

'Then and now, the everyday security of the bourgeoisie can be said to require the everyday insecurity of the working classes.'
Allan Sekula, *Swimming in the Wake* (2002)²

Art, politics or religion?
The social nature of Constantin Meunier and his works

The existing literature on the Belgian artist Constantin Meunier (1831-1905) contains a huge diversity of viewpoints on the artist's possible social motivation and – in particular – that of his art. According to some, like Charles Bernard, there is none whatsoever. In an article written in 1927 he sublimates the content of Meunier's working class iconography, which could have been politically explosive, into a religious discourse. He states categorically that Meunier's works contributed to the sanctification of Labour and the Labourer, but that there could be absolutely no question of 'social art' in his case.³ Bernard sees Meunier's art in terms of a somewhat non-committal 'sublime experience' and in fact confuses art with religion when he says that Meunier's work contributed to a 'growth' or a deepening of religion.⁴

Others, though, including principally the Brussels lawyer Edmond Picard (1836-1924), regard Meunier's works as the equivalent of a well developed platform for socialist politics. Picard, from 1894 onwards a member of Parliament for the BWP (Belgian Workers' Party), made his views on the subject publicly known during an infamous conference which he held at the end of 1891 in the *Galerie Moderne de Saint-Cyr* in Brussels, where Meunier was also exhibiting at the time. With the support of the artistic section of the Brussels House of the People [*Maison du Peuple*], Picard made a plea before a packed audience for revolutionary art and art criticism that would take an explicitly political activist stance. Meunier's work, he argued, showed young artists the way to 'socialist' art of this kind.⁵

Picard's address is known from a particularly sceptical review made by Isidore Van Cleef. In this he suggested that in his discourse Picard was muddling up two things, namely art and politics.⁶ According to Van Cleef, who explicitly refuted the contents of Picard's address, the latter was preaching an 'artistic ideal' that saw art as 'an instrument of vengeance, hatred and social chaos'. It is true, Van Cleef acknowledges, that – in order to be interesting – art needs to have a social-cum-utilitarian aspect, which must, though, aim to 'elevate' the 'minds and hearts' of the people, and not to give cause for social disruption.⁷ Armand Thiery and Emile Van Dievoet give a detailed account of Meunier's embarrassment as a result of Picard's address at the *Galerie Moderne*, where the artist was also present. Meunier did in fact subsequently find himself repeatedly required to qualify Picard's explicitly partisan interpretation of his works.⁸ Thiery



Meunier, *Pudleur enkylosé, habitué de toutes les expositions.*

FIG. 32
X, MEUNIER, *PUDLEUR ENKYLOSÉ, HABITUÉ DE TOUTES LES EXPOSITIONS*, LE PATRIOTTE ILLUSTRÉ, MARCH 10TH 1889 p. 112. (BIBLIOTHÈQUE ROYALE DE BELGIQUE, BRUSSELS)

and Van Dievoet correctly state that Meunier was neither a socialist – with the connotation of a revolutionary activist which would have been associated with it in the Belgium of the early 20th century – nor an anarchist.⁹

Picard and his socialist revolutionary associates definitely overestimated the political potential of Meunier's working class iconography. Yet, it was certainly true that this interpretation did the artistic reception of Meunier's work in connoisseur circles no favours and that it created a certain unease in conservative environments. It is more than probable that the rather conservative-minded visiting public to the current art exhibitions at the time also overestimated the political potential of Meunier's work and was inclined to give Picard's inflammatory words the benefit of the doubt. It seems as though for that reason they were apprehensive, perhaps more than necessary, about the possibly socially explosive nature of Meunier's paintings and sculptures. This resulted in excessive forms of ridicule of his work. For instance, on 10 March 1889 the reactionary newspaper *Le Patriote Illustré* showed a caricature of Meunier's life-size *Puddler*, made in 1887, as a hunted ghost, wandering round exhibitions of contemporary art (fig. 32).¹⁰ In its ankylotic, or 'stiff-jointed', outlook it was hardly likely to make any impression on the visiting public present there from the higher social circles. And yet one gets the impression that this may be just as much a reflected image of the caricaturist himself, for who is in fact this 'stiff' *habitué* of the exhibitions?

