

MOVING STILLNESS

*Nordic Painting & Drawing
from the Late Nineteenth Century
to the Early Modern Period*

COLNAGHI



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INTRODUCTION

Tristan Petersen

Like much of Europe, the Nordic countries underwent a profound artistic transformation at the end of the nineteenth century. Many artists, displeased with the rigidity of their art academies, travelled south to seek inspiration and novel methods. Munich, Düsseldorf and Paris were crucial hubs for the progression of Nordic art, but it was the atmosphere of the French capital which paved the way initially for Naturalism and later for the Impressionist and Symbolist qualities on display in this exhibition. With their proverbial suitcases filled to the brim with new ways to approach art, Nordic artists returned to their native lands not only to challenge the academies they had left but also to lay a mark on the direction of their nations at the turn of the century.

In addition to artistic and cultural exchange, the history of art is intimately shaped by geopolitical shifts. At the time, the northernmost European countries numbered fewer than today. To the northeastern shores of the Baltic Sea lay the Grand Duchy of Finland, a Russian autonomous region relinquished by Sweden following its defeat in the Finnish War (1808-1809). Finland's status was the immediate effect of an alliance between Alexander I of Russia and Napoleon I, which had the aim of exerting eastern pressure on Sweden and Britain. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark was forced to cede Norway to Sweden as Swedish concessions for having lost its eastern part to Russia six years earlier—in return Denmark held onto Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Initially the cession was mandated by the Treaty of Kiel although it was *de facto* established only after the two week long Norwegian-Swedish war in 1814.

Up until its full independence in 1905, Norway had its own parliament, armed forces, and judiciary yet ultimately served under Oscar II's more or less benevolent Swedish crown. In addition to the symbolic element of not having a complete right to self-determination, Norway's foreign policy was also dictated by its Eastern neighbour.

The Finnish duchy, on the other hand, endured more fluctuating levels of autonomy under the nineteenth century tsars. At times gaining more self-legislating power seemed to bolster the formation of a Finnish national identity, but it was tsar Nicholas II's first period of forced Russification spearheaded in Finland by General Bobrikov – that proved to be one of the most powerful catalysts for the Finns to start planning implementations of becoming a fully independent nation and people. Meanwhile across the sea to the west, Sweden experienced a period of relative economic stability and secure foreign affairs. Domestically, however, the political situation was tense. For the nobility, unease was growing regarding peasant proprietors who sought to lessen the Crown's interference in the administration of local affairs. Denmark had undergone an agricultural revolution where the main economy switched from grain to dairy following crashed grain prices due to severe depressions in the 1860s and 1880s.

Against the backdrop of prodded borders, economic and social renewal, and whispers of surreptitious nationalist factions, artists were, willingly or otherwise, at a crossroads: one way followed decorum by continuing the noble pursuit of artistic mastery often aligned with the art academies and status quo, whereas the other led

to the challenge of giving form to myths, aspirations, and sensibilities. The works exhibited here are the products of these artistic and political negotiations.

As such, the cultural landscape the artists found themselves in was then one of upheaval and rebirth. A focal point particularly for Finnish and Norwegian artists, was the question of how to visually represent an ossifying national identity – especially one that had yet to be defined by fixed borders or legitimised globally. For many of the artists who would be looked back upon as seminal figures in the Nordic Golden Age, the task at hand became to create a visual language that would capture the brewing nationalist spirit and its distinctiveness. The rugged arctic tundra, bending coastal lines, myriad archipelagos, and deep ancient forests had long given ample stock for exquisite and grand mimetic depictions showcasing the region's splendour.

A prime instance of which is Olof Johan Grafström's (1855-1933) *Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley* (1882). This expansive painting features Sami reindeer herders in Swedish Lapland. The painting is a remarkable example of Grafström's masterful hand; his style is confident and the composition meticulous. It is no wonder that the aforementioned King Oscar II acquired the painting for his collection – the immense serenity and quietude of the scene is emblematic of the Nordic relationship to nature. As so many of his close compatriots, such as his friend Anders Zorn, it would have been natural for Grafström to embark on a trip to Paris to build on his already successful career.

