

Eugène Leroy

peindre

15 avril – 28 août 2022

Eugène Leroy, *Autopictura*, vers 1958, Huile sur bois, 79 x 58 cm, Collection particulière, Roubaix, France, Eugène Leroy © Adapp, Paris 2022 / Photo Alain Leprieux.

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#ExpoEugeneLeroy

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Eugène Leroy peindre (to paint)

15 April - 28 August 2022



The Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris is devoting a major retrospective to Eugène Leroy. This exhibition will bring together about one hundred and fifty works (paintings and graphic), representative of the evolution of the artist's career.

Although his oeuvre has long remained under the radar, Eugène Leroy is counted among the greatest artists of the twentieth century. It was only in 1988 that his first major Parisian exhibition was held right here at the Musée d'Art Moderne in these same ARC spaces. Spanning over sixty years, the output of this painter – who was born in Tourcoing in 1910 and died in 2000 – was equally based on the perception of the real and an ideal vision of painting.

Partial to the old masters and willingly anachronistic, Eugène Leroy revisited traditional iconographic subjects such as nudes, self-portraits, still lifes, or landscapes throughout his lifetime. More than a retrospective, the exhibition layout, organized thematically, highlights the complexity of a lengthy creative process and pictorial experimentation.

For years Eugène Leroy juggled his painting activity with a career as a Latin and Greek teacher. Since his first solo show, held in Lille in 1937, he has made his mark as an artist in a category of his own. He exhibited his canvases in Paris in 1943, then participated in several iterations of the Salon de Mai in the 1950s. He travelled often in Europe, then to the United States and Russia, where he visited museum collections, seeking to associate his painting with that of the great masters and hone the pictorial knowledge essential to his work. In 1958, he moved into a small home-studio in Wasquehal, in northern France.

COMMUNIQUÉ DE PRESSE

Museum director
Fabrice Hergott

Curator
Julia Garimorth, assisted by
Sylvie Moreau-Soteras

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Eugène Leroy
Autoportrait, vers 1958
oil on wood
73 x 58 cm
Private collection, Roubaix, France
Photo Alain Leprince
Eugène Leroy © ADAGP, Paris 2022

Visitor information

Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris
11 Avenue du Président Wilson
75116 Paris
Tel. 01 53 67 40 00
www.mam.paris.fr

Open Tuesday–Sunday
10am–6pm

Late closing: Thursday until 21h30

Admission

Full rate: 12 €
Concessions: 10 €

Press officer

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The Parisian gallery Claude Bernard exhibited his work in 1961. It was on that occasion that the German painter Georg Baselitz and the dealer Michael Werner discovered his work. "I found in it images, as brown as fields, as stone, as wood, as mass, as scent. A simple Dutch composition with an unheard-of accumulation of colors. [...] A heap of splattered sheet metal from a dovecote that enlightened me," wrote Baselitz. In 1978, his eldest son opened the Jean Leroy gallery in Paris, where he regularly presented his father's work. In 1982, Jan Hoet, then director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Gand, Belgium, whom Leroy had met during a trip to the United States, devoted a major exhibition to his work and included him in Documenta 9 in Kassel. At the same time, the establishment of a fruitful collaboration with Michael Werner allowed Eugène Leroy's oeuvre to gain European and international recognition.

As Bernard Marcadé has pointed out, "the contribution of Eugène Leroy's oeuvre to twentieth-century art is decisive because it bears witness to an incessantly reiterated combat of painting and image." Beyond its thickness - but also thanks to it - this painting creates a new pictorial language that is deeply rooted in the real without any concern for its legibility.

Eugène Leroy sought to capture a truth about perception while preserving the emotion that makes it possible. "All I have ever tried to do in painting is reach [...] a kind of absence almost, so that painting is totally itself," he stated in 1979. He reworked his canvases, sometimes over the course of several years, until the quasi-disappearance of the subject. The difficulty of discerning at first glance the painted motif allows the viewer to linger over the physical presence of the work. His painting was "an act of memory, a projection forward across the present darkness of history," to borrow the poet Yves Bonnefoy's well-turned phrase about Rimbaud.

