

room texts of the exhibition

Théo van Rysselberghe

Flemish artist Théo van Rysselberghe (1862-1926) was a leading Neo-Impressionist. He introduced the Pointillist technique of Seurat and Signac in Belgium and played a major role in the group of avant-garde Brussels artists known as "Les XX" (pronounced "Les Vingt"). This exhibition includes not only a large number of well-known masterpieces, but also works from private collections which have never previously been seen by the public. Van Rysselberghe also influenced artists in the Netherlands, including Jan Toorop, Piet Mondrian and Jacoba van Heemskerck. Examples of their work from the Gemeentemuseum's own collection can be seen in galleries 19 to 25.

In addition to self-portraits and portraits of his wife, daughter, friends and some important contemporaries, Van Rysselberghe produced many paintings of landscapes in Flanders, the Netherlands, Morocco and the south of France. He was a born traveller. His studies of the work of Frans Hals in Haarlem and his first visit to Morocco had a decisive influence on his early style: loose brushstrokes, warm colours and exotic scenes bathed in brilliant sunlight.

In 1883 Van Rysselberghe was one of the founders of Les XX and in 1887 the members organised a major exhibition of Neo-Impressionists. That was where Van Rysselberghe met Signac, and the two became friends. Van Rysselberghe had already discovered Seurat's work the previous year in Paris and at the time of the exhibition he himself was beginning to experiment with a stippled Pointillist technique of painting known as Divisionism, adopting a bright and luminous palette as a result. He had close ties with the French Pointillists. He travelled with Signac to the South of France, worked in Signac's studio in Paris and met Pissarro.

From 1898 on, however, Van Rysselberghe distanced himself from Signac, wanting to concentrate more on nature and move away from Neo-Impressionism. He sought his subjects in Brittany and on the coast of England and his compositions became freer.

Influential

Van Rysselberghe was in close contact with many contemporary Belgian and French artists and writers, as witness his portraits of André Gide, Paul Signac and Octave Maus, the secretary of Les XX. He himself was an influential figure in the cultural life of Belgium and Europe on the eve of the 20th century. Toulouse-Lautrec and Seurat bought work by him and he was responsible for introducing into Belgium and the Netherlands the new technique of Divisionism, whereby pure colours were applied separately alongside each other in small dots or 'points', rather than blended into each other on the canvas. By doing so, he influenced many other artists, including Jan Toorop, who was also a member of Les XX. Together with Mondrian, Toorop went on to develop a northern variant of Divisionism that has become known as Dutch Luminism. Here too, the separation of colours is the key feature, but the colours are applied in larger patches. It was Luminism that eventually led Mondrian to reduce his palette to the three primary colours. His last painting, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, can therefore be seen as the final consequence of this trend.

Biography of Théo van Rysselberghe

1862: Born in Ghent on 23 November.

Trained at the Ghent and Brussels academies of art.
First exhibited (two portraits) at the three-yearly Ghent Salon in 1880.
Went to live in Brussels.

1882–1883: Period in Spain and first visit to Morocco (Tangiers).
Became friendly with Emile Verhaeren and Octave Maus.
Establishment of avant-garde group Les XX (pronounced "Les Vingt").

1883: Studied and copied Frans Hals paintings in Haarlem. Impressed by the accurate rendering of light in Hals' work.

1883-1884: Returned to Morocco for almost a year.

1884: First exhibition of Les XX.

1886: Exhibition by Les XX exhibition including Neo-Impressionist artists. Shocked by Georges Seurat's painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Adopted a Neo-Impressionist style.

1887: Les XX exhibition entirely devoted to Neo-Impressionist painters. Became friendly with Signac.

Summer 1887: Visit to Paris. Met Toulouse-Lautrec and many Paris-based painters.

1887– 1888: Third visit to Morocco.

1888: Adopted the Divisionist technique.

1889: Exhibited his first Neo-Impressionist portraits with Les XX: *Portrait of Alice Sèthe*.

1889: First presentation of work by Les XX outside Belgium (in Amsterdam). The exhibition also included work by Jan Toorop, who had been a member of Les XX since 1884.

16 September: Marriage to Maria Monnom. Honeymoon in Brittany.

1890: Took part for first time in the Salon des Indépendants (established by Seurat, Signac and Cross) and met Maurice Denis.

Birth of daughter, Elisabeth van Rysselberghe.

1892: Homage to Seurat by Les XX. Trip with Signac: *The Harbour of Sète*. *The Tartans*.

Start of a long series of journeys: to the Netherlands, France, Italy and through Europe as far as Constantinople.

1893: *Dunes in Cadzand*.

