

GALERIE OSCAR DE VOS



F R I T S V A N D E N B E R G H E

Portrait of the artist

Circa: 1938

1938

Oil on canvas

73 x 80 cm

Framed: 91,5 x 98,5 cm

Signed lower right: FVBerghe

Towards the end of his life, Frits Van den Berghe worked out very dark themes in his work. *Self-portrait with skull* in this series occupies a separate place and must be read as an artistic will. The painter is in the foreground and is surrounded by strange creatures.

Behind him is a pond, or a swamp, in which a woman is threatened by a figure in a cloak and another figure is drowning; in the center a silly laughing bald head of a man with a long neck appears. Demons stand and float around the pool that also threaten the painter. One is even on his chest. The self-image that Van den Berghe shows here is very dark. He looks at himself (and the viewer) in a gloomy mood, as if he has been troubled by his torments and also by the life that did not exactly suit him in the 1930s crisis. In his position, he seems to sink into the sloping pool. His skin color is green-brown, with red accents. The right eyelid is colored blue, his iris blood red. Of course the show has biographical grounds. In 1938 physical ailments endangered the health of the artist. It is speculative, yet inviting, to state that the painter was looking for relief for the last time before his death in painting, and painted his own displeasure and horror away.

Even in his death the painter stood alone, isolated from his surroundings.

Exhibitions

Ghent 1948, no. 48; Venice 1952, no. 68; Hasselt 1954, no. 34; Tilburg 1954, no. 46 (ill.); Maastricht 1954, no. 40; Amsterdam 1957, no. 72 (ill.); Knokke 1957, no. 57 (ill.); Brussels 1962, no. 96 (ill.); Ghent 1962, z.n.; London 1971, no. 304; Brooklyn Museum 1980; Tampa & Atlanta 1980, no. 67 (ill.); Lyon 1980; Ghent 1983, no. 147 (ill.); Utrecht 1984; Prague & Bratislava 1986; Newport Beach 1986-1987, no. 116; Fort Lauderdale 1987, no. 116; Deinze 1993, no. 170 (ill.); Kortenhoeft 1993, p. 34 (ill.); Paris 1997, no. III-p. 165 (ill.); Ostend 1999, no. 157; Ghent 2017, p. 54-55 (ill.).

Literature

- Langui, E., *Tentoonstelling Frits Van den Berghe*, cat. (Gent: Kunst- en Letterenkring, 1948), no. 48.
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- Robert-Jones, P., *Van realisme tot surrealisme* (Brussel: 1969), 122, no. 70 (ill.).
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- Boyens, P., *Frits Van den Berghe* (Gent: SD&Z, 1999), 290, 302, 305, 468, no. 810 (ill.).
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- Eemans, M., *De Moderne Schilderkunst in België* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Keesing, 1969), p. 86.
- Vanbeselaere, W., *Moderne Vlaamse Schilderkunst* (Brussel: Arcade, s.d.), 258-260.
- Damman, A. e.a., *Ik of een ander. Zelfportretten van Belgische kunstenaars* (Brussel: Dexia, 2003), 29, 126-127 (ill.).

- Hoozee, R. e.a., *Frits Van den Berghe* (Gent: Gemeentekrediet, 1983), p. 173, no. 147 (ill.).
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- Van Cauteren, K., *OER. De wortels van Vlaanderen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2017), p. 54-55 (ill.).
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Artist description:

Frits Van den Berghe was born in Ghent on 3 April 1883. At that moment, his father Raphaël was secretary of the Ghent University library and his erudition was famous among the professors. Beginning in 1898, the young Frederik would perfect his skills at the Ghent Academy for the Fine Arts. His classmates included Leon De Smet and Albert Servaes, with whom he moved into an atelier on Rasphuisstraat in 1902. Already the same year he stayed in Sint-Martens-Latem, together with his bosom friend Robert Aereens. Together with Servaes, we find him again in Latem for a time in 1904. Only in 1908 would he take up residence in the village. Van den Berghe lived in the village during the summer months, spending the winters in Ghent. He was appointed professor at the academy in the same year. In the meantime, he had met Paul-Gustave van Hecke and André De Ridder in Latem, who would remain his friends for life.

Shortly before the First World War, Van den Berghe underwent a crisis. Together with a girlfriend, he went to the United States. However, he returned-disappointed-after a few months. War broke out shortly thereafter, and he fled to the Netherlands together with Gustave De Smet. The Dutch painter Leo Gestel looked after his Belgian companions for a time in Amsterdam; André De Ridder also followed in his friends' footsteps. Both De Smet and Van den Berghe were quickly noticed in the Amsterdam art world. The Larensche Art Shop showed interest in their work already in 1915. The first major exhibition of their work on foreign soil followed in May of 1916. Under the impulse of De Ridder, the Heystee, Smith & Co Gallery presented an extensive exhibition of their work. Amsterdam could not seduce them, however, and already in August, they departed for Blaricum. Still in the same year, Van den Berghe was a noted guest at an exhibition of Belgian exiles in the Amsterdam municipal museum. Afterwards, the Belgian exiles would come together in Het Gooi, and together with De Smet and Jozef Cantré, Van den Berghe formed a 'miniature Ghent' colony in exile.

While he only returned to Belgium in 1922, Van den Berghe played a decisive role in the coming to be of the Sélection gallery. The artist was under contract to the gallery from the start of the movement in 1920; later, Walter Schwarzenberg contractually bound him to the Le Centaure gallery.

After a short stay with Permeke in Ostend, in the summer of 1922 Van den Berghe went to Bachte-Maria-Leerne. One year later we find him-together with De Smet-at the Villa Malpertuis of Paul-Gustave van Hecke, a place he would regularly return to in the coming years. Le Centaure honoured him with a personal exhibition in January 1927; he was again the guest there in April of the same year. Van Hecke continued to support his disciple, among others with an individual exhibition in his Galerie L'époque in November of 1928. Even in times of crisis, Van den Berghe was supported by his Brussels' patrons. Le Centaure organised an individual exhibition of his work again in March 1931; during the course of the year, Sélection dedicated a theme number to the artist.

When his most important employers went bankrupt in 1931-1932, 10 years of history were squandered in only a few months time. The collections of De Ridder, van Hecke and Schwarzenberg, and the collections of their galleries, were auctioned off without limit. Van den Berghe-together with De Smet and Hubert Malfait-was among the worst affected. No less than one hundred and six top works by the artist were auctioned for a trifle.

In fact, the conservative press used the economic crisis and the bankruptcy of the modernistic galleries to announce the end of expressionism, the prevailing movement of the 1920s. As a result, the modernists of the 1920s, with De Smet and Van den Berghe at the top of the list, suddenly fell into disfavour. Van den Berghe thus withdrew from the fickle life of an artist. To earn a living, van Hecke introduced him to the socialist publisher Het Licht in Ghent, where he was able to work as illustrator. Van den Berghe would passionately devote himself to these assignments in the coming years. Illustrative work appeared in the newspaper Vooruit; he also brought a humorous, sometimes satirical, look to leading figures in the contemporary cultural and political world in the weeklies Koekoek and Voor Allen.

Van den Berghe seldom appeared in the limelight in the 1930s. In 1933, the Ghent Socialist Study Circle organised a double exhibition together with Jozef Cantré; in the same year, Emile Langui had the first monograph of the artist published. In 1936, Alice Manteau organised a small exhibition of his work.

Official recognition of his work finally came in 1939, when he was nominated for the directorship of the Ghent Academy. Van den Berghe's sudden death on 23 September of the same year made this recognition impossible.