

Some Observations on Gustave Van de Woestyne's Working Routine

Maximiliaan P.J. Martens
UGent – KVAB

During the 2010 exhibition, *Gustave Van de Woestyne*, curated by Robert Hoozee and Cathérine Verleysen, our research group, Ghent Interdisciplinary Centre for Art & Science (Gicas), documented a few works with infrared reflectography (IRR).¹

IRR is an imaging technique that allows studying the preliminary drawing (or underdrawing) underneath the paint layers. In physical terms, infrared radiation reflects carbon-holding material and absorbs all others in wavelengths around 1500 to 2000 nm. This means that black ink or black chalk, graphite and similar drawing materials become visible through the paint layers. This technique, invented in the late 1960s, has become very common in the investigation of old master paintings, mainly of the 15th and early 16th century. Perhaps surprisingly, it has far less often been applied in the study of more recent paintings. The main reason for that is that around the middle of the 16th century, artists started to use black paint in all phases of the painting process, and not only in the underdrawing. As a result, infrared reflectograms are interfered by these other black materials and therefore less legible. However, it will be argued here that it is well worth to aim the IRR-camera at paintings of some modern artists, like those by Van de Woestyne.

In his portrait drawings, like that of his brother, the poet Karel Van de Woestijne (1910)² or of his wife and two of his daughters (1918),³ Gustave shows himself as a refined and talented draughtsman. In some of his painted portraits, such as that of his own wife (1910),⁴ his sister-in-law (1906),⁵ or the *Farmer's girl* (1913),⁶ Van de Woestyne's underdrawing is visible to the naked eye mainly in the contours of the composition. Clearly, in such works it was the artist's purpose to have his preliminary drawing shimmer through as to play a constitutive part of the finished work of art.

As can be seen e.g. in the *Portrait of Maria Van Hende, Mrs. Karel Van de Woestijne* (ill. 1), he drew the contours and the facial features with utmost concentration and a steady hand without any hesitation in a dry material, probably graphite. It is not excluded that the artist made use of a preparatory drawing, which was traced onto the eventual canvas. Then he placed delicate shadows above the proper left eye, under the nose and the chin. In order to accentuate the paleness of the woman's face, he put also some hatching on the background to the right of the face. The latter was overpainted in the final execution of the portrait. Only one feature of the underdrawing, a ring at her right hand, was not painted out. The infrared document further shows that the neckline was

¹ All references made here are to the catalogue published at the occasion of this exhibition, Robert HOOZEE & Cathérine VERLEYSSEN, *Gustave Van de Woestyne* (Antwerp, Mercatorfonds, 2010).

² Ghent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten (further as MSK), cat. 50.

³ Private collection, cat. 58.

⁴ MSK, cat. 51.

⁵ Private collection, cat. 49.

⁶ MSK, cat. 31.

corrected during the painting phase in order to make the volume of her dark hair more compact.

In other works, like the *Portrait of an Old Woman* (1914),⁷ he prepared the work in a preliminary drawing, paying detailed attention to all the facial features, the wrinkles and the shading of the head (ill. 2). As the recent investigation with IRR shows, the artist drew an almost identical underdrawing on the canvas before he started painting (ill. 3). As the whereabouts of the initial drawing are unknown, it cannot be determined whether it was on a 1-to-1 scale to the underdrawing. However, no mechanical copying technique seems to have been used to transfer the first drawing onto the canvas. Working again in a dry material, Van de Woestyne carefully observed his model's features, drew them with much detail and applied the hatching, indicating shadows in the face, following the main forms and indentations. This drawing functioned as guidance during the painting process. The artist used a traditional technique whereby the darkest tonalities in the face remained transparent, while the lightest ones were painted more opaquely.

This working procedure reminds of that of the Flemish Primitives, like Jan van Eyck. He may have been acquainted with (reproductions of) Van Eyck's *Portrait drawing of Cardinal Albergati* (Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett), which, be it in silverpoint, shows a very similar sense for detail. Van de Woestyne couldn't have possibly known Van Eyck's detailed underdrawing, like it appears underneath the face of Elisabeth Borluut, the patroness of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, as it was only revealed through IRR in 1978. Gustave Van de Woestyne admired his 15th century precursors since the quintessential exhibition '*Les Primitifs flamands*' held in Bruges in 1902.⁸ The artist must have been aware that in order to capture this old woman's features, the careful traditional working method of the old masters was the most suitable one.

