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Showing Schjerfbeck in London

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

The major survey exhibition of Helene Schjerfbeck at London's Royal Academy of Arts, which travels to Helsinki in November, marks an important collaboration with the Ateneum Art Museum and has put Finland's national treasure firmly on the wider European cultural map. Gill Crabbe met Jeremy Lewison, the lead curator of the exhibition in London, to discuss the significance of Schjerfbeck's work and how he conceived the show for the Academy's new gallery space



Installation view of
the 'Helene Schjerfbeck'
exhibition at the Royal
Academy of Arts, London,
20 July – 27 October, 2019
Photo: David Parry

How did you come across the work of Helene Schjerfbeck?

I first saw her work in an exhibition called 'Identity and Alterity', organised by Jean Claire, at the Venice Biennale in 1995, and there were five self-portraits in that show. I remember being struck not only by the power of these portraits but also their imaginative quality and they just seemed to be very different and shocking in many ways – not all of them were late self-portraits, they ranged across her career. I thought, here is an artist I'd like to find out more about. I did nothing until after I had set up on my own and in the Nordic region I came across her work in different places and saw a survey show in Gothenburg around 2009–10. However, at that show I didn't really have any sense of the coherence of her work and I was not so impressed. But I kept thinking there must be another way of looking at the work, especially as the self-portraits were so powerful, so I began to do my own research. When I was working on the Alice Neel show in Helsinki I was given a copy of the catalogue of the 'Helene Schjerfbeck: 150 years'

The independent curator Jeremy Lewison has a distinguished track record, beginning as curator at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge in 1977. In 1983 he moved to the Tate Gallery in London, initially as a curator in the print collection, becoming Assistant Keeper and then Deputy Keeper in the Modern Collection and culminating in his role as Director of Collections in 1998. In 2002 he left Tate to set up his own consultancy as an independent curator and advisor. Since then he has curated a number of significant exhibitions, including 'Ben Nicholson' for the Museum of Modern art in Hayama, Japan in 2004, and 'Turner Monet Twombly: Later Paintings' (2011–12), which travelled from the Moderna Museet in Stockholm – breaking their attendance record, with over 250,000 visitors – to the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart and Tate Liverpool. He has also curated two major Alice Neel retrospectives, one of which took place at the Ateneum Art Museum in 2016



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Stubborn Girl*, 1939,
 oil on canvas,
 42cm x 42cm
 Private Collection, Paris

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

celebration exhibition at the Ateneum Art Museum (2012) and it was at that point I thought I could put together an interesting exhibition. It took a while to raise a wider interest in the project in London. Then in 2016 I asked if the Ateneum Art Museum would support my effort to organise an exhibition in London. Susanna Pettersson, then Director of the museum, was enthusiastic and I suggested that the Royal Academy of Arts would be the right place.

Why did you suggest the RA?

The Academy mounts both large survey shows in its Main Galleries and mid-scale exhibitions in the Sackler Wing of Galleries and in its new space, the Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler Galleries. Since Helene Schjerfbeck had a strong relationship to Old Master painting – and so historically does the RA – I thought the Academy could be an interesting context in which to show her work. I put together a presentation for RA Artistic Director Tim Marlow, curator Sarah Lea and exhibitions producer Andrea Tarsia and they were enthusiastic. That was in 2017. Then it had to go to the RA's Exhibitions Committee – comprising mainly Royal Academicians – and they approved it.

Can you say something about how you collaborated on this project with the Ateneum?

It goes without saying that the Ateneum was indispensable to the project both as the major repository of Schjerfbeck's work and as a centre of Schjerfbeck scholarship. I benefited hugely from the advice of their chief curator Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, who generously provided introductions to collectors and curators and helped to negotiate loans. We also had fruitful discussions about the content of the show and some of the interpretative ideas I was putting forward. And finally the Ateneum's conservators, registrars and art handlers were also instrumental in the successful organisation of the exhibition.



Helene Schjerfbeck,
My Mother, 1909,
 oil on canvas,
 81cm x 83,5cm
 Private Collection

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Yehia Eweis

Is there a trend of finding 'new' women artists to show?

