

Maurice Langaskens, “*Gevangenen troost*” (*Prisoner’s Comfort*): *Self-Portrait of the Artist Observing a Butterfly*
Ghent 1884 – 1946 Schaerbeek

oil on canvas

15 3/8 by 13 inches (39 by 33 cm)

signed, dated, and inscribed upper right: ‘*Gevangenen troost/te Göttingen/ Juni 1917/Maurits Langaskens*’

provenance: The artist;
Galerie Sneyers, Brussels (according to a label on the verso);
Private collection, Germany

note: One of the most prolific of twentieth-century Belgian artists, the painter and printmaker Maurice (or Maurits) Langaskens (fig. 1) was born in Ghent, the son of a furniture maker. He may have had some early training in Paris, but by 1901 had entered the Academie voor Schone Kunsten in Brussels, specializing in decorative painting. He proved an especially proficient draftsman winning several prizes including in 1904 a study trip to Italy. By 1907 he had his first painting, *Orpheus* (fig. 2), shown in a public exhibition that also presented works by Khnopff and Puvis de Chavannes. In 1909 Langaskens was included in a major Brussels museum exhibition for which he designed the poster (fig. 3). Then in 1912 he had an exhibition at the Cercle Artistique of Brussels (fig. 4), and his painting *Hercules* (fig. 5) won a prize for decorative art in Brabant. Langaskens’ rather grandiose and sensual Art-Nouveau manner evident in these and other early works (figs. 6a-b) was suitable for large scale decorative projects, and the young artist quickly achieved fame with a major commission in 1912 for the city hall of Zoutleeuw (fig. 7).

The arc of the painter’s career was suddenly interrupted, however, by the outbreak of the First World War. He was drafted into the Belgian army on August 1, 1914, an event commemorated in his color etching *L’Adieu au Village* (fig. 8). Then just ten days later he was captured by the Germans and interned for three and a half years in German prisoner of war camps first at Münsterlager and then Göttingen. These camps (figs. 9a-d) were fairly lenient in their approach and allowed the prisoners to receive food and books, as well as artistic and musical supplies from home. Thus during the years of his incarceration, Langaskens was still able to both paint and draw (fig. 1). He made mainly small scale paintings and watercolor studies documenting the routine of prison life, but one major work begun there was *Repose en Paix* (figs. 10a-b), a large triptych commemorating the death and burial of a fellow Belgian soldier. In this solemn procession it is notable that the Belgian soldiers all wear their characteristic heavy wooden shoes.¹

Following his liberation and return to Belgium in 1917, Langaskens’ work became primarily devoted to floral compositions, depictions of rustic scenes of ordinary people, and life in his native land often in winter landscapes presented in bold colors (figs. 11a-f). He did, however, in the 1930s return to his grander decorative manner with wall paintings for the city hall of Leuven (figs. 12a-b).

Through the 1940s Langaskens continued to exhibit his work and following his death in 1946 received retrospective exhibitions in 1949 and 1959. More recently a serious reassessment of his career was organized in 2003,² where it was evident that the works, such as the present painting, produced during his internment in Germany were his most significant achievements. His studies of fellow prisoners and their activities provide insight into their daily camp life, culminating in his 1917 *Allegory of Liberation* (figs. 13a-1).

This *Self-Portrait*, done shortly before his release from prison, is in a very different manner than Langaskens' more careful, documentary studies of prison camp life. In this more personal case he paints in broad strokes and rich colors that seem both Fauvist and Expressionist. He hones in on his upper body viewed from slightly above. The artist's intense blue eyes are focused on the butterflies, who can so easily escape to freedom, as they hover over the red flowers. This work captures successfully his senses of isolation, concentration, and longing. This moment of obsessive contemplation would have a profound impact on many of his later compositions in both paintings and prints, reflecting not only his interest in flowers, plants, and insects, but all forms of up-close observation (figs. 14a-i). Here his incarceration is indicated in the background by the wire mesh fence that also appears in his *Allegory of Liberation* (fig. 131). His concern with nature, represented by the flowers and butterflies, and his ability to paint must surely have helped Langaskens survive his long imprisonment and supplied the "comfort" he recorded in his inscription.

There was a long tradition of close up self-portraits in Northern European art, stretching from Rembrandt to van Gogh and on to Max Beckmann, but the only other painter to produce works while in prison was, in the 1940s, the Jewish painter Felix Nussbaum, whose fate was sadly more tragic.³

¹ See the exhibition *War from the Artist's Perspective*, Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, NJ, March-July, 2015.

² *Maurice Langaskens 1884-1946*, Flanders Field Museum, Stedelijk Museum, Ieper, Belgium, 2003.

³ See *The Self-Portrait from Schiele to Beckmann*, Neue Galerie, New York, 2019, especially pp. 176-179.