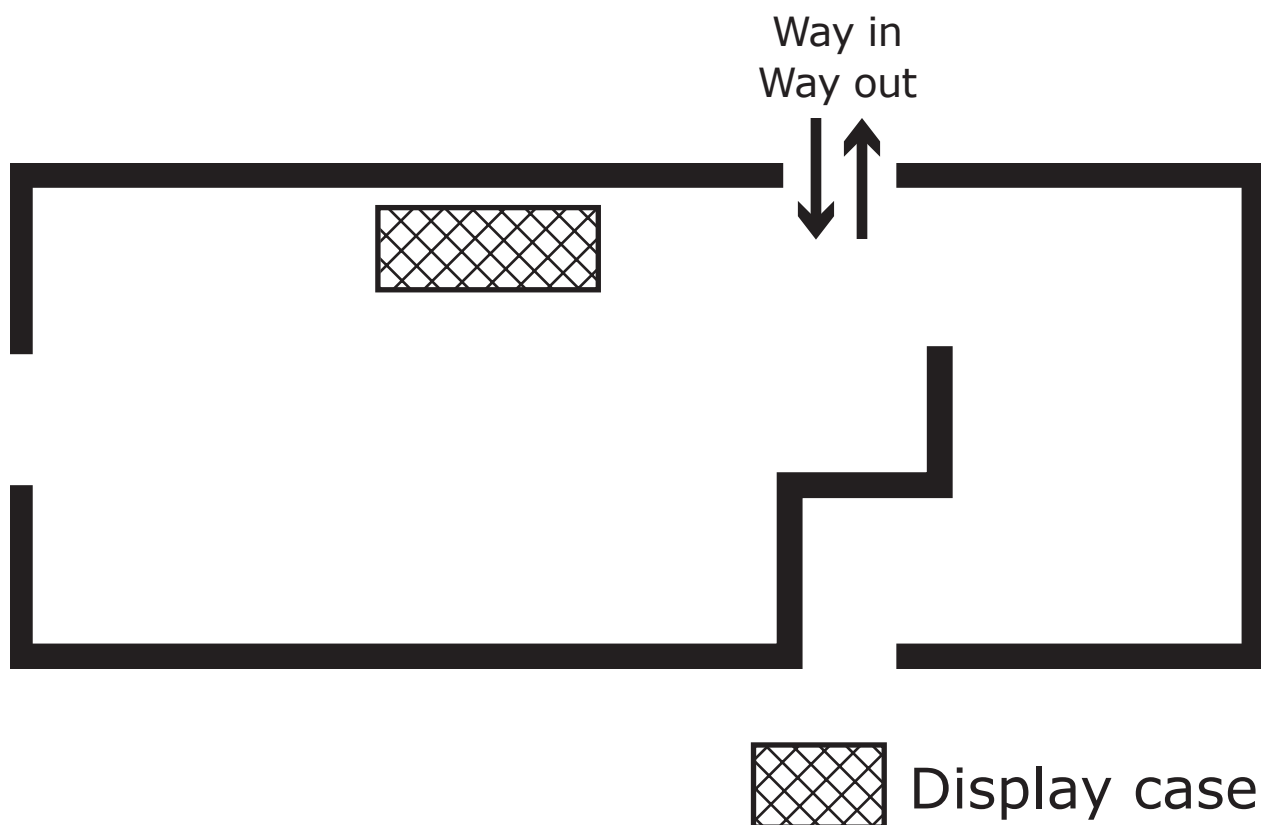
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# Illumination



# Introduction

Leon Spilliaert was born on 28 July 1881 in Ostend, the North Sea resort patronised by the Belgian royal family. He was the eldest child of Leonard-Hubert, who owned a successful perfumery, and Leonie, who ran the Spilliaert household.

Aged 18, Spilliaert enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts in Bruges but left after a few months because of ill health and never returned to formal art education.

In December 1916, Spilliaert married Rachel Vergison, and the following March, when Ostend was occupied by the forces of the German Empire, the couple tried unsuccessfully to move to Geneva to join the Pacifist movement led by the French writer Romain Rolland.

Short of money and expecting a baby, they settled in Brussels instead where Madeleine, their only child, was born in November 1917.



From that time on, they moved between Brussels and Ostend.

Spilliaert's choice of medium played an important role in the character of his finished work.

Largely eschewing oil paint, he worked with a variety of media, including Indian ink wash, watercolour, gouache, charcoal, pencil, pen and Conté crayon, mostly on paper or cardboard.

An avid walker, he was much inspired by the local landscape, with a particular love of the North Sea and trees, subjects he engaged with throughout his career.