Meunier himself was very well aware of the complex social reception of his work, as is abundantly evident from the letters he wrote to his Danish friend Carl Jacobsen.¹¹ On 20 August 1902 he explicitly told Jacobsen that it had never been his intention to make socialist propaganda. 'I am not taking part in politics via philanthropy', he said, with conviction – and convincingly.¹² 'I have great sympathy for the labourer who is so worthy of our interest and who is often maliciously exploited', he adds. 'Work is noble enough to be revered.' This clearly demonstrates to what extent Meunier was conscious that his work was either being greeted by the established powers with a horror of the working classes or could give cause for often misplaced, not very long lasting forms of charitable initiatives. Neither met with his approval.

As a human being, Meunier undoubtedly fostered deep sympathies for a socialist body of thought that strove in a peaceful manner for better living conditions for the working classes. From his correspondence with Jacobsen it is also evident that Meunier could easily identify with the 'velvet revolution' of socialism in the Scandinavian countries, which abhorred any kind of bloody conflict.¹³ This was what he feared most, the inflammatory nature of Belgian socialism. As an artist, Meunier aspired to a slower, but lasting change of minds, without it having to result in social disruption.

If with his work he could initiate consideration and reflection on the importance of the working classes for the 'comfort' of the higher, intellectual classes and on the respect they therefore deserved, then he regarded his artistic undertaking as successful. So it was essential that his work remained acceptable to the environments he wished to sensitise. He wanted them to look at it, he wanted it to cross their paths. He wanted them to be touched by it in a way which would make them think and, in the best scenario, be moved to a lasting form of fair treatment of the workers. Meunier was therefore walking on a very thin artistic tightrope, yet with an increasing measure of success. This is the same kind of acrobatics recognised today in the work of the American artist Allan Sekula.

A new type of artistic representation: the labourer (male or female) as an element 'carrying' society

Even when Meunier was still alive Olivier Destrée stated very explicitly that it is an illusion to believe in the immediate political potential of 'socialist art'.¹⁴ According to Destrée art also 'exists independently of sociological or political considerations'. He believes that Meunier should not therefore be seen as the figure who broke the boundaries of art, thus helping to integrate it into a political platform.¹⁵ In the more liberal climate of the Scandinavian context Meunier might well have let himself be more easily seduced into this, but in the Belgian context he definitely did not consider an open alliance with political platforms a viable proposition.

Meunier opted to act subtly and to convey a point of view by way of his art. By resolutely keeping to the boundaries of the artistic, he was able to propagate an innovatory social message which was not completely disruptive to social order, but postulated a gradual change in mentality. Meunier succeeded in this undertaking by on the one hand remaining outside political spheres, yet on the other hand broadening the horizon of expectations of the plastic arts. He introduced a new 'type of representation' into artistic tradition, in other words into history painting at that time, and into monumental sculpture at the end of the 19th century – that of the male or female labourer.¹⁶ This broadening of what was feasible in terms of representation within the artistic tradition of painting and sculpture, Destrée correctly states, is purely and simply an extension of the boundaries of art altogether. But that does not go as far as to say that Meunier was in this way taking part in direct politics, as was indeed to be the case in the socialist realist artistic ideals of Picard and the artistic ideologies of the mid 20th century which took their cue from them.¹⁷

Meunier was acutely aware that it was most probably not a good idea to drag the workers along in the project of a utopian society that Belgian socialism envisaged at the time.¹⁸ Camille Lemonnier, a close friend of the family since his marriage to Meunier's niece Valentine, also felt this strongly: art, under certain conditions, can expand yet must not go outside its own boundaries.¹⁹ To Lemonnier, it should not enter into overt alliances with revolutionary political projects. He maintained that by staying within the limits of the artistic and by 'ostensibly denying the immense power of uniting and disrupting which is latently present in every work of art', pictorial representations can create 'deep currents' along which the 'turbulences' of social art can indeed take their course.²⁰

Lemonnier's metaphorical language, which is reminiscent of the forces and whirlpools of continuous streams of water, is striking. Stronger, it is not the only time that a link has been made in the literature on Meunier between the 'world of Labour' and that of the sea.²¹ It is all the more remarkable that this relationship is also prominent in the works of Allan Sekula. Both streams of motion, of labour and of the sea, are marked by their cyclical character, by an immanent advance that never seems to fall silent. In its massive, collective force, it, paradoxically, also appears to transcend the individual human being. The world of work and the world of the sea, in their artistic representation, have a great intrinsic metaphorical and allegorical potential that gives rise to thought and reflection. Without doubt this is why the two artists feel so strongly connected to these elements, in spite of the distance in time and in space.

