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# RIIK

A Retrospective

# WOUTERS

TRANSCRIPTION AUDIO GUIDES

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## 1 Introduction

Dear visitors,  
This Rik Wouters exhibition is all about 'seeing'. This guide helps you look more closely at his paintings, sculptures and drawings. Consequently, you won't find any texts in the galleries, just artworks. The visual experience will make it easier for you to penetrate the artist's graphic decisions. Every line, every surface, every volume was thought of by the artist. In the first gallery you'll find Rik Wouters' biography. We will then look in detail at the composition of some twenty works, analyzing them in such a way that your attention is drawn to the complexity of each image. For Rik Wouters the subject was merely a pretext for the visual experiment on canvas, paper or in clay. Each work sets out to communicate and justify those graphic decisions, which is why careful examination will ensure you engage with the artwork and get the most out of your visit.

## 2

The Prix Godecharle was awarded every three years to advance the career of young painters, sculptors and architects. In 1906 Rik Wouters decided to compete for it. His ambitious plan was to capture a dance position in a more than life-size sculpture. However, his wife Nel was ill and unable to maintain the desired pose. Her arms slumped. The sculptor abandoned his initial idea, choosing instead a pose which shows the moment when the body relaxes. To that end he created a supple

counterpose whereby head, shoulders, hip and knees are not parallel. Particularly striking is the turned-out hip because the weight is on one leg. In profile the sculpture reminds us of the original idea of the dance position with the foot and hip to the fore. Viewed head-on, this sculpture works very differently however. The dropped shoulders and drawn back arms push the torso forward and make the image sensually erotic. We see a woman exposing her unprotected body. The fanciful surface texture betrays the hand of the artist who brings the model's skin to life. While he manipulates the clay with his fingers, she stares melancholically into the distance and willingly allows herself to be observed. Anything for art. In June 1907 Rik and Nel moved to a narrow terraced house on the edge of the wood in Boitsfort/Bosvoorde. Meditation was transferred to Rik's attic studio. At the end of August a plaster model stood in the Parc du Cinquantenaire Museum/Jubelparkmuseum in Brussels, one of the three works he had submitted for the competition. Wouters won second prize, which provided him with a one-off state grant of 500 francs, or the equivalent of more than two years' rent. In the winter of 1907 a performance at La Monnaie theatre led to a second attempt to represent the dancing body. By now Nel was on the mend, as we see for ourselves in the Mad Virgin.

## 3

Between 1908 and 1911 Rik Wouters produced some fifty etchings. A preparatory sketch is incised with an etching needle in a soft emulsion coated onto a zinc or copper plate. The plate is then dipped in a bath of acid and the acid bites into the exposed parts of the metal, leaving behind lines sunk into the plate.

During the printing process the paper picks up the ink from the etched lines, making a print. The places where the emulsion is intact remain white in the printing process. Mid-tones are created by playing with the distance between the lines. The closer the blacker. Structure is created by varying the direction and length of the lines. These, in a nutshell, are the challenges faced by the etcher. So to look at an etching is to understand how a collection of narrow lines leads to a representation. In *Carnival at Boitsfort* we automatically look at the centre of the composition. The light emanates from a white spot, a streetlamp, which floods the village square. Radially applied lines gradually condense into the almost black area of the sky. This contrasts with the bright square whose perspective and relief are suggested by light-hearted but correctly directed lines. A lively group celebrates the final hours of the carnival feast. The façades of the houses reflect their bravado. Wouters succeeded in capturing moments of animation not only in his paintings but also using the laborious etching technique. The play of short, long, arched, straight, thick, thin, vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines is the equivalent of the colourful spots on the painter's canvas. The great period of painting began at the end of 1911, leaving little or no time for etching, even though Wouters had now acquired an old press for making proofs. His entire graphic oeuvre comprises some fifty etchings and a total print run of probably no more than 2,500.