In later life, Spilliaert produced many images of the ancient trees of the Forêt de Soignes (Sonian Forest), a favourite haunt of his located to the southeast of Brussels.

# **Illumination**

In 1902, Spilliaert was engaged by the successful Brussels publisher Edmond Deman to illustrate books by Belgian Symbolist writers such as Maurice Maeterlinck and Emile Verhaeren.

Spilliaert hand-illustrated Deman's personal copies of Maeterlinck's three volume 'Théâtre' (Theatre) with 348 drawings, and Verhaeren's 'Pour les Amis du poète' (For the Poet's Friends); both of these unique copies are on display here.

Many of Spilliaert's early images exhibited here revolve around the artist's fascination for characters in Maeterlinck's first play, 'Princess Maleine', published in 1889.

Two years later, Spilliaert travelled to St Cloud on the outskirts of Paris with a letter of introduction from Deman to Verhaeren.

The two struck up an enduring friendship; over the years, Verhaeren would introduce Spilliaert to numerous artistic and literary figures, including the Austrian author Stefan Zweig and the Belgian playwright Fernand Crommelynck.

That year, 1904, Verhaeren helped Spilliaert secure a window display at Clovis Sagot's gallery at 46 rue Laffitte in Paris where his work was shown alongside that of Pablo Picasso.

Spilliaert had an enduring passion for literature, as revealed by a sketch inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. He was also drawn to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche.

As well as book illustrations, Spilliaert made several prints. These include the small triple-portrait of himself with Deman and Verhaeren and a portfolio of ten lithographs illustrating Maeterlinck's collection of poems, 'Serres chaudes' (Hothouses).

Two of these prints can be seen here alongside the original works that inspired them.

## List of works

### **Light on the Mountain at Night, 1905**

Indian ink wash, brush and gouache on paper

KBR, Brussels, Prints

### **The Cloud, c. 1902**

Pencil, Indian ink wash and brush on paper

Luc de Vleminck Collection

### **Cloud Unfurling over a Beach, c. 1900–1902**

Indian ink wash, brush and pen on paper

KBR, Brussels, Prints

### **Contemplation, c. 1900**

Indian ink wash, brush, pen and watercolour on paper

KBR, Brussels, Prints

# **Cemetery, c. 1900–1902**

Indian ink wash, brush, pen and coloured pencil on paper

KBR, Brussels, Prints

# **Landscape with Slender Trees, c. 1900–1902**

Indian ink wash, brush, pen and Conté crayon on paper

Private collection Courtesy Patrick Derom Gallery

# **Boughs, 1918**

Conté crayon on paper

KBR, Brussels, Prints

# **Tree Behind a Wall, 1936**

Watercolour, gouache, Indian ink and pen on paper

Private collection

# **Beech Trunks, 1945**

Pencil, watercolour, Indian ink and pen on paper

Private collection

# **White Robes, 1912**

Black chalk, coloured chalk and gouache on cardboard

Mu.ZEE, Ostend

# **The Dominoes, 1913**

Like many Belgian towns, Ostend has an annual carnival that takes place before Lent and culminates in a masquerade ball, inaugurated in 1898, called the 'Bal du rat mort' ('Dead Rat Ball').

Dominoes refer to the large, often hooded capes worn with masks on such occasions to conceal the identity of the wearer.

Indian ink wash, brush, gouache, pastel and black chalk on cardboard

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

# **Triple portrait, Léon Spilliaert, Emile Verhaeren, Edmond Deman, 1908**

Drypoint etching on paper

NF Art Gallery

# **Vision of a Man with an Emaciated Face, 1904**

Indian ink wash, brush and pen on paper

KBR, Brussels, Prints

# **Princess Maleine, 1910**

Indian ink wash, brush and white chalk on paper

Private collection

# **Love, 1901**

Pencil, Indian ink wash, brush, pen and watercolour on paper

OF Collection, Belgium



# **The Constables, c. 1902**

Indian ink wash and brush on paper

Private collection

# **On the Seabed with Whales, 1918**

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour, Conté crayon and charcoal on paper