Partial to the old masters and willingly anachronistic, Eugène Leroy revisited traditional iconographic subjects such as nudes, self-portraits, still lifes, or landscapes throughout his lifetime. More than a retrospective, the exhibition layout, organized thematically, highlights the complexity of a lengthy creative process and pictorial experimentation.

Eugène Leroy's works are held in major public and private collections in France and abroad. With around forty paintings and drawing, acquired thanks to purchases and regular donations since 1988, the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris is now considered a reference place for the artist.

Other news about Eugène Leroy: the exhibition *Eugène Leroy. À contre-jour* will be presented from 28 April to 2 October 2022 at the MUba Eugène Leroy in Tourcoing.

Image versus matter

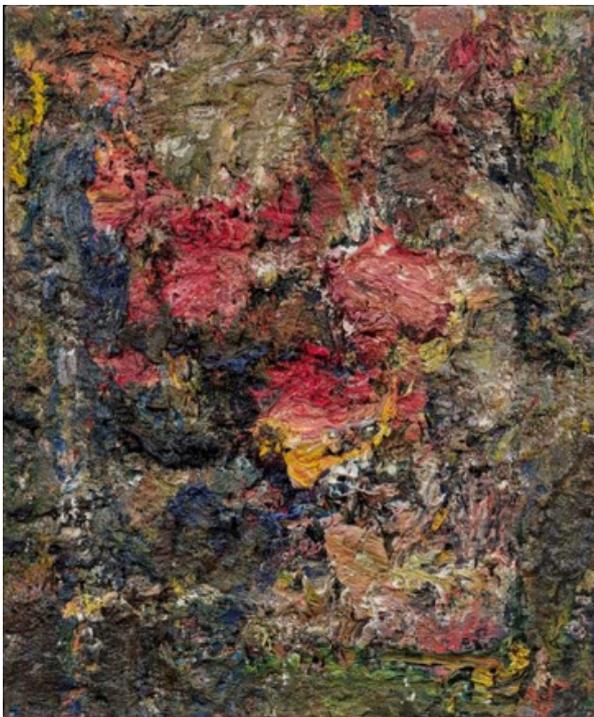
Up until the birth of modern art, pictorial matter had always been in the service of the image. It was meant to make possible an imitation or re-production of the real from the painter's tools. Yet, for Eugène Leroy, resemblance consisted of painting a reality that is not the representation of an image but its essence instead. Since the artist was not seeking mimesis, figuration and abstraction went hand-in-hand. This explains why Eugène Leroy never felt like he belonged to either one of these two currents.



Eugène Leroy
D'après la Ronde de nuit, 1990
huile sur toile
89 x 116 cm
Collection particulière, France
© Photo Jörg von Bruchhausen
© ADAGP, Paris, 2022

Touching painting

"Painting, I'd really like to touch it one day. Just simply touch it," said Eugène Leroy. This statement can be taken both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense through the simple process of painting: although vision is elicited in the first place — as is the case with a painter — the artist nonetheless elicits all the senses. Touch, especially, plays a fundamental role for him. Then, in the figurative sense, with relation to his conception of painting: Eugène Leroy always asserted his choice not to approach painting through each separate canvas, but instead to form an entity, a whole: "When it comes right down to it, I don't make canvases, I make painting." For him, each canvas merely constitutes one step in a vaster project. In this way, each of his works stems from a long and complex process made up of superimposed layers requiring a large quantity of paint. This accumulation of material brings about the gradual disappearance of a recognizable image, while also allowing the painter to make it even more present.