It's great they are currently being foregrounded and it's true women are getting more shows. In the UK there have been recent exhibitions of Lee Krasner at the Barbican Art Gallery, and Faith Ringold at the Serpentine Gallery, as well as a number of shows at Tate Modern. I think this is partly connected to the fact there are now many women museum directors, such as Frances Morris at Tate Modern and Iwona Blazwick at the Whitechapel Gallery. It's good that there are more women involved at a high level in the UK cultural sphere.

In a way this show is particularly timely as there is almost a groundswell of activity foregrounding women artists...

I think in the case of Helene Schjerfbeck it was not just because she was a woman that has precluded her from being shown outside the Nordic region – although in the past ten years there have been solo shows of her work in Hamburg and Paris, in Frankfurt and also in Japan – but by and large she hasn't been shown outside the region because, from an art-historical perspective, she was in what was regarded as a peripheral country. The centres of modernism were regarded as Paris, New York, possibly Berlin and London. They were not Helsinki or Stockholm – that is how art history was written. But now, with the globalisation of culture, art historians have revised that idea and there's less of a view that, somehow, unless you were in one of those centres, what you were doing was derivative and uninteresting. There are many different narratives of art history.



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait*, 1884–85,
 oil on canvas,
 50cm x 41cm

**Friends of Ateneum, Finnish National
 Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum**

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Henri Tuomi



How would you position Helene Schjerfbeck within European modern art today?

I think we have to look beyond the notion of modernism as an idea of progression, of moving away from realism. The idea of positioning her within modern art, for me, is a bit of a red herring. I'm interested in the fact that she engaged with a tradition, with the history of art, mostly from the trecento period onwards, and was trying to bring it into a modern context to give it a modern idiom, not so much updating it, but trying to find a relevance for it within the modern age and that relevance comes from her own transformation of those traditions. Of course, you could say that of Picasso and Matisse – they were plundering the history of art and making something new from it. But that's what Schjerfbeck was doing too. So in that sense you can situate her quite firmly within the modern or the early modernist tradition inasmuch as she engaged with that tradition and was making a modern statement from it.

How did you conceive of the RA show for a UK audience?

From the start I wanted to assemble a really good group of self-portraits that would be the kernel of the exhibition but at the same time I wanted to show the development of her oeuvre. The most interesting works from the UK perspective were post-1900 and mostly portraits. There are only a handful of artists who have made series of great self-portraits in the 20th century – Bonnard, Picasso and Munch come to mind – but here there is an extraordinary sequence of self-portraits by Schjerfbeck. You can also compare her with the work of the Bloomsbury Group – with Vanessa Bell, Gwen John, for example. Schjerfbeck's works speak of celibacy, they are almost monastic and ascetic and utterly self-possessed. And that's where she has a kinship with Gwen John. There is this tradition in British art of artists who are women who have discreet oeuvres that are powerful and different. And Helene Schjerfbeck chimes with that.

At the same time my colleagues at the Royal Academy thought that it would be good to focus on work from her time in St Ives, and there are several works in the show, even though she was only there for a relatively short period in 1887 and 1889. And of course we have an essay on St Ives by co-curator Desiree de Chair in the catalogue.

What kind of research did you undertake in the process of developing this show?

For me, one of the research questions focused on how Schjerfbeck gained access to the art of the Old Masters. When she was in Paris, London and in Florence she saw this art first hand, but after the 1890s she didn't travel again and would only have seen reproductions in the print media. So the important thing for me was to go through the magazines that were available to her. We knew she read *L'Amour de L'art* and *The Studio*, up to a point, and *L'Art et les artistes*, so I sat down and went through every copy of those magazines up until the day she died.



Helene Schjerfbeck,
Self-Portrait, Old Painter, 1945,
 oil on canvas,
 32cm x 26cm
 Private Collection

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen

That would have amounted to hundreds of issues...

