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Dick Ket (Den Helder 1902-1940 Bennekom)

Self-portrait with a landscape

Signed and dated (lower right): 'D. Ket 1927';
inscribed by the artist on the reverse of its original
frame: 'Zelfportret met landschap'

Oil on board

11 ¼ x 9 in. (28.5 x 23 cm.)



Provenance

The artist's estate, 1941;
with Kunstzaal van Lier, Amsterdam, 1941;
Prof. Dr. Gerard Kraus, Groningen, acquired from the above, c. 1942;
Ms. Mr. Catharina Kraus, born barones De Vos van Steenwijk, Groningen, 1956;
on loan at the Groninger Museum, inv.no. 1956/24, 1956-1975, with a different title: selfportrait with a
grey hat;
private collection, Danderyd, Sweden, 1975-2022.

Exhibited

Herinneringstentoonstelling Dick Ket, Amsterdam, Kunstzaal van Lier, 5 April - 24 April
1941, cat. no. 5, The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, 19 August - 24 September 1941, cat
no. 1, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 4 October - 3 November 1941, Arnhem,
Gemeentemuseum, November 1941 - January 1942;
*Twee Groningse collecties. Keuze uit de collecties van E.J. Duintjer J.zn. en Prof. dr. G.
Kraus*, Groningen, Groninger Museum, 19 November 1956 - 10 December 1956, Delft,
Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, 22 December 1956 - February 1957, Arnhem,
Gemeentemuseum, 24 February - 31 March 1957;
Keuze uit aanwinsten 1955-1960, Groningen, Groninger Museum, 8 April - 8 May 1960;
Dick Ket 1902-1940, Arnhem, Gemeentemuseum, 16 December 1962 - 17 February 1963,
Laren, Singer Museum, 23 February - 15 April 1963, Breda, Cultureel Centrum de Beyerd,
19 April - 26 May 1963, cat. no. 5.

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Literature

C. Veth, "Herinneringstentoonstelling Dick Ket in de Kunstzaal Van Lier Amsterdam", in: *Maandblad voor Beeldende Kunsten* 18, 1941, pp. 153-155;
H. van Hall, *Portretten van Nederlandse beeldende kunstenaars/ Portraits of Dutch Painters and Other Artists*, Amsterdam, 1963, pp. 165-166, ill. no. 1;
W. Jos. de Gruyter, *Dick Ket*, Gemeentemuseum, Arnhem, 1962 (reprint 1968), p. 34, cat. no. 5, ill. no. 9;
A. Ottevanger, *Dick Ket. Over zijn leven, ideeën en kunst*, Zwolle/ Arnhem, 1994, cat. no. 44, ill., p. 154.

Due to tragic and difficult circumstances Dick Ket's life and work were closely intertwined. The artist was born with a heart defect. He was a frail child and was bullied in school as a consequence. His physical and mental issues increased over the years. He led a secluded life and did not leave his parental home for the last ten years until his early death aged 37. The artist believed that his ailments were his fate and that his artistic talent was the compensation for his challenging situation. It was his destiny to develop his artistic skills and serve society by creating meaningful artworks.

Ket's oeuvre is best known for his self-portraits and still lifes, genres he was able to paint without having to leave his studio. His self-portraits are his most personal and expressive works. They display the development of his artistic skills as well as his physical decline over the years.

Self-portrait with a landscape is a key work within his oeuvre. It was a sort of prototype for many self-portraits that followed. Here, for the first time, he painted himself as a painter. Until the present painting he had produced several self-portraits but he had not depicted himself at work. Interestingly, this painting also seems to have been the first occasion for him to paint his hands which show the signs of his illness. He had nail clubbing, or so-called drumstick fingers, as a result of his heart failure. He self-consciously combined the display of his profession together with the symptoms of his disease. In later works he even painted his hands with a strong focus on his blue swollen finger nails.