Sometimes painting is scraping. This self-portrait was created in 1908 using only a palette knife. The paint was applied to the canvas in a smooth layer, rather like spreading honey on a slice of toast. The width of the knife determines the structure of the surface. When the knife leaves the surface, a burr forms, most noticeably in the face in this painting. Short horizontal edges betray the knife-work. The rust-coloured zone surrounding the face underneath clearly shows that the painter worked wet on wet. Here and there top layer and bottom layer mingle because of the pressure of the knife. The rust colour under the chin is complemented by the shock of green which stops before the end of the picture plane. The contiguous piece of unpainted canvas would seem to be a 'vanishing zone' where the painter's hand has the time to come to a standstill. Working with a palette knife also makes the painter something of a sculptor in clay, for here and there paint is removed. Note the clear grooves in the black hat. Longer horizontal strokes suggest a curve, ultra-short vertical stripes emphasize the raised edge of the hat. On the right the edge of the hat is given sharply-defined contour lines. Indeed, the whole silhouette contrasts sharply with the vivid background. Wouters applied an extra light layer of paint around the figure's contour. Here and there traces of black erode that white end layer. The use of the palette knife makes this self-portrait delightfully impure, blurred and suggestive. And that's why it's fascinating. The fanciful surface provides the eye with sufficient variation and holds our gaze. Wouters was an expert at bringing dead matter to life.



Here we compare two works dealing with the same subject: *Interior of aquafortist*, dating from 1908 and a second version, *Etching Table*, painted in early 1909. During that period Rik Wouters taught himself the technique of etching, usually carrying out that time-consuming and unhealthy process after a day spent painting and sculpting. A design is cut into the unprotected parts of a zinc or copper plate using a corrosive acid. Several copies of the design can then be printed. Though both take the bath of acid and the bottles containing the strong acids as their starting point, the paintings are executed in very different ways. In the space of a few months, Wouters rethought both the use of colour and composition. *Interior A* is built up of softer tints and the effect is one of intimacy. The light is granular and casts a silvery glow over the objects. At the bottom and in the top right-hand corner, darker zones frame the yellow back wall and the tabletop. The bath of acid casts a heavy black shadow which combines with the dark foreground. Wouters chose a diagonal composition which heightens the sense of space. *Interior B* presents a frontal view of everything, running more or less parallel with the frame. By way of contrast, Wouters placed the bath of acid in a prominent diagonal position in the foreground. Here the cast shadow is no longer black but bluish. In version B there is only a narrow dark strip at the bottom which lights up the surface of the table. The warm intimacy of *Interior A* cools in version B to a bright dialogue in blue and white. Several red, orange, green and yellow accents enliven the picture as a whole. The classic *Interior A* has become a more abstract juxtaposition of pure tones.

The impressionist has turned expressionist or fauvist, as the colour revolutionaries were called. It was this path that Wouters went on to explore in his short life as a painter.



James Ensor, a name Rik Wouters articulated with respect. The twenty-year-old master was even prepared to travel from Ostend to Boitsfort to pose for his portrait. It is not clear how many sessions were required. Wouters had drawn the volumes in outline in advance so that once his idol was with him in the flesh, he could immediately start work on the facial features. Wouters chose the half-length bust, a genre he had already attempted a year earlier, in 1912, for the portrait of Jules Elslander, director of the *Galerie Georges Giroux* in Brussels, of which a plaster of the Paris version appears in this exhibition. In a half-length bust, the arms present a problem. Leave them hanging down and you have to cut them off, which looks strange. In the Elslander portrait the arms are bent slightly and both hands are buried in his trouser pockets. In the Ensor portrait Wouters placed both arms behind the body where they merge with the relief of the jacket. This pose gives the model a geniality that is confirmed by the gentle smile on his face. In 1913 Ensor was fifty-three years old and his reputation was well-established. He belonged to the generation that freed painting of the rigid academic rules and experimented with technique and colour. It was these very qualities of spunk and innovation that Wouters wanted to convey in clay. The sculptor never went further in cutting the surface. The face was executed by building up vigorously applied areas, which break the light like a prism. Each facet stands for an energetic stroke of the

finger. That seems to please Ensor. Wouters translated his approval with a little joke, for what should we make of his rendering of the moustache! The left point shoots up, along with the left shoulder. This was Wouters' daring way of heightening the asymmetry of the sculpture. This expressive manipulation makes it mischievous and wilful, characteristics undoubtedly shared by both artists.