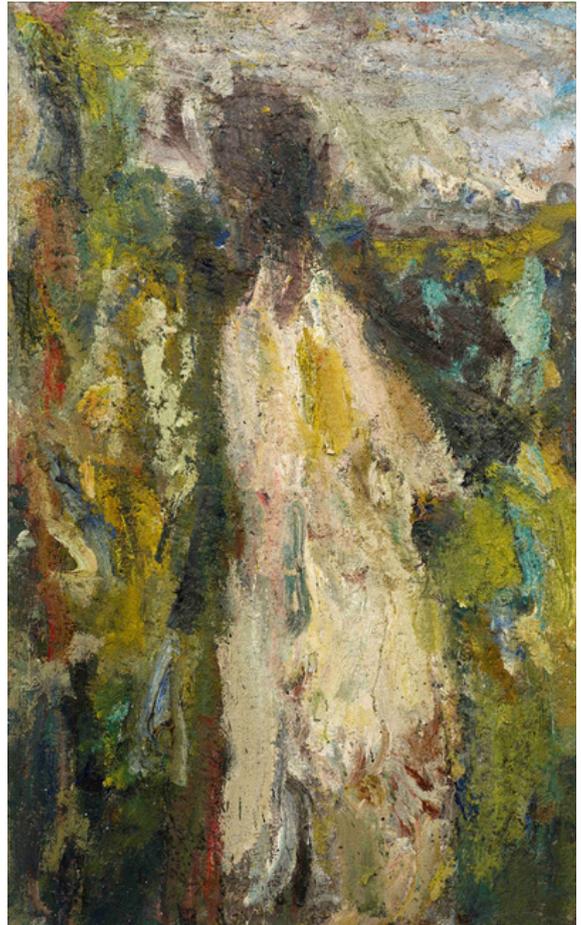


Eugène Leroy
Fleurs, vers 1990
huile sur toile
61 x 50 cm
Collection particulière
© Daniel Blau, Salzburg
© ADAGP, Paris, 2022

Blacklightning

It was with the subject of landscape, and especially trees, that Eugène Leroy progressively experienced the "immanent energy" of backlighting: "Backlighting has been at work in my painting ever since my youth, but without my knowing it." In his studio in Wasquehal, where he settled permanently in 1958, Leroy created this backlighting system by having a north-facing skylight and a south-facing window installed. Owing to the reflection from a mirror, he added another source of indirect light as well. The subject is thus lit from the front (in the regular way) but also from behind: "[Matter] does not exist if it is not permeated with light! I would really like to make a painting that has its own muted light," he confided.

When Eugène Leroy speaks of "muted light," he is evoking a light source that would be found within the material. He often mentions the aesthetic shock he experienced before a Russian icon encountered at the Tretyakov Gallery during a trip to Moscow in 1974. The image painted on gold leaf had tarnished with age and lost its initial shine. For Leroy, "respecting the gold leaf does not mean making it gilded, it's simply doing what the gold leaf does. It reflects the light but in a way that is thick, luminous, and buried at the same time."



Eugène Leroy
Nu de dos, 1957
huile sur toile
130 x 80 cm
Collection particulière
© Photo Kleinfenn
© ADAGP, Paris, 2022