The present work is not painted on canvas but on panel. Along the left side of the composition Ket painted a canvas nailed on to a stretcher seen from aside. This trompe-l'oeil element leads to the question if the canvas is part of the painting opposite Ket or perhaps the side of the painting the spectator is looking at. One also wonders, if the present composition and the painting that he is painting could be identical. The

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position of the point of the brush increases the play between the surfaces of the paintings. Ket applied the same trompe-l'oeil element in several following self-portraits, see fig.1. This drawing was exhibited at the exhibition of artist's society Arti et Amicitiae in Amsterdam in the autumn of 1935. The jury awarded it a gold medal. The work was acquired by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Ket's work is an intriguing synthesis of traditional and modern elements. He was inspired by Old Master paintings, the Flemish Primitives in particular, and found inspiration in contemporary art and design. Like other artists in Europe in the twenties and thirties he was searching for a new visual language to express his observations in a realist manner. In *Selfportrait with a landscape* Ket reinterprets the traditional subject of a portrait in front of a landscape in a modern vein. He zoomed in to the extent that his likeness almost covers the entire picture plane. On the contrary to the Old Masters Ket was less interested in creating a sense of depth. The landscape in the background is recognizable but painted like a pattern. This and the frontality of his likeness make the composition flat and modern. Contemporary posters and commercial design contain similar flat compositions. Ket had an interest in poster designs. He kept several at his atelier and also painted them in some of his still lifes, see fig. 2.

Art dealer Carel van Lier acknowledged Ket's talent during his life-time. He exhibited the artist's work at his celebrated gallery Kunstzaal Van Lier in Amsterdam. He sold several of his paintings. *Self-portrait with a landscape* was shown at Ket's commemorative exhibition in 1941. Art collector Prof. Dr. Gerard Kraus was a doctor and psychiatrist. Intrigued by Ket and his self-portrait he acquired it from Van Lier.

Dick Ket was a Dutch painter active during the first half of the twentieth century. He was born with a serious heart defect – probably tetralogy of Fallot, or blue baby syndrome – in 1902. This disease was incurable at the time and Ket's physical condition was frail throughout his life. His parents did all they could to provide their only child with as normal a life as possible. Yet, Ket was depending on their support his entire life.

While he was in secondary school two teachers appreciated his talent and encouraged his artistic ambitions. Johan Kerkemeijer, his drawing teacher, advised him to enhance his artistic skills and directed him towards the technique of oil painting. His other mentor, Henri Naber, taught chemistry and physics. He was a convinced theosophist and published on the relationship between geometry and mysticism. These ideas

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had a deep impact on Ket's vision of life. From 1922 to 1925 Ket attended the art academy in Arnhem.

In the following years Ket was debilitated by chronic fatigue induced by his illness and growing phobias – especially agoraphobia. He ended up living in seclusion with his parents in Bennekom. The small church tower of Bennekom can be identified in the background of his self-portrait. Ket rarely stepped out of his house after 1930 and met his death several days before his 38th birthday. His posthumously-published letters revealed his sense of humour and self-irony, his passion for the arts, his love for literature, music, cinema, as well as for word play and mystery.



Fig. 1 Dick Ket, *Self-portrait*, conte crayon on paper, 113 x 75 cm,
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, inv. no. A533.

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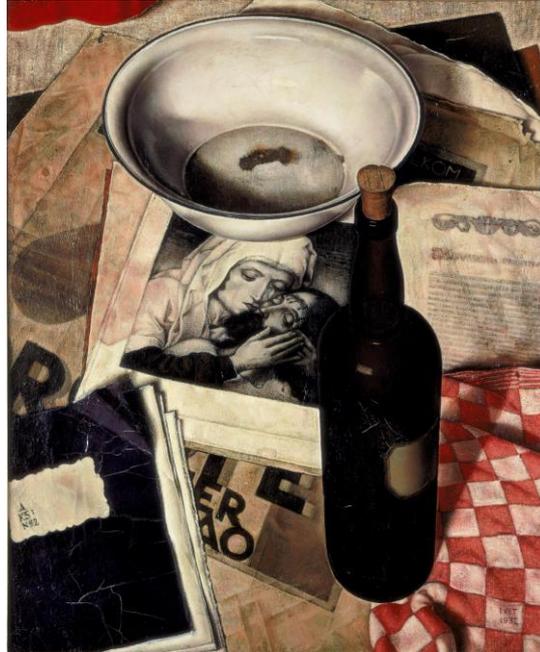


Fig. 2: Dick Ket, *Still life with Pieta*, 1932, oil on canvas, 57 x 46.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, inv. no. A2260.



Dick Ket together with his parents in front of their house in Bnnekom.

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