

# ELLIOTT FINE ART

*Nineteenth Century to Early Modern*

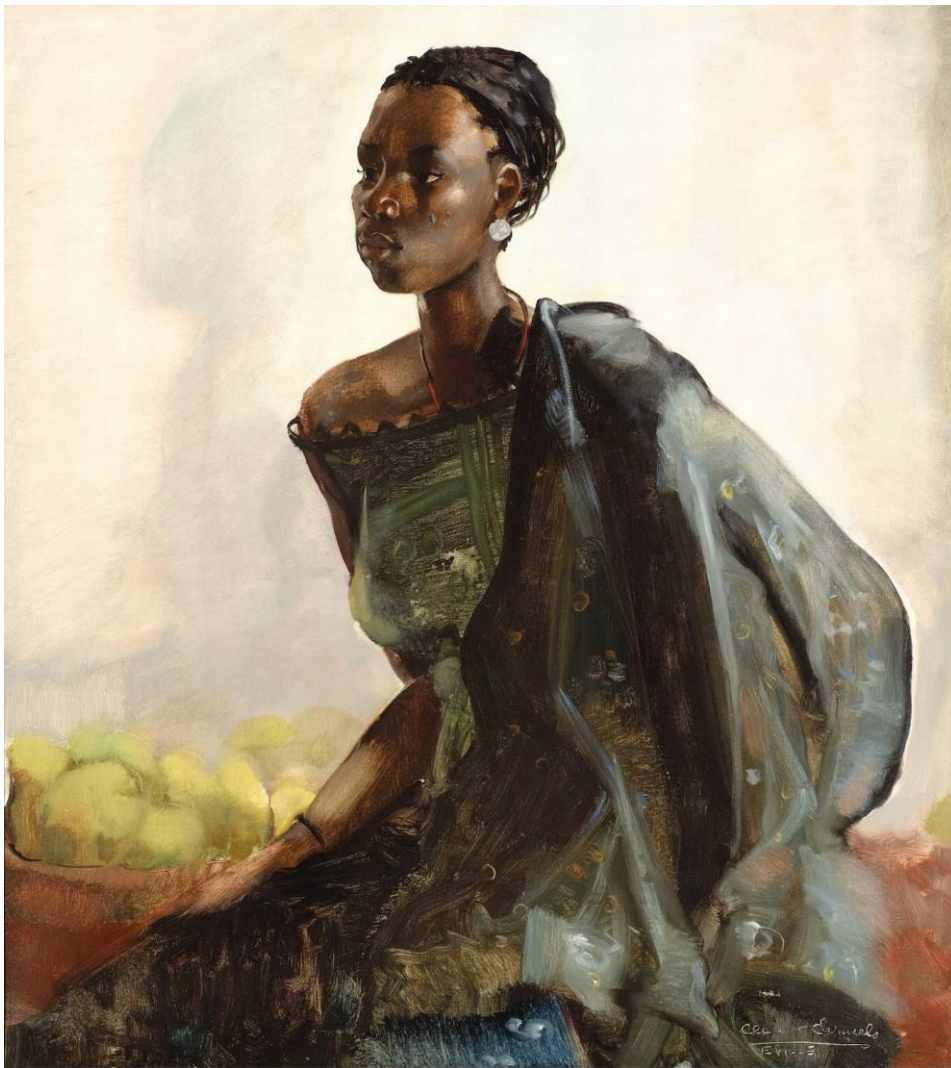
Clément Serneels  
(Brussels 1912 – 1991)

## *Portrait of Eville*

Signed lower right: *Clément Serneels / Eville*  
Oil on canvas  
80 x 71 cm (31 ½ x 28 in.)

### Provenance:

Purchased by the previous owner's mother in the 1960s;  
Thence by descent to Alexandra von Csanády, Munich, until 2024.