The Phoebus Foundation, Antwerp

# **Les Serres chaudes: Cloche à plongeur, 1918**

Lithograph on Japan paper, enhanced with coloured pencils and Indian ink

Private collection

# **Les Serres chaudes: Serre d'ennui, 1918**

Lithograph on Japan paper, enhanced with coloured pencils and Indian ink

Private collection

# **Hothouses I, 1917**

Conté crayon, Indian ink wash, brush, pen and coloured chalk on paper

Private collection

Display case

**Sketchbook with  
drawing inspired by  
Edgar Allan Poe, 'The  
Fall of the House of  
Usher' (1839), 1935**

Pencil, Indian ink wash and brush on paper

Private collection



**Hand-illustrated  
copy of Maurice  
Maeterlinck, 'Théâtre'  
(3 volumes), 1903**

Brussels: P. Lacomblez

Paris: Per Lamm, 1901–1902

Pencil, Indian ink wash and brush on paper

Private collection, Heirs of Maurice Verbaet, courtesy  
of Stak Challenges

# **Hand-illustrated copy of Emile Verhaeren, 'Pour les Amis du poète', 1902–1903**

Brussels: Edmond Deman, 1896

Indian ink wash, brush, pen, watercolour, gouache  
and coloured pencil on paper

Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus

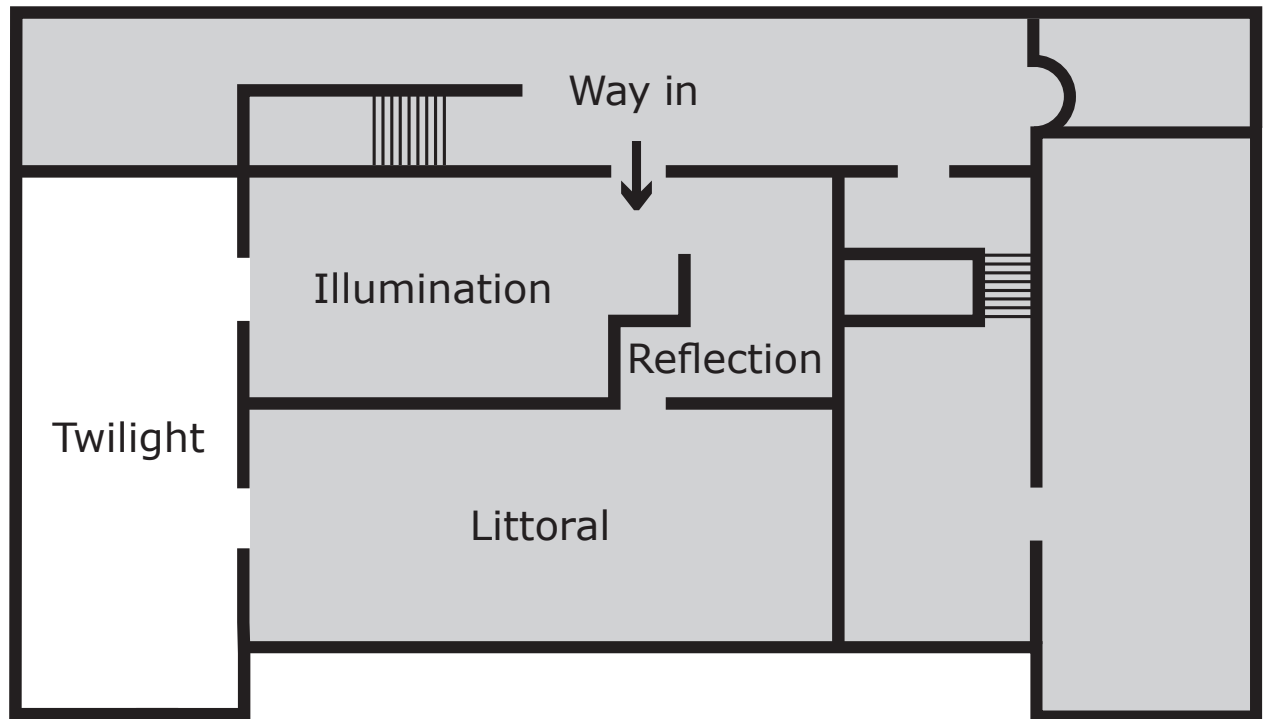
UNESCO World Heritage

# **Marcel Lecomte, 'La Servante au miroir', illustrated by Léon Spilliaert, 1941**

Brussels: Editions des Artistes, 1941

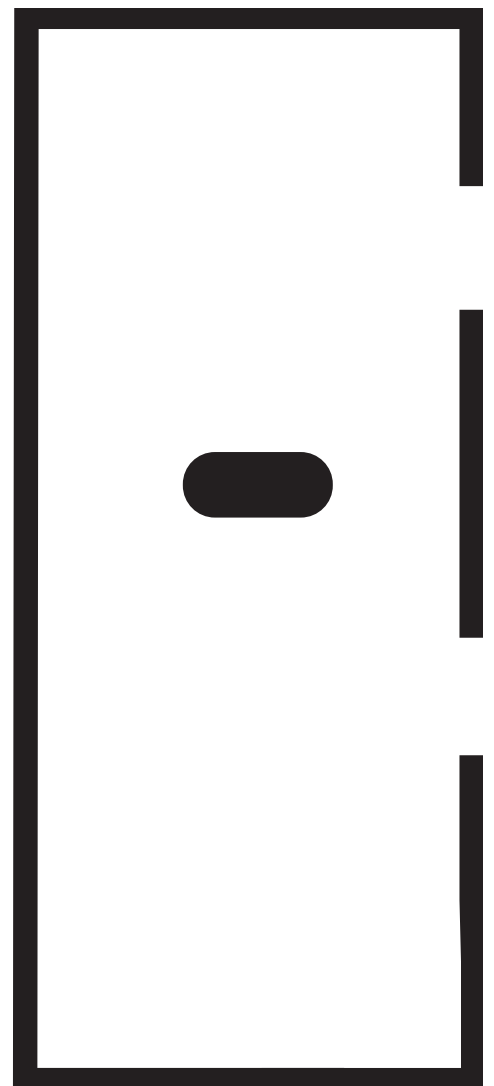
Printed book with eight black-and-white illustrations

Royal Academy of Arts, London



# Twilight

 Seating



# Twilight

As a young man, Spilliaert suffered from a chronic stomach ailment. To combat the resultant insomnia, he regularly paced through the deserted streets and along the seafront of Ostend at night. His love of walking and keen observation fuelled his imagination, and allowed him to process the existential thoughts that dogged him.

Vivid memories of these twilight walks informed his art.

Spilliaert referenced his father's profession as a parfumeur with studies of the glass flagons he used as well as the elegant presentation boxes he made. He also depicted his father's hairdressing salon.

In 1910, he was commissioned by the scientist, inventor and amateur aviation enthusiast Robert Goldschmidt to immortalise the airship that the scientist had financed.

'Belgique II' was housed in a hangar near to the Sonian Forest. Perhaps influenced by photography, Spilliaert portrays the dirigible from unusual perspectives, amplifying its scale and giving it an almost lifelike presence.

Spilliaert's sense of loneliness at this time is captured in his depictions of empty spaces such as his bedroom, and the solitary bentwood chair. Likewise, the wives of the fishermen standing waiting on the quays, often looking out to sea, convey an impression of longing or absence.

A sense of mystery pervades many of his works, particularly 'Misery' and 'Alone'. The bare attic is depicted twice: first empty, and then with a young woman present. The viewer is left to wonder what is about to take place, or to contemplate what has just happened.