Yet a couple of years after his first solo-exhibition in Sweden, he set sail for America. By the time he had become known as the pre-eminent painter of Northern Swedish landscapes, Grafström switched tundra for arid high deserts in Oregon. There he continued depicting sublime panoramas guided by his profound attachment to nature.

Conversely, Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931), perhaps the Nordic artist most associated with shaping a nascent national identity, left Finland to spend much of the period between 1884 and 1889 in Paris. There he was first gripped by Naturalism—as much the influence of Swedish writer and painter August Strindberg (1849-1912) as any of his teachers at Académie Julian. In tandem with growing sentiments in favour of Finnish independence and a heightened interest in its history and culture at home, Gallen-Kallela became absorbed by the national epic *Kalevala* compiled from Finnish, Karelian and Ingrian folklore and mythology and published earlier in the century. In his paintings, such as the triptych *Aino* (1891) now in the National Gallery of Finland, his naturalist tendencies started to give way to Symbolist mysticism. By providing powerful yet beautiful images for the already popular *Kalevala*, Gallen-Kallela helped cement the idea, both domestically and internationally, of Finnish culture as intrinsically rich and distinct. His lifelong pursuit of creating a distinctly Finnish visual language was not contained within Symbolism, however. The 1880s and early 1890s had already seen Gallen-Kallela experimenting with Impressionist techniques. Later as an amalgam of his exposure to the Parisian avant-garde and the development of National Romanticism, the ever-versatile

Gallen-Kallela expanded the boundaries of his oeuvre to include Expressionism, especially in his landscapes.

A stone’s throw away from an analogous work, the exquisite *Lake Keitele* (1905) in the National Gallery, the present exhibition features *View North of Kalela* (1923) depicting a delicate scene from the vantage point of the artist’s wilderness studio by Lake Ruovesi. The studio and its surrounding area were an integral part of Gallen-Kallela’s life, so much so that he incorporated it into his name. Between 1906 and 1907 around 70.000 Finns Finnicised their names – a common act to show one’s commitment to and support of the Finnish national identity. The artist until then known as Axel Waldemar Gallén was one of them. He dropped the accent on the “e” as well as adding the Kallela component as an homage to his creative and familial haven.

The landscape evokes the ephemerality of a warm early autumn evening. Bold, broad brushwork tacitly conveys the water’s gentle movement while the finely rendered branches provide a delicate counterpoint. In the foreground, a slowly fading pine tree relinquishes its needles above Lake Ruovesi, almost yearning for the vigour of the younger evergreens populating the horizon line. This specific pine tree was a motif Gallen-Kallela returned to often in his Ruovesi landscapes. In fact, there are two earlier canvases both executed in 1916, which feature the same composition. In December 1923 he would yet again leave Finland, this time for New Mexico. Furthermore, the departure would mark the end of Kalela as his core studio and homebase. *View North of Kalela* (1923) may then be understood as his last major

engagement with the landscape surrounding this sanctum. As the artist was preparing to leave his motherland it is not difficult to imagine a sense of ambivalence towards the imminent journey. Autumn, the season of change, is depicted in *View North of Kalela* as a site of both death and rebirth. The solemn yet stoic central figure of the pine is flanked by vivacious saplings. Whether or not an intentional allegory for his journey, which would turn out to be his last outside of the Nordics, the perennial Symbolist would likely not have been unaware of the parallel.

Yet if landscape became a powerful vehicle through which emerging national subjects could picture themselves in or feel a responsible ownership of, after all, the great social and political transformations of the nineteenth century were ultimately driven by its peoples. Individuals whose sense of belonging increasingly transcended hyper-local allegiances and found expression in broader cultural and national identities. In Hugo Simberg's (1873-1917) *The Model Warming Up* (ca. 1906) the Finnish Symbolist master conspicuously turns away from grand narratives just as the model in the pictorial setting is turned away from the viewer. She is naked, crouched over a diminutive stove, clearly savouring every warm moment between sitting for the artist. The intimate moment is nevertheless enigmatic. There are carefully considered symbolist markers punctuating the scene: the heaped black clothes on the earthy green pedestal perfectly in the model's reach, the stove's shadow tantalisingly reaching her toes—visually connecting the subjects while paradoxically strengthening their distance. Simberg demonstrates

how a psychological atmosphere can be as intensely evocative as a wilderness vista. By contrast August Johnsson's (1873-1900) *Portrait of a Young Woman in Profile* heavily relies on the artist's translation onto the canvas of mood and the individual character of the sitter (likely the fellow artist Alma Ekberg) to create the sensitive and arresting scene. Johnsson's restrained colour palate and ethereal treatment of light reminds us that the Nordic artistic renaissance encompassed both the monumental and the immediately personal.