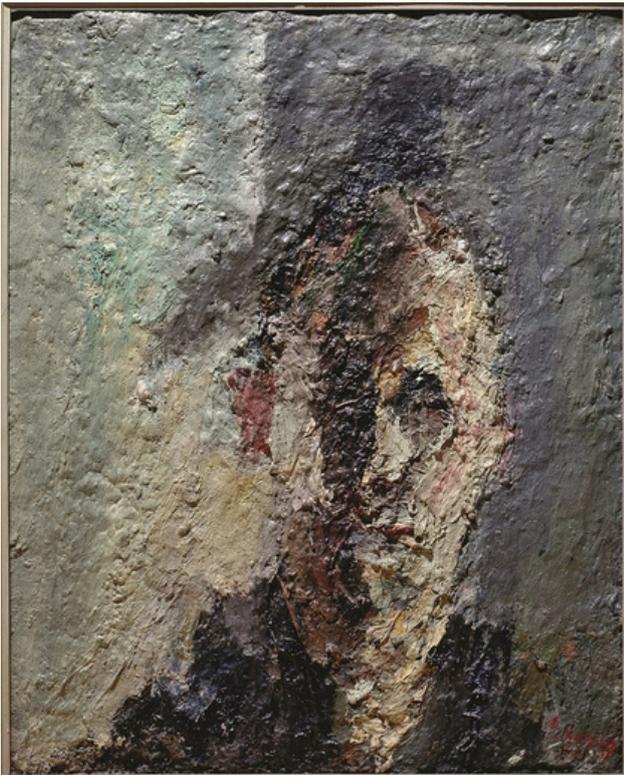
After the old Masters

At age fifteen Eugène Leroy discovered a small book about Rembrandt that determined his vocation as a painter. Since then, he said, "I've looked at painting a lot." From the 1930s on, Leroy always traveled around Europe to engage with the paintings of the great masters he admired (Van der Goes, Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, Poussin, etc.) He forged a strong bond with the painting of the past and drew inspiration from it. His approach, however, whether it be historical, analytical, pictorial, or emotional, is always with regard to his own painting. As if he conveyed the art of his predecessors through his own works. This complex process is particularly obvious in his relation to Giorgione's *Pastoral Concert*, a painting that Leroy so often and so obsessively started all over again during the 1990s. If we spend a moment with Leroy's variations on the Italian painting (the exhibition includes five different versions of this subject), what is striking first of all is the dissimilitude between both the source work and its "copies" and the so-called copies themselves. Admittedly, the composition of Giorgione's painting can be found in Leroy's canvases, or rather the two female nudes and the musician dressed in red can be figured out, but the effect of resemblance ends there. Beyond the way the pictures are painted, it is Leroy's painting that one notices above all. An evocation all the more significant in that from one painting to another the artist varies his approach and his palette, seeming to care more about enlisting his own pictorial means than about mere imitation.



Eugène Leroy
D'après le Concert Champêtre
1990-1992
huile sur toile
130 x 162 cm
Collection particulière, France
© Photo Jörg von Bruchhausen
© ADAGP, Paris, 2022

Self-portraits



Eugène Leroy
Autoportrait, vers 1958
huile sur bois
73 x 58 cm
Collection particulière, Roubaix, France
© Photo Alain Leprince
Eugène Leroy © ADAGP, Paris, 2022

Eugène Leroy produced countless self-portraits at different points in his life. The self-portrait reinforces his ongoing quest for the most profound depths of the self and allows him to merge exterior reality (his physical appearance) with inner reality (his emotions, memories, etc.). Although his facial features are still recognizable in the early self-portraits, they become progressively more complex. In this way, the eyes, clearly identifiable at first, become increasingly akin to dark spots that can also be perceived as cavities before finally disappearing into the backlit blackness covering the face. The portrait then dissolves into a formless mass that only allows the possibility of discerning the presence of a head. However, Eugène Leroy points out, "these are not self-portraits. They are heads." And he adds, "Not being much of an architect, it isn't the structure of the head that interests me. God knows that I drew skulls, nevertheless — for the structure! But the tension of the temple, the baroque of the ear, the eye socket... the mouth...! This black hole is an extraordinary thing for me."

Biography

1910

Birth of Eugène Jean Joseph Leroy in Tourcoing on August 8. He is raised by his uncle after the death of his father when he is only a year old.

1915

At age fifteen, he begins to paint and takes his first drawing classes.

1927

He makes his first self-portrait, which he signs and dates: *The Young Man at the Window*. Discovers the Old Masters at the Palace of Fine Arts in Lille and becomes enthralled with Italian, Spanish, and Flemish art.

1928

Meets Valentine Thirant, his future partner and wife, who becomes his main model from then on. They will have two sons together: Eugène-Jean, nicknamed Géno, and Jean-Jacques.

1929

Contracts pleurisy upon returning from a school trip to Rome. Painting will aid greatly in his recovery.

1931-1932

Attends the School of Fine Arts in Lille for several months. Then moves to Paris to study art but quickly steers clear of academic instruction.

1935

Appointed to a teaching position at his former middle school in Roubaix, where he teaches French, Latin, and Greek for twenty-five years.

1948

Becomes friends with the Lille bookseller and dealer Marcel Evrard, who regularly exhibits his works.

1953

Through Pierre Langlois, he develops a great interest in African and Oceanic objects and sculptures.

1958

Moves with his family to Wasquehal, near Lille, where he sets up a studio in the attic of his house.

1961

First exhibition at the Claude Bernard gallery in Paris.

1964

Beginning of his graphic work, which he pursues until 1972, when he primarily employs the technique of etching on copper.

1977

Opening of the Jean Leroy gallery, on rue Quincampoix in Paris, where his eldest son will represent and support his work for four years.

1979

Death in December of his spouse Valentine.

1982

Beginning of a long collaboration with the German dealer Michael Werner, who will give the artist international visibility.

1986

His second partner, Marina Bourdoncle, a musician and photographer, becomes a regular model for the painter and will continue to be so until the end of his life.

2000

Death of Eugène Leroy on May 10, at his home in Wasquehal.

