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## Strong, Self-Sufficient and Sharp – Nordic Women Sculptors 1870–1940

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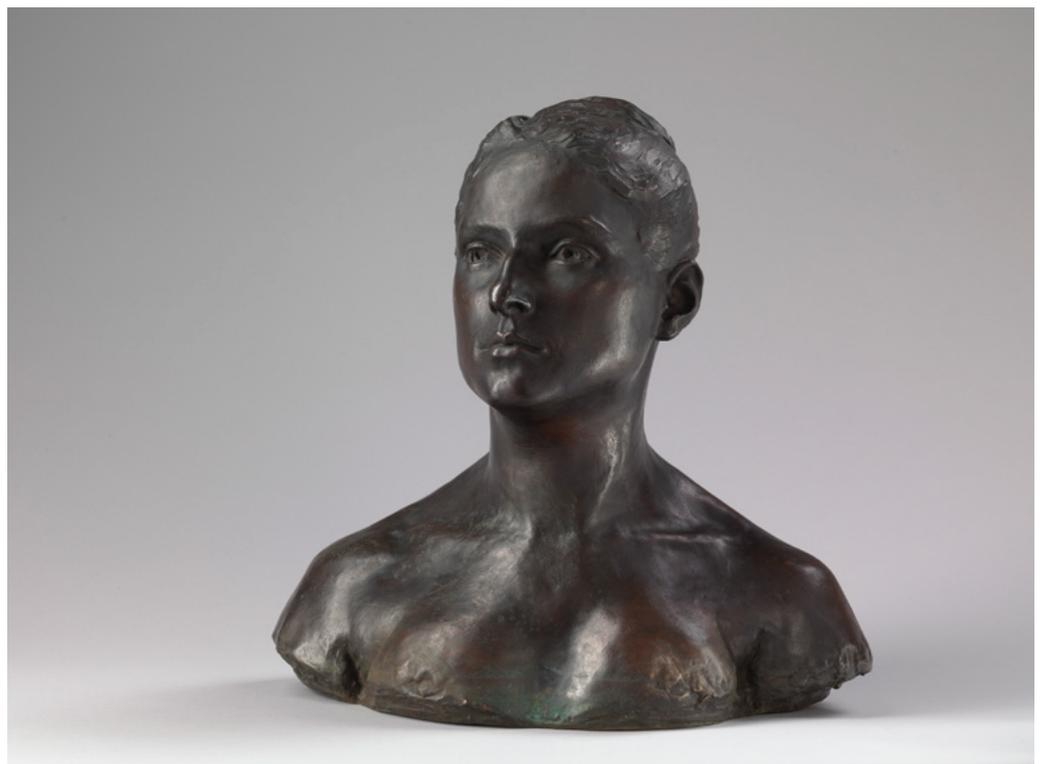
A research and exhibition project co-ordinated by the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, and the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki

This research project aims to chart and compare the women sculptors in the Nordic countries who were active at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The criterion for the selection is that the women were professionals, meaning that they had been trained as sculptors, exhibited sculpture at public exhibitions or that their work had been acquired by museums.

The project is led by Curator of Sculpture, Linda Hinnens PhD of the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Members of the editorial board are Curator Vibeke Waallann Hansen of the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo and Senior Researcher Anu Utriainen

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**Sigrid af Forselles, Youth,**  
1880–89, bronze,  
43cm x 41.5cm x 26cm  
Finnish National Gallery /  
Ateneum Art Museum  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Hannu Pakarinen



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of the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki. The research group consists of scholars and researchers in the Nordic countries, Belgium and France. The results of the research project will be released in the form of a publication and an exhibition at the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm in 2022.

The increased presence of women in artistic life at the end of the 19th century marks an important shift and reflects the discussions about gender in this period. This was a pioneering time for women's rights and particularly for gaining the opportunity to enter professional careers and paid employment. Art was an attractive choice for the daughters of the middle classes. In 1848, Finland became one of the first countries in Europe to give open access to basic art studies for women and men alike at the Drawing School of the Finnish Art Society. In Sweden, the Fine Arts Academy offered art studies for women from 1864 onwards. At the same time, there were still limits placed on women having careers as independent artists, and conventional opinions had a powerful influence on what were deemed to be suitable activities and occupations for women.

This research project is focused on three extensive thematic areas. The first and most elementary is to study the possibilities and means for women artists to become sculptors within the given time period. Another important field of study is the visibility of women sculptors and the market for their works. The third issue of interest is focused on the subject and subject matter of these women – the kind of subjects, materials and categories of objects they used in their work and why.

Recent years have elicited important studies about women sculptors both in the Nordic countries and elsewhere. These studies show that a striking number of women trained as sculptors at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, not least in the Nordic countries. Like their painter sisters, the Nordic 'sculptresses' travelled the continent, and especially to Paris, to continue their studies. In addition to Paris, Finnish women continued their studies in sculpture in Stockholm, Copenhagen and Florence, where they became acquainted with a new and freer idiom, and they had opportunities to study and to practise their profession in a way that would not have been possible at home. Several Nordic women remained in Paris and other European cities for many years.

This project aims to find answers to some principal questions and analyse the similarities and differences among the Nordic countries. There are major questions to be addressed in terms of the education and work opportunities nationally and internationally, as well as in the social context and backgrounds of the Nordic sculptresses – which social classes they came from and what kinds of social networks they engaged in. This was also the period of the rising social status of women in society. The aim is to look at these artists from the point of view of the women's movement – and to explore their involvement in women's issues in general and assess the importance of their contribution to the movement. Looking at these women's lives on a more personal level, the aim is to investigate how much their lifestyles and personal choices affected their professional careers.

There are many unanswered questions regarding the characteristics and reception of works by these sculptresses by their contemporaries in the field. In this context an essential question is how they made their mark in the art world and the art market. Most of all, this project asks why these professional women were subsequently largely forgotten and underestimated in the 20th century.

*Key words:* Nordic women sculptors; Women's movement; Women artists