# List of works

## Human Skull, 1914

Pencil, Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

KBR, Brussels, Prints

## The Blue Bowl, 1907

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour and coloured pencil on paper

Mu.ZEE, Ostend

## Boxes in front of a Mirror, c. 1904

Pastel and charcoal on paper mounted on cardboard

Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

## Flasks, 1909

Indian ink wash, brush and pen on paper

Private collection



# **The Absinthe Drinker, 1907**

The absinthe drinker was a popular subject among artists. Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Pablo Picasso, for instance, reflected on the freedom of the Bohemian life and the perils of living it too fully.

Spilliaert's version may be a reflection on the time he spent in Paris and what he saw and experienced there.

Indian ink wash, brush, gouache, watercolour and coloured chalk on paper

King Baudouin Foundation, Brussels

# **Fisherman's Wife on a Jetty, 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Fishermen's Wives on the Quay, 1910**

From the window of his studio on the Visserskaai, Spilliaert looked down onto the busy wharves where the women of the close-knit fishing community would gather to await the safe return of the fishermen and help unload their catch.

The solitary figure, standing looking out to sea, is suggestive of Spilliaert's own sense of isolation at the time.

Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil and pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Fisherman's Wife, 1910**

Indian ink wash, brush, wax crayon, pastel and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Young Woman on a Stool, 1910**

Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil, coloured chalk and gouache on paper

The Hearn Family Trust

# **Waiting, 1908**

A young woman sits waiting. The mantel clock indicates someone (or something) is late, while her demeanour suggests disappointment. Spilliaert conveys an element of mystery in the work, leaving the viewer to puzzle over what might happen next.

The bentwood chair features in many of Spilliaert's representations of the family home.

Pencil, Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil, coloured chalk and sgraffito on paper

The Hearn Family Trust

# **Interior with Chair and Opaline Lamp, 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush, coloured chalk and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Interior (Bedroom with Beam of Light), 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour and coloured pencil on paper

Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels

# **The Bedroom, c. 1908**

These three works depict Spilliaert's bedroom at his parents' home on Kapellestraat, Ostend.

The austerity of the room, shorn of any comfort or personal adornment, suggests that Spilliaert had no emotional attachment to it, perhaps in part because he associated it with the insomnia he suffered from at the time.