Having returned to Belgium after his exile in Wales and England during WW I, Van de Woestyne turned towards what the art critic André De Ridder coined as 'constructivist expressionism' in the 1920s.⁹ In 1929, he declared: "*Drawing is essential to me, it has to be as sensitive as the colour that it confines. I model my surfaces with care so that each one of them becomes a volume with its own value (...) Each one of them contributes to the indispensable homogeneity of the whole, if not chaos emerges*".¹⁰

The *Woman in Black* (ca. 1925)¹¹ illustrates very well his newly found purity of form. One of the most noticeable features of the underdrawing (ill. 4) is the cross on the woman's forehead, executed in pencil, and not visible in the finished painting. Doubtlessly, this mark functioned as a reference for drawing the facial features in

⁷ MSK, cat. 71.

⁸ Piet BOYENS, 'Sint-Martens-Latem – een debuut met gevolgen', in: Robert HOOZEE & Cathérine VERLEYSEN, *Gustave Van de Woestyne*, Antwerp, Mercatorfonds, 2010, p. 31-32.

⁹ Robert HOOZEE & Cathérine VERLEYSEN, 'Gustave Van de Woestyne en het modernisme', in: Robert HOOZEE & Cathérine VERLEYSEN, *Gustave Van de Woestyne*, Antwerp, Mercatorfonds, 2010, p. 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45 (my translation).

¹¹ Private collection, cat. 93.

convincing proportions. The dry drawing material reappears in some summary hatching indicating the shadow on the nose. It is likely that the whole picture was first underdrawn in pencil and that the contours and facial features were retraced in black paint in a following preparatory phase. The latter ones remained largely visible in the final result.

In one of his most prominent commissions, an ensemble of seven still lifes for the dining room of the Van Buuren family, Van de Woestyne developed his pure modernism even further. All items in *Still Life with Saucer* (1931)¹² are prepared in the underdrawing phase with a dry medium, probably graphite, concentrating on the contour lines of each form (ill. 5). Not one single time these contour lines overlap one another. There are very few corrections or hesitations. The pressure applied by the artist on the drawing material is nearly everywhere equal, except in the lightest areas like the leaves of the white iris on the foreground. There is no hatching to indicate shadows. Only one, nearly imperceptible detail is missing in this drawing: in the reflection of the white bowl with apples in the glass vase to the left of it, the two apples are missing. They were added in the final painting phase though.

All this indicates that the underdrawing was traced from a one-to-one preparatory drawing, in which all elements of the composition were carefully prepared. Such preparatory studies by the artist are known for other works, be it usually on a much smaller scale than the final painting. The different studies in crayon, green chalk and pastel for the *Blind Violinist* (Liège, MAMAC),¹³ are interesting examples.

Eventually, also here these underdrawn contours remain partly visible in the final painting and contribute to the modernist architectonic clearness of the form. Small deviations of the form appear only in the leaves of the sansevieria. They were covered by the opaque paint of the background.

Conclusion

Gustave Van de Woestyne started his major works most probably with a detailed compositional drawing, which he then copied onto the canvas. Although such preparatory drawings have not often surfaced or are lost, the line quality in most of his underdrawings strongly suggests their existence. The underdrawing functioned as guidance throughout the painting phase; often it remained visible as a constituent element of the final painting. In any case, the artist used underdrawings in his working routine in a functional fashion: it contributed to the sobriety of a portrait, to the intricacy of facial features, or to the clarity of modernist compositions.

¹² Uccle, Van Buuren collection, cat. 119.

¹³ Cat. 84 a-b.

CAPTIONS ILLUSTRATIONS

Ill. 1. Gustave Van de Woestyne, *Portrait of Maria Van Hende, Mrs. Karel Van de Woestijne*, IRR, private collection. (© UGent, Gicas 2010)

Ill. 2. Gustave Van de Woestyne, *Portrait of an Old Woman*, drawing published in *De Standaard*, 29-30 Sept. 1990.

Ill. 3. Gustave Van de Woestyne, *Portrait of an Old Woman*, IRR detail, Ghent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten (© UGent, Gicas 2014)

Ill. 4. Gustave Van de Woestyne, *Woman in Black*, IRR detail, private collection (© UGent, Gicas 2010)

Ill. 5 Gustave Van de Woestyne, *Still Life with Saucer*, IRR, Uccle, Van Buuren coll. (© UGent, Gicas 2010)