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Beyond Borders

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

The Helene Schjerfbeck exhibitions in London and Helsinki are a result of extensive international collaboration between the researchers, curators and the two institutions involved. Chief Curator of the Ateneum Art Museum Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff discusses the research processes, preparations and the themes that emerged for the two shows with Gill Crabbe

In 2018, when the Chief Curator of the Ateneum Art Museum Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff travelled to the UK to undertake new research in preparation for the Helene Schjerfbeck exhibition at London's Royal Academy of Arts, she was keen to visit St Ives in Cornwall, as Schjerfbeck had done in the 1880s. Among other things von Bonsdorff hoped to find out whether any of the works known to have been sold in England, but whose whereabouts were currently unknown, might come to light.

'This is the period in Schjerfbeck's career that we don't know so much about,' she explains, 'so it was a great opportunity to collaborate with the Royal Academy's curator, Desiree de Chair, and really get to know more about the artist's time in St Ives.' Von Bonsdorff in fact spent two months in the UK alongside her counterparts at the RA, as part of her research for the exhibition, which has now travelled back to Finland to be presented in an expanded version at the Ateneum Art Museum. She was enabled by an innovative and generous professional development scheme in which the Finnish National Gallery provides opportunities for staff to work for an extended period in a museum or cultural institution abroad. 'London is a very international scene, so for us it was important to be able to show Helene Schjerfbeck there – and like Jeremy Lewison, who curated the show with us, said, the RA is a perfect place to show Schjerfbeck.'

Von Bonsdorff travelled to Cornwall with Desiree de Chair, who was researching for the essay on the St Ives period for the catalogue. 'I wanted to find out more about the times when Schjerfbeck was travelling and building her career,' says von Bonsdorff. 'We were there in March, at the same time of year that Schjerfbeck was there, to see the places where she was living, drawing and painting. St Ives has this extraordinary luminous light, steep streets and very particular air and atmosphere.' While there, von Bonsdorff was struck by the primroses in bloom, as Schjerfbeck had used the flower as a motif in *The Girl from St Ives (Redhead)*, from 1890. It is the only painting that the artist signed as being from St Ives, although at least 12 of her known paintings come from her time spent there.

'I found out in studying this period how Schjerfbeck was adopting a Victorian element in her painting by introducing flowers and plants as symbolic motifs. We visited the local museum in Penzance and there were several paintings from that period depicting girls holding primroses. The museum curator then told us about Primrose Day, which was marked annually to honour the Victorian Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. I believe that by including this flower motif in this and other flowers and plants in paintings from this trip, such as *The Convalescent*, she took up a very British theme in Victorian painting.'

It is this kind of collaboration that can yield fresh insights that cannot be gained other than by researching *in situ*. It was an unusually close knit co-operation, not only



Helene Schjerfbeck, *The Cossack (The Beautiful Cossack)*, 1878, oil on canvas, 60cm x 44cm, Yrjö and Nanny Kaunisto Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Spaniard*, 1881, oil on canvas, 41.5cm x 31cm, Ester and Jalo Sihtola Fine Arts Foundation Donation, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

because of the length of time von Bonsdorff spent at the RA but also because, as she says, 'for a non-Finnish curator or institution it is quite difficult to curate an exhibition of an artist like Schjerfbeck, where the context and culture are so unfamiliar.' Working together, von Bonsdorff was able to translate for de Chair from key texts in Finnish on the artist, such as Riitta Konttinen's seminal work from 2004, *Oma tie*, as well as having ongoing in-depth discussions as they prepared essays for the catalogue. This sharing of knowledge during her time there extended to many departments within the RA, with von Bonsdorff giving presentations, showing images of Schjerfbeck's paintings, and explaining the historical context of Finland's art scene at the end of the 19th century to staff for whom the artist was 'Finland's best kept secret'.

'From the start I felt quite at home,' von Bonsdorff continues. 'I was struck by how little differences there were, working as a curator. It's such an international profession, because the core of what we do is international. The staff are also very cosmopolitan at the RA.' The Finnish curator was also interested in the RA as an institution, as she has an ongoing research project on the history of the Ateneum and she saw parallels with the RA in being not only a museum but also an art school. 'When the Ateneum building was renovated in the 1980s our two Academy schools moved out but, like the RA, we used to have schools here too.'

