

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Engelien Reitsma-Valença  
(Amsterdam 1889 – 1981 Doorn)

*Self-portrait of the artist drawing herself*

Signed and dated lower right: *E. Reitsma-Valença / 1962*

Pencil on paper

34 x 38.3 cm. (13 ½ x 15 in.)

Provenance:

By descent in the family of the artist, until 2024.



In this meta self-portrait, a study for an etching depicting the artist in front of a printing press (fig. 1), the seventy-three-year-old Engeliën Reitsma-Valença captures herself in the act of drawing the very image we see. Holding her sheet aloft, she seems to gaze out at the viewer with visible concentration, though of course in reality Reitsma-Valença would be carefully scrutinising her own likeness in a mirror. Into her eighth decade, the artist has lost none of the precision or surety of touch that won her the Prix de Rome over half a century before.



Fig. 1, Engeliën Reitsma-Valença, *Self-portrait with a printing press*, 1962, etching, 24.5 x 32.5 cm, Private Collection

Active across her career as a painter, printmaker, and designer of stamps and bookplates, Reitsma-Valença was born in Amsterdam in 1889, the daughter of a diamond cutter of Portuguese Jewish heritage.<sup>1</sup> Initially, Reitsma-Valença attended the Girl's Drawing and Crafts School for classes three mornings a week. By 1904, she had gained permission to take drawing lessons at the Academy of Fine Arts, attending only in the mornings and evenings, as she had to cut diamonds in the afternoon. After a number of years, Reitsma-Valença chose to specialise in engraving. Her teachers were the celebrated engravers Pieter Dupont and Johannes Aarts. They taught her that the two most important tools for engraving were a steady hand and infinite patience.

It was obvious from an early stage that Reitsma-Valença was uncommonly talented, winning the coveted Prix de Rome for the graphic arts category at the age of twenty-four. This allowed her to visit Italy and further work on her already formidable technique. Back in the Netherlands, she soon received many commissions to design and engrave book covers, stamps, Ex Libris and portraits. Reitsma-Valença exhibited at St Lucas, the Independents, the Socialist Artist's Circle and had a solo exhibition at Aalderink in 1931.

The Second World War saw Reitsma-Valença lose patronage, being barred, for example, from working for the Dutch postal authorities. The printers Enschedé did enable her to continue working for them anonymously however, commissioning from her stamps depicting Maarten Tromp (fig. 2) and Piet Heim, only officially attributed to artist after the conflict. Reitsma-Valença survived the war and in 1964 received a Medal of Honour from

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<sup>1</sup> Reitsma was her married name, Valença her maiden name.

the municipality of Bergen, where she had lived since 1951. She was later knighted in the Order of Orange-Nassau. Married from 1917 to a lawyer, her obituary stated: 'She lived for art and her family.'



Fig. 2, Engeliën Reitsma-Valença, *Piet Tromp*, stamp, 3.2 x 2.5 cm, Private Collection

Portraiture formed an important part of Reitsma-Valença output throughout her career. Her talent in this area was widely recognised, leading to numerous commissioned works over the years. These commissions often featured prominent Dutch figures, including, notably, Queen Wilhelmina in 1945.