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LÉON SPILLIAERT
1881 Ostend - Brussels 1946

Tasse, réchaud et casserole (Cup, small stove and saucepan)

Indian ink, wash, brush on paper; 1908.

Signed lower left: *L. Spilliaert*; on the verso from another hand dated and inscribed: *1908?/3/1.*

220 x 292 mm

PROVENANCE: Madeleine Spilliaert, Ukkel – Collection of the van Rossum Family, Brussels – Imelda Art Gallery, Knokke

EXHIBITION: *Léon Spilliaert, œuvres inédites*, 23 June – 3 September 2000, Casino, Knokke

Although Léon Spilliaert (1881-1946) is often associated with the Belgian Symbolist movement, he was in fact an independent thinker unwilling to incorporate notions derived from symbolism or idealism in his art. In his early career he had, however, avidly absorbed the writings of Belgian symbolist poets and playwrights like Emile Verhaeren and Maurice Maeterlinck, producing in response a large body of illustrations. He also produced a series of powerful, brutally honest self-portraits triggered by periods of anguished introspection. Artistically, he was something of a solitary figure captive to his private inner world, where his powers of perception roamed free and in isolation. However, like many of his contemporaries, Spilliaert was an acute observer of his immediate surroundings, but he differed from them in his interpretative scrutiny. His major objective was to plumb the world of everyday reality. Encouraged by Xavier Mellery (1845-1903), who was briefly his teacher, he set out to represent an animistic view of the world – in which natural phenomena and inanimate objects possess a living soul.

A mood of unbroken silence reigns in Spilliaert's spaces and interiors – spaces stripped of human presence. He isolates them in timeless compositions which have disparate segments that mirror the selective eye of a photographer with a predilection for unusual perspectives. He varies his viewpoint, thereby producing serial motifs which he constantly revisits – his workplace and his bedroom. Around 1908, health problems kept him cloistered in his private space. Here, tormented by solitude and despair, he was nevertheless to discover a sense of security.

Many of the objects that inhabited his humdrum life as an invalid provided subject matter for simple arrangements with still-life overtones. Sometimes, with a touch of exaggerated theatricality, he would develop an assembly of domestic objects – boxes, bottles and carafes – which he utilised to construct small-scale sets. And he carefully ensured that their shapes echoed each other and that their textures captured the light. But most of the time he would let the immutability of objects take him by surprise when they caught his alert eye. To him, these objects then began to take on a life of their own. This was what he described as a process triggered by a trick of the mind affecting his visual perception. Without warning an object would shed its name and objective significance to reveal a new uniqueness, dissolving his perception of it into a state of heightened, semi-surrealistic consciousness. In this, Spilliaert's work ushers in a new modernity [Fig.1].

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His visual imagery is at its most remarkable in crisp compositions executed solely in Indian ink and wash. In the present drawing titled *Tasse, réchaud et casserole* – which suggests a hospital bedside – the sparseness of the pictorial means and the enigmatic play of shadow are charged with eloquence. A somewhat similar composition of his depicts a candlestick and a mound of white sheets [Fig.2]. The brilliant white of the untouched paper is offset against nuanced shades of grey and black in an elegant interplay of sweeping curves and straight lines, of volumes and areas of blank paper. The cup is conspicuously placed at the centre of the composition as if offering a resting point for the viewer's eye. It skilfully balances the compact mass of dark shapes against the areas of free-floating, light-filled space.

Spilliaert never disparaged a realistic reading of the objects he depicted. But through his handling of the medium and his supple use of delicate veils of liquid ink he transformed and dematerialized them. Contours are all that remain. Devoid of substance, they acquire an immaterial dimension. In his persistent search for the 'absolute reality' of natural phenomena and inanimate objects he saw what was to him a transient potential to transform them and to convey their supernatural reality.

Dr. Anne Adriaens-Pannier
Catalogue raisonné of the work of Léon Spilliaert

This work will be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the work of Léon Spilliaert by Dr. Anne Adriaens-Pannier.

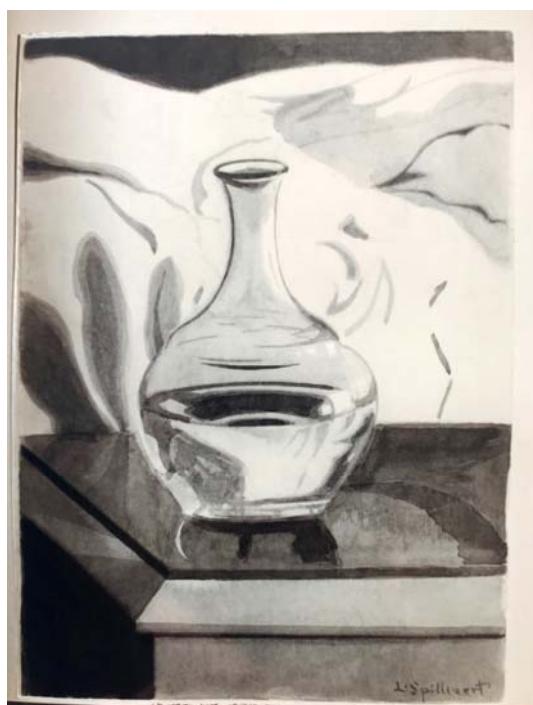


Fig.1: *The carafe of Water*, 1909
Pencil, Indian ink, wash, brush on paper,
292 x 222 mm
Private collection



Fig.2: *Milk Jug, Saucepan and Candlestick*, 1908-9
Indian ink, brush on paper,
212 x 285 mm
Private collection