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## Mood, Masks, and Melancholy – On Emotion in the Art of Helene Schjerfbeck

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It is clear from Helene Schjerfbeck's portraits that she approached her models with great care and sensitivity, concentrating on their momentary emotional states. However, at second glance, in some of her paintings we also find traces of an underlying aggressiveness and a curious interest in death, particularly in the self-portraits from her final years. Emotion and mood are thus an inherent part of her art.

If we, as spectators, want to come closer to the emotive quality expressed in her art, I suggest looking at her paintings against a hermeneutic-phenomenological background of psychological and philosophical ideas. A key to such understanding is the concept of expression, which I understand less as gesture or facial expression than as an act of expression. In this sense, art is not only about the depiction of representational entities, but can be seen as a complex of many more layers, including aesthetic creation.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains in *Phenomenology of Perception*, '...had we not eyes, or more generally senses, there would be no painting at all for us, yet the picture "tells" us more than the mere use of our senses can ever do.'<sup>1</sup> That is because a painting – in fact each brushstroke – is the result of an expression, which is inseparable from the painter's identity, experiences, sorrows and joys.

The analysis of paintings such as *The Seamstress (The Working Woman)* of 1905, *The Red Haired Girl I* (1915) and *The Gypsy Woman* (1919) has shown that, with the help of well balanced, simplified shaping and colouring, reduced to a few corresponding tones, and blurred contours, Schjerfbeck establishes a harmonious overall effect. While the dark toned *Seamstress* emanates a calm and peaceful, almost melancholic mood, the light coloured *Red Haired Girl I* shows a ruddy-cheeked girl shamefully shying away from us. A few years later, when Schjerfbeck painted *The Gypsy Woman*, fear and despair seem to have predominated in her paintings.

The changing moods and emotions in Schjerfbeck's oeuvre are mirrored in the techniques with which she expresses herself – her treatment of colour, form and texture. The rubbing out of painted sections, for example, reveals her more vigorous, aggressive style. At the same time, however, it attests to her love of experimentation. For Schjerfbeck, painting meant more than naturally depicting the 'other' in a certain affective state; it meant delving deeper into the unconscious, to explore the 'dense depths of the soul'<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, (Smith, Colin, transl.) 2005. *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge, 347.

<sup>2</sup> 'I have always searched for the dense depths of the soul (...), where everything is still unconscious – there one can make the greatest.' Helene Schjerfbeck quoted in Ahtela H. 1953, *Helene Schjerfbeck*, 155.