Catalog

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FORWARD

FABRICE HERGOTT, Director of the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris

"Great art is first and foremost that which compels us," wrote Marcelin Pleynet in 1993 with regard to Eugène Leroy's paintings, adding that his painting "[could] only disappoint the fans of immediate consumption." It would indeed take time for Leroy's oeuvre to be fully seen. Although his work has always been appreciated by a small circle of admirers, his first exhibition in a parisian institution took place only in 1988, when the artist was approaching eighty. It was at the Musée d'Art Moderne, already, in the ARC galleries. Suzanne Pagé, who was then the director, had initiated that show, co-organised with Rudi Fuchs and the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. It was a visionary choice, to say the least, in support of a body of work that was clearly original but whose future significance was not yet fully grasped.

Today, nearly thirty-five years later, the Eugène Leroy retrospective is being held in the same spaces, but in an entirely different context. The oeuvre, which has since been the subject of several exhibitions in France as well as abroad, is now widely recognised. In a category of its own, strong, sometimes admired, sometimes misunderstood, it is deeply rooted in the current artistic landscape. Presenting it in the same galleries, the only ones in the museum bathed in natural light from overhead sources, once again provides the ideal conditions for the work. Heavily loaded with pictorial matter, to an extent unprecedented in the history of painting, Eugène Leroy's pictures offer the viewer an experience that may be unsettling. They do not engage without resistance. It requires a concentrated effort and takes time to overcome the initial impression of confusion and dizziness for the eye to find an equilibrium. And this adjustment does not occur in a mere instance.

At the end of the 1980s, visiting Leroy in his home studio in Wasquehal in the suburbs of Lille, was like an initiation. There only painting mattered. eager to welcome you from the start, the artist launched into a lively, joyful monologue that was hard to interrupt. The questions that could be slipped in between his pauses for breath allowed him to redirect a train of thought peppered with quotes and examples borrowed from his readings and visits to museums. He only talked about painters and painting. Listening to him was enthralling.

Once in the studio, his comments related only to the paintings that were there, leaning one against another along the limited wall space in the garret fitted with a skylight looking out at the treetops beyond the bend in the road bordering the house. In seeking the optimal viewing distance from the painting that Leroy set up in the studio's best light, you always had to watch where you stepped to avoid being smeared by wet paint. The painter would bodily move those heavy canvases, picking them up with his huge hands before shooting you an interrogatory glance over his shoulder. He was hoping to have made "maybe a little progress." Then he would show even more paintings, moving quickly and silently with unexpected agility before sitting down in his armchair. It was hard to see in them what he was seeing. It was as if your eyes were muddled up, unable to capture what they were trying to perceive. Leroy would continue his monologue, pointing at the trees, the light in "that corner over there", the sky, Marina. After an hour, you had to catch the train in a kind of visual dizziness and steeped in the smell of turpentine that would take hours to dissipate. Sentences and paintings kept coming to mind, bumping up against each other over and over.

Although he lived in a remote place, not far from Roubaix, Eugène Leroy was never a cursed artist. If his oeuvre took a long time to be seen, it is because it remained, and still is to this day, difficult to look at. It needed this time no doubt to be understood. Above all, doesn't the gaze expect the work itself to convey an image, an effect that reinforces its visual desire? Yet Leroy's painting offers the curious paradox of being at once very physical, heavy and light, cerebral, like a breath of air, once the eyes begin to adjust. "For me, making it heavy means wanting it to look light," confides the artist Olivier Cèna.

His entire body of work forms a block. His paintings and drawings, of course, but also his interviews and writings, most often letters, which should be included. Due to anachronism, to an inner necessity to remain free from any reliance, Leroy fled trends and currents. Nothing is further from him than a school, whether that of Paris, or the north. It would be hard to speak of figuration or abstraction, or even a third direction. His work belongs in a category all its own.

