

ELLIOTT FINE ART

Nineteenth Century to Early Modern

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Suzanne Fabry
(Brussels 1904 – 1985)

Torse (Nude Self-Portrait)

Signed upper left: *SUZANNE / FABRY*

Oil on canvas

116 x 75 cm. (45 ½ x 29 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Private Collection, Paris;

Rémy le Fur, Paris, 23 October 2023, lot 143;

Ambroise Duchemin, Paris, 2025.

Exhibited:

Brussels, Société Royale des Beaux-Arts, Salon de Printemps, 1940;

Brussels, Exposition d'Art de Woluwe-Saint-Pierre.



Suzanne Fabry's *Torse* occupies a singular position within twentieth-century art, not least because it is a large-scale nude self-portrait by a woman artist, painted with striking directness and exhibited publicly in 1940. Few works from the first half of the twentieth century so confidently assert a female painter's agency over her own representation.

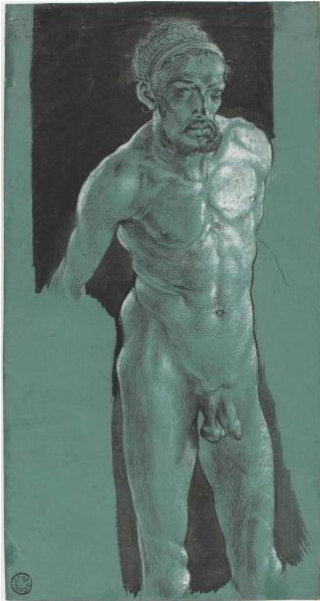


Fig. 1, Albrecht Dürer, *Nude Self-Portrait*, 1516, pen, ink and white lead on green prepared paper, 29 x 15 cm, Schloss Weimer

Fig. 2, Egon Schiele, *Self-Portrait*, 1911, watercolour and graphite, 51 x 35 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Though Albrecht Dürer's 1516 drawing (fig. 1) is often cited as the earliest nude self-portrait in the Western tradition, it was not until the turn of the twentieth century that artists such as Egon Schiele (fig. 2) began to make their own bodies a systematic subject of exploration. However, almost all nude self-portraits from the opening decades of the century are by male artists, with Paula Modersohn-Becker (fig. 3) and Amrita Sher-Gil (fig. 4) being notable exceptions. Even so, their works tend to stop short of Fabry's unambiguous presentation of the female body in its entirety and her commanding self-assertion.

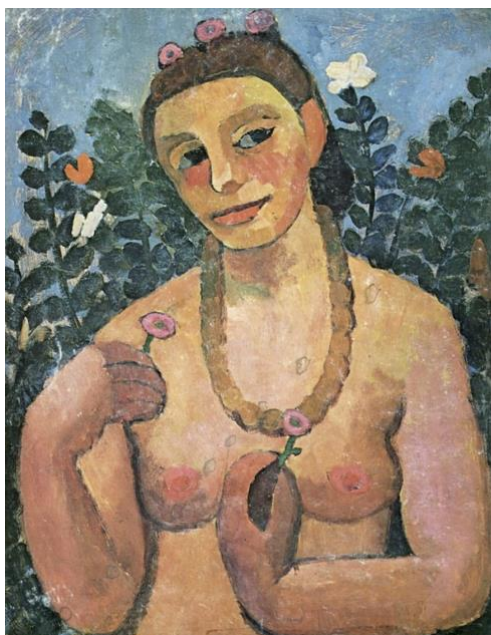


Fig. 3, Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Nude Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace*, 1906, oil on cardboard, 62 x 48 cm, Museen Böttcherstrasse, Bremen

Fig. 4, Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-Portrait as a Tahitan*, 1934, oil on canvas, 90 x 56 cm, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

Fabry presents herself almost heroically: the upright posture, the proud tilt of the head and the firm, challenging gaze transform the vulnerable act of self-exposure into an act of self-definition. The title *Torse* deliberately evokes the muscular forms of Greco-Roman statuary, and the body here is sculptural in its weight and modelling. Yet ambiguity complicates this heroic aspect. The outward-turned hand, poised between refusal and assertion, destabilises a straightforward reading of the work, making it less about sensual display and more about agency and interiority.

