

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Engelien Reitsma-Valença  
(Amsterdam 1889 – 1981 Doorn)

*Self-portrait of the artist etching*

Monogrammed and dated lower left: *ERV / 1932*  
Pencil on paper  
22 x 15.5 cm. (8 ¾ x 6 ¼ in.)

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



In this playful and inventive meta self-portrait, we see the forty-four-year-old Engeliën Reitsma-Valença scrutinising her own features in a mirror, transcribing what she sees on to her etching plate. Leaning forward on her desk, she is the picture of concentration and studiousness. Self-portraiture was an incredibly important part of the artist's output from the beginning (fig. 1) to the end of her career, and through them we see Reitsma-Valença move from adolescence to old-age. The present work is not the only example we have of the artist depicting herself, almost out of body, at work: exactly thirty years later, Reitsma-Valença portrays herself in the act of drawing her own portrait (fig. 2).



Fig. 1, Engeliën Reitsma-Valença, *Self-portrait*, c. 1914, pencil on paper, Private Collection



Fig. 2, Engeliën Reitsma-Valença, *Self-portrait*, 1962, pencil on paper, 34 x 38.3 cm, Colnaghi Elliott Master Drawings

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,

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

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 the municipality of Bergen, where she had lived since 1951. She was later knighted in the Order of Orange-Naussau. 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.