Indian ink wash, brush, pastel, coloured pencil and watercolour on paper

Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

## **The Bedroom, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour, gouache and coloured pencil on paper

Belgian State, managed by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation

## **Alone, 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush and wax crayon on paper

Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle

## **Misery, 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **The Hairdresser's Salon, 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **The Airship in the Hangar, 1910**

Robert Goldschmidt, a successful chemist and aviation enthusiast, commissioned Spilliaert to record his airship Belgique II and its hangar at Oudergem-Bosvoorde, to the southwest of Brussels.

Spilliaert produced fourteen preparatory drawings of the airship over three days in April 1910 that included witnessing a test flight. These were developed into fifteen finished works, three of which are displayed here.

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **The Hangar, 1910**

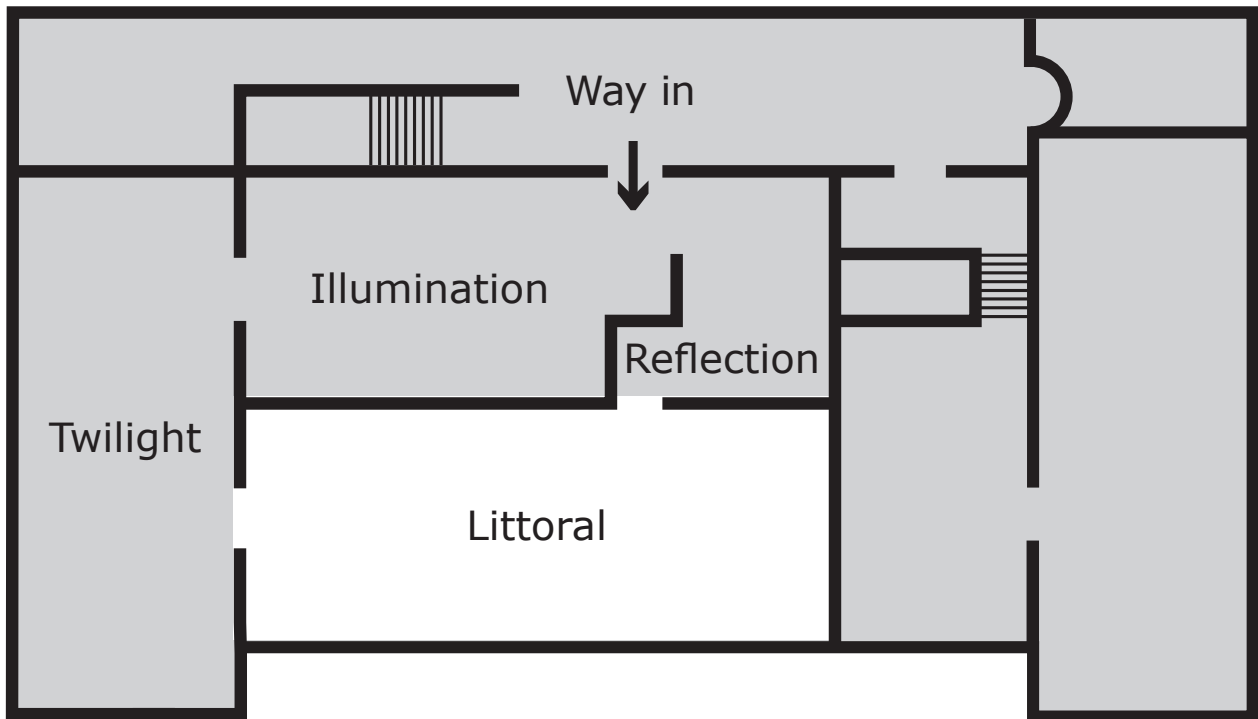
Indian ink wash, brush, gouache, coloured chalk and pastel on paper