The works assembled in *Moving Stillness* consider the politically charged cultural arena of the Nordics at the turn of the century. The images demonstrate the Golden Age artists' responses to oscillations between collective ambition and deeply personal expression – mediating their rapidly transforming milieu through static art forms. Political and material movements proliferating through stillness.

AKSELI GALLEN-KALLELA

(Pori 1865 – 1931 Stockholm)

View North of Kalela

1923

Oil on canvas

53 x 69 cm

20 ⁷/₈ x 27 ³/₁₆ in.

Signed and dated lower right: 'Axel Gallen Kallela / 1923'

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Akseli Gallen-Kallela was one of the pre-eminent Nordic Golden Age artists. While arguably most recognised for his monumental depictions of the Finnish national epic Kalevala, he was instrumental in helping create a visual language for the burgeoning Finnish national identity at the turn of the century. Over the course of his career, the versatile master’s paintings never ceased to stylistically progress. His time in Paris in the 1880s saw him initially influenced by Naturalism and experiment with Impressionism before turning his hand to Symbolism as a vehicle for National Romanticism. From the 1910s onwards he would seamlessly expand his defined style to include expressionist features, aided by the resplendent colours of the disparate Finnish seasons. Gallen-Kallela’s *View North of Kalela*, (1923), painted shortly before his family’s journey to America, may represent the artist’s last major engagement with capturing the serene nature surrounding his wilderness homestead and studio Kalela. The work is bathed in lush colours – the setting autumnal sun’s rays ephemerally held by the trees in the foreground. Gallen-Kallela creates a skilful contrast between the thick brushstrokes of the body of water and the sky, separated by an evergreen forested horizon-line, and the delicately rendered thin branches and sparse pine needles clinging onto the warmth and light of the rapidly decreasing evenings. This exceptional painting is a variation of two other compositionally similar works from almost a decade earlier. As the Gallen-Kallela family were embarking on an extended journey to America, after which they would not be returning to Kalela for any protracted period, perhaps the artist simply wanted to capture the scenery one last time; or the interplay between the old central pine, which he had depicted many times from numerous vantage points, and the saplings eagerly growing to populate the cliffside came to represent the artist’s relationship to Kalela.

The landscape is a prime example of Gallen-Kallela’s versatile mastery. What makes the work especially compelling is its tension between stillness and vitality. The scene is hushed and meditative, yet animated with the anticipation of the changing season depicted in the vivacious atmosphere, preventing it from becoming fully static. The warm yellows of the sky, and its reflection in the lake, are suspended in the air, enveloping the pines as if reeled in by the trees – visualising an ineffable aura that only a sublime landscape can produce. The style of the artist’s mature hand is unrestrained, letting the landscape breathe in and of itself.

Gallen-Kallela captures not simply a view, but the sensation of standing before the Nordic landscape at the threshold of autumn, when the light begins to soften, colours deepen almost imperceptibly, and nature pauses between the fullness of summer and the approach of winter. The result is a landscape of remarkable lyricism, imbued with both immediacy and tranquil introspection.



OLOF JONAS GRAFSTRÖM

(Landskrona 1790 – 1848 Stockholm)

Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley

1882

Oil on canvas

179 x 105 cm

70 1/2 x 41 1/3 in.

Signed and dated lower right: 'Olof Grafström 1882'



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Among the surviving works of Olof Grafström, *Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley* ranks as one of the most important and historically significant. Painted in 1882 and acquired shortly thereafter by King Oscar II of Sweden, the monumental canvas represents a pivotal moment in the artist’s early career, before his emigration to the United States and subsequent transformation into one of the most unusual figures within Scandinavian-American art.

