

Bozar

Jean Brusselmans

2 October 2026 > 31 January 2027



Sunny Brabant Landscape, 1940, Museums Bruges, Belgium



Harvest, 1934, Museum of Fine Arts of Liège, Belgium



Self-Portrait with Easel, 1935, private collection



Church of Dilbeek, 1929, private collection

INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2026, Bozar will dedicate a major exhibition to the **Belgian artist Jean Brusselmans** (Brussels, 1884 – Dilbeek, 1953)—**the first comprehensive retrospective of his work since 1980.**

Brusselmans' oeuvre aligns almost perfectly with the first half of the 20th century—a period in which European art evolved from 19th-century realism and academicism into a broad array of new styles and movements, mirroring a turbulent era marked by two world wars and numerous social and political upheavals. In Belgium too, artistic innovation followed international trends, giving rise to avant-garde movements such as luminism, Brabant fauvism, Flemish expressionism, surrealism, and constructivism.

Although often categorized as a Flemish Expressionist, Brusselmans distanced himself from this label, seeking instead to assert a distinct artistic identity beyond classifications. Despite his involvement in various artist circles such as L'Effort, the Brabant fauvists, La Libre Esthétique, L'Art Vivant, Les Compagnons de l'Art, and Kunst van Heden, he remained an **individualist**.

Navigating between the artistic movements of his time, he forged an **entirely personal visual language**—always rooted in direct observation and classical compositional principles, flirting with abstraction, and relentlessly **seeking the essence of things**. He translated his small, personal world and his very way of being into an authentic pictorial universe, where, in his own words, “not a single brushstroke is too many or too few.” Brusselmans sought to paint “naively, purely and powerfully, to be natural.”

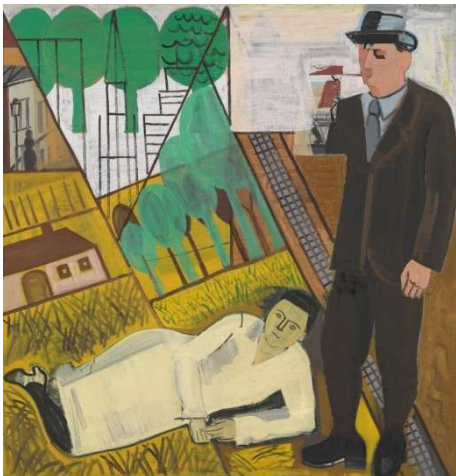
His refusal to conform to prevailing styles and his dogged pursuit of an independent artistic path led to limited recognition during his lifetime and relative obscurity among the broader public today. With this exhibition and publication Bozar aims to change that.



Women with Fan, circa 1915, private collection



In the Garden, 1916, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium



Walk, 1929, The Phoebus Foundation

BRUSSELMANS AND THE PALAIS DES BEAUX ARTS (BOZAR)

Jean Brusselmans maintained close ties with the Palais des Beaux-Arts, which he knew in various capacities. He was a founding member of the artist group L'Art Vivant in 1930 which was based at the PBA, and created monumental stage sets for operas performed there, including Schönberg's *Erwartung* (1936) and Vondel's *Lucifer* (1937).

The PBA was also an important promoter of Brusselmans' work during his lifetime, organizing three large exhibitions in the 1930s and another in 1952. Posthumously, the institution honoured him again with a major show in 1979.

EXHIBITION

The Bozar exhibition will unfold **both thematically and chronologically**, highlighting the uniqueness of Brusselmans' visual language as it evolved from World War I through the early 1950s. **Ten thematic sections** will trace his development and distinctive artistic strategies.

In addition, carefully curated **dialogues with (inter)national contemporaries** such as Rik Wouters, Paul Cézanne, Constant Permeke, and Fernand Léger will shed light on his relationship to the early 20th-century *-isms*.

Featuring 120 works—including paintings, drawings, and graphic works—the exhibition offers a broad overview, combining key pieces from major Belgian museum collections with lesser-known gems from private collections.



Landscape, 1934, private collection



Spring, 1936, private collection



Sunny Brabant Landscape, 1940, Museums Bruges



Gardens, 1934, MuZee Ostend, Belgium

THEMES

The exhibition opens with Brusselmans' experiments from around 1914 –he is then thirty years old – in a vibrant style influenced by impressionism and inspired by the Brabant painters, especially his friend Rik Wouters (1914–1920). Themes such as *The Twenties*, *De Kouden haard* (*The Cold Hearth*), and *The Anatomy of the Landscape* illustrate his evolution towards a distinctly modernist idiom: one marked by a rigorous geometric structure, compressed spatial depth, and a vivid palette of pure, unmixed colours.

Brusselmans found inspiration close to home: labourers, farmers in the fields, village scenes—and above all, nature. The landscape, with which he was intimately connected, remained a constant source of inspiration. His goal was to extract from nature an ideal and a “new plan.” The view from his studio over the Brabant fields became a recurring motif. In these works, Brusselmans captured the soul of the Flemish countryside like no other, using his highly idiosyncratic visual idiom.

“My painting contains neither mysticism nor religious content. It is a hymn to pagan nature, cherished for its sheer beauty.”

Themes such as *Still* and *Grand Interior* focus on how Brusselmans—blending traditional genres like still life, portrait, and interior scene—transformed his modest domestic world into a silent theatre, where the same worn objects and the same personages appear and reappear. The oil lamp, the basket of potatoes, the herring, the jug, the sliced bread, and of course his wife Marie—these elements return in different arrangements, in compositions that resemble carefully constructed collages with a strong decorative quality.