As well as working with de Chair in London, von Bonsdorff joined forces with independent curator Jeremy Lewison, who had first mooted the idea for the London show for Schjerfbeck and was lead curator at the London end. Von Bonsdorff took the two British

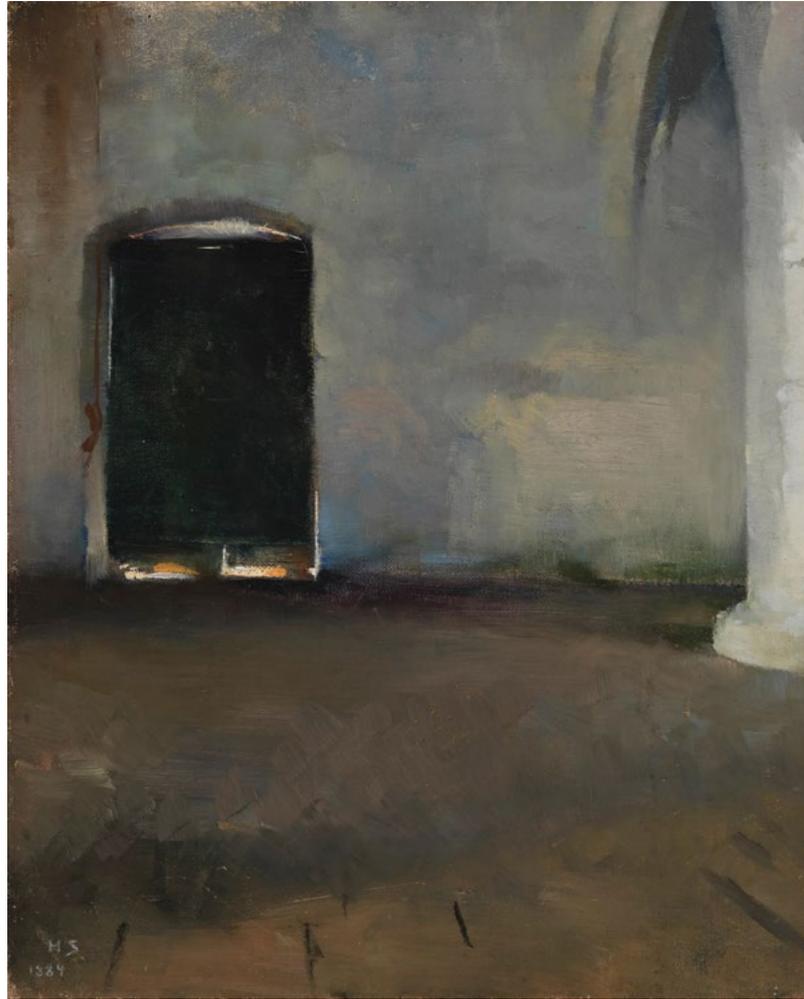
curators to see the material in the collections in Finland, as well as meeting lenders. Their research continued in Stockholm – where a large part of the Ateneum’s Schjerfbeck collection happened to be on display in the exhibition ‘The Modern Woman’ at the Millesgården – and also took them to see works in private collections. The three of them collaborated along with two more curators from the RA, Sarah Lea and Rebecca Bray. In her additional role as head of Research Projects for the Ateneum von Bonsdorff was also aware of the opportunity to promote its Finnish artists to scholars and publicise research in English. So she also worked on arranging an academic seminar at the RA to coincide with the London show that included sessions on European artist colonies, modernist artists sources, and self-portraits.

The extent of the collaboration between the institutions and between the show’s curators, especially for the London show, has helped secure Helene Schjerfbeck a place on the wider international map of European artists from this period. ‘For the London exhibition, we knew that because there were just three rooms in which to show Schjerfbeck’s work we would need a tight narrative for the 60–70 paintings selected. It was a very interesting process and I am so happy about the result. I think it also has to do with the fact that we had so much time together to share ideas and shape the exhibition.’ The show was also considered a resounding success by the Royal Academy, attracting 67,000 visitors – an average of 660 per day – and the catalogue reaching number 6 in the UK’s top artbook sales. Impressive figures for an artist hitherto virtually unknown to British audiences.