The Phoebus Foundation, Antwerp

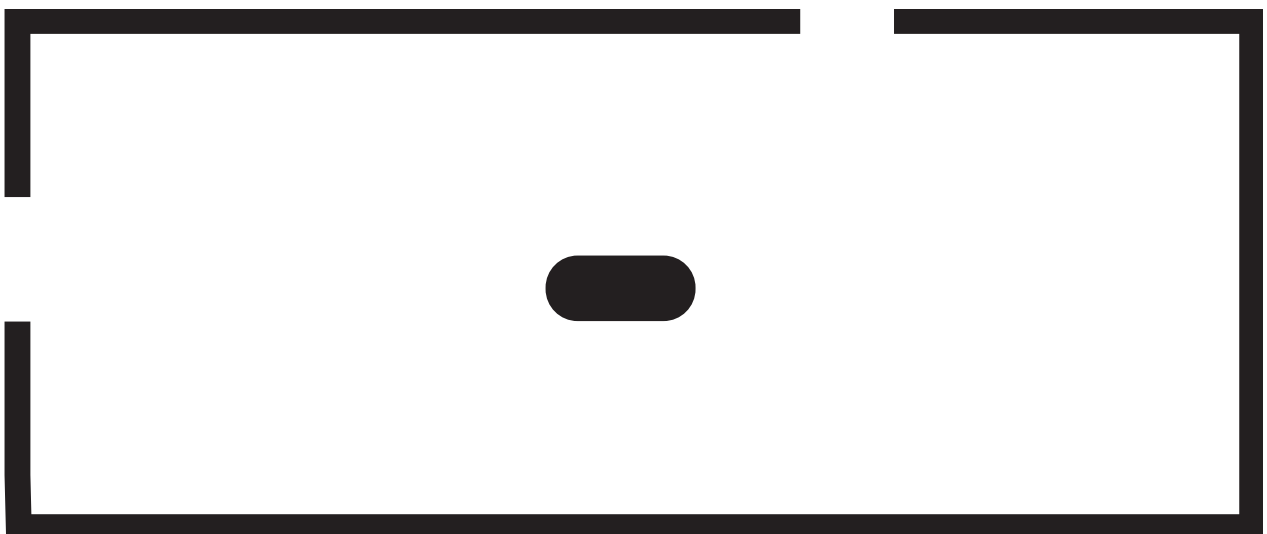
# **The Airship Emerging from the Hangar, 1910**

Indian ink wash, brush, gouache and pastel on paper

Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels



# Littoral



 Seating



# Littoral

The North Sea was a source of endless fascination for Spilliaert.

In 1908, he rented an attic studio on the Visserskaai overlooking the bustling port below. With its wide beach, lighthouse, grand promenade, fishing industry and dramatic, ever-changing skies, Ostend enthralled him and provided much inspiration for his art.

His solitary night-time walks through the familiar streets and along the seafront both calmed and enthused him.

Often responding to the diffused light of the street lamps and the reflected moisture on the streets and pavements, or the moonlight over the dark, brooding sea, Spilliaert created powerful, atmospheric images of his home town.

He was very experimental, too, introducing highly unusual perspectives and bold geometries into his work.

These remarkable viewpoints challenged the perceptions of those who knew the town well; the familiar became unfamiliar. Bold, dynamic angles create paths that seem to disappear in the distance, leading nowhere. These unnerving images perhaps refer subconsciously to the artist's sense of solitude and loneliness.

There are also depictions of people on the famous beach of Ostend. A solitary man walks along the sand; another runs from the sea towards a beach hut. Young girls stand at the water's edge while others let the waves break around them. A lone woman looks out over the unseen sea, the surf breaking at her feet, as if searching for someone, waiting for their return.

These images seem tinged with melancholy, conveying a sense of loss or sadness and, at times, isolation.

## List of works

# **The Window of the Studio on the Vissterskaai, c. 1908–1909**

In 1908, Spilliaert took an attic studio on the Vissterskaai that, as the masts suggest, had a commanding view over the bustling activity of the wharves below and across the Voorhaven, the man-made channel through which boats left the open sea and entered the protected harbour where they could safely moor and unload.

Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil and pastel on paper

Private collection

# **Beach Hut, 1902**

Indian ink wash, brush, pen and charcoal on paper

Private collection

# **Returning from a Swim, 1907**

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour, coloured chalk and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Girls on the Beach, Royal Palace Hotel, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush, pen and pastel on paper

Private collection

# **Girls in the Waves, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush, pen and pencil on paper

Private collection

# **The Mermaids, 1908**

Indian ink and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **The Breakwater, 1907**

Pencil, Indian ink wash, brush and watercolour on paper

Private collection

Courtesy Van Herck-Eykelberg

# **Breakwater with Pole, 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush, charcoal and coloured pencil on paper

Belfius Art Collection

# **Signal Pole on the Pier, 1907**

Indian ink wash, brush, pen and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **The Old Lighthouse at Dusk, c. 1901**

Indian ink wash, brush, pen and coloured pencil on paper

Vanmoerkerke Collection, Ostend

# **Storm at Sea, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Vanmoerkerke Collection, Ostend

# **Promenade and Lighthouse, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **The Royal Galleries at Ostend, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Promenade, Light Reflections, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

