

# Xavier Tricot Victor Servranckx: From Constructivism to a cosmic vision – a Belgian pioneer of abstract art and his experimental journey

Victor Servranckx had already been studying at the Académie royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels for three years when he met the year-younger René Magritte. The aspiring artists, aged 19 and 18, became friends and six years later co-authored the manifesto "L'Art pur: Défense de l'esthétique." At the time, both worked as designers and technical draftsmen in wallpaper factories. Although painting did not yet provide him with a steady income, Servranckx was already intensely dedi-

cated to it. Paintings such as *Opus 30-1922 (Factory)*, now in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, show him as a representative of Constructivism, albeit one who was already pursuing his own unique path. By 1927, Servranckx made a radical break and began experimenting with a wide variety of materials—canvas, wood, cardboard, plastic, textiles. Avant-garde artistic techniques such as collage, grattage, and assemblage also captured his interest. Through these experiments, he sought to distance himself from what he perceived as the "normative" painting of his time. His works were to embody an elevated vitality, a *vitalisme élevé*.

This marked a departure from what he perceived as 'normative' painting of his times. His works started being characterized by a 'vitalisme élevé', a heightened liveliness.

The abstract, constructivist formal language he had practiced until then was replaced by dreamlike, and at times apocalyptic, motifs. These themes referenced extraterrestrial phenomena, as seen in paintings such as *Opus*

*3-1927 (Terre de terreur, terre de désastre)* and *Opus 4-1927 (Le désastre apprivoisé)*. Other works from 1927 carry titles like *Cosmogonische Vision: Ende und Anfang der Welten (Opus 9a-1927)* or *Das Reich des Wassers (Opus 2-1927)*. Servranckx drew inspiration not only from the macrocosm of the universe but also from the microcosm of bacteria and unicellular organisms.

But his work also had a very concrete basis. Through his work as a designer, Servranckx discovered the unique aesthetic qualities of wood and marble grain. Serpentine lines, mineral veins, knots, scars, and dense textures feature prominently in his compositions. Particularly in his drawings, meandering ornaments dominate, as if they were images of the subconscious. Many of his late 1920s and early 1930s paintings feature strikingly colorful backgrounds that emphasize the eccentric, sharply defined formations in the foreground. The painting *Opus 7-1930*, for instance, could depict a rocky massif rising against a cloudy sky, with a subtle, star-like shape—a possible unknown planet—emerging between the mountain and the heavens?

Where Servranckx left parts of *Opus 7-1930* unpainted, the wooden panel becomes an element of the composition itself. The natural grain of the wood adds to the work's design. By this time, the artist had already become familiar



Lot 48



Victor Servranckx in his solo exhibition at Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. 1929

with the work of Max Ernst, whose diverse techniques encouraged Servranckx in his experimental approach. Servranckx often recounted how his "discovery" of colour stemmed from his internship at the Peters-Lacroix factory in Haren, near Brussels. He described how mixing colours in large vats left a lasting impression on him. For him there was a magic in it that left a lasting impression on him.

*Opus 7-1930* bears an inscription on the reverse: *Œuvre à voir dans tous les sens*. This phrase reflects a characteristic Servranckx ambiguity, as "sens" can mean both "direction" and "sense" or "meaning." A similar directive appears on paintings such as *Opus 23-1923* from the collection of the Cologne Neven DuMont family and *Opus 1-1941*. Both works are labeled *Tableau à contempler dans tous les sens*—paintings meant to be viewed from any angle, allowing the observer to discover any meaning their perception suggests. The titles reveal that Servranckx ascribed these works unique, non-representational features. He also moved beyond the confines of the wall, treating his paintings as objects that could be freely examined in space.

At the start of his career, Servranckx was a "cool" Constructivist, yet his work also resonated with a mystical sensualism, a seeming contradiction that he reconciled effortlessly. For him, both approaches represented a transcendence of the limitations of material and form. While Servranckx remains celebrated as a Belgian pioneer of abstract art, his work extended far beyond abstraction. He embraced the zeitgeist while challenging the prevailing canon. With extraordinary sensitivity, he reflected the ideas and works of his contemporaries. Yet, as *Opus 7-1930* demonstrates, Servranckx consistently resisted being confined to a singular movement or ideology.

Xavier Tricot is an art historian, author, curator, and artist. He is the curator of the James Ensor House in Ostend and authored the catalogue raisonné of Ensor's paintings. He is currently preparing the catalogue raisonné of Victor Servranckx's works.

## 48 Victor Servranckx

Diegem near Brussels 1897 – 1965 Vilvoorde

“Opus 7-1930”. 1930

Oil on worked veneer plate. 69.5 × 89.7 cm

(27 3/8 × 35 3/8 in.). Unten rechts signiert und datiert:

SERVANCKX 1930. Signed and dated lower right:

SERVANCKX 1930. Signed, titled and dated with

brush in black on the reverse: SERVANCKX Opus

7-1930. Additionally signed with pencil on all four

sides: SERVANCKX. There too inscribed in pencil in

French and Dutch: Œuvre à voir dans tous les sens /

Dit werk kan in all richtingen aanschouwd worden.

[this image can be viewed from each side] on the

reverse a label of the exhibition Ixelles 1965 (see

below). The painting will be included in the catalogue

raisonné of works by Victor Servranckx of Xavier

Tricot, Ostend under the preliminary no. 166. [3079]

Provenance

Estate of the artist / Private Collection, Belgium

EUR 100,000–150,000

USD 110,000–165,000

Exhibition

Servranckx. Ixelles, Musée d'Ixelles, Museum van

Elsene, 1965, cat. no. 118, ill. / Victor Servranckx.

Knokke, Studio Prisma – Galerie Rivage, 1967, cat. no.

37 / Retrospectieve tentoonstelling Victor Serv-

ranckx. Hasselt, Provinciaal Begijnhof, 1970, cat. no.

62 / Victor Servranckx. Knokke, La Réserve, 1988, cat.

no. 9 / Victor Servranckx 1897-1965 et l'art abstrait.

Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique,

Musée d'art moderne, 1989, cat. no. 92, ill. / Hom-

mage à Victor Servranckx. Brussels, Group 2 Gallery,

2019, no. 2 (folded sheet)

Literature and illustration

Jozef Gijsbrechts: Servranckx Mysteries. Constructivistic

Surrealistic Abstract Belgian Artist 1897-1965. Korten-

berg, private print, 2005, ill. p. 38