While the London exhibition was very much an introduction to Schjerfbeck’s work, based on in-depth research, covering her entire career, and giving centre stage to the artist’s remarkable body of self-portraits, the Helsinki show required a different treatment for an artist who is a household name in Finland and who is regarded as a national treasure. ‘In choosing the title for the Helsinki show, “Through my Travels I Found Myself”, we wanted to emphasise Schjerfbeck’s periods of travelling in Paris, Florence, Brittany and St Ives, and how these trips helped her in building her career,’ says von Bonsdorff, ‘because this aspect of her oeuvre hasn’t been shown before in Finland.’ This theme also relates to the history of the Ateneum – how an 11-year-old received special permission to join the Finnish Art Society Drawing School at a time when gender issues throughout Europe militated against women gaining access to formal art education, yet in Finland girls were admitted to the School from the outset, but rarely as young as this. ‘From our research I could see signs that from the start, the young Schjerfbeck was developing an international career, which is quite different from many other artists that I have studied.’ Helsinki’s expanded show of 130 works, includes sketches and drawings, as well as paintings. ‘I wanted to emphasise the art schooling system in Finland at end of 19th century – how important it was for an artist to secure grants to go to Paris, because at that time our art school was for drawing, not painting.’ So in Helsinki, Schjerfbeck supplemented her art education with evening classes in painting in a private studio run by Adolf von Becker. To show some of the development in her technical skills from these very early years, the first room of the Helsinki show includes two male portraits hung side by side – *The Cossack (The Beautiful Cossack)* made in Helsinki in 1878, and *Spaniard*, painted in 1881, while she was studying at Colorassi’s studio in Paris.

In the exhibition catalogue von Bonsdorff argues that ‘in later life, Schjerfbeck was often to draw on the eclecticism of her former years’. A new interpretation of Schjerfbeck’s artistic development – that her experimentation started earlier than previously thought, in Paris and was a much longer process – is threaded through the Helsinki show. It was in Paris (1880–82), before her sojourns in St Ives, that the young Schjerfbeck had her first chance to see Old Master paintings in the flesh, at the Musée de Cluny and the Louvre. These would give her much food for thought as she developed her ideas and was exposed to new painting techniques. ‘When she went to the Louvre she went back to the Old Masters – Botticelli, Holbein, Velázquez – and tried technical methods and ideas that were new to her.

One painting von Bonsdorff had not been previously aware of – ‘a happy coincidence that happened during the research process’ – reveals some of these new ideas Schjerfbeck was exploring. ‘Jeremy found this lovely early painting, *Girl with a Madonna* (1881), from the Helsingborg Museum in southern Sweden, in which a young girl, wearing a late-medieval dress, places a small sprig of flowers in front of a Madonna statue and I believe that work was inspired by her visit to the Musée de Cluny. The painting is not in the 2012 catalogue



Helene Schjerfbeck,
The Door, 1884, oil on
 canvas, 40.5cm x 32.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Yehia Eweis

raisonnée of Schjerfbeck, so it was a great find for this exhibition.’ Importantly, it also shows that she was dressing up her models from early on in her career, something that became a key aspect of her oeuvre from 1910 on, when she used contemporary French fashion images from magazines as visual sources for clothing her models in the portraits from Hyvinkää. The discovery of this work also points up the value of smaller museums uploading data and images of their collections online. It had come into the Swedish museum’s hands via a bequest made by a donor who was originally from Porvoo, near Helsinki. The museum had uploaded data on it only recently and Lewison had found it while trawling the Internet.

In focusing on Schjerfbeck’s travels von Bonsdorff not only wanted to highlight the effect the different places she visited had on her painting, but also how what she learned in one country was carried over into works made on other trips. ‘I was curious to see what happened to her painting style when she went to Cornwall. She used all the French naturalism and motifs she had learned in Paris, in works such as *The Convalescent* (1888), but I believe she was looking for something new already back in 1884 in Pont-Aven, when she started with *The Door*, using an almost monochromatic palette and removing all people from the scenes. She continued the Brittany experiment in St Ives in *The Bakery* (1887), a scene that her host, Adrian Scott Stokes, chose to paint with four people inside in a typically Victorian style. Schjerfbeck just became curious to find out what would happen if she took the people out – this was an innovative move, as paintings from that period, apart from landscapes, usually featured people.’

