Self-portraiture has been existing since the earliest of times, but it became a frequent and more recognised occurrence in the mid-16th century during the Renaissance era. It was during those times that the first self-portrait created by a woman was widely recognised. In the 20th century, women's self-portraiture was blooming with artists like Paula Modersohn-Becker being a fine example of the influence female art had on self-representation.
The Representation of Self: Women's Self-portraiture through history is an exhibition that brings together a collection of various artworks throughout history. Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) will be a starting point for the retrospection that will take the audience back in time to better understand and provide greater insight into the aesthetic nature of painting but will also explore the subject of female representation and self-representation in the context of social history. Through the prism of Modersohn-Becker's work, the audience will have a chance to learn more about how women were represented in the past and present and how they responded to that by creating undoubtedly some of the most important artworks. The exhibition will feature artists like Catharina van Hemessen, Rolinda Sharples, and Frida Kahlo.

Women self-portraiture existed all along for centuries, while in men dominated world "it is not until the sixteenth century, however, that the names of women artists, let alone biographical information and body of work, crop up with any frequency" (Borzello, 2016, p.41).
But before further analysis of the historical timeline, it is worth thinking of why the self-portraiture, and in this case the one created by women is such an interesting and important aspect in the context of art and social history. To answer that it is worth asking another question "Why does one paint self"?

From the psychological side, the self could be reflected as a function, a job, a concept, an emotion, a feeling, or a combination of these. A self-portrait could be any work that the artist feels represents this aspect of self.

(Lubell, 1982, p 12-13)

The reasoning for self-portraiture appeared to be strongly related to time. With musical themes being frequent in the 16th century, maternal images in the 18th, and then subjects like pregnancy and sexuality being the main concern for the artists of the 20th century (Borzello, 2016, p 29)

On the other hand, considering the historical implications that women found themselves throughout the centuries the act of painting self was perhaps a response to the female representation in those times. Lack of access to education, the first and second wave of *Feminism*, and later *Modernism* were among those historical events that steadily revealed the power of self-portraits and increased attention to female artists.

Speaking of Modernism, Paula Modersohn-Becker whose work will be the focus of the exhibition, was one of the leading female artists whose work was what shaped the movement and was an aftermath of women's self-portraiture that had its beginning in the

16th century. Thinking again “Why self-portrait”? Modersohn-Becker’s works suggest some interesting ideas “She wanted to paint; in her self-portraits, she presented herself as an unconventional woman able to challenge the social world” (Friedrichsmeyer, 1991).
Paula Modersohn-Becker was incredibly determined to make her artistic dreams come true. She was pressured by her parents to settle down, learn to cook, have a child — a thing that women were expected to do by society, and Paula had an incredible gift to express herself and her notion of those norms. Through her work, not only painting but series of journals and diaries we can notice her struggles of being a woman and an artist. And as odd as it may seem this approach was innovative and modern. This is because she was one of the first to openly express her views, what more paint herself nude, which was a daring move. She went unnoticed for decades, but her work was there all along, making an impact, and writing a history of the 20th century. Now, it is worth going back in time and seeing how self-portraiture got to this point and what artists and historical events influenced it in the past.
With the 16th century came the *Renaissance* but the art world was dominated by men. It is mainly because women with any artistic abilities were not considered worth educating and simply were refused to learn. That may be the point where self-portraiture had its real start in the Western world. During those times is where the oldest surviving example of self-portrait in Western art has been executed – *Self Portrait* by Catharina van Hemessen from 1548. The painting depicts the artist herself at work, with an easel and brushes, a sigh that before was only seen in male portraits. (Borzello, 2016)
Throughout the 18th century, female self-image and representation began to become more common but it was the 19th century that saw a greater change.
First Wave Feminism that emerged out of socialist politics and industrialism influenced women to thrive for better opportunities in various sectors but in this case for access to education, and the doors of art schools in Europe began to open. That was a significant notion that led women to become more daring especially when it comes to painting self-portraits. One example could be Rolinda Sharples who benefited from the artistic education and created a noteworthy self-portrait with her mother, an important example of both self and female representation that depicted women outside their usual domestic setting.

This brings us back to Paula Modersohn-Becker and her importance in the history of female representation. Even though an immense number of female artists came after her, the early years of the 20th century were impactful in the sense that they opened some doors and started conversations that were absent in earlier centuries.” In addition to the almost unheard-of daring in portraying herself nude, which she did not only in the 1906 painting, but it is also the eyes in her self-portraits which issue her challenge” (Friedrichsmeyer, 1991). She often painted herself staring directly into the viewer. For some, it might seem like an aesthetic choice, but it is also another one of the ways she represented herself. And how that representation was unapologetic and convincing. And that is what the 20th century seemed to be about. But it couldn’t have been done without artists before Paula Modersohn-Becker who despite social implications attempted to be seen, to leave their mark.

Artworks in the exhibition start from the oldest to those from the 20th century. One of the first artworks featured in the exhibition to represent self-portrait from the 16th century is

"*Self-portrait* by Catharina Van Hemessen (1528 – after 1583), signed and dated in 1548 it is the oldest surviving example in Western art of a self-portrait showing the painter at work" (Talon, 2019). The painting portrays the artist seated on the chair in front of the easel. The significance of this painting lies not only in the timing of when it was made but the subject matter. In comparison to other work from this period paintings of artists at work were rather rare and van Hemessen opted for this unusual format and painted herself in the action possibly using a mirror. The painting is "radiating professionalism" (Borzello, 2016) and the skills that van Hemessen was taught are clear in this painting.
The 19th century as mentioned was a time of great change. Despite the conventional view of women as delicate and less rational than men female representation through self-portraiture continued to increase. Similarly, van Hemessen Rolinda Sharples (1793-1838) focused on depicting herself as a working artist in *Self-portrait with her mother* Ellen c.1820. Ellen was an important mentor for her talented daughter, encouraging her to go beyond the family tradition" (Mertz,1995).
One of the last paintings in the main room is Frida Kahlo's (1907-1954) and painting *My Birth* (1932). It touches upon the subject of metaphorical pregnancy in the context of her personal experiences. "Her paintings tell stories—intimate, engaging terrifying, and tragic ones" (Udall, 2003-2004).

Going further into the main separate part of the gallery, two of Paula Modersohn-Becker's paintings are hung opposite each other. First *Self-Portrait with an Amber Necklace* (1906). A new type in modern art: the nude, female self-portrait, something that has never been seen before. But in all its novelty and controversy, she keeps the painting fresh and feminine. She portrays herself in a botanical setting.
The second one of her artworks is Self-Portrait on the 6th Wedding Anniversary (1906). The significance of this painting is the fact that it is believed to be the first nude self-portrait, painted by a woman. In the painting, she appears pregnant, but in fact, she was not at the time of executing this artwork. "She pictured herself pregnant without being so may be an indication that as an artist she felt within herself a creative force similar to that of an expectant mother" (Laukötter, 2020 p 32). This painting along with Kahlo's My Birth represents the essence of 20th-century women demanding political and social independence, not being afraid of their femininity.