



**Xavier Mellery (1845-1921)**

*Méditation*, circa 1894

Pen and black ink, black chalk and wash on board  
78.5 by 55 cm.  
Signed in red pencil 'X Mellery'

**Provenance**

Christie's, London, 16 October 1990, lot 15  
Brussels, Galerie Moderne, 24 May 2005, lot 424  
Galerie Ronny van de Velde, Brussels  
Private collection, United States

**Exhibited**

Herford, Germany, MARTa, 2 June – 14 October 2007

**Literature**

W. Brassat, *MARTa schweigt. Die Kunst der Stille von Duchamp bis Heute*, p. 163

**Note**

The painter, draftsman and illustrator Xavier Mellery is considered a precursor of Belgian Symbolism. During his academic years Mellery committed himself to the study of nature, antiquities and historical composition, for which he won the Prix de Rome in 1870. Spellbound by the many fresco's he encountered in Italy, he aspired to create a *peinture d'idées* without abandoning realism: this would become his lifelong artistic goal and the basis of his symbolist work. His involvement in the *Salon Pour l'Art* and *Les XX*, and contact with Octave Maus and Émile Verhaeren, confirm his contribution to the symbolist movement.

In his intimistic works, starting around 1885, Mellery expresses his search for the deepest meaning of things. The subjects of these drawings are loneliness and silence and often are situated in monasteries or empty corridors, often in the artist's own home. Living beings and their surroundings blend in and the lack of use of color enhances the intimate character of the scenery. Mellery titled these works *Emotions d'Art: L'Âme des Choses* (artistic emotions: the soul of things).

The mysterious and reclusive life of the convent is recurrent in Belgian symbolist literature and Mellery's work.<sup>1</sup> For artists and writers of the turn of the century, entry into a religious order was a valid retreat from the inconsequential restlessness of life. In his 1889 *Notes on Pessimism*, Georges Rodenbach summarized an essential decadent stance: "It is necessary to practice renunciation, instead of delighting in things, become deached from them, and frozen in inaction await the supreme promise, the immense peace of nothingness."<sup>2</sup> The peace of nothingness and the suspension of action emphasized by Rodenbach are evident in Mellery's meditative monk. The spiritual servant becomes a figurative substitution for the symbolist artist engaged in a parallel quest for immanent divinity. Disengaged from worldly activities, the faceless friar's existential being indicates silence, isolation, and waiting.



**Xavier Mellery**

*Beguines at Prayer*, circa 1894

Ink on paper

30.2 by 47.3 cm.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Object no. 291-1973

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald Friedman, in: *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde. Prints, Drawings, and Books ca. 1890*, Spencer Museum of Art, 1992, p. 284

<sup>2</sup> Georges Rodenbach, "Notes sur le Pessimisme", in: *La société nouvelle*, 1882, p. 208