For the Helsinki show von Bonsdorff also wanted to include Schjerfbeck’s travels to Italy in 1894, in what was to be the last of her study trips abroad. While in Paris in 1887–89,



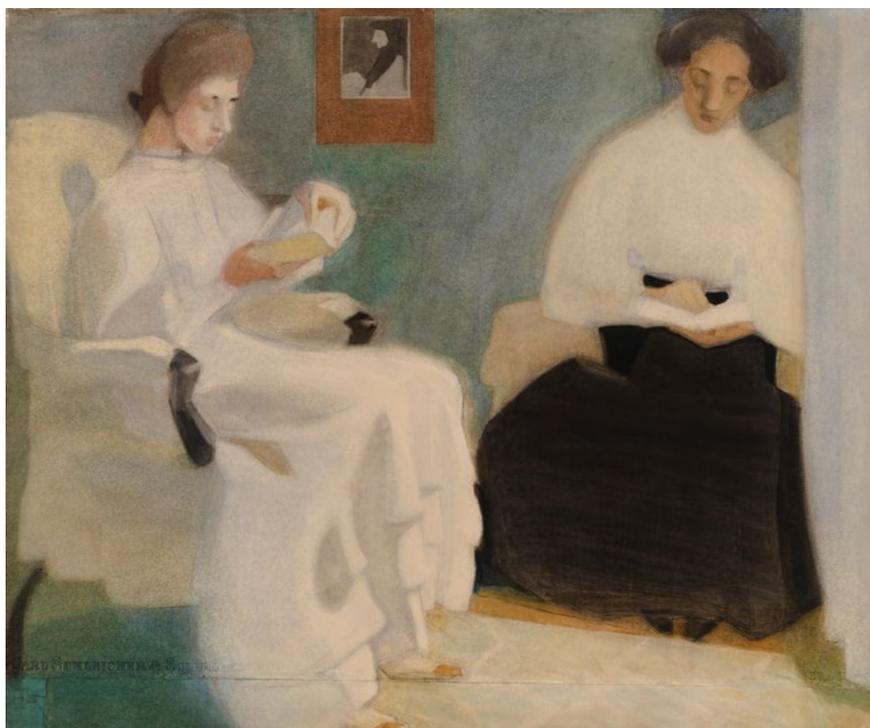
Helene Schjerfbeck,
Cypresses, Fiesole, 1894,
 oil on canvas,
 43.5cm x 62.5cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen

on a visit to the Louvre, the artist had been fascinated with the fresco technique she saw in Botticelli's painting of Lorenzo de Medici, which she copied in oil applied thinly onto canvas. On showing it to her fellow Finnish artist Fanny Churberg she was told that the matte, soft chalky colours of fresco cannot be realised in oils. Thus, when Schjerfbeck travelled to Florence in 1894 with Finnish artist Ellen Thesleff, the two of them made copies of Fra Angelico's frescoes in the monks' cells at San Marco, mostly in pencil. 'In her paintings from Italy, such as *Cypresses, Fiesole* (1894), the misty treatment of the landscape is almost abstract, and breaks completely from the very strong naturalist way of painting, to using soft tones in a limited palette with an atmospheric touch – this treatment is also similar to the *Girl From St Ives* of 1890, which is why I have placed these works side by side to underline these changes,' says von Bonsdorff.

Ten years on from her time in Florence, Schjerfbeck's interest in fresco reemerged, with the use of radical treatments of the canvas, scraping back paint then retreating it, in works such as *Fragment* (1904) and many portraits from 1902 onwards. In the third room of the Ateneum show, dedicated to early Hyvinkää works, von Bonsdorff has grouped a series of works to show the processes involved in the artist's technical development arising from this interest. 'The effect in *Fragment* is similar to the absorption into the wall of the fresco paint but also in the technique of distressing or ageing the material,' von Bonsdorff explains. 'Schjerfbeck also made large watercolours, such as *Girl from the Tree of Life* (1907) to create a smooth matte surface and this continues in *Silence* (1907), which although it's executed in oil and tempera, created the same effect. She had developed a fresco technique in oil, having experimented with watercolour. This became something she continued on and off for the rest of her life.'