Born in Attmar in southern Norrland in 1855, Grafström studied at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts alongside friends and artists such as Anders Zorn, Richard Bergh, and Bruno Liljefors. Under the guidance of the landscape painter Per Daniel Holm, he developed a profound attachment to the northern Swedish wilderness. The present work derives from sketches executed during a journey through Lapland in 1881 with fellow student Johan Tirén. Travelling through the remote regions of Kvikkjokk, Torneträsk, and Karesuando, the young artists followed routes previously explored by Holm, immersing themselves in landscapes that were already becoming symbols of a vanishing northern frontier.¹

The painting depicts a Sami encampment within an expansive mountain valley. Reindeer graze across open terrain while the immense landscape dominates the composition, emphasizing both the scale of nature and the traditional rhythms of Sami life. Unlike later ethnographic depictions that focused on social conflict, Grafström’s vision remains idealised and romantic, presenting Lapland as a place of harmony and freedom. This quality reflects broader nineteenth-century Nordic fascination with the Northern reaches, a cultural phenomenon that coincided with growing public interest in Sami culture and Arctic exploration.

The acquisition of the painting by King Oscar II confirmed Grafström’s rising reputation. Yet despite this success, he chose to leave Sweden in 1886 for Oregon, where he would spend decades teaching art and producing church commissions. As a result, major landscapes from his early Scandinavian period remain comparatively rare. Works by Grafström are today preserved in institutions including Portland Art Museum, Sundsvall Museum and Augustana College, while his reputation continues to be reassessed by scholars of Nordic and Scandinavian-American art.

Sami in the Kvikkjokk Valley remains a defining achievement: a powerful expression of national landscape painting that captures both the grandeur of Lapland and the romantic imagination of nineteenth-century Nordic art.



GUSTAF FJÆSTAD

(Stockholm 1868 – 1948 Arvika)

The Snow

1920-1921

Oil on canvas

134 x 174 cm

52 ¾ x 68 ½ in.

Signed and dated lower left: 'G Fjæstad / Vermland 20-21'

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carl-Johan Olsson, *White winds and withe woods* in *FMR Magazine*, No 16, p. 111 (image p.112-113)



Gustaf Fjæstad transforms the winter landscape into a scene of near-mystical stillness. Snow does not merely cover the earth here, it animates it, swelling over branches in soft sculptural masses until the tree appears almost creaturely, with its agency bent beneath its own frozen abundance. The great mangled mass of ligneous limbs stretching across the composition becomes both architectural and gestural, a natural bridge suspended between weight and lightness. Its contortion, partially exposed beneath the snow brings tension to the image, where nature is immobilised, yet never inert.

The palette is exceptionally refined. Rather than rendering snow as purely white, Fjæstad adorns it with speckles of lilac, blue, rose and pale gold, allowing the surface to shimmer ethereally. The low winter sun, diffused through a pearly sky, casts the entire scene in a sublime radiance. Five small golden orbs of light punctuate the air like embers or celestial signs, heightening the dreamlike quality of the landscape. Particularly remarkable is Fjæstad’s distinctive method: the surface is built from countless small touches of colour that dissolve at close range into a mosaic of delicate marks, yet coalesce from a distance into a unified atmospheric whole. This subtle division of colour is redolent of Pointillism, though employed here less as a scientific or formalist exercise than as a means of capturing the elusive shimmer of winter light. The snowfield in the foreground, gently rigid and shadowed, seems to pulse with chromatic nuance, while the distant trees recede like silent witnesses into the frosted horizon.

What makes the work so compelling is its fusion of close natural observation with poetic imagination. Fjæstad does not present winter as barren or hostile, but as a realm of transformation. Branches evolve into arabesques, snow becomes flesh, and the forest itself

seems to breathe beneath its frozen surface. The scene possesses the decorative elegance associated with Nordic symbolism, yet remains deeply rooted in the physical experience of nature, with cold air, crystalline light, muffled sound, and the fragile splendour of a landscape held in suspension, a moving stillness.

