

Rik Wouters (Mechelen 1882 - Amsterdam 1916)

Rik with the black eye-patch
Circa: 1915-16
1915-16

Brush drawing with Chinese ink on paper

400 x 290 mm / 61 x 50 cm

Exhibitions

1935, Brussel, Palais des Beaux-Arts, *Exposition Rik Wouters*, 01.05-01.11.1935.

1946, Rotterdam/Den Haag, Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen/ Gemeentemuseum, *Exhibition Rik Wouters*

1946-1947 Mechelen, Feestzaal, *Retrospectieve Rik Wouters*

1947, Antwerpen, KMSK

1953, Varese, Seconda Rassegna Internazionale di Scultura all'aperto

1957, Antwerpen, KMSK

1957, Parijs, Musée National d'Art Moderne

1961, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service, Belgian Drawings: From Ensor to Delvaux (Le dessin belge), no. 61

1999, Mechelen, CC A. Spinoy, *Rik Wouters. De Menselijke figuur*, 31.01-11.04.1999, no. 74b.

Literature

Panorama des Arts (Paris).

Avermaete, R., *Rik Wouters* (Brussel: Arcade, 1962), 145, 242 (ill.).

De Pesseroey, A. & E. Langui, *Honderd zelfportretten* (Brussel: Arcade, 1976), 46-47 (ill.).

Van den Bussche, W., O. Bertrand, P.P. Devriese e.a., *Rik Wouters (1882-1916)*, exh. cat. (Gent: SD&Z/Pandora, 1994), 20, 234 (ill.).

Hautekeete, S., B. Simon, H. De Nijn, *Rik Wouters. De menselijke figuur*, exh. cat. (Gent: SDZ-Pandora, 1999), no. 74b, p. 100 (ill.).

Damman, A. e.a., *Ik of een ander. Zelfportretten van Belgische kunstenaars* (Brussel: Dexia, 2003), 148-149 (ill.).

Artist description:

When he was six years old, his mother died. At the age of twelve, he watched the school and started working as a woodcarver in his father's furniture workshop. He attended local academy and became acquainted with Ernest Wijnants. Together they went to Theo Blickx's studio. Artistically he originally expressed himself as a sculptor, after which he first worked out his ambitions in color and made a name for himself as a painter.

When he turned 17, he went to the Brussels academy. He hardly kept it until he had to become a soldier. He found his sweetheart there: Nel, a young model, born as Hélène Philomène Lionardine Duerinckx. Nel was sixteen years and four years younger than Wouters. It became the great love and they got married on April 15, 1905. Nel will totally master his short life and inspire the artist. She became his muse and his model.

The young couple move into a small house in Watermaal. Sensuous happiness and bitter poverty went hand in hand. The village, the houses and Nel become Riks most important models. To make a living, they go to live with father, but Nel can not live there. Rik then worked a time for a manufacturer of porcelain and for his father, but he does not last that long. Not willing to make concessions, he wants to paint. In 1907 they moved to Bosvoorde near the Sonian Forest and rented a simple house for eighteen francs a month. The then 25-year-old painter has already exhibited several works. With a nude sculpture called Dromerij he achieves a second prize in a fairly prestigious youth competition. He thus receives a state allowance of 500 francs, with which he can pay two years' rent. He is looking for his own style at work of the time, made out of necessity on cardboard. He imitates the then fashionable styles but also opposes it. Wouters wants to capture the light without falling into pointillistic dots. Wouters lightness in his work rather depends on the composition, of harmony and contrast in which color surfaces begin to lead their own existence on the canvas. In this he already leans towards the abstract. Rik Wouters then wrote in a letter: Life is painting, sculpture and drawing. Wouters was always busy with his work, they saved their food to buy expensive paint. In the meantime, Edgard Tytgat and Willem Paerels have become friends. That same year Rik makes a bust of Tytgat in plaster. It will never be cast in bronze during his lifetime. Under the care of the Brussels gallery Giroux, this happened later. The sculpture currently belongs to the collection of the Brussels Royal Museum of Fine Arts.

The material constraints are somewhat resolved by a contract with the Brussels Giroux in 1911. Rik Wouters is apparently the first Belgian artist to commit to a gallery with a contract. On the other hand, it points to the confidence that a gallery owner places in a young artist, with all the associated risks. He receives a monthly fee of 200 francs (BEF), which, however, was not paid as regularly and a credit to a

painter's shop. His total production, both painting and sculptures and drawings, had to be put on sale at Giroux, on the basis of 50/50. In addition, the gallerist took a job every month.

In the midst of a feverishly busy sculpting, drawing and painting, Rik Wouters, in 1912 and 1913, realized the masterly highlights from his short career. He painted and drew almost continuously and in 1912 he made fifty canvases. "The crazy violence" and "Domestic worries", of course to the Nel model, and the magnificent bust of James Ensor are the famous sculptures from those years. With the canvasses, "De strijkster", again Nel herself, is an indisputable color vortex to the fauvistic model. After a successful sale at the Giroux gallery, Rik and Nel traveled together for a few weeks to Paris to admire, in colors, the works of painters such as Renoir and Cézanne. In addition, in the same year, the crowning with the "Picard prize" worth 600 francs. He lends another 10 000 francs, buys a building plot, signs the building plans for a workman's home. In the spring of 1914, Rik and Nel moved into the new home. In this house, Wouters painted his Wife in blue in front of the mirror. It is a typical canvas of his, sketchy set up with extremely mobile juxtaposed color surfaces in which a mirror looks at a woman and seems to be dizzy. He also sells a work to the Belgian State.

In 1914 the war drama broke loose. First he gets his first individual exhibition in the Giroux room. His approaching disease manifests itself when he complains of regular headache, which prevents him from working for days. The artist is called as a soldier and is used for the defense of Liège. There he is taken prisoner, but escapes. Near Antwerp his group is enclosed and he is deserting, to end up in a camp in Zeist, in the Netherlands.

In 1915 the symptoms of his fatal disease are clear: jawbone cancer. Already in 1912 he had complained about increasingly common headaches. Nel comes to him and he is released. Together they will live in Amsterdam in an apartment on the third Kostverlorenkade nr 37, third floor. He gets a first exhibition there and shows the wry "Rik with black eye dressing". Short consecutive surgeries do not provide a solution for his cancer on the upper jaw. He undergoes intensive X-ray and radium irradiation that offer no relief. That same year he paints his Self Portrait with an eye patch.

A second exhibition was organized in Amsterdam in 1916. Nel testifies about Rik's last winter as follows: The bleak winter of 1915-1916 hangs over Amsterdam like a shroud of sleet and snow. It was during one of those sad days that the disease resurfaced. His voice is hollow and it is painful to see him eat. He can only get fluid things in, and then only, like his daily connection, through the opening of his broken jawbone. This link in the back of his mouth stinks and liquid food disgusts him. The prospect of long sleepless nights, in desperate struggle against pain, makes him desperate. He can not lie down, walked around in circles like crazy. Not even 34 years old, Rik Wouters dies after a painful eye cancer in Amsterdam. His wife, Nel, stayed in Amsterdam until 1919 after Wouters' death, after which she returned to Belgium. She remarried with a doctor, represented Riks artistic interests and died in 1971, 85 years old.
Five years after Nels's return, Rik's mortal remains were buried at the cemetery of Watermael-Boitsfort, close to his home. In the garden wall of their house Nel had the brick of Rick's grave in Amsterdam bricked in as a memory.