Salvador Dalí
Apprentice Painter

Dalí Theatre-Museum
Figueres
«Les belles formes, ce sont des plans droits avec des rondeurs. Les belles formes sont celles qui ont de la fermeté et de la plénitude, et où les détails ne compromettent pas l’aspect des grandes masses.»

In January 1922, the year in which Dalí joined the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, Galeries Dalmau in Barcelona organised a widely publicised group exhibition by the Association of Catalan Students. At this exhibition, for the first time, the young Dalí exhibited eight works, one of which, Market, received the university chancellor’s award.

It was not until 14 November 1925, however, that the artist, who was only twenty-one years old, held a solo exhibition of paintings and drawings at Galeries Dalmau. These works combined two aspects that would alternate and complement one another throughout his career and that arose from his bold and critical analytical approach towards all types of conventionality: a return to order and tradition, and a search for the most avant-garde trends. Ninety-two years have passed since his works were first shown at Galeries Dalmau, until the time visitors to the Dalí Theatre-Museum in Figueres again have had the chance to view one of the oils from the original exhibition —the least known of them all— entitled FIGURE IN PROFILE.

The press of the time covered the exhibition by this apprentice painter in great depth. All observed in Salvador Dalí the simultaneous presence of the strong cubist influence of the avant-gardes and a style that referenced tradition and, specifically, Ingres. We are very much aware that Dalí kept both the pictorial and written work of the latter firmly in mind —particularly the book Pensées—. Three quotes that the painter included in the exhibition catalogue are in fact taken from this book in which Ingres reflects on painting

1. “Beautiful shapes are straight planes with curves. Beautiful shapes have both firmness and fullness and in them the details do not compromise the appearance of large masses.”


2. The organiser, the art dealer Josep Dalmau, introduced the avant-garde movements in Catalonia and promoted the most interesting Catalan artists of the time. He was, as Dalí described years later in his autobiography The Secret life of Salvador Dalí, the “Barcelonian patriarch of the advance-guardism and who looked as though he might have just stepped out of a painting by El Greco.”

3. Market, c. 1921, location unknown, cat. no. 359.

4. Figure in Profile, 1925, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres, cat. no. 147.

5. As his father, Salvador Dalí Cusí, described him in the notebook where he kept press cuttings and wrote comments about his son’s exhibitions and journey towards becoming an established artist.
In this first solo exhibition, Dalí presented seventeen oils and five drawings. Six of the paintings exhibited were portraits of his sister Anna Maria, almost always with her back to the viewer: Seated Girl, Figure Seen from the Back, Girl at a Window, figure in profile, Portrait of My Sister and a sixth oil painting with the same title. He also presented other portraits—such as Portrait of My Father, Portrait of Ramoneta Montsalvatge and Portrait of Maria Carbona, the latter two friends of the Dalí family—, accompanied by works chiefly featuring the landscape, specifically Landscape of Cadaqués and Empordà Landscape with Figures, as well as the works Figure at a table and Venus and Sailor (Homage to Salvat-Papasseit). In cubist style the artist exhibited Pierrot Playing the Guitar (Cubist Painting), Siphon with Small Bottle of Rum (Cubist Painting) and Still Life (unidentified). The exhibition catalogue closes with another Still Life that we have also been unable to identify.

Dali himself later referred to this initial period of constant experimentation, so evident in the Dalmau exhibition: “I at the time was painting Cadaqués landscapes, my father, my sister, everything that could be a subject for my frenzied brush. I was paying close attention to Chirico’s paintings, through the magazines. I was contributing to Barcelona’s Gaseta de les Arts and L’Amic de les arts; and one book was always at my bedside, Ingres’ Thoughts. I decided I would take some essential notes out of it as preface to my first one-man show, at the Dalmau Galleries, Barcelona, in November 1925. [...] This tribute to the beauties of craft and tradition corresponded exactly to my own ideas. This is the basis on which one can afford to be a genius. [...] The critics, who are always laggards and unaware of truth, were nevertheless enthusiastic.”


