

# The Wanderer and his Shadow

The BAM's  
collections seen by  
Xavier Noiret-Thomé

08 oct<sup>22</sup>  
08 jan<sup>23</sup>



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## Press release

**From 8 October 2022 to 8 January 2023, the artist Xavier Noiret-Thomé offers an invigorating take on the collections of Thomas Neirynck and the Duviviers, kept in storage for more than ten years at the BAM, now conserved by the Artothèque. For the first time in the history of the BAM, we entrusted an artist with the task of curating an exhibition, using pieces from the museum's collection. It is therefore the first time that an exhibition is organised exclusively around our two collections of European and late 20th century art, showcasing the work of iconic artists such as Fautrier, Fontana, Alechinsky, Asger Jorn or Peter Saul.**

Inviting Xavier Noiret-Thomé to select a set of works from the Duvivier and Neirynck collections means a shift in the gaze we would usually cast onto these pieces. With no initial conception of the classification and day-to-day management of these collections, Xavier Noiret-Thomé went with the flow of discovering one artwork, and then the next, thus compiling a selection in keeping with his own identity and the story he wishes to tell. Applying his many years of experience as an artist and teacher, he has designed the flow of the exhibition to be experienced as a life cycle

that begins with the "primal magma" and ends with "Hades and Thanatos", mythological figures of death. He invites us to embark on an initiatory journey of five stages directly inspired by Greek mythology, which he vividly brings back to life through the figure of Nietzsche. The title "Le Voyageur et son ombre" ("The Wanderer and his Shadow"), incidentally, is taken from a work by the German philosopher which appears to have influenced him enormously since young adulthood.

The colour silver has emerged as a recurring theme in the work of Noiret-Thomé. Used as a material that captures light and colour, here it covers the museum's walls, creating a strong unity throughout the exhibition.

# Interview with Xavier Noiret-Thomé

Alice Cantigniau and Xavier Roland

## What place does the philosopher Nietzsche hold in your life?

Nietzsche has greatly influenced me in my work; his texts have accompanied me from my young adulthood to the present day. [...] While re-reading "Human, All Too Human", I discovered this section: "The Wanderer and His Shadow". [...] In Nietzsche's text, the wanderer addresses his shadow directly. Here, I address the artists included in the collections. I think of these artists of the past as protective shadows, in a way, and they are very present in my work. There is nothing original about this approach. Up until the late 19th century, all painters went to museums in order to appropriate a style or a subject and so on. They took up the paintings of the old masters in order to try and understand and learn as closely as they could from the greats. There aren't many people who do that nowadays. Personally, I don't make copies in the strict sense. I appropriate the work of others out of love. [...]

## During your research, you wanted to select works from the Neiryck collection and the collection of the spouses Duvivier. Why?

[...] If this exhibition was going to be a mini-retrospective of my work from the last 30 years, it seemed important to me not to miss out on certain aspects. Their inclusion means that the path follows a trail between expressionism, geometric abstraction and an urban pop approach. These two collections represent the spirit of my work which vehemently refuses to anchor itself in any particular style.

What is great about painting is you can literally explode time, by creating kinds of elastic time capsules [...]. In other words, I explode chronology and I hang the works without forcing formal associations. [...]

## Could you characterise the two collections: how they complement each other, how they differ... using your eye as an artist today?

I think that Thomas Neiryck, initially, purchased the prestigious and emerging painters who were his contemporaries, such as Soulage, Hartung, Mathieu, etc. Then, on meeting the artists, he lent importance to cultivating relations with them. When he pushed open the studio door, a special relationship began. With Thomas Neiryck, I see a need to help the artist first of all and then to appropriate a part of his thinking, his work [...]. In the end, it's the link to the man that is predominant, presiding over the choice of his collection.

With the Duvivier spouses, it's very different. If I understood rightly there was an anterior collection from the inter-war period, but they sold it in order to make up the current collection which is truly totally eclectic with no guiding line at all; something bordering on the absurd, nihilism with lots of black humour. It's a tragicomic collection. It is sombre and at the same time it's life in all its derisoriness. In short, there's enormous humanity in this collection.

