

The Village of the Mermaids

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Paul Delvaux: The Village of the Mermaids

Oil on canvas, 1942

Lisel Mueller

Who is that man in black, walking
away from us into the distance?
The painter, they say, took a long time
finding his vision of the world.

The mermaids, if that is what they are
under their full-length skirts,
sit facing each other
all down the street, more of an alley,
in front of their gray row houses.
They all look the same, like a fair-haired
order of nuns, or like prostitutes
with chaste, identical faces.
How calm they are, with their vacant eyes,
their hands in laps that betray nothing.
Only one has scales on her dusky dress.

It is 1942; it is Europe,
and nothing fits. The one familiar figure
is the man in black approaching the sea,
and he is small and walking away from us.

Paul Delvaux, The Village of the Mermaids (1942)

Oil on panel, approximately 41 inches x 49 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago.

