

Léon Navez, *Portrait of Gustave van Geluwe*
Mons 1900 – 1967 Auderghem

oil on canvas, 1925
27.56 x 21.85 inches (70 by 55.5 cm)
signed at the lower right: 'LEON NAVEZ'

provenance: Collection of Gustave van Geluwe, until 2016

literature: M. De Reymaeker, et al, *Léon Navez: une Peinture de L'Âme*, Empain Solutions Graphiques, 2015, p. 173, illustrated.

note: Léon Navez (figs. 1a and b) was born in Mons, Belgium where he first studied before moving on to the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. There he took courses in decorative arts but also pursued painting with Anto Carte, who was to be his mentor and friend. In 1924 Navez's talent was recognized as he won the Prix Godecharle, which allowed him to go to Paris where he remained until 1928. In Paris he certainly became familiar with the developments of Cubism but was also influenced by the work of Modigliani. Following his return home, Navez next won the Belgian Prix de Rome, which in turn allowed him to spend time in Italy absorbing the influence of Renaissance frescos by Giotto. On his return to Belgium, Navez split his time between teaching in both Mons and Brussels. He was an active member of the Belgian art establishment and one of the founding members in late 1928 of the Nervia Group of artists from the province of Hainaut. With his colleagues in this group he created the official decorations for the 1935 Exposition Universelle in Brussels. During the war years he assisted in the resistance. Late in his life in 1956 he visited the Congo.

Navez pursued an essentially solitary, independent career, producing works – portraits, still-lives, landscapes, nudes, and genre - often classified as Neo-Classical in a stylized, decorative manner. Already at a sale of one of his paintings in 1930, he was described as an “Artiste penseur et analyste raffiné,” both “an artist en vogue” and “a painter with a fine future.”¹

His early work (fig. 2) shows a variety of influences from Cézanne and Cubism, but tempered by the Belgian manner of his friend Carte (fig 3.). Works produced in the mid-1920s in Paris, like his *The Ages of Women* (1924, fig. 4), *Mother and Child* (1925, fig. 5), and *Self-Portrait with Models* of 1926 (fig. 1a) reveal a further development. By the later 1920s he had evolved his spare style of large empty spaces populated by Vermeer-like figures (fig. 6) but often with the surprising addition of a nude, as also occurs in his *La Toilette* of 1935 (fig. 7).

The subject of this portrait, Gustave Van Geluwe (1881-1962), first established himself as a tailor in Brussels in 1910 and eventually founded there a successful couture house. In addition to his fashion business, he was also a distinguished art collector (figs. 8a-d) and focused especially on the Belgian school with such well-known masters as Ensor and Permeke. But Van Geluwe also amassed works by many of the younger contemporary Belgian painters. Like Helena Rubinstein, he commissioned a number of portraits of himself from these artists. This dapper portrayal of him looking out at the viewer with drawings of nineteenth-century fashions in the background was painted by Léon Navez in 1925. Navez, based at this time in Paris, did a number of paintings that reflect an interest in fashion (figs. 9 and 10). Later depictions of himself that Van Geluwe commissioned are a more full-length oil of 1946 (fig. 11) by Jean Brusselmans (1884-1953);² a

very colorful, less staid portrait (fig. 12) by Henri François Raemaeker, known as Ramah, (1887-1947),³ and a 1955 treatment by Serge Creuz (1924-1996, fig. 13).⁴

The plain directness of Navez's 1925 *Portrait of Gustave Van Geluwe* is oddly reminiscent of the realistic portraits being produced at just this time by the German painters of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). Although he did not visit Germany, it is certainly possible that while in Paris Navez saw examples or reproductions of works by such leading artists of this movement as Otto Dix, Christian Schad, and Rudolf Schlichter (figs. 14-18). Navez never followed these painters in their extreme departure into Expressionism or caricature, but instead remained faithful to his modest Belgian roots, continuing to produce his own unique, often haunting, poetic portraits (figs. 19-20).

¹ Sale of the Collection de Gueldre-Barrays, Les Ventes Mondaines, Brussels, November 20, 1930, no. 53.

² Sold Christie's Amsterdam, December 3, 2002, no. 234.

³ Sold Beaux-Arts, Brussels, December 6, 2004, no. 108; and Brussels Art Auctions, Brussels, January 20, 2015, no. 24.

⁴ Sold from the Van Geleuwe collection at Brussels Art Auctions, January 20, 2015, no. 42.