Meunier's homage to the worldly wisdom of the worker

In the light of this conclusion it is all the more noticeable to what extent Meunier's life's work, his majestic *Monument to Labour* (fig. 1), has today found its ideal location. Towering above the jetty in Brussels – at the *Quai des Yachts* in Laeken – it offers visitors the opportunity of seeing the fluidity of the surrounding water in visual continuity with the rich programme of working class iconography the artist is supplying.²² The synthesis and at the same time the apotheosis of the *Monument to Labour* is the *Maternity* group (fig. 33), which you meet first – as soon as you start to climb the steps. The mother figure sits enthroned on a plinth, with bared breast, above the observer. In her left arm she is holding tightly her younger child who has just been fed. Her hand is protectively clasping the tiny hand of her small daughter, in a single, tender flowing movement (fig. 34-detail 1). The attitude of blending together the mother and her small son, who is leaning against her left side, is also striking against the background of the allegory of the fluidity of water and work that appears to characterise Meunier's entire body of work (fig. 34-detail 2).

Also striking is the strong emphasis the artist places on the *nonfinito* nature of the statue ensemble. This is all the more remarkable since Meunier had already completed the group by 1893.²³ This gives him an undisputed prominent place among the most progressive sculptural avant-gardes of his era. The artist has undoubtedly worked here on the basis of meticulous studies from life, with very progressive results, not only in terms of form, but also of content.²⁴ At the end of the 19th century breast-feeding was a contentious point for ladies from the upper classes, where it was not regarded as suitable for 'anyone of standing'.²⁵ Meunier seems to be subtly attempting to offer them an alliance with the simplicity with which working class women treat their physicality. He is, as it were, offering them visual acquaintance with a kind of primordial mother, a fragment of nature for whom such matters are totally self-evident.

Walther Gensel also writes correctly that the representation of *Maternity* should be symbolically interpreted: this is not just any working class woman, but in fact an allegorical reproduction of 'mother earth' herself.²⁶ So Meunier's 'Working class Madonna', as Gensel calls her, can be included in a pictorial language of Christian iconography.²⁷ For instance, Meunier simultaneously gives her the meaning of a *sedes sapientiae*, a constantly recurring basic wisdom. By her intense physical contact with her children she points to the future, to the fruits of (her) labour which they will surely enjoy. The dynamic figure of *The Sower* (1904-'05) (fig. 13), throning right above her as the personification of contemporary Labour, very obviously makes the link to the fertility of men and women, but also to the fruits of work itself. The inscription 'Au Travail' (fig. 1) which is displayed between them in the foreground of the massive block forming the pedestal of *The Sower*, even shows this didactically. The representation on the lower left side of the block, of *The Ancestor* (1903) (fig. 1) - symbolising the past - completes this allegory of a cyclic, flowing motion of time.

These personifications of the 'fruits of labour and of the earth' symbolise not only the heroism of a particular social group. They are at the same time an allegorical representation of an entire nation.²⁸ This class of labourers *carries* – often literally – a social system. Without them, without their daily efforts, a social elite is impossible. Meunier was extremely well aware of the

dialectic aspect of this two-way social reality: one class cannot exist without the other and this is true in both directions. Meunier strove towards the right balance between the higher and the lower groups of the population, towards an endurable form of mutual respect. He did not want to eliminate the differences, but did wish for edification of the minds of both: he believed in the positive power of a social process of reaching awareness based on principles of justice and respect. His work is unique witness to an enormous gratitude that he felt towards the social group he illustrates, and to which he wanted to give a fully acknowledged place in society. The extensive form of sympathy he felt towards them was translated into a silent ambition to grant them a decent existence, but not into a utopian desire to make them into proletarian 'kings'.