The most figurative paintings, the early ones, cannot be associated with a movement. They relate less to an overall vision of a face, a body or a landscape, than to accumulated sensations that build up the work by blending intimate memories and recollections of older paintings. As with Cézanne, Leroy's painting is concerned with sensation and memory, which are reconfigured in the colourful matter through successive and complimentary layers. His paintings always begin with an impulse stemming from an attempt to reproduce the real, to surpass the mere rendering of light and space. They are at once a distillation of a presence — hours of work and observation of something that is as fleeting as it is permanent, an atmosphere of light and shadow — and memories already suggested, endlessly reorganised by the brushstrokes and gestures that come together on the surface of the work. But the word "surface" itself is not accurate. It is instead a space the painting projects around the material, where nothing is left to chance; the word "chance", like the word "surface", is also too limited to account for this attempt to convey a truth about life from observation and memory, a challenge the painter has managed to tackle. His voluntary isolation is the necessary condition for this undertaking, and essential, too, for the success that gave Leroy joy, the profound bliss of having succeeded, which permeated those visits. A "perhaps", which only time will prove right or wrong, should no doubt be added. The isolation, the tight space of the studio, and the face-off between the painting and the painter all ensure a long process of unfolding into the future, like the action of a spring releasing far forward, all the more so since it is firmly fixed in the memory of an artist who delves deeply into both his own life and the history of painting. Each painting is therefore a distillation of idealism based on an intense observation of reality — lights, forms, colours — and the incessantly invoked memory of the preceding painting as well as all the pictures he had already painted. When he would speak of Giorgione or Rembrandt, staring into space, Leroy projected himself into both the past and the future, a still distant future when his paintings would finally be seen in their bareness, as he had painted them — often over the course of several years and sometimes several decades, unlike his drawings, which took him no more than ten minutes.

Contrary to the widespread assertion about current painting, which posits that directly experiencing the format and the material is requisite to assessing it, Leroy's paintings reproduce well both in colour and black and white. As confusing as what they show might seem, photographing the works often has the favourable effect of leading the eye to the work's inner structure.

If Eugène Leroy's oeuvre appears so significant today, it is because he transformed the relationship to painting. With his work, we are not faced with images of art, unlike the majority of current artworks that are simply a version of the photographic image. Leroy's painting introduces a new paradigm: paintings that are not images, are not abstract as long as they are present and physical, loaded with sensations, observations and memory, and yet, do not represent anything that is representable. They are a presence of presence, something conveyed through visibility while avoiding the system of images — those of mass consumption that are imposed on art in spite of itself.

Leroy's oeuvre is one of the few that announces the failure of the utopian notion of a mass media culture that has not allowed for the creation of this intimate space so crucial to the gaze and the indispensable guarantee of our profound and personal freedom. This is also the reason no doubt that Leroy's work is becoming a myth. Its greatest strength lies in its resistance to the eye, which it manages to free from the seductive power of the image. This retrospective extends from the early decades, where the figures are still easily discernible, to the very last years when the question of painting seems to prevail. Both thematic and chronological, the exhibition's layout could not have been conceived without sometimes jumping ahead and going back.

We hope that this show, so very important for the Musée d'art Moderne de Paris, will find its audience since the 1988 exhibition, the museum has continued to expand its holdings of paintings by Eugène Leroy, to such an extent that, after the Musée des beaux-arts in Tourcoing, renamed MUba Eugène Leroy in 2010, it has become a foremost public institution for his oeuvre, owing to several gifts from the family and various enthusiasts — the most recent being Claude Bernard, thereby coming full circle since he was the first dealer to show the artist in Paris. It was during one of the exhibitions at his gallery, in 1961, that something happened that has become legendary, because of the effect it had on their vision of art: the discovery of Leroy's work by Georg Baselitz and Michael Werner. Many thanks are due to the latter, a major donor to the Musée d'Art Moderne, for supporting our exhibition project and contributing his incredibly sharp eye and vast experience. Not to mention Gina Kehayoff, who tirelessly oversaw the perfect communication between all those involved in this project. My gratitude extends of course to the artist's family, with special acknowledgement of his son Jean-Jacques Leroy, who, in the footsteps of his brother Géno, whom I owe an amicable and profound tribute here, has given his full support to the work of his father with the attentive and respectful help of his niece Anne-Charlotte Leroy-Cauliez. Many thanks to Marina Bourdoncle, too, for her luminous presence during all of my visits to the home-studio in Wasquehal. I am also grateful to Julia Garimorth, curator of the exhibition, who has masterfully brought this project to fruition, along with Sylvie Moreau-Soteras. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the Paris Musées staff in the exhibition and publications departments, all of the teams at the Musée d'Art Moderne, as well as the authors of this catalogue.

