

EUGEEN VAN MIEGHEM

1875

Eugeen Van Mieghem was born at his parents' tavern cum café on the Van Meterenkaai on October 1st 1875. His father Henri was a shipping agent while his mother Virginie ran the tavern known as In Het Hert.

Eugeen grew up on the banks of the River Scheldt, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the port. He also observed the colourful characters who frequented the café: skippers, sailors, owners of stevedoring companies ('natiebazen'), porters of bagged goods ('buildragers') and female sack sewers.

The port and ordinary people were to become a major source of inspiration for the artist who bequeathed us an impressive, unique and masterfully executed picture of humankind in a cosmopolitan seaport around 1900. Van Mieghem was aptly dubbed the "artist of the people".

In 1873 the Red Star Line started transporting emigrants from Antwerp to the New World (first America but after the First World War also Canada). The ships tied up near the Rijnkaai. The Red Star Line's first office was on the Jordaenskaai.

1883

The port of Antwerp had to be extended to accommodate the increasing activity and larger ships. The stone quay walls were built and the old inlets filled in. Around 1883 the works reached the Van Meterenkaai and Van Mieghem senior built a new tavern on Montevideostraat.

The Van Mieghem family's café (No. 6 Montevideostraat with telephone number 21) was located on the 'Eilandje', a port district surrounded by the Scheldt and the docks. The street was the border between the port and residential Antwerp.

Eugeen went to school on Keistraat and his talent for drawing soon became apparent. His teachers at the Koninklijk Atheneum in Antwerp included the writer and poet Pol de Mont. In 1891 Van Mieghem attended evening classes at Antwerp academy. In 1892 he became a full-time student there.

In November 1885 Vincent van Gogh enrolled at Antwerp academy but in February 1886 he was dismissed after a conflict with Professor Siberdt.

1892-1894

In 1891 the Antwerp art society L'Association pour l'Art was founded by Henry Van de Velde and Max Elskamp. Their trailblazing first exhibition in May-June 1892 included work by foreign artists like Bonnard, Pissarro, Seurat, Signac, de Toulouse-Lautrec, Toorop and Van Gogh.

Eugeen Van Mieghem saw this exhibition because it was held in the Old Museum in Venusstraat (back of Antwerp academy). In May 1893 L'Association pour l'Art mounted a second and last exhibition.

Van Mieghem came top of his class at the academy. For the academic year 1893-94 he enrolled in the *Drawing after ancient sculpture* class. Between 1894-95 and 1895-96 he studied *Drawing, figures from life* under Professor Siberdt.

In 1893 the Red Star Line built a warehouse right opposite Eugeen's mother's café on the corner of the Rijnkaai and Montevideostraat. Here every migrant had to undergo a first brief medical check and their clothes and luggage were disinfected.

From then on the artist encountered the mainly Jewish emigrants on a daily basis. Later on he portrayed them authentically and sympathically in sublime drawings, pastels and a few very rare paintings which are now shown all over the world.

Van Mieghem's earliest little paintings, including a self-portrait, date from 1894.

1895

Around this time the artist came across the work of Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, a Swiss painter, draughtsman and etcher who moved to Paris around 1881 and became friends with (among others) Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Aristide Bruant.

Steinlen was very productive and contributed to more than 30 newspapers and magazines, including *Le Chat Noir*, *Le Mirliton* and *L'Assiette au beurre*. Consequently, his drawings of the Parisian populace were known all over Europe and their influence on contemporaries such as Pablo Picasso (Barcelona), Käthe Kollwitz (Berlin), Kees van Dongen (Rotterdam) and Eugeen Van Mieghem (Antwerp) should not be underestimated.

1896

In 1896, ten years after having Van Gogh removed from the academy, Professor Siberdt, a follower of Henri Leys, also dismissed Van Mieghem.

Van Mieghem senior sent his son to the docks to look for freight for him. The artist always carried a sketchbook with him to record his impressions. In the evenings Van Mieghem read avidly.

