

INDEPENDENT VISIONS HELENE SCHJERFBECK AND HER CONTEMPORARIES

FROM THE COLLECTION OF ATENEUM,
FINNISH NATIONAL GALLERY



3-22-2017

INDEPENDENT VISIONS: HELENE SCHJERFBECK AND HER CONTEMPORARIES FROM THE COLLECTION OF ATENEUM, FINNISH NATIONAL GALLERY

Exceptional grouping of 19th and 20th-century works by four Finnish artists on view for the first time in the U.S. at New York's Scandinavia House 4-29 through 10-3-2017

MEDIA PREVIEW: WED—4-26-2017—9-11 AM

Independent Visions: Helen Schjerfbeck and Her Contemporaries from the Collection of Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery, an exhibition presenting fifty-five works by four celebrated Finnish artists, opens at Scandinavia House: The Nordic Center in America, in New York City, on April 29, 2017. The exhibition highlights the pioneering role of these artists at the end of the 19th century and in the early decades of the 20th: Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946), Sigrid Schauman (1877–1979), Ellen Thesleff (1869–1954), and Elga Sesemann (1922–2007). Coinciding with the yearlong celebration of the centennial anniversary of Finland's independence from Russia, the exhibition provides a rich opportunity for American audiences to engage with these influential Finnish painters.

The exhibition is curated by **Anu Utriainen**, curator of collections at Ateneum and Dr. Susanna Pettersson, director of Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery. **On view through October 3, 2017**, the exhibition will be accompanied by a range of public programs for all ages and a new catalogue.

Drawn from Ateneum's extensive collection, *Independent Visions* features Schjerfbeck's complex self-portraits, Thesleff's colorful woodcuts, Schauman's lush and delicate landscapes, and Sesemann's brooding Expressionist portraits. Sharing the experience of traveling and studying in France and Italy while maintaining strong attachments to their home country of

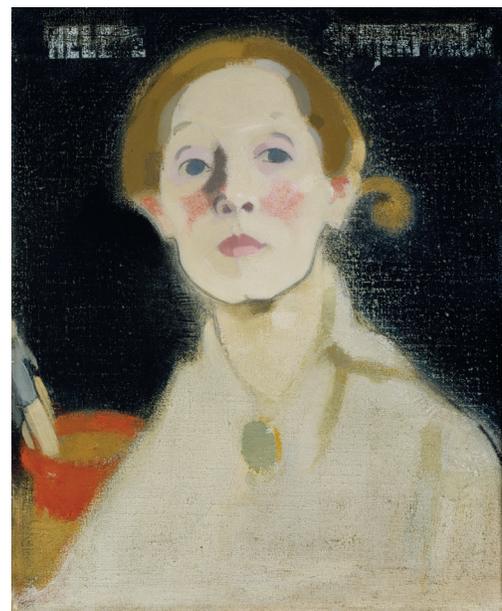


Fig. 1: Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self Portrait, Black Background*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 1/5 in., Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery.

Finland, these artists and their work reveal the excitement and turbulence of the modern period that generated a newly found independence—both cultural and personal.



Fig. 2: Ellen Thesleff, *Decorative Landscape*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 39 3/4 in. Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery.

Edward P. Gallagher, president of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, said, “This year marks the 100th anniversary of Finland’s independence and this exhibition, presenting four accomplished artists, is an especially meaningful way of honoring the occasion. All of us at ASF and Scandinavia House are delighted to collaborate with Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery in drawing wider attention to the unique talents of these women and, in turn, to the creative environment of Finland that helped nurture their artistic practice.”

Dr. Petterson said, “The exhibition delves into the role of the modern woman in the middle of the social, political, and cultural changes that defined the era. We want to show that it has long been possible for women in Finland to build independent careers as artists.”