Compared to painters who have genres like still life and landscape at their disposal, sculptors are confined to portraying the human figure. But Wouters still felt there was plenty for him to explore in sculpture. For example, he wanted to inject new life into the bust. The bust is a dialogue between the head and the upper part of the body. The head turns, the face is given expression, hair is styled, shoulders follow a line, the body is naked or clothed, and then there is the position of arms and hands. So sufficient elements to set the representation free. In the bust entitled *Contemplation* dating from 1911, the upper part of the body leans forward. The shoulders are asymmetric and turned inwards creating deep hollows in the collarbones. They in their turn create a tension with the onset of the breasts which are cut off in a most unusual way. When you look at the face head-on, a part of the back comes into view. Consequently, the sculpture seems to glide towards you in a sensually languorous manner. There are two more descriptions of busts further on in the exhibition.



For Rik Wouters drawing was as natural as breathing. The drawing was an extension of his keen eye on the lookout for subjects. More often than not, that subject was Nel who frequently had to interrupt her activities to pose for him. But here illness has rendered her immobile, and the draughtsman seizes his opportunity. This sheet of quick sketches eventually led to the oil painting *Sick Woman* in a *White Shawl*, which you will see further on in the exhibition. When Wouters began a work on canvas, he had already completed part of the thought process. Composition, stance and background were explored in the drawing, while painting was experimenting with light, colour, brushstroke and contrast. In these four sketches we see a frontal view, a three-quarter pose and two profiles bending forward. Here and there an attribute appears: a head, the back of a cane chair, a blanket. They are pure line drawings with occasional shading to heighten the effect of volume. The greatest challenge for Rik Wouters consisted in retaining the spontaneity of the drawing in the oil painting. The arabesque ink strokes become accurate brushstrokes. Lines become surfaces. The black and white contrast becomes a play of light and shadow. Whereas in the drawing all the attention is drawn to the stance of the figure, in the painting it is more to do with the way the figure merges with the elements around her: chair, wallpaper and blanket. The directness of Wouters' method of painting has its origin in his drawing technique. The artist has kilometres of lines in his fingers. While studying in Mechelen, as well as modelling, he also took lessons in drawing the classical torso, the principles of perspective and anatomy. At the academy in Brussels, Wouters learned antique

sculpting from Julien Dillens, who also taught drawing and anatomy. For Dillens nature was the only real educator. In 1914 Wouters was to claim: "I have but one model: nature. Her beauty is immeasurable and I assure you that I will manage to extract sufficiently from it to arrange it as I see fit, sculpturally and pictorially."



A full-figured woman relishes the painter's gaze. For Rik Wouters the house in Boitsfort where he lived with his wife Nel was an artistic goldmine. Every room, every piece of furniture, every stance promised new possibilities. A scantily clad woman on an unmade bed was an appealing subject for an artist looking to paint life in all its colour. And in this painting that life literally seems to come into being before our eyes. Wouters allows the spectator to watch the birth of his world. The convivial chaos of textile and surroundings grows streak by streak. The floral wallpaper nestles comfortably around Nel's head and shoulders, the darkest zone in the composition. Elsewhere transparency, movement and transience prevail, along with the broad laugh of the red lips. The female body is not looking to flatter. The sunburnt arms and pale legs support the torso which is bending forward slightly. This body shimmers like a huge chunk of life and the room shimmers with it. The right side of the composition consists of four patches of colour: yellow, blue, red and brown. The dark line between yellow and brown helps build the perspective of the space. The painter needs that depth to make a frontal monument of his wife. Her legs are cut off to emphasize her closeness. The painter wants us to share just for a moment the warmth and exuberance he feels. 'Now' is

almost nothing and that is precisely the idea that Wouters paints. You snooze, you lose.



On December 12th 1907 Rik and Nel saw the American choreographer Isadora Duncan dance at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. Duncan danced with bare feet, arms and legs. Her movements were simple and natural, her face expressive. The audience was particularly enchanted by her energy and simplicity. She didn't play a role but looked for new forms of bodily expression. Wouters turned his first impressions into drawings. Between 1908 and 1912 he worked on this more than life-size sculpture in the small attic room in Boitsfort. Nel helped him find the pose that best expressed the exuberance and vitality. He was determined to create an ambitious sculpture, one that was more powerful than his previous attempt, *Meditation*, which was also inspired by a dance position. In 1942 a critic described the image as "capturing the immediacy of the exuberance in a Bacchanalian figure, buoyant on the toes of one foot, the right leg thrown high into the air, the torso tilting backwards and the moist mouth in the jubilant face laughing with pleasure." The memory of Isadora Duncan became an image of pure *joie de vivre*. Wouters translated it into an explosive pose that fills the space in all directions. Every angle is powerful and spectacular. As a viewer you automatically find yourself walking round the sculpture and, in so doing, you not only become part of the movement, but you also set the image in motion. On our journey around this mad maiden we come to appreciate the balance the artist achieved in constructing this sculpture, a perfect dialogue of opposite directions. Arms: horizontal and vertical.

