SCHIRN
KUNSTHALLE
FRANKFURT

HELENE SCHJERFBECK

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WALL PANELS

Helene Schjerfbeck

Schjerfbeck is without a doubt Finland's most prominent female artist. Already during her lifetime, an iconic history grew up around her, closely linking her isolated life – she lived in seclusion from 1902 – and her work. The exhibition shows that Schjerfbeck drew less on her immediate surroundings than on her rich pictorial world, which she had gathered on her earlier travels through Europe and then, starting in 1902, continually developed further from art books and magazines.
Throughout her life, Helene Schjerfbeck produced self-portraits. The early ones, dating from before 1900, are painted in a realistic manner. After 1912 they become more and more modern, and from 1930 onward they develop towards quasi-expressionistic works. While the wraithlike face in the late self-portraits appears to herald the artist's imminent death, the treatment of the material used in the painting expresses enormous vitality. The constant application and removal of the paint and scratching into the picture's surface, far from suggesting infirmity, emphasise the author's strong presence.
In *Self-Portrait with Black Background* of 1915, her name is written out across the entire width of the surface. On the one hand, this bears witness to the painter's strong sense of self-awareness; within the painting, however, it is reminiscent of the lettering on a gravestone. These complex pictorial compositions that oscillate between vitality/presence and death/ absence should under no circumstances be reduced to the assertion that she wore her soul on her sleeve in the self-portraits and documented her process of aging to the point of decay.

Reincarnations

The Convalescent, today Schjerfbeck's most famous painting, was shown at the Paris Salon with the title *Première verdure*, which has been interpreted as a reference to the biographical fact of the broken hip the artist suffered as a child, leaving her with a permanent limp.
Although this painting was executed in a naturalist manner, the emphasis is on the content. Today it is considered the work that marks the end of the artist's naturalist period and at the same time launches her transition to a more psychological and introverted approach. At the request of her art dealer Gösta Stenman, Schjerfbeck painted a more abstract, formally simplified version of the painting. In the late thirties she began working with the medium of lithography, in which she likewise executed a new version of the early work.
This circumstance also helps substantiate the notion that she used prototypes – older paintings, photographs, etc. – as points of departure and bases for new works. Schjerfbeck seems to have developed a limited number of formal schemata that provided a framework within which she could experiment with different kinds of mediums, colours, factures, and surfaces.

The artist took not only herself as her model, but also her early works such as *The Death of Wilhelm von Schwerin*, *The Convalescent*, and *The Seamstress*. She had a reproduction of her own history painting sent to her in 1927. The reinterpretation she described as a 'reincarnation' shows a flattening of the figures and concentration on a reduced number of pictorial elements. In the latest version, Schjerfbeck zoomed in on the motif of the figural group. Here she shows only the upper body of the dead person lying on the stretcher and the seated soldier at the right-hand edge.
While the realistic painting technique of the early versions corresponds to the classical style of academic history painting, the choice of subject in this case is astonishing. History painting was considered to be the highest in the hierarchy of genres and, at the end of the 19th century, was reserved for male artists. Seeking to be appreciated and promoted as an artist, Schjerfbeck deliberately wanted to make her mark in history painting. And she was successful. *Wounded Soldier in the Snow* was her first work to be purchased by the Finnish Art Society, and it brought the seventeenyear- old early recognition.