This portrait of a Congolese woman is one of Clément Serneels' finest half-length portraits, notable for its remarkable quality, fine condition and the striking beauty of the sitter. Painted between 1936 and 1939, during one of the artist's early trips to the Belgian Congo, the portrait, painted in Serneels' typical bravura style, depicts a woman named Eville, as per the inscription at the lower right of the canvas.<sup>1</sup>

Wearing a green dress and shawl, Eville sits by a basket of fruit, suggesting a market setting. In his half-length portraits, Serneels often incorporates elements which allude to either the sitter's status or occupation. For instance, the Tutsi basket in the portrait of Chief Rwampungu's wife (fig. 1) emphasises her nobility, whereas the produce surrounding the young man from Matadi (fig. 2) might imply a role as a market vendor, as is perhaps the case with Eville.



Fig. 1, Clément Serneels, *Portrait Chief Rwampungu's Wife*, oil on canvas, 80 x 71 cm, Private Collection

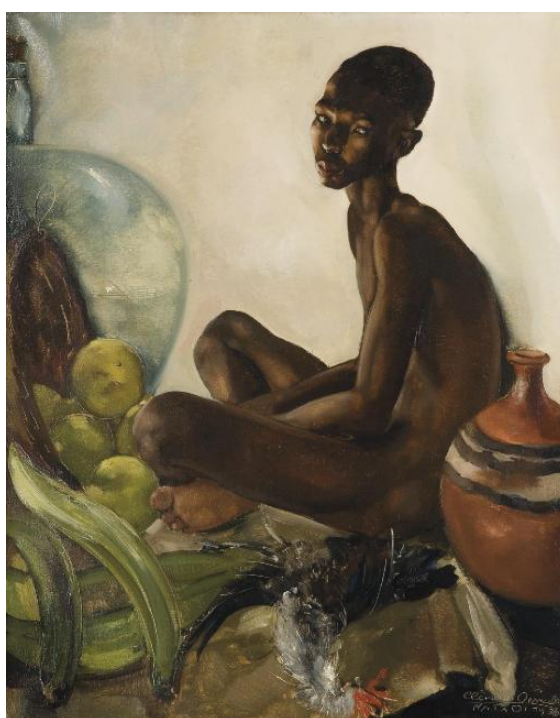


Fig. 2, Clément Serneels, *Young man from Matadi*, oil on canvas, 101 x 81 cm, Private Collection

In the portrait of Eville, as with the others, Serneels focusses the viewer's attention on the key areas of the composition, painting these parts with a high degree of finish, whilst filling in the remainder with beautifully fluid and seemingly spontaneous brushstrokes. As a contemporary reviewer wrote, Serneels' 'technical dexterity is above reproach'.<sup>2</sup> From a purely painterly perspective, the artist is certainly one of the most talented painters of his generation, with the same reviewer likening the artist to a 'modern Rubens'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> After his signature, Serneels often inscribes some combination of the name or ethnicity of the sitter, or the location where the work was painted. In this case, Eville would seem to refer to the sitter's name, since there is no known Congolese town of this name.

<sup>2</sup> *Art News*, 1949, vol 48, issue 7, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Clément Serneels, born in Brussels in 1910, was the son of a Belgian architect. He first visited the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi in 1936-37, though there was initial resistance from the Belgian minister of the Colonies due to the expensive nature of such travels. However, he was eventually granted the necessary finances thanks to the support of Alfred Bastien, the director of the Académie de Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, where Serneels was one of his most brilliant students. Thanks to the success of the first trip, with a sell-out exhibition on his return to Belgium, Serneels travelled back to Central Africa in 1938, this time using his own resources. When World War II broke out, the artist stayed on in Costermansville, an important town on the south-west shores of Lake Kivu in the Belgian Congo.

Serneels moved to South Africa after the end of World War II, before returning in 1953 to Costermansville, which by then had reclaimed its ancient name of Bukava. He stayed there with his wife until 1960, the year of the Congo's independence from Belgium, leaving once again for South Africa, before finally settling back in Brussels.