1897

At the annual salon of the progressive Brussels art circle La Libre Esthétique Van Mieghem saw the work of artists like de Toulouse-Lautrec, Toorop, Luce and Edvard Munch.

It was not long before the Norwegian expressionist's influence manifested itself in the oeuvre of the young Van Mieghem (especially in terms of composition). The foreground of his work was now peopled by pensive characters staring into the distance.

Because of his interest in literature, Van Mieghem's friends included Antwerp writers like Lode Baekelmans and Edmond Van Offel.

1898

June of that year saw the opening of a second exhibition by the De Scalden group in the Zaal De Keyser. Influenced by the ideals of the English Arts and Crafts movement, the group attached great importance to traditional craftsmanship and quality materials and design.

This was probably Van Mieghem's first group exhibition. He showed several drawings alongside work by friends like Karel Collens and Edmond Van Offel. Pol de Mont referred to his drawings in the magazine *De Vlaamse School*. De Scalden's second yearbook contained illustrations of Van Mieghem's work.

The 17-year-old Augustine Pautre, born in Brussels but with Swiss nationality, enrolled at Antwerp academy for the 1898-99 academic year. It was not long before she and Eugeen Van Mieghem met.

1899

At the end of 1899 the Antwerp entrepreneur François Franck founded the De Kapel cultural society and the empty Lantschot chapel on the Falconrui soon became a lively centre of progressive intellectual life. Exhibitions and musical evenings were held, and writers and well-known personalities entertained an often restless but zealous audience that consisted of bourgeoisie, artists and workers. Though Van Mieghem became a regular visitor to De Kapel, he always remained discretely in the background. He admired the French poet Paul Verlaine and read anarchistic books by Domela Nieuwenhuis, Pierre Kropotkine, Jean Grave, Elisée Reclus, Sébastien Faure and others.

A remarkably large number of Van Mieghem's works are dated 1899. At the age of 24 he was already displaying great expressiveness and maturity.

Some of his works on paper exude a powerful *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere. Eugeen's father died on June 26th. We see Augustine Pautre for the first time in Eugeen's pastel *The Inner City*, which he produced the day of his father's funeral. She is depicted next to Eugeen's mother. That year the artist also made several noteworthy drawings of churches.

1900

In 1900 De Scalden mounted an exhibition in the Old Museum in Antwerp comprising works by Van Mieghem and seven other artists. These eight artists then formed a group which called itself Eenigen. In his magazine *De Vlaamse School*, Pol de Mont encouraged them to go their own way.

At the end of March De Scalden mounted an exhibition in the Old Museum with work by (among others) Van Mieghem.

The artist also took part in the Brussels salon held every three years. In the courthouse in Antwerp he showed several of his designs at the exhibition on the theme of *Ex libris* organized by La Conférence du jeune Barreau. Shortly after that Van Mieghem made the cover design for the 15-year commemorative album of the Flemish Conference of the Antwerp Bar. Between 1900 and 1905 he made a series of drawings in the courthouse in Antwerp which are reminiscent of work by Daumier and Forain.

1901

The eighth salon of La Libre Esthétique opened in Brussels on March 1st 1901. Ten of Van Mieghem's works were on show for a month alongside work by Cézanne, Cross, Sérusier, Denis, Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Vuillard, Guillaumin, Meunier, Hodler and others.

He sold several pieces there but despite the fact that his work was received favourably, the artist sought no further contact with Brussels upper middle classes.

In June De Scalden held a fourth annual exhibition which included work by Van Mieghem.

On May 28th Eenigen's second exhibition opened in the Old Museum in Antwerp with several of his works. That year Augustine Pautre graduated from the academy.

In August the artist took part in the summer exhibition at the Koninklijk Kunstverbond / Cercle royal artistique and in September in the triennial salon in Antwerp.

1902

On January 28th 1902 Eugeen Van Mieghem married Augustine Pautre. Initially the couple lived in the building behind the house on the inner courtyard of Eugeen's mother's café (which was now called the Café Veuve Van Mieghem to reflect her new status as a widow). There the artist produced wonderful portraits of his young wife during her pregnancy that year.

