

## ***Cornelis le Mair: no desire to be a fashionable painter***

### **A passion for paint**

Chickens, peacocks and goats wander about in the yard at Cornelis le Mair's converted farmhouse on the outskirts of Eindhoven: this, however, is not unusual in a farmyard. And there are some weatherbeaten sculptures too, which is not exactly unexpected either, since Le Mair is a visual artist. The shock only hits you after you enter the house; visitors suddenly find themselves in the middle of an exotic three-dimensional still life which enchants the senses.

Everywhere you look, objects are hanging, standing up or lying down. There are innumerable pots, dishes, vases, candelabra, glasses and knick-knacks, a few of which are housed in beautifully-tooled glass cases. The rooms are filled to overflowing with painted furniture, clocks, lamps, Chinese lanterns and musical instruments. Carpets and rugs hang on the walls - Oriental fashion - and decorate the ceilings as well. The opulent abundance of shapes and colours is breathtaking, and hopefully the photographs will speak for themselves, since this interior is impossible to describe in words.

A voice speaks, bidding the visitor welcome. It is not clear from which nook or cranny this voice is issuing. Not a living soul can be seen on the ground floor, but a narrow winding stair leads to the studio, which is also crammed with hanging, standing or recumbent objects. Le Mair looks up from his easel in surprise, suddenly remembering our appointment. We descend the staircase and chat at the kitchen table, where the artist has to clear a space for a writing pad. And it's only then that I see the parrot, which had greeted me so cordially upon my entrance.

Talking to Cornelis le Mair is talking to an outsider among painters. His canvases resemble those of old masters such as Botticelli, Rubens en Rembrandt, whilst composition, chiaroscuro and subject poses derive from the great Renaissance artists, as does the technique. However, being described as 'the last survivor from the Golden Age' is going too far for Le Mair.

"This cramps my style too much. Painting is a traditional art, and to me, traditional work is the most beautiful as well as the most challenging. But there's more involved than the way one puts paint to canvas. A painter has to discover and gauge his own depth, and every artist develops his own way of doing so, as I have. Anyway, it has always been absolutely clear to me that I have to work in this way. I was born like this: it's in my genes."

#### **Nursery school**

His talent became evident at nursery school, and he was often asked to show his drawings to all the classes. "Oh, that was awful!" Le Mair says. "Having to trail around the classrooms with my pictures. Really traumatic! I was extremely shy and the last thing I wanted to do was attract attention. I still am shy, actually, although I've learnt to live with it."

When he was nine years old, he painted an almost life-size copy of Rembrandt's *Night Watch* on his bedroom wall. "That was a joke," he says now. "But it's true that I was really keen at a very early age. I used to collect pictures of Rembrandt and other painters, and everything connected with art. The other boys used to collect pictures of footballers."

Le Mair, born in Eindhoven in 1944, does not come from an artistic background; his father worked at the Philips office, although he did enjoy music, the theatre and museums. Le Mair *père* probably recognised early on that his son was endowed with

special gifts. When Cornelis was 12, his father took him to a special Rembrandt exhibition in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum. Cornelis was 'enraptured' and threw himself with even greater verve into his study of the Renaissance master works. This resulted in the very first exhibition of his own work before he even left secondary school.

He went to the Academy in Den Bosch because his parents considered it proper for him to do so. Le Mair: "People said that you could learn a lot there, but that wasn't true. Everything at the Academy was modern, and my work was taboo. It just wasn't done. I painted still life and studied the Italian Renaissance, 16th- and 17th-century work, and the old masters. Nobody there knew anything about this and nobody wanted to know either. I couldn't understand it at all. You don't throw a Botticelli in the rubbish bin, you put it in a museum."

One of the tutors in Den Bosch encouraged him to go and study in Antwerp: "After I'd screwed up all my courage, I went to see Marc Macken, the director of the Fine Arts Academy (*Academie voor Schone Kunsten*), taking my drawings with me. He thought my work was wonderful, and I was allowed to start in the sixth year under Professor Victor Dolphijn. One thing I learnt from him was a certain nonchalance; I'd always been very meticulous and detailed in my work. Thanks to him, I started painting in a more informal and relaxed manner."

He thoroughly enjoyed his time in Antwerp, where he was in the company of like-minded fellow artists and where he felt appreciated. He was relieved to discover that there were some painters, like Werner van Hoylandt, who earned their living with their art alone. This meant that he would not have to teach in order to support himself. Le Mair took his degree *cum laude* in 1968.

Le Mair only painted surrealist pictures at the beginning of his career, influenced by Breughel and Jeroen Bosch. This phase came to an end when he discovered still life at the end of the 1960s: this genre was to become his greatest passion. His first still life paintings were composed of 'contemporary' objects: coffee grinders, banknotes, his own passport, or old wristwatches. He gradually began to draw his inspiration from seventeenth-century still life paintings, where his favourite objects were a knife, clay pipes, tin jugs, earthenware jars and Chinese pottery.

### **Vanitas**

He developed a preference for paintings that depict the mortality aspect (*vanitas*), with a skull as the most significant object. During the past few years, Le Mair's still life paintings have acquired more complexity and opulence; he makes more frequent use of exotic objects such as glasses and jars from Mediterranean countries and gaily-coloured fabrics from Asia: "I love looking for beautiful things and grouping them together," he says.