I studied them in the Tate Research Centre and the National Art Library at the V&A in London. I was also interested in tracking down the fashion magazines she read, so at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris I combed through editions of *Chiffons*, looking for any relationships with Schjerfbeck's images. That magazine was not available in London. Of course, all of the reproductions from that period are printed in black and white, so in fact what Schjerfbeck was seeing was form and tonality, she wasn't seeing colour. For example, there is a portrait by Antonello da Messina in *L'Art et les artistes* (December 1925), and whereas the colour in the actual work is brilliant orange, Schjerfbeck would have simply seen a grey tonal image. To my mind it bore a close resemblance to *Self-Portrait* (1935), in pose and tone. All of that research contributed to the essay I wrote for the catalogue. So in researching the artist I wanted to be aware of the context in which she was looking at works of art.

This kind of research moves into the territory of hypothesising as to what might have influenced her and how. Were there cross references with other kinds of research material, such as letters?

Yes, there are occasions in her letters she writes about artworks she has seen and it coincides in time with things I found in the magazines. For example, in a letter of July 1925 she writes to Maria Wiik that she has been looking at paintings by Cézanne and Van Gogh, as well as Cambodian sculpture, in *L'Amour de l'art*.

Were there any other outcomes from your research?

I think the emphasis I place on the Rococo revival. My research has led me to suggest that the Neo Rococo was more important to Schjerfbeck than perhaps has been previously considered. There was an excellent exhibition in 2015 at the Serlachius Museum in Mänttä on 'Neo Rococo and the North', that touched on Schjerfbeck – there was a reference in the catalogue to her masked portrait *Masquerade (Rococo Lady)* (1890). But when one thinks that she was



Helene Schjerfbeck,
The Skier (English Girl), 1909,
 oil on canvas,
 46cm x 40cm
 Sven-Harry's konstmuseum,
 Stockholm, inv. SHK26

Photo: Per Myrehed

in Edelfelt's studio in Paris in 1885 at the height of the Rococo revival – he was making Neo-Rococo paintings – she could not have missed it. The Swedish Royal family collected Rococo art in the 18th century and now at the end of the 19th century it had come back into fashion in the Nordic countries, through the enthusiasm of Nordic painters, like Edelfelt, who lived in or visited Paris. In following up this thread, I looked at Schjerfbeck's portrait *The Skier (English Girl)* from 1909, with its mask-like face and highly rouged cheeks in the manner of a Pierrot, that seemed to me to be a key painting in that sense. It seemed to me to be something of a parody of the Neo Rococo. Make-up, masking, fashion were all themes of the Rococo period.

Were there other themes you wished to develop?

Yes, the influence of Japonisme. For the Ateneum's 2016 exhibition 'Japanomania in the Nordic Countries', Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff wrote an interesting catalogue essay on the influence of the Japanese sensibility on Nordic artists, including Schjerfbeck. Schjerfbeck's interest in Japanese woodcuts and Japanese culture in general relates to the idea of masks and masking in her work and I wanted to explore that further.

How did you do that?

In my essay I wrote about the concept of the mask in her portraits. In the second decade of the 20th century, something seems to have occurred that stopped her from making psychologically penetrative portraits. It was as though the shutters came down, perhaps the result of the romantic rebuff she received from Einar Reuter in 1919. Thereafter if the paintings become introspective there seems no way for the viewer to understand the preoccupations of the sitters. The works have a general air of grief and melancholy, perhaps a projection of Schjerfbeck's own state of mind. Her models were not always present – sometimes she had to finish her paintings from memory, working from her imagination and



Helene Schjerfbeck,
The Seamstress (The Working Woman), 1905,
 oil on canvas,
 95.5cm x 84.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



therefore projecting herself onto the image. *Profile of a Woman (from Memory)* (1932) is an example. Schjerfbeck herself said she would love to be able to get inside these people and find out their inner thoughts and in fact nearly all of her portraits feature figures who refuse the gaze – they are looking down or away, and appear masked and not showing strong emotion. Those large eyes in her self-portraits are set back from the face, as though behind a mask, and it reminds me of the subsequent work of Gillian Wearing and Cindy Sherman. That is how Helene Schjerfbeck is relevant to today. Again, with the self-portraits from her final 10 years, they look less and less like her and are instead more and more an image of either what she feels or some kind of mask – the last few appear more like death masks.