# **Hofstraat, Ostend, 1908**

Gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper

Private collection

Courtesy of Francis Maere Fine Arts, Ghent

# **Moonlight and Lights, c. 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gift of Madeleine Spilliaert, 1981

# **Woman at the Shoreline, 1910**

Indian ink, coloured pencil and pastel on paper

Private collection

# **The Gust of Wind, 1904**

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour and gouache on paper

Mu.ZEE, Ostend

# **Seascape Seen from Mariakerke, 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Vanmoerkerke Collection, Ostend

# **Seascape, 1905**

Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil and varnish on paper

KBR, Brussels, Prints

# **Blue and Yellow Seascape, c. 1934**

Watercolour and gouache on paper

Private collection



# **Seascape with Reflections, c. 1907**

Indian ink wash, brush, wax crayon and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Beach at Low Tide, c. 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Seascape with Beacons, c. 1900**

Pastel on paper

Private collection

# **The Shipwrecked Man, 1926**

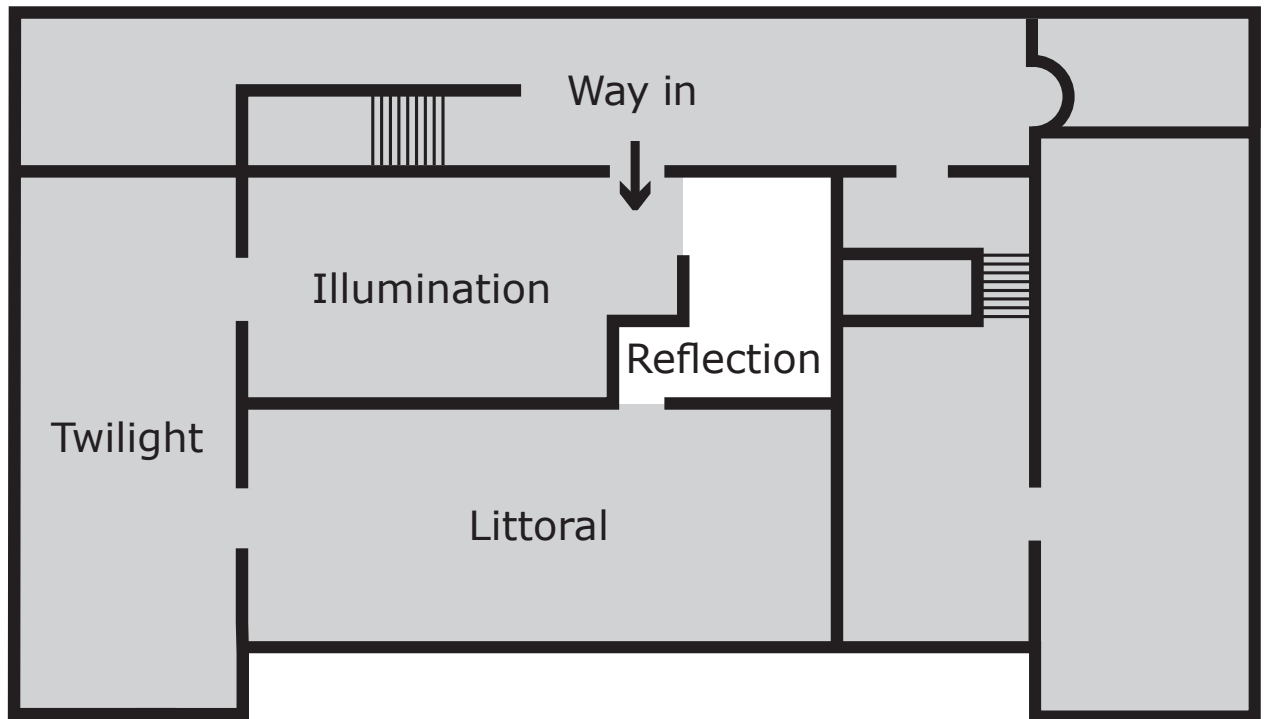
Watercolour, gouache, Indian ink wash and brush on paper

