

The Enigma of Helene Schjerfbeck

Interview by Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

As the Finnish National Gallery announces a new donation of Helene Schjerfbeck's letters, Gill Crabbe interviews Lena Holger, who has been a scholar of this intriguing artist since the 1970s and whose extensive research work has been significant in producing new knowledge and questions regarding Schjerfbeck's art and life

GC A private individual has recently donated to the Finnish National Gallery eight letters written by Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946) that were in the possession of the donor's family. The letters relate to Schjerfbeck's last years of life in Sweden, from 1944 to 1945, when she resided in Saltsjöbaden's spa hotel. The letters were written to Schjerfbeck's second cousin, the artist Martha Neiglick-Platonoff (1889–1964). What research questions do you imagine are prompted by the emergence of these letters?

LH Helene Schjerfbeck longed to return home to Finland for most of the two years that she stayed in Sweden, which were her last years. She wanted to have her relatives nearby and would certainly have appreciated such correspondence highly. I have not seen the letters yet, but hopefully they contain more than mere family matters. I presume that Martha Neiglick-Platonoff's letters to Schjerfbeck have disappeared, like so many other letters addressed to Helene Schjerfbeck.

GC What is the significance of the 1912 *Self-Portrait* which was recently purchased by the Ateneum Art Museum? This self-portrait has been known and exhibited, but there is clearly a new interest in portraiture and self-portraits internationally, so are there new angles to this part of Schjerfbeck's oeuvre?

LH Portraits always say more about a person than a photograph does, and a painted self-portrait says even more. I have written about this self-portrait from 1912 in an article about international influences in the book accompanying the 1997 exhibition in Denmark at Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, 'Helene Schjerfbeck: kvinder, mandsportraetter, selvportraetter, landskaber, stilleben' (Helene Schjerfbeck: women, portraits of men, self-portraits, landscapes, still-lives), and more recently in my book for the Ateneum Art Museum in 2016. It is a sign of a new self-confidence and a kind of 'goodbye' to the artist world, which had not accepted her as an artist colleague. In the painting, one of her eyes is without an iris as though she was blind: blind to the world or blind to the critics. She is also turning her painting soul and face to the public again after about 10 years of painting in solitude. She had latterly entered on her own path as an artist and she shows it here.

GC There has been much speculation about who was her one-time fiancé; you suggest in your recent book that it might have been the Swedish artist Otto Hagborg; others say it was an Englishman. How important is it to know who it was in terms of her as an artist?

LH The most important fact for posterity is that she did not marry. Otherwise she would have been stuck in the role of housewife and, like most of the women at that time, she would



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait*, 1912, oil on canvas
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis

have had no time for her own work. Luckily for her art, she had all the time she wanted after her engagement was broken, but for her sensitive soul it was very hard. And is it not always interesting to know who is hiding behind such an anonymous title as 'an Englishman'? Why was it so important to conceal his identity? Did he really influence her in her painting? In a way, that man, whoever he was, did her a favour. She was forced to go her own way.

GC During her early years in France, Schjerfbeck's painting motifs differed from those of her contemporaries. Has there been much research into finding out why that was so?

LH *Not very much, but a certain amount. As early as 1992, I wrote about that period of 'breaking new ground' in an exhibition catalogue for the Ateneum Art Museum in an essay entitled 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained: Helene Schjerfbeck's struggle for her painting in 1892–1917'.*

GC In your book, you say that her painting *The Door* (1884) was kept secret and not exhibited until 1917. Is this a significant area to be researched? A constant thread in the art-historical discourse about Schjerfbeck is her being deliberately hidden, withdrawn from the world etc. Do you think that she really was so 'far from the rest of the world' as has been stated?

LH *No, I do not think she was so 'far from the rest of the world'. Admittedly, she was not in Helsinki for several years at the beginning of the 20th century, but for reasons that were*



Helene Schjerfbeck, *The Door*, 1884, oil on canvas
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis

*mostly political. We often forget that Finland at that time was struggling to be free from Russia and people had other things to be concerned about than artists. Another reason is that artists at that time seldom had solo exhibitions, particularly women artists. When she was given the opportunity to have a solo show for the first time in 1917, she exhibited *The Door*. Of course she could have sent it to the autumn exhibition of the Finnish Art Society the year it was painted, in 1884. But she had received such harsh reviews from the critics the previous year, and I think that is the reason why she didn't submit it then.*

GC What are the further research questions relating to her time spent in Cornwall and London?
 LH To find her 'hidden', or rather, forgotten paintings in the UK.

GC Related to this, Schjerfbeck exhibited two paintings in London in 1889–90, *Wild Flowers* and *A Hard Lesson*. Another painting, *Twilight*, which also went on display in London in another exhibition in 1890, is also missing. Are their whereabouts still unknown? What research questions might relate to these works if they were found?

LH It would complete the documentation of an important time in her life and show how she worked in the company of the other artists in *St Ives*, and in the art class taken by Adrian and Marianne Stokes. In Finland she liked to have a studio companion and they often painted the

same motif. We might find more examples of that. Who did she paint with, apart from Maria Wiik, who joined her in *St Ives* some months later in 1889? It would also be interesting to find out how many motifs she produced using the scrape technique while in *St Ives*.

GC Are there research questions relating to her textile works, and relating to fashion and other non-fine art visual culture?

LH Her textile work and non-fine art craft/design work were first researched by Eeva Toikka in 1994 in her Master's thesis (written in Finnish) at Jyväskylä University, but there is certainly more to do. Schjerfbeck's standing as an artist in handicraft circles was admired, but not taken so seriously. She was first and foremost a painter.

GC Relating to those years in Hyvinkää, her painting style evolved dramatically during those times – for example her use of a simplified, reduced palette, with colour and marks used as motifs in themselves – yet she kept away from art circles. So what influenced those changes?

LH In the first years in Hyvinkää she found it difficult to paint. She walked around the village and made notes in small, simple drawings of flowers, leaves, the colours of the clothes of the immigrants at the railway station and so on. She went home to her studio and room, and made patterns for textiles out of her nature studies. They had to be simplified to be usable. She could then sell them to the Finnish Handicraft Society to earn a living. That is how she started redacting motifs. During this period, she was fully aware of what was happening in art circles in France and in the UK especially. She studied and followed the art magazines *L'Art et les Artistes* and *The Studio*.

GC Are there any research questions relating to her prints – do we know why many prints of her painting *At the Hearth* (1893) were destroyed, for example?

LH Yes, it is simply because she did not like the print of *At the Hearth*. It did not come out the way she expected. She tried to improve it by adding some pastel colours in 1945, but was, however, never satisfied with the print.

GC Are there any other research questions you think should be addressed?

LH There are certainly more areas for further research, for example regarding her place in Finnish society at that time and the status of female and male artists. Was there a difference? Another question is what impact, if any, do her paintings have on the artists of today, considering, for example, the current interest in her work in Japan, as well as in Germany?

GC Has the growing international art-historical interest in Schjerfbeck already changed her status within the canon of Finnish art and on the other hand within international modern art of the early 20th century? It would also be interesting to hear what you think about Schjerfbeck's linking with international art trends and modern artists, thinking about our international modern art canons and narratives.

LH In my opinion she is one of the best artists in international modern art, despite – if I may put it that way – the fact that she was a woman artist. However, I myself am not so concerned with gender. She is an artist, an artist who is as good as Rembrandt, for example, and as good as a modern artist like Francis Bacon.

Artists of the Ateneum: Helene Schjerfbeck, by Lena Holger, was published in 2016, Ateneum Publications vol. 84, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki. It is the first in a new series of books on individual artists in the museum's collection.