

# Eugène Leroy

## Mythe

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Born in 1910, Eugène Leroy spent long hours as a student at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, spending much of his time in front of paintings by Rubens. He soon began to reject the academic conventions that had been instilled in him. Weary of his studies, he continued his education by going to Flemish museums, where he was especially moved by Rembrandt's work. His wanderings expanded to all of Europe and beyond its borders. He was determined to learn from painters who "see what he would like to be able to see."<sup>11</sup>

The art of these impasto painters gave Leroy permission to engage even more deeply with his interest in thick paint strokes. However, the artist never fell into pure imitation. On the contrary, he used this otherness to develop and affirm his own artistic vision. His early works depicted classical subjects, portraits, landscapes, floral compositions, and religious scenes. Yet they made a strong impression because they already stood out through their energetic brushstrokes and their sense of movement, which went against the tide of the artistic conventions of the period. "Leroy has become a colorist," his first professor, Fernand Beaucamp, said. This can be seen in *La grande bleue* (1989), which is representative of his great mastery of the power of color. Beaucamp also pointed out the "instinctive," "rough," and "mystical" aspect of his former student's paintings, which can especially be observed in *L'Automne* (1995).

"Saying that Leroy doesn't seek to make paintings at any cost, but to capture true light in painted color (truly painted, molded by human hands on the canvas), is perhaps a way to justify his work while risking the least confusion."<sup>12</sup>

This exhibition highlights the artist's passion for paint and relief, which he sometimes obtained by working directly with his hands, without using a brush. The thickness thus produced is a *trop*,<sup>13</sup> or "too much," a gargantuan accumulation of paint, a superimposition of layers, an astonishing build-up, an excess that is actually measured and developed in every detail.

Depositing paint directly out of the tube allowed Leroy to obtain a raw effect, which looked as if it had not been shaped but was produced by elemental intuition without any mental development. It seems that the painting has composed itself spontaneously, instinctively, independently of artistic conventions and of the artist himself. "Everything I've ever tried in painting is to reach [...] a kind of absence, almost, so that the painting would be completely itself."<sup>14</sup>

Leroy's approach depended on total experience and the act of creation, disconnected from conventions and theories determining modern painting and the attempted reforms to which it was then subjected. This could be seen in his studio, which was entirely covered by a painting that extended beyond the canvases, creating an artistic immersion, an invasion of the space of the real world that would not be confined to the medium.

Eugène Leroy's art was not simply about crossing the boundaries that separate content and subjects, the canvas and the studio, or art and life, but abolishing them. He refused to assign them to a strict role and tried, on the contrary, to promote their dialogue and their permeability. "More than ever I merge my life and my painting [...]."<sup>15</sup>

What Eugène Leroy offers us is a painting of the discernible, of the living and the moving, of perceptible matter, of the sea, landscapes, and bodies and their flesh, stirring the emotions and the senses.

The artist makes the choice of voluntarily destabilizing us. As viewers, we are used to always trying to identify what our eyes see, defining and naming what we observe. What his paintings show is the inexpressible, the result of a “disidentification of the theme”<sup>161</sup> that he deliberately undertakes in his paintings. So we are mystified, deprived of our ability to explain what we see because the subject is so unrecognizable, and thus, for once, we are made silent.

It is a break between what is seen and what is known,<sup>171</sup> making any understanding difficult. It is the result of the superimposition of countless layers of paint that come, like strata, to absorb the subject without erasing it. For Eugène Leroy, the absence of the subject that makes itself felt at first sight actually makes the subject even more present.

<sup>161</sup> Eugène Leroy in “À voix nue,” a radio interview with Jean Daive, France Culture, April 20-24, 1998.

<sup>162</sup> Marcel Evrard, in *Eugène Leroy, Jacques Bornibus. Une complicité, la peinture, années 50*, exhibition catalogue, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tourcoing, June 19 – September 12, 2004.

<sup>163</sup> “L’atelier dans la peinture,” Pierre Wat.

<sup>164</sup> Eugène Leroy, “De la matière et de sa clarté. Entretien avec Irmeline Lebeer,” in *Eugène Leroy. Peinture, Lentille du Monde*, Brussels, Lebeer Hossmann, 1979, p.69.

<sup>165</sup> Eugène Leroy, “Lettre-préface à Louis Deledicq,” in *Chemins de la Création*, exhibition catalogue, Château d’Ancy-le-Franc, June 2 - September 10, 1973

<sup>166</sup> See note 5.

<sup>171</sup> See note 5.