'Here her art is more about material qualities,' says von Bonsdorff. 'Many paintings from this period also have extra pieces of cloth added on the canvas to extend the size, and we find the same treatment with paper in her mixed media work *Girls Reading* (1907), which has a strip of paper added on the bottom edge deliberately to be shown. That's so modern. And no-one else was doing anything like this in Finland. All the travels led to this point – in Hyvinkää.'



Helene Schjerfbeck,
***Girls Reading*, 1907, watercolour,**
gouache and pencil on paper,
67cm x 79cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Narcissus*,
1908–09, oil on canvas,
46cm x 56.5cm
Hoving Collection, Finnish
National Gallery / Ateneum Art
Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen

It is this kind of grouping of paintings that has created new dialogues in the Helsinki show. Further on in the exhibition, in another intriguing juxtaposition, *Narcissus*, (1908–09) discovered in 2016 on the back of another painting, is on display in Finland for the first time, hung alongside *The Skier*, from 1909. ‘Putting these two together was an aesthetic choice,’ von Bonsdorff explains. ‘It shows the point at which Schjerfbeck started changing her palette to bright colours, after a long period of using an earthy toned, ascetic palette, and this is something she continued in the 1910s.’

‘It’s not a coincidence that she changes her palette at this time,’ von Bonsdorff points out. ‘Many artists in Europe were doing this after the Fauves exhibition at the Salon d’Automne in 1905. Then again, I believe Schjerfbeck’s enthusiasm for Japanese art brings the colour palette in here – the bright pink in *The Skier* and the vivid yellow in *Narcissus*. She herself said she always went back to still-life when she wanted to move forward.’

As around 60 per cent of Schjerfbeck’s 730 or so known works are in private hands, securing loans for an exhibition such as this requires a particular skill in detecting specific works. ‘The Ateneum has good early records of sales and sometimes we go back to try to trace them,’ says von Bonsdorff. ‘Until the early 1960s the owners were recorded in books and catalogues and then we have built up our own confidential records. It’s also important with an exhibition such as this, for us to make a relationship with private

lenders to secure vital loans. For example, we were unable to get *The Dance Shoes* (1882) for London, but the owners heard such good reports from the RA show that, with the help of a mutual contact from London, we got the loan for Helsinki at the last minute.’

While the Ateneum has the largest collection of Schjerfbeck, smaller museums might own just one or two and these are often on display. ‘Schjerfbeck is one of Finland’s most popular artists and that can make it more difficult to secure loans, as these museums receive so many loan requests.’ However most lenders, both public and private, understood the

national significance of showing Schjerfbeck, especially in London. 'If you establish good relations with lenders it will benefit.'

While von Bonsdorff's hope of finding the whereabouts of missing paintings from Schjerfbeck's St Ives period has not yet yielded a result, something else has come to light from that period in Finland. 'I had really hoped we would be contacted about those works when the RA show happened. So often, private collectors really enjoy their painting being shown. In Finland this is quite a typical story with those who own a Schjerfbeck because many of these works have stayed within the family.' So von Bonsdorff was thrilled when she was contacted by the owner of a work previously unknown to them, who had read the news about the RA show. 'She knew that the Ateneum probably wasn't aware of this painting because it had been in their family and was probably a gift to one of her ancestors when the artist had visited.'

Girl from Barösund (c. 1890), was painted in between the two St Ives trips, when Schjerfbeck was painting on the west coast in Raseborg, Inkoo and the surrounding area, when she was staying as a guest in various summer villas. 'It was quite a discovery because Schjerfbeck didn't paint so much in Finland during this period in this way. The motif is an unusual one for her work at this time – a local girl standing outdoors in the local scenery painted in that fresh, Nordic yellow-green that you see here before midsummer,' says von Bonsdorff. 'Schjerfbeck had returned to Finland and painted a small, intimate piece, probably plein air, almost like a Romantic vision of her homeland. Then she had signed it in a vivid red colour, the same way that she had done with *Girl From St Ives*, but here against the Nordic summer's green.'

**'Through My Travels I found Myself', until 26 Jan, 2020, Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki.
Helene Schjerfbeck (published in English). London: RA Publications, 2019**