Le Mair has always been fascinated by portraits, even as a child. When he was only 11 years old, he painted a picture of himself with the aid of a mirror. His first priority is not whether the portrait is a good likeness; creating an interesting painting is much more important as far as he is concerned. He says: "A portrait painter has to reduce all facial details to one characteristic spot. This is how he can discover the essence of a face." He prefers painting women, particularly with regard to figure studies: "As far as I'm concerned, men are not at all sensual. In other words, they don't have any effect on me."

For Le Mair, painting is primarily a traditional technique. Although he does consider specific talent to be necessary, it is even more important to possess absolute mastery over a number of technical disciplines. And he firmly believes in home study: "You need an awful lot to be able to paint well," he says. "Skills and a great deal of knowledge and experience of the world. And you need a tremendous amount of substance, which you have to seek and acquire yourself; you need to become learned and obtain depth."

One of the ways in which Le Mair gets his 'substance' is during his many voyages; his favourite destinations include India and Bali. When there, he enjoys soaking up the atmosphere, seeing how the people live and work, and coming across objects that 'might well come in handy'. And this is how an old Rajasthan couch hammock, which he saw outside a small shop in Jaipur, ended up in his house. "As soon as I saw this couch hammock, I thought: what a wonderful thing for a painting. I had no idea at the time what exactly I was going to do with it. I thought I'd probably put a few pretty girls on it; I like painting pretty girls."

The couch hammock, together with two young ladies, is immortalised in Le Mair's large (255 x 212 cm) pendants entitled '*Schommel*' (swing) and '*Pilaar*' (pillar) and painted in 1997. In his 1998 catalogue, the artist describes the steps which led to the realisation of both these works. The actual process of putting paint on canvas was preceded by sketches, drawings, preliminary studies in oils, photographs and even computer print-outs, in order to determine the right composition. All this preparation took two years to complete.

Le Mair also documented the progress of these two master works with photographs. He soon rid himself of the idea that this might spoil the effect as far as the public was concerned. As he writes in his catalogue: "Why should I maintain the illusion that I'm some kind of magician? This simply is not true. The miraculous effect generated by a master work results from the fact that people generally can't penetrate the complicated strata of the traditional technique. However, mere skill alone does not satisfy me: I'd also like to stir up aesthetic emotions in the heart of the beholder. And that's why I propose that people view my work as attempts to create an atmosphere, or a mood, of serene beauty. So please, don't attach any deliberately-expressed iconographic or symbolic significance to my pictures."

At the mention of symbolism, Le Mair looks up from the sixteenth-century Chinese vase that he is turning in his hands and examining for cracks. He smiles when I remark that the Renaissance paintings are full of symbols, and that many art historians earn large salaries by explaining their meaning. Le Mair: "Symbolism is irrelevant. It's wonderful hearing people talk about my *Vanitas Triptych*. Everything they see in this work is quite right as far as I'm concerned. I think it's very touching to see how they project their entire personality on to my work. There's nothing wrong with that and I don't find it a problem. But I didn't put all these things into my paintings: I only see paint and how Rembrandt worked with it. What would an Indian make of Bach? If you enter that world, it'll swallow you up. Putting paint on canvas is enough for me. I don't need iconography."

### **Versatile**

Le Mair is an extremely versatile artist. He also engages in sculpture, architecture, music and making musical instruments, and he has even published a novel entitled '*Vanitas*', using his life and work in the 1960s as a guideline. But all these things should not be taken too seriously, he says: "I loathe pretentiousness. I'm a painter with other hobbies, and sometimes I sculpt. But I don't want to be known as a sculptor, since it's not in my line and I don't do it regularly. I do occasionally appear as a troubadour, just for fun. *Vanitas* is a romanticised autobiography which I enjoyed writing and I really did my best. And when they wanted to publish it, I shook off my diffidence and didn't stop them. Recording a CD with songs? Not on your life! I'd have fans too before I knew where I was."

To return to the paintings. The prices are obviously for the well-to-do, although Le Mair does not sell all his work. One person once offered one million guilders for the *Vanitas Triptych*. This painting, measuring four by six metres with its richly-ornamented and painted frame designed and executed by the artist himself, is propped casually against a wall together with a number of other works. Le Mair: "Why should I sell it? I don't need

the money: I'm not a poor man. I might possibly sell it in a couple of years, although I doubt it."

Cornelis le Mair could easily be the Netherlands' national portrait painter and make a great deal of money by painting the 'elite'. However, that's not his thing, he says: "I've unconsciously avoided celebrities and as a painter, I've always remained out of the spotlights. I've never cared about my reputation and I don't want to be a fashionable artist. People often attach supreme importance to their reputation and make a big parade of it. I regard reputations as a threat, I don't want to offend anybody and I don't want my freedom to be curtailed. Freedom is extremely important to me: I'm going to carry on doing what I want to do."

*For this article, use has been made of the catalogue entitled 'Cornelis le Mair, paintings & drawings' (1998) and its supplement (2002).*

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