1893: Break up of Les XX. Joined La Libre Esthétique group set up by Octave Maus.

1896: Visit to the Netherlands with Signac: Vlissingen, Veere, Dordrecht, Rotterdam, The Hague, Amsterdam and Volendam. Spent two months at Signac's home in Saint-Tropez.

1898: Wanted to get closer to nature and distance himself from Neo-Impressionism. Moved from Brussels to Paris.

From 1899: Various trips to the Côte d'Opale (Ambleteuse) and the south of France, with the painter Henri-Edmond Cross.

1904: Periods in Brittany and Jersey.

1906: Period in the Netherlands.

1908 – 1909: Start of a long tour of Italy: Taormina, Naples, Florence and Rome.

1911: Moved to Saint-Clair.

1915: Portraits of Emile Verhaeren.

Periods in Paris, Brussels and the south.

1922: First solo exhibition in Belgium at the Galerie Giroux.

1926: Died in December. Buried in France, in the churchyard at Le Lavandou.

The academy

Théo Van Rysselberghe was born in Ghent in 1862. He was the youngest in a family of six children who went on to pursue brilliant careers as scientists, architects or university professors. However, Théo wanted to become an artist. He attended the art academies in Ghent and Brussels. At the age of 18 he exhibited at the three-yearly Salon in Ghent. Shortly afterwards, he painted his *Self-Portrait with Pipe* (1880), painted in fairly sombre colours in the Belgian Realist tradition of the time. Soon after this, however, he was to develop his own Realist style, close to Impressionism.

In 1879 and 1881 he visited England and in 1883 he came to Haarlem to study the work of Frans Hals. He was deeply impressed by Hals' accurate rendering of light. In Knokke in the summer of 1883 he became acquainted with the future members of Les XX. He also met Emile Verhaeren, who was to become one of his most faithful friends, and Octave Maus, a lawyer and later secretary to Les XX. In Knokke, Théo painted *Western Flanders*, the painting he would submit in 1884 for the opening exhibition of Les XX.

Les XX

In 1883 Théo was one of the co-founders of Les XX: a group of young artists who were rebelling against the outmoded academism and prevailing artistic standards of the time. The Brussels jurist Octave Maus became secretary of the group and a capable organiser of its exhibitions. Other notable members of Les XX were James Ensor, Willy Finch, Fernand Khnopff, Jan Toorop, Félicien Rops and later Auguste Rodin and Paul Signac.

The lure of the East: Morocco

Unlike many novice artists, Théo decided against the traditional tour of Italy, but instead set out in 1882, with the help of a scholarship, on a trip to Morocco. His tutor at the Brussels academy, Jean-Francois Portaels, had given him some idea of the oriental ambiance of North Africa and he wanted to experience it for himself. In the course of his journey he made many small-scale sketches in oils. The paintings he brought back were shown in Brussels at the first exhibition by Les XX. They depicted scenes of everyday life in the streets and souks. In 1883 he returned to Morocco and, this time, spent a year there. He was obsessed by the problem of rendering light.

Portraits

Returning from Morocco, Théo concentrated on painting portraits to order. He also painted relatives and friends. The atmosphere and style of these pictures bear witness to his taste for Japanese prints. The colours are less bright than in the paintings done in Morocco. In accordance with the fashion of the time, his subjects are generally shown in a reflective mood.

The influence of Neo-Impressionism

In 1886, Les XX organised an exhibition about French Neo-Impressionism. This movement had been prompted by scientific work on the perception of colour. If pure colours are applied in small patches or dots alongside each other, they appear to blend together when seen from a distance. The technique of painting used to achieve this result is known as Pointillism or Divisionism. It was at the 1886 exhibition that Théo first saw Georges Seurat's Divisionist paintings. He was deeply impressed. After seeing Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* he started to use the technique in his own work.

Between December 1887 and March 1888 he undertook his third visit to Morocco. He made sketches and colour notes and recorded his impressions in notebooks. In his paintings, he experimented with Divisionism, although still using short brushstrokes rather than dots.

Peak of Divisionism

Signac, Seurat and Cross were regarded as the figureheads of the Divisionist movement. Théo produced his well-known *Portrait of Alice Sèthe* (1888) in shades of blue and gold. This work marked a turning-point in his life: it was the first time he used a fully Pointillist technique. Alice Sèthe was later to marry the sculptor Paul Dubois. Her sister, Maria Sèthe, who also sat for Théo, married the art nouveau architect Henry van de Velde.