Turning towards the exhibition hang, the show was presented in the RA's Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler Galleries which, since it opened last year, has hosted the film installations and drawings of Tacita Dean, the monumental-scale sculptures of Phyllida Barlow, and architect Renzo Piano's survey show with its models and display tables. How did you feel about creating the hang in that space, with its very high ceilings in two of the three rooms?

This is the first classical painting show to be mounted in that gallery. Because most of Helene Schjerfbeck's works are relatively small scale, one of the issues was how to stop the hang looking like a row of postage stamps on the wall. I knew immediately that I had to break up those two large galleries and at one point I was thinking of having a couple of return walls

coming out of the long doorless walls. Then Anna-Maria, Sarah and I had our first meeting with the designer Robin Kiang, who suggested installing freestanding walls in the gallery in order to break up the space without dividing it. We needed to make the spaces human scale. To stop those screens being overpowering Robin suggested they should be the height of the doorways. I also knew immediately that I wanted to group all of the self-portraits together in the central room – which is smaller, with lower ceilings and a more intimate space – in order to create an interlude or focal point within the show. I thought this would make a huge impact, whereas were we to have distributed the self-portraits throughout the show chronologically I think the effect would have been dissipated. It seemed to me that in making these self-portraits Schjerfbeck was acutely aware of her own history of self-portraiture, so that each work responded to previous works. They were not executed in isolation.

Yes, that central room creates a powerful narrative of her life from her first self-portrait of 1884 to her last drawing in 1945. But what about the transition into the last room?

I was careful to position *Costume Painting II* (1909) in the final room, directly in line with *Tapestry* (1914–16) from the first room, so that the visitor could look in both directions through the enfilade and pick up the continuity from the first to the last room.

Were there key paintings you felt must be displayed in this show?

Of course, every painting here is a key painting. When you conceive an exhibition you are looking to create conversations between works of art, so the loss of one work would make that difficult, but some of the late self-portraits I felt were indispensable. Also *Silence* (1907), *The Seamstress (The Working Woman)* (1905) and *The Skier (English Girl)* (1909). The portraits of Schjerfbeck's mother were really important. When you look at the portraits of her mother you then begin to read her self-portraits against them. Schjerfbeck keenly observed her mother in old age and responded to her isolation by depicting her alone, refusing to engage with her daughter. She is an absent presence. In her late self-portraits I sense Schjerfbeck recalled her mother, and identified with her separation and her depression. There is a strong sense of exile in both the depiction of her mother and her self-depiction, as well as a sense of absence, a fading away.

Were there any works you didn't include that you would have liked to show?

We were able to get the loans of everything we asked for. However, there were paintings I would have liked to have shown if the exhibition had been bigger. There was no doubt that if this exhibition would have been shown in another museum with a different curator it might not have been as spacious as I have hung it, but I felt it was important to allow each work to breathe. I would have liked to have had more landscapes as I think some of her landscapes were quite radical and ahead of the game, such as *Park Bench (Little Park in Sjundby)* (c. 1885), and a beautiful snowscape, *Snow Covered Tree* (1908), *Pear Tree* (1905), which has a distinctly Japanese feel to it – and also *The Apple Girl* (1928). There is also *Katri Reading* (c. 1917–18), a painting which I relate to the work of late Sickert. But I would have had to eliminate one of the portraits of her mother to accommodate them and in the end I felt that to have three portraits of her mother was a more powerful statement.

How have British audiences responded to the exhibition?

The exhibition is well attended so far and the lecture I gave at the RA was more or less sold out. I will be interested to hear the discussions at the symposium the Academy is running on 27 September, at which Sarah, Anna-Maria and I are chairing sessions. Among the distinguished speakers at the conference is Griselda Pollock, one the UK's leading art historians and professor at Leeds University. Griselda, who has pioneered feminist art history from the late 1970s onwards, has a strong interest in Schjerfbeck and Käthe Kollwitz. Contemporary artists Chantal Joffe RA, AK Dolven and Ian McKeever RA are also in conversation there too.