

Welcome to **VERS L'IDÉAL**

The first time I heard about **Jef Leempoels** was in the mid-1980s, at the home of my future parents-in-law.

Next to the mantelpiece hung a framed reproduction of '**A l'Église**' and when I showed interest, my mother-in-law - *herself a Leempoels* - told me about the illustrious painter, the pride of all Leempoels. In the following months I heard even more about the man from 'uncles' and 'aunts'. They all confirmed that '**The Painter**' had portrayed kings and statesmen and was of great esteem in his time.

I saw photos, reproductions and real works by the man at various family members. I heard about **the great auction of 1968** where a large part of his works went under the hammer. At my first '**Poelekesfeest**'¹ in 1992, people recalled a family trip to Reynel in Northern France. There, **Walter Leempoels**, a cousin of Jef, had given them a private tour of his castle, where two dozen of Jef's works are on display.

The current search options on the internet were not yet available and my sporadic attempts to find something about 'The Master' in local libraries yielded nothing. Jef Leempoels quickly drifted into the background of my interests.

In 2005, my daughter was given the assignment at school to draw up **a family tree**, up to and including her grandparents. That was a piece of cake, so we tried to go back a step further. With the content of a box full of old documents and two Leempoels brochures from previous gatherings - '**De stam Leempoels**' from 1992 and the '**Poechelin**' from 2001 - we quickly arrived at the generation of the great-great-grandparents.

During some searches on '**Yahoo**' and '**AltaVista**' to expand that family tree a bit further, Jef Leempoels appeared in the results one day. To be precise: it was an image of one of his paintings: '**La dame à l'éventail**'². Sotheby's in New York hoped to get \$15,000 to \$20,000 for it in 1995 (you can double that amount today). The combination Leempoels/Sotheby's seemed to confirm the stories: the man did indeed have a name and a reputation in the art world...

In the following years, archives all over the world were digitized and became available on the internet. You could quietly browse through them on dark winter evenings without having to leave the house. Through websites that follow art auctions, I also got to see **more of his works**. Mostly in black and white, but also in color and some even with a decent resolution. Gradually, I

¹ a decennial gathering of all Leempoels from the Rotselaar-Werchter-Haacht region

² Original title: "La dame à l'éventail", a.k.a. "A day at the races"

collected more than **2,500 newspaper and magazine clippings** with reviews and commentaries from 1885 until long after Leempoels' death in 1935.

Initially, I planned to write a short biography for **Wikipedia**, but that idea gradually derailed... The material I found contained so much interesting information that it eventually became a **monograph** of almost 800 pages. It is a work in which I mainly let his contemporaries give their vision and opinion of Jef Leempoels.

It is a **story** about a young, ambitious and talented painter, who delivers his *magnum opus* at the age of 25. It is an **overview** of the career of an internationally respected and celebrated artist. It is an **anthology** of good and bad reviews. A **collection** of justified and unjustified criticism of a classically trained artist who stubbornly resisted any form of innovation. It is a **look** into the drive of a man who defended his art - and all its practitioners - against fraudsters and counterfeiters. It is the modest **portrait** of a gifted portraitist who was able to capture the soul of his subject in a thin layer of oil paint. It is a **journey** along salons in Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp and Liège, in Berlin, Munich and Vienna, in London, St. Louis and New York. It is much more...

Please read it as I have looked it up, sorted it out and written it down... bit by bit. Enjoy the numerous side trips in which I highlight his colleagues, the salons and the **general zeitgeist** of Leempoels' period. Enjoy the **flowery prose** of the reviewers, the old photos, and the forgotten posters. But above all, enjoy the incredibly rich palette that Jef Leempoels (and his contemporaries) have left us.

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PS: do I need to mention explicitly that I would be incredibly happy to receive further information, in particular copies of letters from / to Jef Leempoels as well as photos of his missing works?