Legs: sharp and at an obtuse angle. The head turned to the left, the raised leg pointing to the right. And what required the most careful calculation was to balance all that on one small supporting surface, half a left foot. Rik Wouters makes us easily forget the four long years of work that went into this piece. What stays with us is the endless moment of loud laughter.

## 12

Wouters painted his immediate surroundings rather than far-fetched or spectacular subjects. He sought the spectacular in the act of painting. He made every streak of paint an experiment which we, the viewers, can follow with the naked eye. In this painting, Interior A or lady in white, it is intriguing to ascertain that the dress, which we would describe as white, contains next to no white paint. Wouters positioned the figure almost completely against the light. The dress becomes an animated landscape of pink and bluish areas, in other words a juxtaposition of warm and cold, light and shadow. The dress clearly defines the shape of the woman's body underneath. Our eye can follow the painter's hand in the blue construction lines. It is no accident that the dress occupies the area between a warm zone in the bottom left-hand corner and a cooler motif in the tablecloth on the right. The woman's face against the light harmonizes perfectly with the surrounding wall; her hair nestles comfortably in the dark rectangle behind her. Despite the pale mixed colours in this painting the light predominates. Moreover, a convivial flurry of spots prevails which irradiates the atmosphere of this scene. It is the colours on the canvas rather than the figure's body language which establish the mood in this painting. Wouters composed with colour just as a musician composes with

notes. The significance of the work derives from the choice and manipulation of the formal elements. The spectator derives fulfilment from the careful examination of a work.

## 13

Rik Wouters has two primary colours, yellow and blue, converse constantly in this painting. The result is a dazzling mosaic of patches of light which transform an ordinary interior into a light-filled palace. The painter heightened the sense of space by resolutely opting for dialogues. An overfull laundry basket links up almost seamlessly with the white ironing sheet. The woman ironing forms the link between the table and a stove, which together with the yellow cupboard, takes us into the furthest corner of the room. That top right-hand corner of the picture plane has much to offer visually. We automatically focus on the face of the backlit figure. The window and the white collar provide a clear border around the head so that it momentarily extricates itself from its surroundings. Yet the painter also links it with the surroundings by means of the blue lampshade on the right. There is some ambiguity regarding the position of that light: is it hanging from the ceiling right in front of the woman's face, or is it standing on the yellow cupboard? Perhaps it is hanging in the middle of the room, but the lack of clarity is part of Wouters' game. We don't leave the top right-hand corner without noticing the patterned wallpaper which also plays a role in other interiors, as do the mirror and the glass bell-jar on the mantelpiece. In the mirror the bright pink spot between vase and bell-jar provides a colour link with the apron the woman is wearing. Wouters repeats that same pink bottom left, thereby creating a clearly recognizable pile of washing. These three

pink islands - mirror, apron and linen – encircle a dark blue area which further illuminates them. Blue is repeated prominently on the surface of the table and in the lampshade, again three islands. And we shouldn't forget the blue bow round the figure's neck or Wouters' yellow straw hat with a blue band seen at the bottom. This seemingly spontaneously painted scene was carefully put together in terms of colour and composition. Space and light must prevail. Never before was ironing so exhilarating!

## 14

In her memoirs Nel Wouters describes how she allows the head of a dribbling baby to rest on her shoulder so that it doses off, giving Rik sufficient time to capture the pose. As an impressionist he looked for the moment to petrify the pose irrevocably: modelling as a snapshot in time. Not only painters but also sculptors had done this before him: Rodin and Rosso for example. At the end of the nineteenth century, Medardo Rosso sculpted expressive children's heads in wax and by leaving out details gave them a melty blur as if they were out of focus. Wouters keeps the communication clear. He makes the image diminutive, endearing even, by terminating it above the shoulders. The head tilts forward. Only on the right do locks of hair fall with it, on the left they are pulled back to provide the necessary asymmetry. But it is in the facial features that Wouters concentrates the tension. For the sculptor, forehead, eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks and chin are interesting volumes in action. The execution perfectly interprets this young child's situation and makes us forget the static material. That is particularly impressive given that Wouters expressly shows us the traces

of the modelling work. The irregular texture is looking to break up the surface into smaller entities, each of which reflects the light in a different way. That heightens the complexity of the observation, particularly when you, the viewer, move around the sculpture. With some slight exaggeration, you could speak of a stroboscopic effect. In that way the weight of the material is exchanged for the agility of the light. In the spring of 1909 Rik Wouters exhibited his children's heads in Brussels. The same exhibition featured some twenty sculptures by Medardo Rosso. The affinity between the two sculptors is striking. The event heralded a busy period of exhibitions for Wouters.

