



Irène Zurkinden | Artist

Self-Portrait, around 1930.
Gouache on paper, 32,5 × 24,6 cm.
Private collection Suter, Basel.
Photo: Studio David Berweger

Irène Zurkinden (1909–1987) led a life of extraordinary freedom for a woman of her time. Born in Basel to a dance teacher and a customs agent, she was encouraged by her parents to pursue her artistic talents. She enrolled in art school in 1923/24 and later received a grant to study in Paris, where she completed her training at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière inspired by the legacy of Toulouse-Lautrec. Her first stay in Paris in 1929 marked the beginning of a lifelong relationship with the French capital, which ultimately became her second home—a place of both creative and personal liberation.

In Paris, Zurkinden moved among the avant-garde, developing a unique artistic voice that blended Surrealist influences and Neo-Impressionist sensibilities with her own expressive flair. . She formed a close bond with Meret Oppenheim, documented in a number of paintings and drawings that testify to their personal and artistic connection. Zurkinden's portrait Meret à l'orange (1932) remains one of her most iconic works.

Together with the German Afro-Brazilian jazz musician Kurt Fenster, Zurkinden had two children. During the 1930s and '40s, the family moved fluidly between Paris and Basel, balancing artistic freedom and familial responsibilities. In 1942, she settled permanently in Basel and joined Gruppe 33, a progressive collective of anti-fascist artists.

Her artistic output included commissioned portraits, psychologically nuanced nudes, experimental theater set designs, travel-inspired works from Italy, Spain and Morocco, and whimsical sketches often tinged with Surrealist humor. She illustrated books and created deeply personal drawings that explored themes of identity, sensuality, and society.

Zurkinden's work defied categorization and remained distinctly her own—emotive, curious, intimate, and boldly independent. Despite being historically overlooked, she is now being recognized as a vital voice in Swiss modern art.