“In art, all genres are difficult. Painting a kerosene lamp demands as much talent as portraying a marchioness.”



Brusselmans in his artist studio in Dilbeek, June 1943



Stilleven met rode kruik, 1938, Mu.ZEE, Kunstmuseum aan zee



Grand Interior, 1939, Museums Bruges



Lady with Rose, 1939, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

Another section focuses on portraiture, where self-portraits are shown in direct dialogue with various depictions of Marie, his muse and wife.

In *The “Dynamic” Body*, Brusselmans depicts the human form almost as an architectural construction in increasingly monumental compositions.

The exhibition also highlights the major interdisciplinary commissions Brusselmans received during the 1930s, which testify to his refined decorative sensibility—most notably the stage designs he created for Schönberg’s *Erwartung*.

As art historian Paul Haesaerts wrote in 1939, Brusselmans’ entire oeuvre is a hymn to **methodical construction**. Across the exhibition’s interconnected sections, **the complexity of his work** is revealed: his distinctive treatment of line and colour, his use of abstraction within figuration, his inventive engagement with a limited repertoire of objects, his appreciation of the decorative, his systematic revisiting of themes, his affinity for the modest and vernacular, his dismantling of traditional genres, and the experimental balance he maintains between completion and the unfinished. Brusselmans’ work is imbued with a singular and deeply authentic vision.

His rejection of every *-ism* and school attributed to him marks him as a true “painter’s painter.” For contemporary



Brusselmans in his artist Studio in Dilbeek



The Vagabonds' Bath, 1936, Van Abbemuseum



The Vagabonds' Bath, 1930

artists, his exploration of the pictorial surface remains both resonant and inspiring.

BIOGRAPHY

Jean Brusselmans was born in 1884 in Brussels and grew up in a working-class neighbourhood steeped in artistic and anarchist ideals. At fourteen, he began working as a lithographer at the Société Belge de Lithographie, but soon received permission from his parents to study drawing and painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels. There, he met Rik Wouters and became acquainted with Brabant fauvists like Auguste Oleffe and Edgard Tytgat.

In 1910, he met Marie-Léonie Frisch at the Royal Theatre of La Monnaie. The couple married in 1911 and had a son, Armand. Over the following years, the family moved ten times within Brussels. Brusselmans joined the artists' collective L'Effort and met artists such as James Ensor. He first exhibited in 1912 at Galerie Georges Giroux in Brussels.

His first solo show was held in Antwerp (Galerie Breckpot) in 1921, followed by a 1924 solo exhibition at Le Centaure in Brussels, where he would exhibit repeatedly. That same year, the family purchased a small home in rural Dilbeek, in the hamlet Koudenaerde. From his studio window, Brusselmans painted countless versions of the ever-changing natural landscape.

From the 1930s, he became more prominent in the Belgian art scene. He co-founded L'Art Vivant—alongside artists such as Floris Jespers and Gust De Smet—received a first retrospective at the Palais des Beaux-Arts (organized by L'Art Vivant), and became a member of Les Compagnons de l'Art. He was knighted in the Order of Leopold in 1932 and received several decorative commissions, including a large-scale mural for the 1935 World Exhibition in Brussels and the sets for Schönberg's *Erwartung* in 1936.

This period marked the peak of his career. Exceptionally prolific—he sometimes painted up to 50 works a year—



Storm, 1936, Herbert Foundation



Winter in Dilbeek, 1945, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens



The Lighthouse of Heist, 1939, private collection



Stage design for Erwartung by Arnold Schönberg, 1936

Brusselmans referred to this as his “période héroïque.” Despite critical acclaim, commercial success remained elusive. Financial hardship forced him to paint advertisement panels under a pseudonym and to sell household belongings.

During World War II, he produced relatively little but continued to exhibit, notably at Galerie Apollo in Brussels. Both he and Marie fell ill; she died of deprivation in 1943.

After the war, Brusselmans gradually resumed his artistic activity. His work received growing appreciation. The young generation behind the *Jeune Peinture Belge* exhibition at the PBA saw him as a major influence. In 1947, he exhibited internationally for the first time, in Paris. His final retrospective was held at the PSK in 1952. A year later, he died of a heart attack at home in Dilbeek, aged 68.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Location and Dates

Palais des Beaux Arts / Bozar

Rue Ravenstein 23, 1000 Brussels

Exhibition circuit : Royal Circuit

2 October 2026 > 31 January 2027

Opening: 1 October 2026

Contacts

- Director of Exhibitions – Zoë Gray
- Curator – Ann Geeraerts, ann.geeraerts@bozar.be
- Curatorial Project Coordinator – Marie Claes, marie.claes@bozar.be

Catalogue

A hardcover catalogue will be published by Bozar Books to accompany the exhibition.



Carnaval, 1952, Mu.ZEE, Ostend

PALAIS DES BEAUX ARTS / BOZAR

Bozar is a welcoming and vibrant house of the arts in the heart of Brussels. We offer a platform to artists from Belgium and beyond. Within the iconic Art Deco building designed by Victor Horta—a landmark of Belgian architectural heritage—visual arts, music, film, performance, and ideas flow together in a living organism. Bozar seeks to be a dynamic space for the living arts, in line with its original mission from the 1920s.