Fig. 3: Elga Sesemann, *Self-Portrait*, 1946. Oil on cardboard, 30 1/3 x 68 4/5 in. Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

As Finland established its independence, various political and social changes were distinctly progressive and inclusive. Finland became one of the first Western countries in the world to give women the right to vote in 1906. For women living during the period of 1890 to 1920, opportunities such as art school, grants, and international travel were available. Schjerfbeck, Thesleff, Schauman, and Sesemann pursued independent careers as artists. Without shouldering the nationalist expectations of their male colleagues, but benefitting from newfound freedoms, these artists experimented with neo-romantic and symbolist styles, eventually morphing into purveyors of synthetism and producing highly unique bodies of work.

ARTIST OVERVIEW

Helene Schjerfbeck's (1862-1946) artistic career spans a period of almost seventy years, developing from historic painting to “plein-air” realism; from painterly still lifes and figures to intensely expressive self-portraits. Although as a young woman she traveled abroad (often to Paris), she lived in virtual isolation from the main centers of artistic activity for most of the last forty years of her life. She nonetheless experimented boldly with reductive color and

angular, stylized lines, and incorporated elements of Cubism and Expressionism. **Ellen Thesleff** (1869-1954) studied in Helsinki and later lived in Paris, Florence, Venice, and Rome. In addition to paintings, Thesleff's works include drawings, prints, and woodcuts. Enjoying a successful career, Thesleff's radical use of color and abstract rhythms placed her and Schjerfbeck into an early class of avant-gardists, departing early on from the portrayal of narrative-like content. Both were also driven by a profound awareness of the international art of their time, with the first signs of painting inspired by Wassily Kandinsky appearing in Finland in Thesleff's art. Thesleff's friend and a noted art critic, **Sigrid Schauman** (1877-1979) was an intense researcher of color. She freely experimented with the application of paint on canvas and became familiar with Orphic Cubism through Sonia and Robert Delaunay, whom she befriended in Paris. **Elga Sesemann** (1922-2007) was greatly influenced by Expressionism and Surrealism. Sesemann painted portraits, cityscapes, and solitary figures, characterized by a spontaneous and wild style. Experimenting with form through color, and utilizing the strong, brusque mark of the palette knife, Sesemann created a fully original oeuvre.

EXHIBITION-RELATED PROGRAMS

Independent Visions will be accompanied by an artist talk, symposium, and lectures; kid-friendly workshops led by art educators; and gallery tours.

CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue, featuring essays by Anu Utriainen and Dr. Susanna Pettersson.

CURATORIAL CREDITS

Dr. Susanna Pettersson is museum director of the Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery. She previously served as director of the Finnish Institute in London, director of the Alvar Aalto Museum, and director of development at the Finnish National Gallery. She is also an adjunct professor of Museology at the University of Jyväskylä and associate professor at the Reinwardt Academy in Amsterdam. She specializes in museum history and collection studies, and has published widely on the subjects. Dr. Pettersson headed the curatorial team of the Ateneum's extensive collection exhibition *Stories of Finnish Art*, 2016-2020.



Fig. 4: Helene Schjerfbeck, *Girl from Eydtkuhne II*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 30 1/3 x 21 1/2 in. Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery.

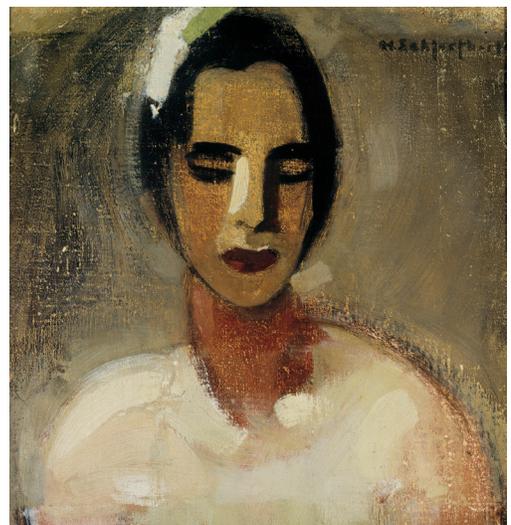


Fig. 5: Helene Schjerfbeck, *Girl from California*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 15 1/2 x 15 in. Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery.

