In spite of Masereel’s many social activities and artistic commissions in Paris, these works express his most-inner torments with themes such as solitude, gloom, and melancholy. Masereel had evaded his military service so that by 1922 he was stuck in France without a passport, unable to return to Belgium.

There was also an important stylistic change in his woodcuts: in work such as Melancholy linear lines dominate the surface creating an almost stylised effect; after 1925 Masereel preferred a more naturalistic approach and black became the most important colour. Intended to decorate the walls, these large-size woodcuts express, despite their burdened content, a quiet atmosphere that contributes to the poetic character of Masereel’s work.

In the 1930s Masereel was occupied with themes such as the world as it was created by mankind, filled with despair, misery and hate. On the eve of World War II the artist described mankind: It starts with the forest and wild animals flee with the appearance of men, full of desire and hungry for possession (from foreword Noir et Blanc (1939)). Works such as Interior from an Inn and the couple from Expiations show the human gluttony for physical pleasure and the destructive consequences.

After World War II Masereel settled in Nice and he continued to experiment with large woodcuts, of which he published about 140 during the 1950s. Black remained the dominant colour in his works and the designs consisted of one protagonist, sometimes with a secondary figure. Among his best work from this period were Grapes (1952) and The Restless Man (1959). The series Folly, of which two prints out of more than twenty are exhibited, proves his undiminished activity in those years.

The self-portrait dated 1959 shows the artist at the age of 70. Kurt Wolff praised Masereel’s undiminished warmth, open-heartedness, innocence and vitality (1961).

Homage to Romain Rolland is dated 1959. Masereel met the French writer Romain Rolland (1866-1944) in Geneva in 1917. Rolland was a militant pacifist and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature. Both their interest in pacifism and humanism resulted in a lifelong friendship. The displayed woodcut is a personal gift by Masereel to Bogomil Rainov (1919-2007). Rainov was a professor aesthetics, a writer of spy novels and a diplomat in Paris. Moreover, he was a passionate art collector in post-war Bulgaria, with amongst others an important collection of Western European graphic work. Hugo Voeten managed to acquire the works by Masereel from Rainov's collection before the latter’s passing.

Text: Bieke Ackx
© Art Center Hugo Voeten, 2012-2013
Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, Käthe Kollwitz and Frans Masereel. The exhibition presents 55 works by these three graphic artists from the period from c. 1895 until 1960. Man and his existence occupy a central position in their art and the start of World War I in 1914 was an important turn in their artistic expression. Steinlen’s observing eye; Kollwitz’s penetrating expressiveness and Masereel’s poetic humanism. Both Kollwitz and Masereel met Steinlen during their stay in Paris. In 1904 Kollwitz noted in her diary the admiration she had for the famous illustrator of *L’Assiette au beurre*, an anarchistic magazine.

Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen left Switzerland in 1881 and settled in Paris. Above all, he became famous as a producer of posters for the cabaret *Le Chat Noir* and the magazine with the same name. In 1881, liberty of press became a fact in France and Steinlen became a prolific illustrator in humoristic and social-critical magazines. Daily life in the streets of Montmartre became a central subject in his work. Inspired by the work of Honoré Daumier (1808-1879), Steinlen depicted washerwomen and workwomen, such as *Housekeeper and Children Returning from the Laundry House* (1899). The errand girls in the streets also enjoyed his special attention, such as in the exhibited etchings *Errand Girl in the Rain* and *Two Errand Girls*. Steinlen ennobled working-class women and their depiction in posters was rare during the belle époque. Both works have a special historic value because the metal printing plates have been destroyed in respectively 1898 and 1902.

When the first World War started Steinlen was too old to enlist in the army and so the artist took to the battle front in 1915 to record the life of the soldiers with the observing eye of a journalist. The series, titled *The War*, with more than thirty drawings were published in *L’Art et les Artistes* in 1918. Steinlen represented the horrors of war and poverty. Among the exhibited works are themes such as patriotism, the mobilisation, the burial of fallen comrades and fleeing civilians.

Two works, *Reclining Nude* and a group of fleeing civilians from the series *The War* have the inscription ‘for Eugène Delâtre’ in Steinlen’s handwriting. Eugène Delâtre (1864-1938), was an engraver, who lived in the same area as Steinlen. His work was characterised by melancholic depictions of the hillock of Montmartre. Influenced by Delâtre, Steinlen started experimenting with colour etching in 1898 and many of his works were printed by Delâtre.

The draughtsmanship of the German Käthe Kollwitz was already recognised at the age of 14 and her father had high hopes for her to become a great artist until, much to his disappointment, she settled for a marriage with the physician Peter Kollwitz in 1891. In 1893 the play, *The Weavers*, by Gerhart Hauptman was performed in Berlin, telling the revolt of the Silesian weavers of 1842, which inspired Kollwitz for her famous series with the same name. Kollwitz’s series consists of six pieces: three lithographs *Poverty, Death* and *The Conspiracy*; and three etchings *March of the Weavers*, *Rebellion* and *The End*. The last four are exhibited here. When the series was displayed in 1898 in Berlin the jury awarded her a golden medallion but the Emperor opposed to this prize because art should be void of any social content and judged it as ‘art from the gutter’. In 1899 en 1900 the series received the first prize in Dresden and in London. *The Conspiracy* and *March of the Weavers* were published by Emil Richter in Dresden, who went bankrupt in 1930. *Rebellion* is the only signed work in the series, exhibited here, which was a contemporary re-edition by Alexander von der Becke in Berlin. *The End*, also dry stamped by von der Becke, was re-published posthumously in 1946–1948.

Her work from after the war reflects the grim social-economic situation in Germany. The ever increasing unemployment led to famine and impoverishment, such as depicted in the exhibited work, the *Beggars* (1924). Kollwitz also registered the political turbulent times in the woodcut *Memorial for Karl Liebknecht*. Liebknecht was a Marxist leader and a friend of the Kollwitz family, who was murdered in 1919. The *Mourner* in the exhibition is a detail from the original woodcut and one of the men gathered around the bier of the revolutionary leader.

Kollwitz produced at least 50 self-portraits both in drawings as sculptures. The displayed *self-portrait*, dated 1921, shows the artist at the age of 54 in a simple dress and with a quiet dignity. In spite of her introvert impression, she loved to laugh, sing and dance amongst intimate friends.

All the exhibited works by Frans Masereel date from the post-war period. During World War I Masereel stayed in Switzerland. The woodcuts produced during this period belong to the most harsh condemnations of the destruction and madness of the war. In 1922 Masereel returned to Paris. Many of the large-size woodcuts date from this period, such as the examples displayed *Melancholy* (1924), *The Accused* (1925), *Skyscrapers* (1926), *The Cards* (1927), *The Siren* (1928) and *Dark Thoughts* (1929).