**FIGURE IN PROFILE** was acquired for 500 pesetas by the pharmacist and family friend Joaquim Cusi i Furtunet. It was not exhibited again until it was auctioned at Bonhams in London on 2 March 2017, when the Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí purchased it. The only record of the painting hitherto encountered is a black and white reproduction published in the magazine *Atlántico* in 1929.

The central figure in the painting is the artist's sister, Anna Maria, his main model until Gala arrived in 1929. Anna Maria wrote about the moments of close rapport with her brother: “My brother painted countless portraits of me during that period. Many of them were mere studies of curls and of a shoulder always uncovered. He painted patiently, tirelessly, and posing for him did not tire me at all, as I have never been bored by staying still and silent.” She continued: “During the hours that I modelled for him, I never tired of looking at that landscape which has forever been a part of my life. He always painted me close to a window [...]”

Anna Maria’s words come to life in this work, in which she is portrayed with calm and corporeal realism in the centre of the scene and focal point for the artistic composition. The simplicity of design and approach to the room's empty spaces evoke a peaceful atmosphere. The three-quarter view of the girl's profile and the direction of her gaze yield gentle movement and guide the viewer’s full attention towards the top left quadrant of the work, where the landscape of Cadaqués is visible through the window. The landscape can clearly be identified as Es Sortell, an area near the home of the Pichots, a family of artists to whom the Dalís were very close. It shows the characteristic bridge connecting it to the adjacent island, which Dalí could see from the window of his studio at his father's home in Es Llaner. The landscape through the window is calm, shaped with geometric precision and the result of detailed, metaphysical observation.

This clear, infinite space of sea and rocks visible outside the window was painted with a bright, diffused light that gently illuminates the figure of the girl, leaving her back and delicate curls over her bare
shoulder in the shadows. It appears to be a winter's day in which time has been diluted by the landscape's serenity and in the calm emanating from the figure, whose face, neck, shoulder, arm and hands, legs and lap are all delicately illuminated. The composition, in which empty space plays a key part, is meanwhile elegantly balanced by the pale grey light that enters vertically from the right to yield a silence that envelopes the figure. The Italian metaphysical style of painting is fully apparent in the robustness of the elements, their separation in space, the secret dialogue established among them, the play and convergence of the perspectives, the geometric form of the shapes and the light created by the warm tones reminiscent of Giorgio Morandi.

As in many of the portraits of his sister from the same period, the figure is portrayed with her back slightly turned to the viewer, revealing her face in profile. Seated, with her legs crossed and hands resting in her lap, she reclines in a chair with a distinctly cubist feel to it. Here, the light is not frontal but instead originates from the background, from the window and from the top of the canvas.
The softness of colour intensifies in the zone emphasised by thicker brushstrokes that texture the landscape with sky blues, whites and ochres; in the white and bluish greens of the window frame, and in the flesh and pink tones of the figure and her dress. In contrast, the room’s shadows are painted predominantly in dark colours, greys and browns applied with a thin, diluted pictorial layer that is almost transparent in the area of the buttocks.

FIGURE IN PROFILE, a portrait and representation that transcends the strictly real, distils the wisdom of the masters and a vehement desire to experiment. The painting reveals a purposeful distance from the enthusiastically colourful palette of impressionism and, rather, resembles the approaches of cubism and the magazine *Valori Plastici*, all framed in the essential, eternal and future iconic landscape of Cadaqués. This portrait points to the future Salvador Dalí and like the other four oil paintings owned by the Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí that accompany and complement it in this exhibition, exemplifies Salvador Dalí’s learning period with absolute clarity.
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Figueres

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#AnnaMariaDalí

Cover Image
Salvador Dalí, Figure in Profile, 1925

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Curator: Montse Aguer, director of the Dalí Museums
Coordination and Assistance: Cuca R. Costa (Centre for Dalinian Studies)
Design: Pep Canaleta — Graphics: Alex Gifreu
Preventive Conservation: Irene Civil, Josep M. Guillamet and Elisenda Aragonès
Registrar: Rosa Aguer — Communication: Imma Parada — Web and Social Media: Cinzia Azzini

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