## 15

A vista from an open window. Rik Wouters painted this landscape in Boitsfort in the spring of 1914. In 1907 he and Nel had moved into a small house on the edge of the Sonian Forest. In 1914 he showed a large number of works in the Giroux art gallery in Brussels, which drew the attention of the press and sold well. Rik and Nel were able to move into a new house. The studio offered the artist a stimulating vista and it became a recurrent theme in Wouters' work until July 31st, the day he left for the front. He used it as a backdrop for figures but also as a subject in its own right, as in this work. A straight blue street is lined with houses drawn in perspective. The straight roofs are swamped by the undulating hills beyond. On the horizon a train shoots like a black arrow through all that red and green, the white steam mingling with the rarefied colours of the air. Only in the sky did Wouters have the colours fade. He created the sense of distance by diminution in size, not by diluting the colour. For example, the red roofs in the bottom left-hand corner

act as foreground. But the real masterstroke is the narrow strip of bricks which closes off the picture plane on the left so that we suddenly realize we are looking out from the inside. The landscape becomes an image seen through a window. The narrowing row of bricks makes the painting tilt. The artist sets this static piece of the world in motion. All the elements work their way towards the edge of the painting: the street, the row of houses, the trees, the train. The *Coin du Balai* in Boitsfort has all the airs and graces of a dazzling world landscape. The holdfast in all this undulation is found at the edge where window and painting converge.

## 16

A man is sitting on the arm of a chair holding a flute in his left hand. He is looking not at us but at an open book. Rik Wouters placed the figure firmly in the foreground by cutting him off at the knees. Figure and chair are built up of the same yellow, ochre and pink and thus form one block which continues on the left in the wall and the windowsill. The predominance of yellow finds its complementary contrast in the bluey-purple tie and shaded part. The red touches in the chair establish a link with the top half of the composition, where our eye is drawn to a single bright-red roof in the background. Wouters strove to introduce uniformity to foreground and background, thereby flouting the academic rule which requires a clear distinction between figure and surroundings so that the figure always has the upper hand. In this painting the artist reverses the roles. Screw up your eyes and try looking at this painting again. The background is still visible. The buff colours underneath seem to dissolve the figure. Notice how here and there Wouters sets off the figure with black lines so

as not to lose it altogether. Black is important for the legibility of the subject. For example, there is the contour line between underarm and chair and between collar and neck. The darker section of hair prevents the head disappearing into the row of houses. On the right, the picture plane is framed by a blackish-blue band of colour. Dark touches also appear on the left. We are now looking at the middle ground of the composition, because that's the real feast: a dance of two complementary colours, red and green. Wouters used the same red and green to throw the flautist's head into relief. This work is radiant, not because the sun is shining but because the colours vibrate.

## 17

In a previous sculpture called *Contemplation*, we saw how Rik Wouters wanted to revive the genre of the bust. A bust is a dialogue between head and upper body. In *Leaning Bust* dating from 1909 Wouters contrasts a frontal body with a head in profile. The shoulder line forms a strong downward-sloping line. The left arm is present, the right is left out. A black knot of hair, which doesn't quite touch the right shoulder, balances the profile of the face in terms of volume. Nel seems to be smiling at something she has just noticed. In this sculpture everything revolves around movement and the spontaneity of a moment in time. And now look at *In the Sun* dating from 1911. Head and torso are frontal but in this sculpture Wouters creates the tension by angling the head to the left. What is most striking here is the presence of both arms which form a support for the head. Together with the demure face, this pose conveys a moment of tranquillity and pleasure.