Such imagery emerged from Fjæstad's years in the Rackstad Colony near Arvika in Värmland, where he and his wife, the artist Maja Hallén, became central figures in a community dedicated to artistic renewal through nature, craftsmanship, and spiritual reflection. Surrounded by dense forests and some of Sweden's longest winters, Fjæstad found in the snow-covered landscape an inexhaustible source of artistic and philosophical inquiry. Here, the snow-laden branches curve across the composition in rhythmic patterns that recall Art Nouveau ornamentation, transforming a familiar woodland scene into an intricate tapestry. At the same time, the profound stillness of the image reflects the artist's engagement with Symbolist and Theosophical ideas, which regarded nature not simply as a physical environment but as a gateway to deeper spiritual truths.

Painted in 1920-21, *The Snow* belongs to the mature phase of Fjæstad's career, when he had fully developed the idiosyncratic visual language that would bring him international acclaim. Few artists are more closely associated with the winter landscape than Fjæstad, whose evocative depictions of snow transformed a familiar Nordic subject into one of the defining images of Nordic Symbolism. In the present work, winter is neither merely seasonal nor descriptive. Instead, it becomes a state of transcendence, where the observable world dissolves into pattern, light and atmosphere, revealing nature at once as material reality and poetic vision.



HUGO SIMBERG

(Hamina 1873 – 1917 Ähtäri)

The Model Warming Up

ca. 1906

Oil on canvas

67 x 43 cm

26 ³/₈ x 16 ¹⁵/₁₆ in.

Signed lower right: 'Hugo Simberg'

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Hugo Simberg's *The Model Warming Up* transforms an intimate studio interlude into a scene of striking psychological and visual tension. A naked model is bent over a tiny stove, desperately trying to warm herself during a posing-break. Rather than presenting the nude as an idealised, static object of academic study, Simberg captures the body in a moment of interruption: chilled, vulnerable, and deeply human. The figure is couched over with arms outstretched towards the diminutive heater, her body forming a long, sinuous arc that imbues the composition with its intrigue. The pose is neither theatrical nor conventionally graceful, yet it possesses an unexpected elegance, its natural beauty found precisely in its informality.

Her pale body is set against a quadrant of negative space painted in rich earthy colours of muted greens, greys and ochres. Simberg's handling of flesh is especially delicate, numbing blue shadows gather along the legs and torso, whilst the faintest traces of warmth appear on her hand – the minuscule heater surpassing its expectations. The contrast between the model's marbled skin and the dark stove intensifies the palpable frigidity of the scene. The warmth becomes an invisible agent in the setting – a sacred force, alluring as the object of desire yet tauntingly inefficient. Nearby, a willfully ignored heap of black clothing with its latent promise of warmth becomes another silent presence, communicating that this is but a brief chance for the woman to absorb all the heat available to her.

As with many of Simberg's artworks *The Model Warming Up* contains a humorous element. The tiny stove, almost absurd in scale, appears feeble to the task of warming the exposed figure, let alone the room, while the model's single-minded posture gives the scene an almost ritualistic quality, as though she were a worshipper making obeisance

to the modest source of heat. The model is standing on a platform which further accentuates the diminutive size of the object and her distance to it. Yet this humour never compromises the tenderness of the image. Instead, Simberg elevates a fleeting domestic moment into something poetic: a mediation on the body not as ideal form, but as living, tender and susceptible.

The composition is resourceful, allowing the viewer to consider the relationship between negative space, objects and subject – while retaining a formal sophistication. The strong verticals of the panelling, the block-like juniper platform, and broad ochre plane at the right of the composition creates a complex geometric structure, juxtaposing her anatomical curvature. The result is a painting of rare charm and nuance, offering a behind-the-scenes vision of artistic life that feels at once candid, modern and deeply affectionate.



PEKKA HALONEN

(Lapinlahti 1865 – 1933 Tuusula)

Winter

1930

Oil on canvas

73.5 x 50 cm

28 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 19 ¹¹/₁₆ in.