This negotiation between tradition and subversion is typical of Fabry's art of the 1930s, which often reveals the influence of classical statuary. The arm bent behind the head recalls the archetype of Venus Anadyomene, whether in ancient bronzes (fig. 5) or through intermediaries such as Ingres' celebrated version at Chantilly (fig. 6) or Bougereau's painting in the Musée d'Orsay. Yet if Fabry engages with such sources, she also breaks decisively with the academic tradition that they embody. Their nudes, painted by men for male audiences, are idealised and objectified; Fabry instead insists on composure, self-command and the right to be seen on her own terms.

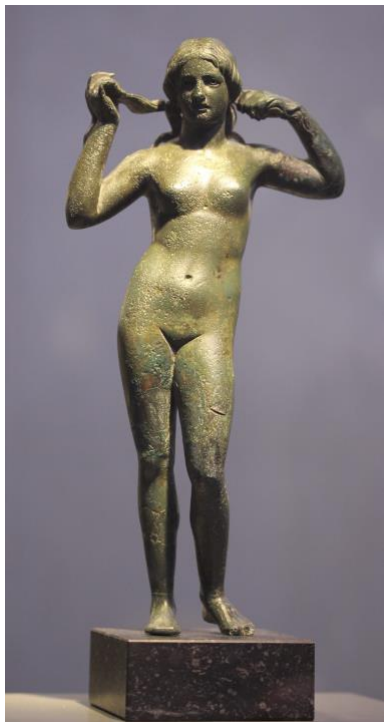


Fig. 5, Roman, 2nd century CE, *Venus de Courtrai*, bronze, 24 cm high, Musée Royal de Mariemont, Kortrijk

Fig. 6, Jean-Dominique Ingres, *Venus Anadyomene*, 1807-1848, oil on canvas, 163 x 92 cm, Musée Condé, Chantilly

During the 1930s and early 1940s, Fabry painted several monumental nudes that incorporated aspects of her own features but remained essentially generalised (fig. 7), while she also undertook private nude studies that were never intended for exhibition (fig. 8). *Torse* is exceptional in that it is both an unambiguous self-portrait and a large-scale painting designed for public display. To show such a work in 1940, when the sight of a woman artist confidently presenting her own nude body would have shocked many audiences, was an act of radical self-assertion.

In retrospect, Fabry's self-portrait anticipates later feminist practices of the 1960s and 1970s, when women artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke and Ana Mendieta used their own bodies as subject and medium in order to reclaim representation. *Torse* thus stands as an early, and previously under-recognised milestone: a work that foreshadows

later struggles while staking its own claim to autonomy within the fraught tradition of the nude.



Fig. 7, Suzanne Fabry, *Nudes by the Sea*, 1943, oil on canvas, 157 x 173 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 8, Suzanne Fabry, *Nude Study* c. 1935, black chalk on paper, 75 x 54.5 cm, Colnaghi Elliott Master Drawings

Born in Brussels in 1904, Suzanne Fabry was the daughter of the renowned Symbolist painter Emile Fabry (1865–1966). While not a Symbolist herself, Suzanne possessed a lyrical, dreamlike sensibility, which was particularly evident in her portraits.

During World War I, Suzanne and her family relocated to England, first living in Herefordshire and later in the coastal town of Saint Ives, Cornwall. They returned to Belgium after the war, and in 1923, Suzanne began her studies at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts. There, she was mentored by Jean Delville (1867–1953) and Constant Montald (1862–1944), prominent members of *L'art monumental*, an artistic movement co-founded by her father. This group sought to elevate cultural consciousness through monumental public art, focusing on idealized and universal themes. Their commanding depictions of the human form would influence Suzanne's artistic vision.

After graduating from the Académie in 1928, Suzanne launched her career in the 1930s, participating in prestigious exhibitions such as the Antwerp Triennial in 1930 and the Liège Quadrennial in 1931. Around this time, her father was completing a series of large-scale paintings for the entrance and grand staircase of Brussels' opera house, La Monnaie. Years later, Suzanne and her husband, Edmond Delescluze (1905–1993), would contribute to the opera house as costume and set designers, respectively.

Suzanne continued to paint throughout her life, balancing her artistic career with her role as head of La Monnaie's costume workshop. Her work retained its distinctive sensitivity and elegance until her death in 1985.