He observes how Albertine's absence heightens her presence for him. So coming back to Leroy, it is tempting to expand on such an observation in order to state that absence always becomes necessary when it is a question of stimulating our imagination. Because it naturally elicits memories, which are all the more compelling in that they make up for a lack, a void. That's why the impossibility of recognizing Eugène Leroy's motifs does not mean they have disappeared. On the contrary, they are there, but they find themselves buried under the material, or mixed in with it, which for them constitutes the reality of their presence.

Eugène Leroy's painting is thus both individual and universal. In order to render this universality, the painter sought to seize the subject (in every sense) by including with it all the physical aspects that may envelop the model at various moments, seen from a variety of angles and several viewpoints, even in movement. This approach may recall that of the cubists, the difference being however that with Leroy it is not analytical but intuitive — it marshals, as the painter himself described it, "a prism that comprises all of the hues colour can have, from the most basic, more or less brutal and material, spot to the tones and muds that you are familiar with." Although vision is solicited in the first place — as befits a painter — the artist nonetheless appeals to all of the senses. Touch in particular plays a fundamental role for Leroy. The artist would ask his models to touch themselves, to caress themselves during sittings, in order to be able to transcribe directly into pictorial material the tactile sensation that skin registers. He appealed to hearing or audition in the same way. Marina Bourdoncle, the painter's second companion, would sit for him regularly while reading Joyce, Rimbaud or Proust, as well as playing the guitar or the flute. For the painter, it entailed trying to transpose the sounds to painting — to see the music through colour — by relying on the effects of synaesthesia (or *correspondence*, to quote Baudelaire).

With this type of approach, which strives to seize the motif by summing up every instant, as far as possible, in a single one, light plays a crucial role. Eugène Leroy created a circular lighting system in his studio: "I set myself up in the attic by inserting a north-facing skylight and a south-facing window. I paint there, between this dual light streaming in. "The model was therefore illuminated from the front (the standard way) but also from behind in order to fulfil the artist's wish: "[matter] does not exist if it is not permeated with light! I would really like to make a painting that has its own muted light." When Eugène Leroy speaks of "muted light" he is referring to a light source that would be found inside the material. He often mentions the aesthetic shock he felt before a Russian icon at the Tretyakov gallery during a trip to Moscow in 1974. The image painted on gold leaf had tarnished with age and lost its initial shine. This is what Leroy said about it: "in fact, it all comes from the Tretyakov and the gold leaf. Respecting the gold leaf does not mean making it gilded, it's simply doing what the gold leaf does.

C'it reflects the light, but in a way that is thick, luminous and buried at the same time." What interested Eugène Leroy above all was that "thick" and submerged aspect, of a presence that does not show itself but that we get an inkling of thanks to a glimmer emanating from the interior, and which, with regard to his painting, emerges at certain moments and in certain places on the canvas.

While at this stage we are relying on a Kantian type of interpretive framework, we could say that Eugène Leroy's paintings are the product of an encounter between subjectivity and the real or raw world (which could be called noumenal, to simplify the Kantian viewpoint). Yet, the raw world is never perceived as such by a subject. It can only be surmised by always relying on what our spontaneous perception has itself already introduced into the world. Thus before the majority of Leroy's canvases would at once be faced with chaos, in other words, schemas our perception offers us right away by anticipating for us, and at the same time, a more profound (noumenal) truth, that is a recovered motif that our attention and our patience alone can recognize.

The artist's interest in thickness, or even opacity, is also related to an introspective quest, which was relentless for him. Having lost his father during the first year of his life, Eugène Leroy had an extremely tough childhood and adolescence. He admits to having been "haunted... by catastrophes, anxious to get away from [his] milieu, somnambulant from being long deprived of maternal affection; excessively emotional, painfully shy." Although "all of these scars remained on the skin of adolescence" it was painting that "cured [his] suicidal tendencies, of doing pretty much anything, of fleeing anywhere whatsoever, of hitting rock bottom." Gradually having become his ally, painting turned out to be, he confirmed, "[his] only reason to live."