Signed and dated lower left: 'P. Halonen / 1930'

Galerie Hörhammer stamp on the stretcher

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In an interview in relation to what would become Pekka Halonen’s last solo exhibition in 1932, the artist’s gave a remark which succinctly encapsulates his attitude towards art and nature:

“Art should not prod your nerves as if scrubbed by a coarse brush—it should grant peace. For as long as I can remember, I have not been able to see art in any other way. I have lived in the same house at the edge of the forest for over thirty years. I often feel as if I am the owner of the Louvre or that I possess the world’s greatest artworks right on my doorstep.”

Pekka Halonen came from a peasant family who had tilled the soil for hundreds of years where the serene southern Finnish landscapes meet the wild beauty of the sub-Arctic hills. Besides fulfilling his duties as a farmer, Halonen’s multi-faceted father was an avid decorative painter and draughtsman, which introduced Pekka to art as a natural past-time inextricable from nature. Halonen’s father was clear that he painted for his own pleasure, an approach which Halonen rigorously adopted as his own. Halonen’s mother was similarly artistic showing talent as a kantele player. The naturalness and self-assuredness with which Halonen was able to interpret nature onto the canvas owed a lot to his creative parents as well as the sublime nature that helped shape him.

The present work, *Winter* (1930) demonstrates Halonen’s mastery of the seasonal scene – a subject that became as good as synonymous with his name. Rolling mounds of snow dominate the foreground of the composition, concealing a rocky terrain beneath soft sculptural drifts rendered in dense, tactile brushstrokes. The deep brown central pine tree punctuates the white expanse, imbuing the painting with a subtle struggle between vitality and the sublime force of winter.

The majestic tree, supported by an evergreen bush to the left and smaller specimen to the right, stand defiantly in a silent and slow storm beautifully rendered in a cool porcelain. Interspersed in the thick snowy atmosphere are delicate violet and red hues skilfully equipping the scene with an otherworldly warmth devoid of sun and heat. Halonen heightens the three dimensionality of the snow mounds and shadows of the trees through delicate modulations of darker purples and blues, intensifying the coldness while simultaneously realising a perspectival depth. The influence of Japonic art, which Halonen would have been introduced to as a pupil of Gauguin in Paris is clear in the painting: the sparse but decisive use of shadows and diagonal asymmetry skilfully leaves room for the colours to vie for attention whereas the snow on the ground is reminiscent of a frozen Hokusai. Though Halonen’s influences were always integrated idiosyncratically they remained subservient to his greatest muse, nature.



AUGUST JOHANSSON

(Lund 1873 – 1900)

Portrait of a Young Woman in Profile, possibly Alma Ekberg

Oil on canvas

48.2 x 40.5 cm

19 x 16 in.

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Likely executed by August Johnsson (1873-1900) during the final years of his brief but remarkable career, this evocative portrait captures a young woman in profile with a striking sense of quiet introspection. Thought to depict the Swedish artist Alma Ekberg (1876-1942), the work offers a compelling glimpse into the close-knit artistic circles of Lund at the turn of the twentieth century, where many of southern Sweden’s emerging painters trained and worked alongside one another.

The composition is marked by a refined simplicity. Set against a dark, undefined background, the sitter emerges softly from the shadows, her face illuminated by a restrained and meticulously rendered light. Johnsson avoids overt sentimentality, instead conveying character through subtlety: the thoughtful upward gaze, the gentle modelling of the features, and the harmonious balance between light and darkness. The result is a portrait of unusual psychological depth, imbued with a sense of stillness that invites prolonged contemplation.

The painting exemplifies distinctive qualities of the finest Nordic fin-de-siècle portraiture. Eschewing status or narrative, the work privileges mood, atmosphere, and inner life. Johnsson’s handling is confident yet delicate, demonstrating a sensitivity to both form and emotion. The muted palette and intimate scale further enhance the painting’s contemplative character, creating an image that feels at once personal and timeless.

If the identification is correct, the sitter is Alma Ekberg (1876-1942), an artist who studied under Fredrik Krebs in Lund before continuing her education in Copenhagen and Dresden. Her presence here enriches the portrait’s historical significance, connecting two artists whose careers developed in tandem within the vibrant cultural

environment in southern Sweden, although it would turn out to be a tragically brief phase.