## How did Eugène Leroy profoundly move you?

The exhibition starts with four small silver portraits installed opposite an engraved self-portrait by Eugène Leroy, a painter who has influenced me hugely. I was lucky enough to meet him in the final years of his life, in the 1990s. [...] At that time, I didn't understand this matterist painting that didn't portray anything, whereas I was coming more from graffiti, urban painting or free figuration. Later, I understood that there was nothing abstract about it and that Leroy spent his whole life seeking to paint landscapes, nudes, seascapes or homages to Rembrandt... In this quest, he needed to use so many materials in order to make the image slowly emerge. The encounter was determining. To hear him speak, to see him work, to explore his studio... He was a really strong influence. With him, I evolved towards painting that was more closely linked with history, the past, and tradition... What was difficult afterwards was to depart from that and find my own identity.

## Why the silver colour?

Leroy's hold was such that I felt I was mired in an excessively close filiation to the master. There was a kind of click the day I purchased a chrome aerosol; the colour of the reflective metal. I painted oil portraits which I covered with this colour; an iconoclastic gesture that transformed these paintings into monochrome. The silver colour then became recurrent in my work, either in monochrome or as full-blown colour in the compositions. This chrome colour is in fact matter, a receptacle of light and colours. In the exhibition, the silver colour covers the museum's walls in order to create a strong unity. In a way, this painting seeps into the whole of the works, it unites them in a big whole.

## Biography of Xavier Noiret-Thomé

**Xavier Noiret-Thomé** was born in Charleville-Mézières in 1971. Following studies at the École régionale des Beaux-Arts in Rennes from 1990 to 1995, he took up a residency at the Centre d'art contemporain du domaine de Kerguéhennec then at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Amsterdam. He was the recipient of the Levis award for Young Belgian Painting at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 2001. In 2005, he became a laureate of the Académie de France in Rome and obtained a residency at the Villa Medici. In 2011, he made the windows of Saint-Thomas church in Vaulx-en-Velin. Since 2005, Xavier Noiret-Thomé has been professor and since 2017 co-ordinator of the Master in Painting at the École nationale supérieure des arts visuels de La Cambre in Brussels. His works have become incorporated into numerous public and private collections.

## Themes of the exhibition



## Primal Magma

For this first chapter, Xavier Noiret-Thomé selected pieces that illustrate the birth of the work through matter. Close to the essence of things rather than to their appearance, magma is the degree zero of the matter at the origin of the artwork. Through its manipulation, the artist engages with the primary, telluric, element which constitutes humankind's planet. In these paintings, the image disappears beneath the matter; one occasionally senses the former's presence without caring about its legibility. Are these landscapes, portraits, seascapes? These works are testimony to an unceasingly repeated confrontation between matter and image. These artists grappling with this primal magma, and Asger Jorn is no exception, are permanently tossed between these two modes of representation: abstraction or figuration.



## Human Things

This title evokes the text, "Human, All Too Human" by Nietzsche, a philosopher who has a great influence on the work of Xavier Noiret-Thomé. This chapter illustrates the world in all its diversity, humanity in its complex relation to things, to life, in pain as well as in joy. Here we try hard to understand the task taken on and the effects sought or achieved by the artist, who no longer considers matter as primal artistic forces, or even as individual and stylistic "nature", but as a "soul" communicating with us, employing in order to do so the artifices and the procedures that the artist explores.

**Enrico Baj, Gian Battista Della Valle di Venasta, s.d.**  
Collection des époux Duvivier, propriété de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, en dépôt au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Mons (BAM), conservé à l'Artothèque.

**Xavier Noiret-Thomé, L'emprise des Sens, 2009.**  
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Charleroi



## Le miroir aux alouettes

A childhood memory of Xavier Noiret-Thomé, the swallow mirror is a hunting object made up of a sleeve decorated with small mirrors used as bait to attract swallows and other small birds. Xavier Noiret-Thomé presents to us here a metaphor for painting as an illusion. On the model of the swallow mirror, the works that he has chosen are baits, traps for the gaze, pretences.