## 18

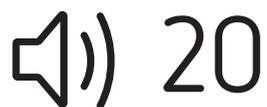
We are looking at *Lady in Blue Before a Mirror*, a painting that takes the interaction between figure and space as its starting point. The composition is schematic in execution, particularly in the four corners of the picture plane. We enter the room via the bottom right-hand corner. This area looks spectacularly empty, as if what is too close doesn't fall within our field of vision and so can be left out. A little higher up, diagonal blue streaks effectively create a horizontal surface, bearing a green vase. The bottom left-hand corner contains several cursory lines. Above that, we recognize a jug through which the edge of the table can be seen. The corners at the top don't quite contain the thinly applied pink paint which briefly calls to mind the wallpaper seen in previous paintings. Here and there a red and green floral motif appears. In the top right-hand corner we are in the mirror image, which in terms of haziness differs little from what we see in front of the mirror. The mirror image of the face is as sketchy as the profile view it reflects. Mouth and right ear are reproduced as a similar red streak, the area around the eyes is rendered by a blue stripe, the bottom of the chin by a green patch. The glass bell-jar on the mantelpiece is more clearly recognizable in the mirror, a curious inversion. The most saturated areas of colour are in the centre of the composition. The four brilliant white flowers really stand out. As we look at their pure whiteness, we realize that the other white spots on the painting are not paint, but the typical sallow colour of the primed linen. Those breaks in the layer of paint suggest not only space as in the bottom right-hand corner, but they also model the female figure. We spontaneously interpret

the white under the shoulder as a patch of light, not as a hole in her dress. As a modelled form she conducts a dialogue with her surroundings, dominating them in her blueness.

## 19

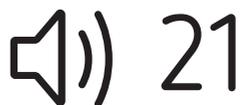
A patchwork of smudges and a smattering of pencil lines. With the help of the title we create order in the chaos. We can make out a foreground, on the left and right elements which act as coulisses, and in the centre a landscape stretching into the depth. This highly abstract representation resulted from the need to understand the grand structure of things. Wouters filters the superfluous from the essential. He worked 'on the subject', in this case a place in the Sonian Forest. His painterly eye converted the wooded landscape into an irregular draughtboard of saturated and unsaturated spots. As a viewer you have to admit that it works. Our eye distinguishes a foreground, a perspective. The position, orientation and colour saturation make each spot a specific building stone of this landscape painting. Wouters would spend a long time looking but worked quickly, unlike his great role model, Paul Cézanne. Between 1904 and 1906, the last years of his life, Cézanne produced a series of watercolours which clearly inspired Wouters. In 1912, after seeing the work of Cézanne in Paris, Wouters purchased a white artist's palette. A palette is usually the colour of wood. The advantage of a white palette is that the colours appear as on the paper or canvas. As watercolour is transparent, the white of the paper plays an important role, giving a natural luminosity to the washes of colour. The spaces between the spots give each colour the chance to contrast with the white. Consequently, the

drawing remains fresh and bright. Wouters applied the same principle in his paintings by applying highly diluted and liquid oil paint to the white canvas. Hence his characteristic free style, which allows the viewer insight into the creation of the work. What fascinates us in this series of spots and smudges is the moment the landscape appears in our imagination. The artist initiates the image and we complete it.



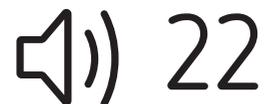
Winter 1913. In his attic studio Rik Wouters erected his third monumental sculpture of Nel. To limit the weight of this more than life-size sculpture, he kept the iron and wooden frame as light as possible. Compared to Meditation and Mad Virgin, this sculpture is a completely closed volume, reflecting the introversion of domestic cares. The wide folds of skirt and apron fall robustly downwards and enclose the body all the way to the low plinth. Wouters placed the sculpture at an angle on the plinth. The whole figure leans a little to the left. Shoulder and pelvis line advance towards each other. The head is bent forward slightly. She looks sullen. Firmly crossed arms push the breasts together. Despite the monolithic character of the piece, these subtle interventions ensure that the sculpture never fails to excite and that it never deteriorates into a rigid mass. The format is important too. The everyday concerns manifest themselves in a tall figure towering above the viewer. There she stands. And in that simple stance Rik Wouters manages to tell a whole story. Rik and Nel spent their lives trying to earn the sort of money to live the only sort of life they deemed worthwhile. By 1913, however, things were beginning to look up. Works sold regularly and there were even plans to build. Domestic

Cares was completed in the new studio. It is as if with this work the sculptor wanted to look back at a period of hardship he hoped was behind them for good. The year 1914 began with a retrospective exhibition at the Giroux art gallery, the result of two years' hard work: sixteen sculptures, forty-five paintings and almost a hundred works on paper. Wouters was as yet unaware that the period of domestic cares would turn out to be the most carefree time of his life. War and illness were lying in wait.



