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Suzanne Fabry
Self-portrait

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SUZANNE FABRY

(Brussels 1904 – 1985 Sint-Pieters-Woluwe)

SELF-PORTRAIT

Charcoal on paper

48.2 x 39.5 cm

Provenance

Private collection

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This charcoal *Self-portrait* by Suzanne Fabry captures the very essence of eyes as windows to the soul. Born in Brussels in 1904, Fabry spent many of her artistic years as an explorer of identity through enigmatic self-portraiture, a practice incongruous with her quiet, reserved nature and dream-like temperament.

The present portrait demonstrates this critical self-studying through the carefully modelled face and direct gaze yet simultaneously favours a confrontation with the viewer through the centrality of her positioning. The softly shaded contours of her face, framed by loose and energetic charcoal hair, are illuminated by the contrast against the bare, light ground. The chiaroscuro furthers Fabry's piercing gaze, heightening the realism of her likeness through the whites of the eyes.

This self-portrait not only depicts a visual representation of Fabry; it shares a sense of self and personhood with the viewer themselves, as if engaged in a mutual, unspoken conversation. *Self-portrait* reveals an aspect of her personality, one that is serious, reserved and self-contained.

Fleeing to England at the start of World War I, with her father, the celebrated Belgian Symbolist painter Émile Fabry, the young Suzanne spent her formative years against the backdrop of the political and ideological turmoil of the early twentieth century. Following her time in Herefordshire and the Cornish town of Saint-Ives, Fabry and her family returned to Brussels after the war, where she went on to enrol as a student at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in 1923.

During this time, Fabry studied under Jean Delville (1867-1953) and Constant Montald (1862-1944); both influential Belgian symbolists who, in partnership with her father, founded the group *L'art monumental*. Emerging from Symbolist ideals, the group sought to bring art from the private gallery into the public sphere, elevating public consciousness through the beautification of civic spaces. Their draped figures and commanding nudes, holding to classical antiquity and projecting internal strength and harmony, are evident influences on Suzanne Fabry's practice. Graduating in 1928, her inclination toward portraiture was already manifest since the very first years of her artistic journey. Her early experiences, alongside her Symbolist education, provide an important context for her sustained interest in visual self-examination portraiture and the female form.

Self-portrait lives alongside an array of introspective and enigmatic portraits of the artist as she navigates her artistic formation. Though the specific date is unknown, comparison with related self-portraits in terms of Fabry's appearance, hairstyle and technique suggests a likely date of around 1930. Holding the same fixed gaze, *Autoportrait* (1932, fig. 2) captures what could be understood as a later extension and development of the present work, supporting the attribution of an earlier dating.

With an elongated neck – reminiscent of Parmigianino's Madonna (fig. 3) – and a direct gaze, Fabry visualises the same confronting dialogue, positioning the viewer

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as if under scrutiny whilst simultaneously enacting her own examination of the self. Through her mirror image, Fabry explores questions of selfhood against the pressures and dislocations of a turbulent society that, in turn, moulded the assertive woman we see before us.

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Fig. 1. Suzanne Fabry, *Autoportrait*, 1944, pencil and stamping on paper, 45 x 36.5 cm, private collection.

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Fig. 2. Suzanne Fabry, *Autoportrait*, 1932, oil on canvas, 111 x 74 cm, the estate of the artist.

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Fig. 3. Parmigianino, *Madonna with Child and Angels (Madonna with the long neck)* (detail), ca. 1534-1540, oil on panel, 216.5 x 132.5 cm, The Uffizi Gallery

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