Meunier's social engagement cannot therefore in any sense be understood in absolute terms: his work was not designed to overthrow the prevailing social system. He was himself a fervent supporter of the constitutional monarchy, a democratic regime he described as 'good' and 'just'.²⁹ It was, though, his explicit goal to appeal to the sense of responsibility of the dominant social groups. By means of his work he tried to encourage them to protect the working classes and to support them in their development and abilities, without fundamentally disturbing the existing balances.³⁰ But he did subscribe to a fair 'redeployment' of those balances in terms of greater dignity and equality. Implicitly Meunier's work also spreads the message that a stable social system can only function properly if all sections of it belong to the 'working class' and also mutually respect one another's tasks. This means that labourers must also regard intellectual 'brainwork' as labour, if indeed the 'higher' social classes are effectively performing the duties of labour assigned to them.

Constantin Meunier believed very strongly that an artist should work with subtle metaphors in his visual language so as to convey a thoughtful message with as much differentiation as possible. He also knew that that message could come over very powerfully if you as an artist hit the right chord. Art can make a considerable difference in the way its observers think, without this necessarily immediately giving rise to general social tumult. This lack of a direct political gesture does not need to be a reason for fundamental pessimism. Meunier believed in the power of small scale action, in the intervention of his work in the everyday treatment of everyone who came into contact with it. As the American artist and critic Martha Rosler writes about her own photographic work, art can pose an 'act of criticism' without having the direct intention of starting a political action.³¹ This is not proof of a cowardly attitude, she stresses: the fact that you as an artist are not aiming at a process of politicisation does not mean that you do not have a political viewpoint. But an artist may know precisely how far he or she can go in his or her critical artistic engagement. Meunier and Sekula without doubt walk this artistic tightrope together, each in his own era, each in his own way.

Social realism in Meunier's art – a method rather than a style

On the occasion of Meunier's solo exhibition at the Brussels *Galerie Saint-Cyr* Emile Verhaeren thoroughly praised his work, clearly distinguishing it from that of George Minne (1866-1941). Minne, says Verhaeren, strips suffering of the context of its worldly existence. His work confronts the observer with the Idea of poverty, deprivation or sickness rather than with a tangible, real

pain as experienced in everyday life itself. 'One imagines Minne's characters rather than seeing them', the critic rightly says.³² Meunier, he continues, on the other hand keeps 'to the facts'. 'He thinks of a social class, looks at it through his melancholy and sympathy and makes it exist via his personal emotion. He sculpts bodies, notes attitudes and creates, in a word, from life. His art is realistic.'³³ This is why Verhaeren sees in Meunier the painter and sculptor of 'democratic suffering' instead of 'ideal suffering'.³⁴ However much Verhaeren admired Minne, he recognised in Meunier his superior, precisely because of the fact that Meunier does not allow himself to enter a dream world, but always unrelentingly holds on to the life that people 'breathe, endure and 'suffer'.³⁵

Verhaeren finds in Meunier's characters a truthfulness, expressed, among other ways, in the way he reproduces their gestures. He maintains that this shows how well Meunier knew and had studied the way in which they normally moved or sat still. Meunier does not hesitate to reproduce tanned hands or other deformed parts of the body as they are and as we see them in everyday reality. When Verhaeren describes Meunier's art as 'realistic', this is primarily a fact of *style* that he recognises in his work. Meunier's attention to unembellished reproduction of reality as it is, is the 'constant form' or the realistic style distinguished not only over and over again in his own works, but also in those of his contemporaries, such as Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) or Charles Degroux (1825-1870).³⁶

Yet important differences are increasingly being discovered between Meunier's paintings and those of other artists painting in realist style. At the Brussels Salon of 1851 Degroux was greatly impressed by Courbet's lost monumental canvas *The Stone-breakers* (1849). His painting *A Winter's Scene (The Coffee Roaster)* dating from 1857, which caused a scandal at the Brussels Salon that same year, is explicitly intended to play on the sense of guilt of a well-off social group and so to spur them to 'works of charity'.³⁷ Degroux's characters are obviously suffering from hunger or cold, they have no roof over their heads – in short they are clearly very badly off. Meunier's earlier realistic paintings, such as, for example, the various versions he made of *The Flemish Peasants War 1798-1799 (The Rendezvous)* (c. 1875) are still suffused with this same spirit (fig. 35). The striking thing about this work is the ashen, grim facial expression of the peasants gathering to go into battle against the French occupying force.