A second exhibition by Eenigen opened in the Old Museum. Van Mieghem's portrait of Augustine appeared on a publicity postcard of the Collection vins du Clos Marguerite.

On November 11th their son was born. He was named after his father.

1903-1904

In May 1903 the Eenigen's third exhibition opened at the Koninklijk Kunstverbond / Cercle royal artistique, which included work by Van Mieghem. From July to September he took part in the fourth Eenigen exhibition at the mondain casino in Blankenberge and from November 28th to December 7th at the Koninklijk Kunstverbond / Cercle royal artistique in Antwerp.

In September the artist showed work at the triennial salon in Brussels and at the *Exhibition of watercolour paintings, pastels and etchings* organized by the Antwerp Royal Society for the Furtherance of the Fine Arts.

In November the fifth Eenigen salon opened at the Kunstverbond / Cercle Artistique with work by (among others) Van Mieghem.

In January 1904 Lenore Van der Veer published an article entitled *Eugene Van Mieghem – An Artist of the People* in the London-based Pall Mall Magazine.

In July the artist and several friends from De Kapel took part in a tribute to the Dutchman Domela Nieuwenhuis, who had championed anarchistic and social causes. A drawing by Van

Mieghem appears in the tribute book. During his stay in Amsterdam the artist admired the work of Rembrandt, Vermeer and Breitner.

In September he took part in the triennial salon in Antwerp and in October he showed work in Brussels at the annual exhibition of the Brussels group Labeur.

In November Van Mieghem took part in the *Exhibition of sketching and judicial caricature* in Antwerp.

In November the artist also contributed to the sixth De Scalden exhibition, for which his poster design was chosen as the exhibit image. We recognize Augustine on the right holding a flower.

By now his family was finding it difficult to make ends meet and in October Van Mieghem had his wife pose as a model for him and several of his friends. The last drawings in which she posed as a healthy young woman are dated December 12th 1904.

1905

At the beginning of 1905 Augustine became seriously ill with tuberculosis. Van Mieghem dealt with his grief by drawing his sick muse as she wasted away.

He drew on any available material, using the back of port telegrams, waybills and even mourning cards. The artist never showed these works during his lifetime.

On February 5th 1905 a preparatory meeting was held for the foundation of the new art society Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain, an initiative of the Antwerp brothers François and Louis Franck. On March 1st the foundation's meeting proper took place at the home of Louis Franck, but Eugene did not attend because of Augustine's deteriorating health.

Augustine died in Brussels on March 12th 1905, at the age of just 24.

On July 22nd the first Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain salon with work by living artists opened at the Old Museum in Venusstraat. Van Mieghem showed no fewer than 23 works.

1906-1909

The bereaved Van Mieghem did not show any work from September 1905 to March 1910. This period is referred to as the 'silent period'.

1910-1913

In March 1910 for the first time the artist again showed work at the annual salon of Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain. At the end of that year he also took part in the Christmas Exhibition at the Koninklijk Kunstverbond / Cercle royal artistique. A re-found zest for life manifested itself in the colour of his pastels.

In February 1911 he took part in the Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain group salon.

Van Mieghem held his first solo show at the Koninklijk Kunstverbond / Cercle royal artistique (now the Arenberg theatre) from November 17th to 28th 1912. He exhibited no fewer than 39 paintings, 52 pastels, watercolours and drawings.

In 1913 he took part in the Easter Exhibition of the Antwerp Koninklijke Kunstkring / Cercle Royal Artistique d'Anvers, the Salon du Printemps in Brussels and the group salon of Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain.

1914

In March 1914 Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain organized the *Second Belgian Salon* at the Pulchri Studio in The Hague with works by Ensor, Laermans, Van Rysselberghe, Wouters, Van Mieghem and others.

On March 7th the annual Antwerp salon of Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain opened with no fewer than 29 works by Van Mieghem. The spotlight was on the work of Jakob Smits, Rik Wouters and Van Gogh (with no fewer than 96 pieces!). Van Mieghem was confronted by world-famous paintings like *Iris* and *The Bedroom*. He went on to paint *Iris* and *The Alcove*.