Anu Utriainen is the curator of collections at Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery. She has co-curated a number of exhibitions at Ateneum, including *Stories of Finnish Art 2016–2020*; *Tuulikki Pietilä Collection, 2017*; and *The Great Rider: Italian Prints & Finnish Female Sculptors, 2016*. She is also an editor of Ateneum's exhibition catalogues. Her work focuses on Finnish art and sculpture of the 1920s and 1930s.

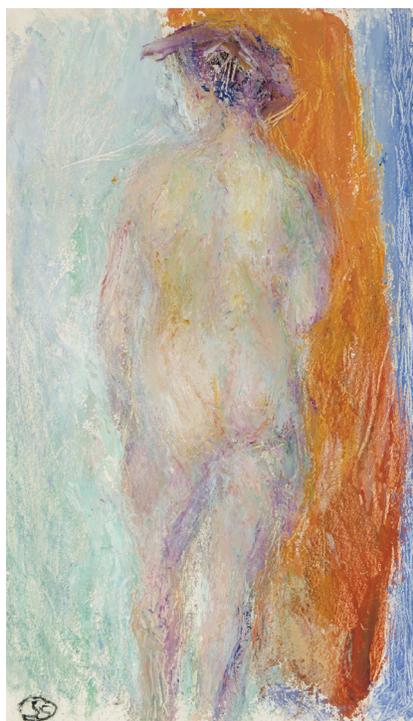


Fig. 6: Sigrd Schaudman, *Model*, ca. 1958. Oil on hardboard, 15x 9in., Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery.

SUPPORT

Independent Visions: Helene Schjerfbeck and Her Contemporaries from the Collection of Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery is organized by Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery. Presentation of the exhibition at Scandinavia House has been made possible by the generous support of the Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation and the Finlandia Foundation. Organizational support for the American-Scandinavian Foundation has been provided by the Ella Leppala Kronquist from Kuru, Finland, William Kronquist from Narpes, Finland, and Dr. Laura Kronquist Mesaros Memorial Endowment Fund.

THE AMERICAN-SCANDINAVIAN FOUNDATION

The American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF) promotes intellectual and creative exchange between the United States and the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. A publicly supported American nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, ASF has an extensive program of fellowships, grants, intern/ trainee sponsorship, publishing, and cultural activities. Headquartered in New York City, ASF has members throughout the United States—and alumni and donors worldwide.

For more information: amscan.org

SCANDINAVIA HOUSE: THE NORDIC CENTER IN AMERICA

Scandinavia House was created by ASF to be the leading center for Nordic culture in the United States. It offers a wide range of programs that include exhibitions, film series, concerts and other performances, readings, lectures, language courses, and activities for kids and families.

For more information: scandinaviahouse.org | Facebook: ASF + Scandinavia House
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ATENEUM ART MUSEUM, FINNISH NATIONAL GALLERY

Situated in the heart of Helsinki, the Finnish National Gallery comprises three museum units: the Ateneum Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma and the Sinebrychoff Art Museum. The National Gallery is responsible for the State Art Collection, the management of which rests with the National Gallery's Collections Department. The State Art Commission with its collections is also part of the Finnish National Gallery. The Finnish National Gallery works

to develop Finnish cultural heritage, strengthen the national art collection, produce exhibitions, and make art accessible to audiences. The Finnish National Gallery is the largest art museum organization in Finland and a national cultural institution that employs approximately 250 professionals. The museums of the National Gallery have approximately 500,000 visitors annually.

For more information: www.kansallisgalleria.fi | Facebook: AteneumArtMuseum
Twitter and Instagram @AteneumMuseum

HOURS AND ADMISSION

The Scandinavia House Gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday, 12–6 PM (Wednesday until 7 PM). Admission to the Scandinavia House Gallery is free.

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