In the spirit of realist style *The Flemish Peasants War* is immersed in a certain social pessimism, the readiness to fight if necessary to the death being represented as the only possible way out of their misery. But what is striking about this painting and what distinguishes Meunier even at this stage from the other realists of his generation is the dignity he gives to his characters. They are standing bolt upright staring self-confidently ahead. They are self-assured and by no means ashamed of this. They are not simply asking for help. In fact, the opposite, as you can see in their attitude a pride and readiness to fight which prevents them from accepting alms like passive victims. In Meunier's paintings from the early 1880s this aspect becomes more and more prominent. Increasingly and with great success Meunier leaves behind the dimension of obvious blaming and moralising in the work of his former mentor Degroux.³⁸ Yet, Meunier was also aware of the fact that too stark a 'neutral' line of approach can easily tip over into an overly non-committal sensational reproduction of reality – the observer would too easily be inclined to avert his glance and think 'this is happening to them, but it won't happen to me'. He therefore specifically chose to develop a visual discourse that is averse to evoking both the desire for

sensation and feelings of guilt. It is also noticeable in the sculptures that he was to begin showing at the Salons from the mid 1880s that Meunier's work from that time neither sublimates nor confronts. He encourages reflection on the destinies of a particular social class, but in doing so neither explicitly judges nor prejudices.

Sura Levine attributes this swing in Meunier's method of representation from reality to the impressions he gained during a longish stay in Seville between October 1882 and March 1883 in the company of his son Charles (1864-1894). He was working there – not exactly from choice – on a copy of a *Christ being taken down from the Cross* by the 16th century painter Pieter de Kempeneer (Pedro Campaña) by order of the Belgian government. But although Meunier had therefore accepted the well-paid mission out of economic necessity, the impressions he gained there were evidently fertile ground for an important change of direction in his work. From then onwards it can be seen that Meunier's pictorial language succeeds in transcending the purely factual 'reportage nature' of reproducing the facts. From the mid 1880s Meunier's paintings and sculptures achieve an added value in the way reality can be visualised: they are evidence of an extensive form of personally experienced engagement and balanced sympathy towards his subjects.

Of course, the media Meunier uses, those of painting and sculpture, demand that added value: the subjective contribution of the artist cannot be switched off while he is painting or modelling. The manual nature of the technique obliges him to think about the way in which he reproduces the facts. Meunier opts for the representation of a differentiated form of the joy of living. In the magnificent reportage painting in monumental historical format, *Tobacco Factory in Seville* (1883) (fig. 40), he gives, with a great deal of attention to detail, an unusually empathetic insight into the working situation of the female workers there employed in rolling cigarettes. Meunier spent many hours in the 'immense, vaulted halls' of the factory, where 'thousands of women, completely surrounded by tobacco leaves, sit in front of a kind of long bench, making cigars and cigarettes', as he reported in a letter to his wife Léo.³⁹ Sura Levine speaks aptly, in connection with the central section of this canvas, which could also be seen as the nave of a church, of the presence of a 'sea of bodies'.⁴⁰

An extensive form of genuine involvement of the artist in the world in which these people live is obvious not only from the letters, but also from the handling of the paint in the painting itself. The painter, and with him the canvas, gives himself up, as it were, to the swirling sea of people. During the process of looking, you, as the observer, are also very acutely aware of that physical proximity of the artist: the canvas oppresses just as much as it fascinates and stirs. *Tobacco Factory in Seville* is a quasi-photographic, chronicling image, in which the artist spares no effort to bear witness as meticulously as possible to the atmosphere which prevailed in the area represented. Partly due to the dominant use of brown tones, it makes an almost literally 'smoky' impression. The artist would have preferred to be able to paint the work on site in the factory, so that it would have been, as it were, suffused with smoke and the smell of tobacco.⁴¹ The painting can in this way be analysed as a life-like record or an inscription – an index – of a reality experienced by the artist at close hand.⁴² In this sense the notion of realism in relation to Meunier's work should definitely not be interpreted as a style term only. For him realism is also – perhaps even mainly – a *method*. It is an attitude, an artistic way of approaching reality, whereby the artwork is not only the result of a committed process of investigation but also an actual, personally experienced record of it.