“[...] The complexity of Delvaux’s relations with women manifests itself in his work in numerous ways. An authoritarian mother, a lost love, a platonic marriage [...] are among the elements that encouraged his obsession with the subject of women.

In the early 1930s and as a result of pressure from his family, Delvaux was obliged to renounce marriage to the woman he loved, Anne-Marie De Martelaere, known as Tam. His marriage in 1937 to Suzanne Purnal did not help him to overcome this loss. It was not until 1947 that he filled this void when Tam crossed his path again and the artist decided to spend the rest of his life with her. In 1948 he painted Leda, a type of allegory in which Delvaux, emulating Zeus in the Greek legend, metamorphoses into a swan in order to seduce his beloved. It is very likely that the artist’s amorous disappointments of his earlier years lie behind his fascination with women, whom he placed on a pedestal. The women in his works are always young and beautiful, as they appear to him in his dreams. They are enigmatic and absorbed in their thoughts, condemned to endlessly wander through the universe. There are no words in Delvaux’s painting, only gestures. Above all the artist draws attention to the lack of contact between individuals of different sexes. The Dream (1944) is a particularly clear expression of Delvaux’s tendency to stigmatise male-female relations, locating them on a plane in which dialogue is impossible. Thus the dreaming, nude man in the foreground is unaware of the presence of the two similarly nude women who offer themselves to him, a situation that recurs in many of Delvaux’s works.

[...] Architectural elements, executed with a marked interest in detail, became a key element in Delvaux’s pictorial universe. Always present in his work, architecture thus acquires new importance. It should be noted that before embarking on his training in painting at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels and on the advice of his parents, Delvaux spent a year studying architecture. He then abandoned the subject but it gave him time to acquire a mastery of architectural drawing which he retained throughout his life. It was at this point that he met Giorgio de Chirico, an encounter that resulted in a change of direction in his career. The discovery of De Chirico’s Metaphysical painting in 1934 in the exhibition Minotaure, held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, was an unprecedented moment in Delvaux’s life. He succumbed to the atmosphere of these Italian city squares filled with a strange silence that is both troubling and mysterious. A few months after this discovery, he completed Ruined Palace, the first work that can be considered to fall within the ambit of Surrealism.

[...] As a result of this contact with De Chirico, Delvaux’s works acquire a theatrical, almost cinematographic character, due to the importance placed on the settings, the compositions structured into successive planes, the hieratic poses of the figures and their bizarre clothes. The poses become less natural and are now frozen in a mise-en-scène. A good example is Serenity, a notably theatrical composition in which the action seems to be suddenly frozen in mid-flight, suggesting the idea of suspended time. Over the years, Delvaux’s women became increasingly affected, disguised by costumes and exquisite, as if performing a play. In addition, his compositions evoke the idea of a stage set, with majestic figures set against a detailed architectural background. The Terrace is an outstanding example of this type of work. Despite the precision of the line and a clearly mimetic intent, Delvaux departs from historical realism and mixes architectural styles and clothing from a wide range of different periods. The canvas thus acquires the appearance of a dreamlike, mental, immutable theatre [...]”
“[...] According to Delvaux, ‘the figures, in the painting, must have the appearance of poetry and mystery, and must also be their intercessors.’ Poetry and mystery, two key elements in his painting, which reveal themselves through ‘unique presences’: ‘The unique presence of a nude woman or an unexpected figure not only makes the scene timeless and the place unspecific, but more than that, and this is the important part, it allows us to see a vision that traverses time and consciousness.’

[...] According to Paul Delvaux, painting, the work, offers to those who contemplate it ‘a fortunate opportunity, the opportunity for a journey’ towards the unknown. This is a non-narrative type of painting that does not represent ‘stories’ but rather unique scenes that thus allow one to see beyond appearances. This ‘theatrical’ dimension is one of the most fundamental keys to Delvaux’s work, which involves a wide range of gestures: a ceremonial, silent gesturing and one that is thus expressive per se. ‘The figures’, the artist said, ‘are theatrical extras.’ For Delvaux, ‘these figures have no history: they simply are.’

The dream and the dreamlike would seem to be the realm of these unidentifiable scenes and situations, with figures that give the feeling of wandering like sleepwalkers in unspecified settings. In fact, rather than night-time dreaming, Delvaux’s scenes arise from day-dreaming or dreaming while awake. In his own words: ‘I rarely dream. Furthermore, I never have dreams at night that could contribute anything to my work.’

The artist’s quest lies within the ambit of a visual poetry that springs from spontaneous, unintentional associations arising from imagination and recollection: ‘Poetry is involuntary, it emerges from our innermost beings.’ It is the transformation of the real into the unreal that allows us to visualise these dream scenes: ‘In some circumstances and positioned in a certain way, the real, due to its reality, can become completely unreal and become a dream. I have painted many works that start from the real and are real in all their forms but which have become unreal dreams that are so poetic I could not have imagined them.’

[...] Trains, trams, stations, streets [...] the places where Delvaux’s somnambulist figures wander in his paintings are metonymic images of a journey to the inner depths of the self. A symbolic sign of that Journey to the Centre of the Earth, Jules Verne’s novel of 1864, which had given Delvaux’s daydreaming a scientific, visionary character since his childhood.

[...] Among Delvaux’s ‘actors’ and along with visionary scientists and nudes, we also encounter the presence of skeletons. On various occasions I have noted that Delvaux took this motif from James Ensor. However, the two artists’ pictorial treatment of it is extremely different. Ensor’s skeletons tend to wear clothes and are presented as transpositions of individuals in very varying situations, used to reveal the face of Death that dwells within them. With Delvaux, his skeletons are simply nudes, they are ‘extras’ in the fullest sense, in that there is nothing inside them that can give them away. In my opinion, together with his scientists and nudes, Delvaux’s skeletons complement the erotic charge of his paintings. Not as figures of death or Thanatos: with Delvaux, the skeletons are the watchmen of life in dreams: always active, never inert, they function as a mark and trace of what was once life. As such, they refer to the transience of living but also to the continuity of life: the breath of Eros is not extinguished with the death of the individual.

Even when they appear in paintings on religious subjects [...] for Delvaux, the skeletons are alive: ‘When painting them I merely wanted to try to revive the dialogue with a certain descriptive tradition of the Passion of Christ. However, I did not introduce any moral sense into it or even think about death [...] I only tried to paint expressive skeletons and, I might venture to use the word, living ones. I consider them to be characters located in a dramatic context.”