Male Nudes

In her self-imposed isolation, Schjerfbeck was not beholden to – or at least did not follow – the trends of the art scene. This perhaps also explains the two male nudes completed in 1918 and 1924–25 respectively. Nothing comparable was created during this era – above all, not by a female artist. Hardly anything is known about the origins of the two paintings. They also do not belong in the canon of works usually shown in exhibitions on the artist. In the case of *The Sailor,* the subject is presumably Einar Reuter, Schjerfbeck's trusted friend and first biographer. The model for *Robber at the Gate of Paradise* is thought to have come from within the artist's immediate environment in Tammisaari.
By choosing a comparatively large format, Schjerfbeck lent these works particular importance – her remaining extant oeuvre consists primarily of small-scale paintings. The figures occupy almost the entire pictorial space, and no narrative visual elements are associated with them although the titles would suggest as much. *Robber at the Gate of Paradise* is a poetic and narrative title that contrasts with the descriptive terms Schjerfbeck otherwise gave her works. We can assume that, here as well, the artist took as her point of departure imagery she projected on her sitter. In 1924 she wrote to her friend Dora Estlander: 'It is Huolman, he could be from the harbor in Alexandria – is a harbor there? – or he could be a Tatar prince, though in reality he is from the shores of Saimaa, looks just like a Greco.'

Images as Models

The artistic practice of drawing from existing art is nothing new. On the contrary, copying works from art history was part of the traditional artists' training supported by the Finnish state. In the 1880s and 1890s, bursaries awarded by the Finnish Art Society took Schjerfbeck to Paris, Vienna, St Petersburg, and Florence, where she produced copies of paintings by Hans Holbein the Younger, Frans Hals, Diego Velázquez, Sandro Botticelli, and Gerard ter Borch. These works then became the property of the Finnish National Gallery, where they can still be found today. As pure copies that recreate not only the motifs but also the formal styles of the originals, they are not suitable as a basis for analyzing Schjerfbeck's painterly oeuvre. Recourse to these early

paintings can, however, help us to gain an understanding of her later method of borrowing pictorial motifs from art history and translating them into her own visual language.

After her move to Hyvinkää in 1902, Schjerfbeck saw only a few originals – those brought by Gösta Stenman, her art dealer, for her to view. *Girl Reading* provides evidence that she worked after reproductions: Hans Holbein's *Erasmus of Rotterdam* hangs on the wall behind the two women, depicted as a black-and-white reproduction. At the beginning of the 20th century, in the French art magazine *L'Art et les Artistes*, Schjerfbeck saw a great number of illustrations of paintings which served her as models for her own works: the composition of *Angel Fragment* closely resembles that by El Greco, and her *Woman with Blue Hat* corresponds to a detail in one of Constantin Guys's paintings of the Parisian society. Schjerfbeck's simplified stylistic language, which concentrated on just a few pictorial elements and evolved particularly after the turn of the 20th century, is indebted to the translation of her models into colourless, two-dimensional images.
While in her early copies her tendency to adopt the original working method inevitably placed her in relation to the authors of the originals, in the later works the painting itself attained a kind of subject status. It served as a model for her own work.

SurFaces
People as Projection Surfaces

Shjerfbeck primarily painted people. This is astonishing in view of the fact that, from 1902, she lived a secluded life in the Finnish villages of Hyvinkää and Tammisaari. It is all the more surprising that the supposed 'subjects' were Californian, Spanish, and French women wearing the French fashions of the time – kimonos, elaborate dresses, or costumes. This diversity of cultural influences prompts the suspicion that these are not portraits in the traditional sense, where the appearance of the person sitting for the artist is reproduced during the painting process. Even if people from her immediate environment sat as models, she created her work based on a visual world which she developed on a continual basis by drawing from art books and magazines.
Whereas *Spanish Woman* of 1928 is reminiscent of El Greco's madonnas, the fashionable Parisiennes in paintings by Constantin Guys and the depictions of modern urban women's cropped hairstyles by Dora Estlander, *Girl with Beret* of 1935 recalls the delicate French women Schjerfbeck knew from the Paris fashion magazine *Chiffons*. The real person in her environment became a projection surface for a world conveyed by pictures. Only in very few cases does the person depicted look out of the picture. Most have their eyes closed or their gaze directed downwards. Since they do not engage in any communication with the external world, the impression arises of concentration on something internal. This is where they display the potential of a projection surface – not only for Schjerfbeck, but also for the viewer of her paintings.