Nature is always too big for the picture plane. So Rik Wouters ostentatiously painted a 'piece' of nature. Here we have an example of the way he terminated or interrupted an object. In the centre the composition is severed by two tree trunks. They disappear from view both at the top and at the bottom of the picture. In the space between these two parallel trunks Wouters painted another four trunks which lead our eye into the depth. A bridge heightens the impression of a ravine. A chance horseman is captured neatly between two tree trunks. Had he been cut off, he would have been completely unrecognizable. The left part of the composition is dominated by diagonals. Green, yellow and red streaks of paint draw the eye down. The right part of the composition repeats the same colour combination but in a different configuration. Here the streaks form a wall with which the eye collides. We find those same colours at the top of the painting but then applied slightly more loosely. We owe the legibility of this work in large part to the way in which Rik Wouters spread the paint and the direction of his brushwork. In this red, yellow and green undulation, the two tree trunks in the foreground constitute an

important visual holdfast. In this work Wouters also plays on the contradiction of painting: a two-dimensional surface that tries to evoke a three-dimensional world. He gives the viewer the chance to discover or to ignore the ravine by drawing us into the sideways movement of the colour structure. The viewer can choose the surface or the depth.



Where do your eyes lead you first? Perhaps to the face of the woman with the yellow necklace. Her gaze is pretty much the only rest point in a composition in which all the components goad one another. A fur blanket fills the bottom right-hand corner. A blue spot dominates the foreground on the left and returns as a mirror image in the background. A yellow, floral curtain hangs diagonally across from the red blanket. Yellow also appears in the two chairs and the necklace. A floral motif is part of the wallpaper too. That diamond-shaped pattern of red and green spots reveals a corner of the room on the right. A small black and white print confirms the perspective of the diagonal wall. The frontal-diagonal tension also defines the posture of the seated woman. Her head is turned to the right, her body faces the viewer, while her chair is angled to the left. Her dress has the structure of a blue patchwork. The streaks of paint follow her anatomy. Here and there the painter added a contour line. Sometimes the tension is in a few streaks. For example, the yellow necklace extricates itself from the white ground and conducts a dialogue with the green streak just above it, which borders the white. We find the same tension in the red mouth and the green streak that rounds off the sleeve on the right. The shadow on

the chin reflects the blue of the dress but in a softer hue. The side of the face imitates the colour of the floor. But in this busy dialogue of colours it is red that sets the tone. The red of the blanket at the front, the flower motif at the back and the lips in-between contain the same intensity and repleteness, thereby doing away with the hierarchy between what is far away and what is close to. But the hierarchy between figure and background also disappears, making each motif equally important or unimportant. The female figure is swallowed up in the composition as a whole. Only her gaze makes her the protagonist.



Black is sometimes described as the absence of colour. That definition is tragically appropriate here. The black eyepatch affects the painter's most precious faculty: his ability to see. In this composition the black patch acts as a kind of vanishing point. Around it Wouters applied the most brilliant red, both in the modelling of the head and in the expanse of curtain. He built up the shaded area of the head from greens which are echoed in the clothing. Thus together with variations of blue and grey he created a bright zone which is borne by the black contours of a chair. White spots of empty ground and highlighting ensure that the three large areas of curtain, clothing and chair retain their lightness and vividness. The face is not filled in completely either. Only the top right-hand corner gives the impression of being closed, matt. It is the only part of the composition that doesn't draw our attention, its main purpose being to push the red curtain further forward. In contrast to this colourful firework is the leaden reality of the black eyepatch. Rik Wouters suffered from jaw

cancer which proved fatal in 1916. Wouters used a mirror to create this self-portrait in November 1915. The right side of his face was mutilated by a series of operations. The mirror provides a left-right inversion. However, it is important to note which elements from the mirror image he DOESN'T show us: the act of painting itself. His hands are idle. His body is enclosed by a chair and curtain. But those very elements show how Wouters turns his physical torture into the joy a painter experiences. So this painting is a brilliant paradox. The image of the incapacitated artist is refuted by the sheer force of the composition.

Stop by the Rik Wouters workshop  
and let your creativity flow!

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