Collection of Barry Sloane

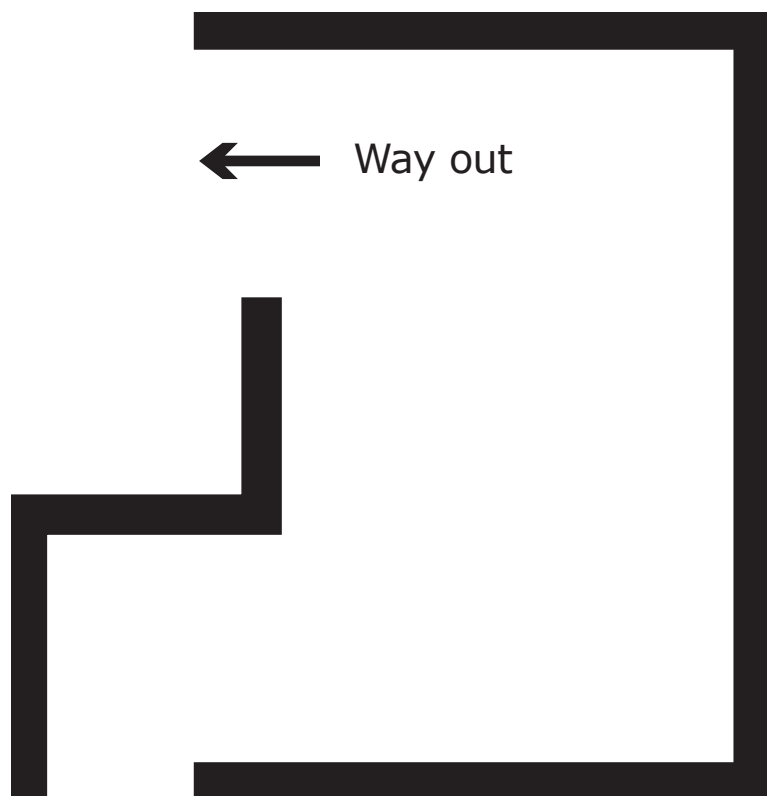
# **The Mast, 1914**

Indian ink, gouache, casein, watercolour and coloured chalk on cardboard

Axel Roch de Bellefroid



# Reflection



# Reflection

Among some of Spilliaert's best known and most admired works are the numerous self-portraits he produced throughout his life.

The selection here focuses on those produced over a two-year period between 1907 and 1908 when he was in his mid-twenties and still living with his parents in Ostend.

Plagued by insomnia and frustrated by his lack of recognition as an artist, his mind was full of unanswered existential questions.

Many of these self-portraits were produced at night in the glass-roofed sun room, seen here, which was populated with mirrors and pot plants. This unassuming room not only served as his studio, a place of intense creativity and experimentation, but was akin to a sanctuary for the troubled young artist.

Like many artists, Spilliaert examined himself dispassionately, representing what he saw without embellishment.

Sitting or standing, he depicted himself reflected in the mirrors, at times working intensely with a drawing board propped up on the ubiquitous bentwood chair or drawing in a sketchbook, at others simply capturing his likeness.

In other works, however, he seeks something else, delving beyond his appearance and attempting to reach into the inner workings of his mind.

Often, he depicts himself with dark rings around his sleepless eyes as if hallucinating from tiredness. Wrestling with inner demons, plagued with self-doubt and sleep deprivation, he often mercilessly confronts himself as a person on the edge of reason. Physically and mentally spent, Spilliaert bares himself before the viewer.

## List of works

### **Portrait of Rachel, the Artist's Wife, 1917**

Spilliaert depicted Rachel Vergison, whom he married in 1916, on numerous occasions.

Here we see Rachel, heavily pregnant with their only child Madeleine, on the harbour overlooking the Voorhaven channel. Nearby a more intimate study captures a seated Rachel sewing in the window of their home.

Pencil, Indian ink wash, brush, black gouache and pen on laid paper

KBR, Brussels, Print

### **Needlework, 1917**

Watercolour, Indian ink wash, brush and pen on paper

Private collection

# **Lady with Lorgnette, 1907**

Although it is not known who this assured and sophisticated young woman is, it has been suggested that she is the artist Paule Deman, as implied by the prominence of the painting on the wall behind her.

Paule was the daughter of the Brussels publisher Edmond Deman who employed Spilliaert as an illustrator.

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour and coloured pencil on paper

Collection of Stefan Campo, Antwerp

# **The Glass Roof, 1909**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Private collection

# **Self-portrait with Masks, 1903**

Pencil, Indian ink wash, brush, pen and coloured pencil on paper

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

# **The Silhouette of the Artist, 1907**

Indian ink wash, brush and coloured pencil on paper

Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent

# **Self-portrait, 3 November, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil, pastel and Conté crayon on paper

Private collection



# **Self-portrait, 1907**

Indian ink wash and brush on paper

The Hearn Family Trust

# **Self-portrait in front of a Mirror, 1908**

Indian ink wash, brush, watercolour and coloured pencil on paper

Mu.ZEE, Ostend

# **Self-portrait (with Drawing Board), 1907**

Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil and watercolour on paper

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
Gift of William S. Lieberman, in honour of A. Hyatt  
Mayor, 1980

# **Self-portrait with Blue Background, 1907**

Indian ink wash, brush, pastel, coloured pencil and coloured chalk on paper mounted on canvas

Quintet Private Bank (Europe) S.A.

# **Self-portrait with Blue Sketchbook, 1907**

Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil and pastel on paper

Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

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