It was through his art that Eugène Leroy sought to recover, to get a grip on, to make known this inner reality, this thick and complex world lying dormant beneath his visible skin and which he himself referred to as a muddy and slippery terrain. Amongst other readings, it was with Montaigne — whose approach informed that of Leroy — that he grasped how painting had built him up. Painting had become, in a certain way, the mirror of his existence, and felt inextricably tied to his life.

Leroy's introspection was also nurtured by Proustian inner reality. The painter says he was deeply affected by reading the second part of *Time Regained*, where Proust states that it is "through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves." And we can observe how through painting Leroy undeniably achieved the exteriorization of a heavy and complex inner burden. In a letter addressed to Louis Deledicq in 1973 he confided: "What to say about myself? I am now practically an old man. More than ever I mix up my life with my painting with perhaps more abandon and less distraction. But does one know oneself?"

It is therefore not surprising that Eugène Leroy produced countless self-portraits throughout his life, this genre undoubtedly being the best suited to merging the exterior and interior realities of one and the same individual. Leroy worked in front of the mirror a lot. To make drawings of himself, he did not even look at the sheet of paper anymore but only at the image reflected back at him in an old, tarnished mirror. Noteworthy in this regard is the premonitory aspect of his first self-portrait, created in 1927 when he was seventeen, showing his own reflection in a windowpane — a work that signalled the inaugural act of his existence as an artist since it was the first time he signed a work (following the advice of his professor). We can see that all of Eugène Leroy's self-portraits demonstrate this same relationship to identity, a permanent quest for the deepest part of the self. It seems obvious that this quest intensified with age for the painter. And whereas the early self-portraits still displayed the recognizable facial features of their creator, over time they become progressively more complex, thereby gradually losing any possibility of not only recognizing a mimetic morphological identity, but also of reading the specific content of interiority. If the eyes are the window to the soul, it should be elucidated that the pupils are what allow us to pass from an externally identifiable figure to an inner reality. Yet, the pupils which are clearly legible in some of the early self-portraits then become akin to dark spots which could also be perceived as cavities before finally disappearing into the backlit blackness covering half the face or all of it. The portrait dissolves into a formless mass that no longer allows for the possibility of discerning the presence of a head. However, Eugène Leroy points out, "These are not self-portraits. They are heads". And he adds, "not being much of an architect, it isn't the structure of the head that interests me. God knows that I drew skulls, nevertheless — for the structure! But the tension of the temple, the baroque of the ear, the eye socket ... the mouth ...! This black hole is an extraordinary thing for me." At this stage, as Éric de Chassesey so accurately observed, "it is no longer a self-identity where the self would remain exterior to the painting (like a pre-existing referent living elsewhere), but a new self-identity where the self has become all of the painting (that is, the totality of painted works by Leroy): from the artist's particular nature we thus move to a general nature of painting as all living things. According to de Chassesey, this is a process of "incorporation" that translates to the fusion of life lived and painting itself.

The complexity of Eugène Leroy's relationship to reality could be compared to the one that characterizes Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1930). In effect, the novel's protagonist uses operations of indeterminacy (in the sense of stratagems) to avoid the real world, which is deemed unsatisfactory, giving way to other spaces of life, spaces of unforeseeable magic instants, of diurnal mystique. Eugène Leroy's painting, like Musil's novel, is an open work, lending itself to indefinitely renewed readings over the course of time and according to who is looking at it.

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE AUTHORS OF THE CATALOG

Paul Audi, philosopher and writer, has published numerous books on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the West.

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Visitor informations

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Public transport

- Metro : Alma-Marceau ou Léna (line 9)
- Bus : 32 / 42 / 63 / 72 / 80 / 92
- Velib's bike stations : 4 rue de Longchamp ; 4 avenue Marceau ; place de la reine Astrid ; 45 avenue Marceau ou 3 avenue Bosquet
- Bike : Bicycle parking spaces are available in front of the museum entrance.
- RER C : Pont de l'Alma (line C)

Opening hours

- Tuesday-Sunday, 10am - 6pm (last entry 5:15pm)
- Closed Monday and some public holidays
- Open late : Thursday 9.30 pm

Admission

Full rate : 12 €
Reduced rate : 10 €
Free for under 18

The exhibition is accessible to people with motor disabilities and reduce mobility.

No-queue tickets : www.mam.paris.fr

Wearing a surgical face mask is recommended.

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