A month later Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain organized the *Sonderausstellung der belgischen Kunstvereinigung L'Art Contemporain* in Cologne, which included work by Claus, Ensor, Smits, Vaes and Van Mieghem. That year he became a member of Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain, but his increasing national fame as an artist was abruptly interrupted by the German invasion on August 4th.

1914-1918

During the bombardment and the siege of Antwerp (October 7th, 8th and 9th) the Van Mieghem family fled the city, as did most other citizens.

Even as they fled, the artist continued to record on paper the desperate flight of the helpless citizens. His mother, with the family around her, is often at the centre of this war work.

After the fall of the city, they returned to the café in Antwerp, where they lived through the years of occupation. Van Mieghem helped distribute soup, drew pictures of needy children and produced razor-sharp caricatures of the German occupier.

On February 3rd 1918 an activist demonstration was held for the independence of Flanders on the initiative of the Flemish nationalist politician August Borms. Afterwards Van Mieghem made a lithograph and several drawings of an incident with the lion flag on Meirplaats.

1919

Shortly after the war his mother sold the café and moved into a rest home.

From March 8th to 19th Van Mieghem showed his sizable war oeuvre at the Koninklijk Kunstverbond / Cercle royal artistique. Though the reviews were very favourable, sales were poor. People did not wish to be reminded of the suffering of war.

In April he fell ill and was admitted to Le Fort Jaco sanatorium in Ukkel (Brussels).

There the artist met the 23-year-old Marguerite Struyvelt. In September 1920 he went to live with her in Antwerp.

In May a second exhibition of his war work was held in Scheveningen. In the magazine *Onze Kunst* Georges Eekhoud reviewed his participation in the *Salon des aquarellistes belges* in Brussels in September in a very positive light. At the end of 1919 Van Mieghem took part in the *Exhibition of Antwerp artists* in the banquet hall (stadsfeestzaal) on the Meir.

1920-1921

On March 22nd Minister Jules Destrée appointed Van Mieghem a teacher for the *Drawing after classic sculpture* class at Antwerp academy, but in practice he took the *Drawing after the living model* class. The artist taught at the academy until the end of his life.

In June Van Mieghem submitted just two works to the annual Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain salon.

On November 10th at the age of 45 he married the 24-year-old Marguerite Struyvelt. His son did not accept the marriage and signed up as a sailor with the Red Star Line.

In 1921 Van Mieghem showed work at the Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain salon.

1922

In February the artist was admitted to a sanatorium in Burtscheid, near Aachen.

In April Van Mieghem sold the painting *Children of the docks* at the annual salon of Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain to the collector Jozef Beuckeleers.

In July he took part in the triennial salon in Ghent and in September in the *Salon des aquarellistes belges* in Brussels.

In 1922 the artist and his young wife moved to a flat on the second floor at No. 30 Sint-Paulusstraat.

In April 1923 Van Mieghem showed work at the triennial salon in Antwerp where his *Port Rascal* was purchased by Cléomir Jussiant. In September the Antwerp museum bought his work *Women at the docks* at the triennial salon. In September the artist took part in the *Salon des aquarellistes belges* in Brussels.

1924

In May Van Mieghem showed 36 works at the exhibition of Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain and Paul Lambotte, director of the Fine Arts Department in Brussels, corresponded with him about a possible purchase by the Belgian state of *At the docks*. The sale did not materialize.

Pol de Mont praised Van Mieghem's exhibit at the annual Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain salon that year.

In September the artist took part in the *Salon des aquarellistes belges* in Brussels.

At the end of 1924 he and Struyvelt broke up. She left him and returned to Brussels.

1925

At the beginning of May Van Mieghem showed eight paintings and four monotypes at the Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain salon.

In July he went on holiday to Blankenberge with the family of Henri Trousselot, the director of Antwerp's paper factories, who was married to Eugeen's niece. The artist travelled with them to Ostend where he visited a friend of Ensor.

