

Luc Tuymans



LUC TUYMANS, *L'Orphelin*, 2024, Musée du Louvre, Paris, © Musée du Louvre / Audrey Viger, © Luc Tuymans

While it's not unusual for the Louvre to present artworks by living artists — Georges Braque, Anselm Kiefer, François Morellet, Cy Twombly and Wim Delvoye spring to mind — it's rare still for the Louvre to empty out a gallery so an artist can make their mark temporarily. In this case, the Louvre has commissioned the Antwerp-based artist Luc Tuymans (1958, Mortsel) to create four frescoes on the walls of the Valentin Rotunda, a space once reserved for Nicholas Poussin's *The Four Seasons* (1660–1664), and more recently paintings by Valentin de Boulogne, the gallery's namesake. Tuymans' art is included in the exhibition 'Le monde comme il va,' concurrent at Bourse de Commerce in Paris through 2 September.

While the invitation to make an ephemeral artwork at the Louvre is not entirely unprecedented (in 2020 choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker introduced *Forêt at the museum*, a dance project she realised together with Nemo Flouret), the choice of Tuymans to invigorate the Valentin Rotunda is geographically fitting. Known for being bathed in both shadow and light, the Valentin Rotunda is situated at the heart of the Louvre's seventeenth-century French painting collection, at the junction of the Sully and Richelieu wings, adjacent galleries focused on fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Flemish painting. The nearby Galerie Médicis features the *Marie de' Medici Cycle* (1623–1624), Peter Paul Rubens' monumental 24-panel series chronicling the life of a Florentine orphan turned Queen of France, originally commissioned for the Palais du Luxembourg. Following her coronation, her husband Henri IV, the 'peace-loving king' who expanded the Palais du Louvre, was slain, leaving her widowed. Marie de' Medici's great uncle was Charles V, so her hiring Rubens to paint her life story suits her maternal heritage. Despite France's anti-Habsburg foreign policy, she formed an alliance with Habsburg Spain, strengthened by the double marriage in 1615 of her son and daughter to Phillip III's daughter and son.

Tuymans is renowned for painting eerie pictures consisting of evidential fragments gleaned from films, his drawings, the Internet, photographs, postcards and TV. Painted in muted, sombre palettes, his pictures typically capture the visual residue of trauma, lest we forget our propensity for inhumanity. As he puts it, 'I don't want to make art for art's sake but a painting of history, or rather a painting of memory and trauma'. On this level, his oeuvre complements Rubens' nearby *Marie de' Medici Cycle*, however different their stories, styles and scales.

So what does Tuymans have in mind for his four frescoes, painted directly on the museum's walls and displayed at eye level amidst the Valentin Rotunda's surprisingly contemporary architecture? The heart of this historic space, once Marie's palace, is now a place to experience historical paintings. His four-panel installation, 'The Orphan Cycle', consists of a fresco based on his lost painting *L'Orphelin* (1990), accompanied by three frescoes related to the cleaning of painters' palettes, loaded with pigments. The original *L'Orphelin* depicted the back of a doll's head, whose nape remains especially visible. With the orphan adjacent to images of palettes, one cannot help but be reminded of the orphan turned queen who is renowned for her arts patronage, even though Tuymans' orphan painting has nothing to do with Marie de' Medici. While some describe Tuymans' palette paintings as cruel, they're especially emblematic of the Louvre's special role as a 'school of the gaze, an inspiration for artists by artists, a place of copying in academic times and a territory of creation that is alive and well today.'

When the exhibition closes in May 2025, the Valentin Rotunda will be repainted and rehung with paintings from the Louvre's collection. Tuymans' orphan will disappear, but it will no longer be lost to history. (Sue Spaid)

'Luc Tuymans', through 26 May 2025,
Louvre Museum, Paris, www.louvre.fr