

Artist Biography & Facts

Theodore Van Elsen



Theo Van Elsen (1896-1961) *Turning Boy*

Without Alice Prin's (*Kiki de Montparnasse*) 1929 memoir, the colorful life of Theodor Van Elsen may have been lost forever, but in her capture of 1920's Paris, she singles him out as a memorable character. She writes:

Among the thousand and one picture galleries in Paris there is none more singular than that of Theo Van Elsen, the Dutch-Japanese artist known for his caricatures in *Le Rire* and *Candide*. He is also known as the *Hermit of the Dives*.

The walls of his tiny studio, which is situated next to the Deux Magots Café in the heart of the Latin Quarter are covered with paintings he has made of outcast women encountered in the lowest haunts of vice and crime.

Van Elsen, who is 31 years old, dresses like an Apache, paints best when intoxicated, and is a confirmed night hawk, leaving his room each evening at 10 o'clock to prowls about unfrequented side streets in search of cut-throat dens. His knowledge of obscure retreats, where lives are lived in the dark half of the day, is unlimited.

As Baudelaire found something noble in a drunken rag picker, so Van Elsen sees beauty in the haggard countenance of the most degraded street-girl. She may have a voice like a clash of cymbals, yet it is sweet music to his ears, and he discovers a reserve of purity in her gross impurity.

When the painter meets a particularly pathetic creature in some smoke-dimmed bistro of the underworld his interest is aroused. He visits her there for a fortnight, treating her to drinks, buying her trinkets. He promises to become her *amant de coeur*, and finally induces her to tell him her life story. After analyzing her fate, Van Elsen makes the girl's portrait, giving expression in a powerful manner to all those scattered marks which temperament and habits have imprinted on her features.

It is then hung in his studio among the portraits of the other unfortunate women of her class. And strange as it may seem, he refuses to part with these paintings, though collectors have offered him great sums.

Van Elsen is further evidence that artists who choose the security of steady illustration work are doomed to the backwaters of art history. Born in Java in 1896, he sold his illustrations - ranging from cartoons to racy romances to crime features - to France's top publications of the day, including, *Le Rire*, *Ric et Rac*, *Ridendo* and *Le Journal* from roughly 1920 to 1960. But off-hours, as illustrators often do and as Ms. Prin describes above, his real art emerged.

He died in Paris on January 16, 1961.

Written by Nat Humphreys