**Jo Delahaut, sans titre, 1962.**  
Fonds Thomas Neiryndck, propriété de la Fondation Roi Baudouin, en dépôt au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Mons (BAM), conservé à l'Artothèque. © SABAM Belgium 2022



## Luxury, Peace and Pleasure

Xavier Noiret-Thomé takes the title of this chapter from a painting by Matisse. Following on from the room entitled "Swallow Mirror", a watchword comes to our attention: peace and pleasure take their place with subjects like still-life, landscape or the picnic out of doors. The painting becomes a peaceful window on the world. Works such as those by Agnès Maes, Jean-François Octave or Jean Brusselmans reveal a highly singular treatment in the objects' combination and at the same time a softness with a great deal of simplicity in the colours and compositions. They illustrate perfectly the famous verse by Baudelaire:

*There all is order and beauty,  
Luxury, peace, and pleasure.*

This chapter represents, in a manner, an interval, a moment of half-real, half-dreamt happiness, before the tumult of the final chapter of this life path: death symbolised by "Hades and Thanatos".



## Hadès and Thanatos

Like every life path, Xavier Noiret-Thomé leads us to Hades and Thanatos. These mythical figures each represent a different meaning of death. In Greek mythology, Thanatos is he who accompanies us to our fate, like a guide, while Hades represents the master of limbo. Despite this disquieting shadow enthroned in the background of the painting by Serge Vandercam, other artists such as Fred Bervoets, David Mach or Peter Saul treat the personification of death in a caricatured, almost exuberant way. In the view of Xavier Noiret-Thomé, an adopted Belgian, with artists like these included in the two collections, we are never very far from a tragicomic spirit where seriousness and pleasantries mingle. From carnival to great buffoonery, an air of Belgianness resonates in us. In this circle of life that begins with the "primal magma" and ends with death, there is necessarily a renaissance that Nietzsche characterises as "The eternal return of the same"...

Jean Brusselmans,  
*Nature morte aux roses, 1937.*  
Fonds Thomas Neiryck, propriété de  
la Fondation Roi Baudouin, en dépôt  
au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Mons  
(BAM), conservé à l'Artothèque.  
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Xavier Noiret-Thomé,  
*Pic-nique, 2004*  
Artist's collection

Peter Saul, *Captain Crime, 1962.*  
Collection des époux Duvivier, propriété  
de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles,  
en dépôt au Musée des Beaux-Arts de  
Mons (BAM), conservé à l'Artothèque.  
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Xavier Noiret-Thomé,  
*L'incendiaire, 2009-2014*  
Artist's collection

## The catalogue

Editions La lettre volée, 112 p., 22€  
(only in French)



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Xavier Roland, directeur du Bam et responsable  
du Pôle muséal de la Ville de Mons
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Sophie Simon, conservatrice des collections  
communales montoises
- Artiste, curateur, exposant, la trilogie  
de Xavier Noiret-Thomé  
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## Practical info

The exhibition is open from 8 October 2022  
until 8 January 2023

During the expo  
"Joan Miró. The Essence of Past and Present Things"  
Tuesday — Sunday | 10 a.m. — 6 p.m.

Closed on 2 and 25 December and on 1 January  
Closes at 4 p.m. on 24 and 31 December.

Full price : 16€  
Concession : 12€  
Youths 12+/students : 2€  
Children -12 : free

Free admission on opening weekend: 7, 8 and 9 October

Ticket for the BAM included the expo  
Joan Miró and the "Salle aux Piliers"

### Booking and ticket purchase

- online via VisitMons
- by telephone on +32 (0)65 33 55 80
- in person at VisitMons (Grand'Place de Mons)  
or at the museum reception

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## List of exhibited artists

Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Enrico Baj, Gérard Baldet, Anna-Eva Bergman, Fred Bervoets, Bram Bogart, Marcel Broodthaers, Jean Brusselmans, Gaston Chaissac, Tal Coat, Philippe De Gobert, Jo Delahaut, Fabio De Sanctis, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, Jean Fautrier, Lucio Fontana, Michel Frère, Asger Jorn, Eugène Leroy, David Mach, Agnès Maes, Pol Maryan, Antoine Mortier, Daniel Nadaud, Jean-Francois Octave, Meret Oppenheim, Albert Pepermans, Jordi Pericot, Pablo Picasso, Franz Ringel, Eduardo Sanz, Peter Saul, Antonio Saura, Antonio Segui, Imai Toshimitsu, Philippe Vandenberg, Serge Vandercam, Hugh Weiss, Maurice Wyckaert and Xavier Noiret-Thomé.