That year he took part in the *Salon des aquarellistes belges* and the *Libre Académie de Belgique* in Brussels, and in Antwerp in the triennial exhibition and the *Children's Portraits* exhibition at the Kunstverbond / Cercle artistique.

At the end of March 1926 works by Van Mieghem were shown in Bern where two were bought by Swiss collectors.

1927

On February 1st Van Mieghem and Struyvelt reached a provisional agreement to divorce. Owing to his personal problems and ill health, he did not take part in the Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain salon that year.

At the beginning of July the artist was admitted to Dennenheuvell sanatorium in Ossendrecht (The Netherlands).

In November his old friend Lode Baekelmans published a very complimentary article about Van Mieghem in *De Vlaamse Elsevier*. It mentioned the names of the artists he admired. They included Breitner, Israëls, Meunier, Millet, de Toulouse-Lautrec, Steinlen and Forain.

In September Van Mieghem took part in the *Salon des aquarellistes belges* in Brussels and in the triennial exhibition in Antwerp.

In October Van Mieghem's *Port Women* was shown in an exhibition organized by the Belgian state in the Hungarian capital of Budapest. The work was purchased by the local museum.

In 1928 the artist took part in the *Junge belgische Kunst* exhibition in Hannover. For the last time he contributed to the Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain salon, submitting four works.

1929

Van Mieghem's health rapidly deteriorated. Finding it difficult to get around, he corresponded more with his friends Lode Baekelmans and Ernest Van den Bosch.

In his pocket diary he made sketches and noted down appointments with doctors and lawyers.

Towards the end of his life the artist produced a cycle on the Stations of the Cross. The painting *Christ's descent from the cross* was bought by his friend Willem Elsschot.

In September the artist showed work at the *Salon des aquarellistes belges* in Brussels. It was his last exhibition.

1930

In January Van Mieghem made a series of small, masterly drawings of the objects around him in his flat at No. 30 Sint-Paulusstraat.

On March 24th 1930 at the age of just 54 the artist died from a traumatic aortic rupture at Stuivenberg hospital in Antwerp.

On his easel was his last painting of a female sack sewer. A quote (in French) by the poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke was found in his pocket diary: "Perhaps you will discover that you are called to be an artist. Then take that destiny upon yourself, and bear it, its burden and its greatness, without ever asking what reward might come from outside. For the creator must be a world for himself and must find everything in himself and in nature, to whom his whole life is devoted."

After his death

Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain organized a major Van Mieghem retrospective in its pavilion at the 1930 World Fair in Antwerp. The art book planned by Ernest Van den Bosch was postponed because of the economic downturn and in the end it was never published. The artist's son did publish a portfolio of 30 etchings. Thirty copies were printed posthumously.

In October 1930 the Galerie d'Art Kodak in Brussels organized a retrospective.

In 1931 work by Van Mieghem was shown at the *100 Years of Belgian Art* exhibition at Van Wisselingh & Co in Amsterdam.

In 1933 and 1935 the Antwerp gallery Breckpot organized Van Mieghem retrospectives.

In 1933, 16 of his paintings were exhibited at the *Belgian Art* exhibition in Stockholm, Malmö and Oslo.

In 1935 his work was shown at the exhibition at the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels to mark the 30th birthday of Kunst van Heden / L'Art Contemporain.

In 1944 Antwerp city council organized a retrospective at the Stedelijk Kunstsalon. With the emergence of new art movements after the Second World War, sadly, Van Mieghem's work passed into oblivion.

In 1958 former pupil Jan de Schutter worked on a Van Mieghem retrospective at the Stedelijk Kunstsalon in Antwerp and in 1968 the Emile Verhaeren Museum mounted a retrospective.

In 1975 Frits Danckaert and Remi de Cnodder organized a retrospective at the Antwerp Waterworks to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth.

In 1975 the Antwerp insurance group Apra published the book *Mensen van toen* (People of the time), reproductions of pencil sketches by Van Mieghem from a 1905 sketchbook. On August 16th 1982 the Eugeen Van Mieghem Foundation was established.