An inveterate traveller

In 1895 Théo was commissioned by the Compagnie des Wagon-lits to design a number of posters for it, and in this connection travelled to Constantinople, Athens and Romania. In 1896 he spent two months at Signac's home in Saint-Tropez and also accompanied Signac to the Netherlands. He painted many landscapes in Ambleteuse and, together with his wife Maria, daughter Elisabeth and

French writer André Gide, visited England, Germany, Brittany and the Dutch town of Veere. In 1907 he spent time in Jersey and at the end of 1908 he embarked on a long tour of Italy, including visits to Sicily, Ravello, Naples, Pozzuoli, Rome and Florence. Finally in 1913 he spent a short time in Granada.

Works on paper between 1895 and 1907

Théo gradually abandoned Seurat's technique. He began to work more sketchily on paper, recording his subjects with a few telling strokes of the pencil, pastel or brush. His compositions, subjects and palette betray the influence of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec.

Works on paper after 1907

He was constantly drawing and always had a pencil and sketchbook to hand. The results were sketches for countless paintings that never saw the light of day. On his walks or trips, he noted down his impressions of light and colour, drew the curve of a bay or the slope of a hillside. After making this initial spontaneous sketch, he analysed each composition systematically. Light and colours were never left to chance.

Closer to nature

In 1898, Théo and Paul Signac had a difference of opinion about the development of their art. Théo wanted to get closer to nature, to listen more to his instinct and feelings, and to free himself from the straitjacket of Neo-Impressionism. He abandoned the strict division of colours and began to use broken tones again. In his portraits and compositions, he placed friends and relatives in arranged settings. Although these backgrounds became more varied, portraits were henceforth to remain the main focus of his work.

From 1904 on, Théo regularly spent time in Provence, staying with his friend Henri-Edmond Cross in Saint-Clair. Together they explored the Côte d'Azur. Théo was now painting almost nothing but Mediterranean landscapes, female nudes and portraits of his wife, daughter and brother Octave. In 1911 he asked Octave to design a house and studio for him. He was fascinated by the brilliant light of the Mediterranean region and the wild countryside around Saint-Clair. Turning his back on Neo-Impressionism once and for all, he painted from now on with long, broad strokes of the brush.

Luminism and its consequences in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum

Théo van Rysselberghe influenced artists in the Netherlands as well as Belgium.

Painter and graphic artist Jan Toorop became a member of Les XX in 1884 and was just as impressed by Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* as Théo van Rysselberghe was to be two years later. In 1889 Toorop organised the Les XX exhibition in Amsterdam, which included not only his own work but also Neo-Impressionist paintings by Van Rysselberghe. The exhibition was a sensation and proved highly controversial with both the critical establishment and the public: they were not accustomed to the bright palette.

The role of Toorop

In Domburg, where – according to many artists – the light was paler and blonder than elsewhere in the Netherlands, Toorop assembled a circle of artists around him. His dual role as a modern artist and an organiser of contemporary art exhibitions led to his being regarded in around 1907/1908 as one of the pioneers of Dutch Luminism. The works on show here provide the opportunity to compare the oeuvre of Van Rysselberghe with work by his contemporaries now in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum. The other artists have been selected on the basis of their interest in Divisionist technique and their contribution to the consequent liberation of colour.

Luminism is an exaggerated form of Divisionism in which the stipple technique is used to achieve an even more radiant effect of light. Leo Gestel, Jan Sluijters and Bart van der Leek also played an important part in the development of this movement within modern Dutch art.

Mondrian and Luminism

The Gemeentemuseum's renowned collection of Mondrians is the biggest and best anywhere in the world. Mondrian was a pioneer of abstract art. His paintings are universally recognisable, with their black horizontal and vertical lines on white or grey backgrounds and their squares or rectangles of primary colour. The drawings and paintings that Mondrian produced earlier in his career, as he worked his way towards abstraction, can be seen nowhere else than in this museum.

Mondrian made systematic use of solutions that other artists had found to the problems facing them in their work. In his analysis of colours and the separation of colour from representation, he was influenced by Théo van Rysselberghe.

From 1908 onward, Mondrian spent several summers in Domburg, where he met fellow avant-garde artists Jan Toorop, Jacoba van Heemskerck, Leo Gestel and Jan Sluijters. They were all following the latest trends set in France, using a Divisionist application of bright colours to strengthen the effects of light and atmosphere in their work. Even so, the colours in Mondrian's work from this time are always linked to a search for a spiritual dimension. His paintings differ from those of his Luminist artist friends in their concentration on the varied representation of certain recurring motifs: trees, windmills, church towers and dune landscapes. By confining himself to the primary colours red, yellow and blue, he was later to take the principle of colour separation to its ultimate conclusion. His *Victory Boogie Woogie* can be seen as the culmination of the Divisionist trend.