

Léon Frédéric, *La petite Ardennaise à la robe bleue (Young Ardennaise Girl in a Blue Dress)*
Brussels 1856 – 1940 Schaerbeek

oil on panel
20 5/8 by 15 inches (52.5 by 38 cm.)
signed and dated lower right: 'Léon Frédéric 1896'

provenance: Dr. Jules Destrée, Brussels;
Georges Hulin de Loo, Ghent;
Georges Frédéric, Brussels by 1948;
Professor Lucien Deloyers, Brussels

exhibited: *Rétrospective Léon Frédéric*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1948, no. 57.
Exhibition, Hotel communal et Maison des Arts Schaerbeek, *Léon Frédéric*,
December 5 – January 27, 2001.

literature: Georges Frederic, *Catalogue raisonnée de l'oeuvre de Léon Frédéric*, n° ?.

note: Leon Frédéric drew on contemporary and earlier influences as well as on his own personal spiritual views of life and nature to evolve a unique artistic style. Working during a period when Impressionism and its offspring Divisionism and Post-Impressionism were the main currents of avant-garde art, Frédéric's idiosyncratic realism comes as a considerable surprise.

Frédéric studied briefly under Charle-Albert before attending the Académie Royal des Beaux-arts in Brussels, where he became a pupil of Jules Vankeirsblick (1833-96) and Ernest Slingeneyer (1820-94). He also worked in the studio of Jean-François Portaels (1818-1895).

The tenor of Frédéric's work was formed largely by the Italian and Flemish art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the poetic paintings of the English Pre-Raphaelites. A two-year sojourn in Italy (1876-78) which included visits to Venice, Florence, Naples and Rome, exposed Frédéric to the works of the Italian Renaissance. This experience conveyed to the painter the profound beauty of nature with its artistic disposition toward harmony, and the inherent nobility of mankind. This sense of harmony was balanced by a personal artistic vision which conveyed a truthfulness to nature which was reinforced by Flemish and German Old Master painters who had studied directly their natural surroundings. Both Italian and Northern Renaissance schools depicted the natural world through clear, detailed compositions, and their influence infuses Frédéric's work with a lucid and unaffected honesty. In his symbolist designs, including his various large multi-paneled *Cycles of Life*, Frédéric attempts to unify Christian mysticism with the current social conditions of the working class. The

landscapes included in many of these compositions take delight in a pantheistic communion with nature.

Following his stay in Rome, Frédéric made his debut at the Brussels Salon in 1878. He then became a member of the Brussels-based association *L'Essor*, a group of young artists who wanted to paint contemporary social reality instead of using imaginary or literary themes as their artistic starting point. Subsequently, his work was exhibited in Ghent, Liège, Munich, Nice and Paris. He was awarded gold medals for painting at the Exposition Universelle of 1889 and 1900, and in 1929, together with James Ensor, Frédéric was created a baron.

Many of Frédéric's early works show poor people and peasants, especially after 1883, when the artist moved from Brussels to Nafraiture, a small village in the Ardennes region of Belgium where he lived for several years.

The present portrait was painted in the Ardennes in 1896. As often is the case in Frédéric's compositions from the mid 1890's, social realism cloaks a strong orientation toward hidden symbolism bound to a Christian mysticism still present in the Belgian countryside. These forces formed the basis for Frédéric's profound involvement with naturalism, which conformed with ideas developed at the same moment by critics such as Camill Lemonnier (1844-1913), a member of the Symbolist *La Jeune Belgique* group in Brussels, and earlier by John Ruskin (1819-1900) in England. This naturalism brings with it a portrayal of an austere life and the misfortunes of poverty, which were understood to be the result of industrial modernity. In Frédéric's work there is no sense of revolt, but a curious resignation, where both poverty and social reform remain accepted through faith.

The present realistic portrait is a superb work by Frédéric. The young girl with her tilted head and slightly turned face set against the rural background provides a powerful and mysterious visual effect. Although the model has not been identified beyond the title "La petite Ardennaise," she bears a resemblance to Héléne Wauters, the daughter of the painter Emile Wauters. Frédéric had painted a portrait of her as very young girl in 1891. (fig. 1) The sitter's pose is also reminiscent of the young girl standing at the left, holding a dark earthenware pitcher, in the central panel of *The Ages of the Working Man* (1900-01), now at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (fig. 2)

It is difficult to see the connection between Frédéric's early naturalist works and his later Symbolist allegories. How do we reconcile the realism of a painting like *La petite Ardennaise* with the almost surreal qualities of, for example, *Summer*, painted in 1894 (fig. 3), one of the four panels of the *Four Seasons* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art? Its bright, almost psychedelic colors seem far removed from the earthy tones of Frédéric's earlier works; its idealized body different from their realistic figures, and its lack of spatial qualities unlike their pronounced perspective. The radical transformation of Frédéric's style was not an unusual phenomenon, however, among the artists of his generation. Numerous artists born in the 1850s – Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret in France, Jan Toorop in the Netherlands, and Edvard Munch in Scandinavia, to name only a few, went through a similar stylistic change in the late 1880s, as they became increasingly attracted to, and involved with, the Symbolist movement. In Frédéric's case however, it was the form rather than the content of his works that changed. Themes like the cycle of life and its inherent contrasts – youth and old age, life and death – continued to be a major inspiration throughout his entire career.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3