Widely regarded as one of the most promising young Swedish painters of his generation, August Johnsson received the prestigious Hertliga Medal in 1897 at the age of twenty-five, yet his career was cut short when he died from tuberculosis just two years after. According to contemporary accounts, Johnsson destroyed a substantial portion of his work before his death, leaving only a small surviving body of paintings and pastels. Their scarcity is further compounded by the fact that Johnsson rarely signed his works, making questions of attribution particularly significant. As a result, authentication has often relied upon the testimony and records of his close friend and fellow artist Herman Österlund (1873-1964), whose inscriptions and identifications have played an important role in preserving Johnsson’s surviving oeuvre.

This rarity lends particular importance to the present portrait, which stands as a poignant example of the artist’s sensitivity and poetic vision, qualities that earned him recognition as one of the leading voices of the so-called “Scanian twilight” generation. More than a likeness, the painting is an intimate meditation on presence and personality, preserving a fleeting moment from a rich artistic milieu and burgeoning career whose promise was curtailed.



HELENE SCHJERFBECK

(Helsinki 1862 – 1946 Saltsjöbaden)

Head of a Man *(Christ)*

1898

Pencil on paper

11.5 x 9.5 cm

4 1/2 x 3 3/4 in.

Monogrammed lower right: 'HS'

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Ed. by Naoki Sato. (Tokyo: Kyuryodo Publishing, 2015) pp. 202-205.



A central figure in Nordic modernism, Helene Schjerfbeck developed a highly distinctive style created largely at a distance from the currents of European modernism.

Long admired in her native Finland, her international significance has recently been reaffirmed major retrospectives, the most recent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which emphasised her psychologically charged portraits and striking formal language. As an important figure of the modernist women artists of her generation, Schjerfbeck occupies a pivotal position in the history of both Nordic art and modernism more broadly.

The present drawing, *Head of a Man (Christ)*, executed in 1898, is a preparatory study for Schjerfbeck's altarpiece *Resurrection of Christ* (fig. 1), commissioned for Ruotsinpyhtää Church in southeastern Finland.[1.1] The sitter was the railway worker Johannes Lindfors, whom Schjerfbeck selected as the model for Christ in the finished composition. While the altarpiece transforms Lindfors into a biblical figure through the addition of flowing hair and a beard, the present study presents him as a handsome and clean-shaven modern man, his short hair and moustache firmly rooted in the visual culture of fin-de-siècle Finland.

The pencil drawing demonstrates Schjerfbeck's extraordinary ability to capture character through the subtlest of marks. The sitter's strong jawline and prominent nose are defined by emphatic contour lines, while delicate passages of hatching softly model the brow, cheekbones, and neck. This interplay between firm structure and atmospheric shading imbues the portrait with both physical solidity and emotional nuance. The slightly elevated gaze, combined with



Fig. 1 Helene Schjerfbeck, *Resurrection of Christ*, 1898, oil on canvas, Ruotsinpyhtää Church, Pyhtää, Finland.

the sitter's half-lowered eyelids, creates an expression of introspection that feels at once accessible and elusive. Free from unnecessary detail, the composition directs the viewer's attention entirely toward the psychological presence of the sitter, revealing Schjerfbeck's remarkable capacity to distil personality into a few assured strokes of graphite.

While Schjerfbeck was no stranger to using sitters from her immediate surroundings, as extended family members, sanatorium staff, caretakers, factory workers have all featured in significant paintings in her oeuvre, her choice of Lindfors for the figure of Christ was likely a deliberate one. His strong masculine features and stoic bearing felt apt as inspiration for a personification of Christ, reflecting the artist's preference for grounding even religious subjects in careful observation of everyday life.

The present sheet is particularly significant as it anticipates qualities that would come to define Schjerfbeck's mature work. Her ability to grant a sitter profound physical presence while simultaneously preserving an air of privacy and inwardness is already fully apparent here. As later scholars have observed, the drawing exemplifies her gradual movement toward a sparser and more psychologically charged mode of expression, a development that would culminate in the celebrated portraits of her later career. Both intimate and deeply perceptive, *Head of a Man (Christ)* offers a compelling glimpse into a pivotal moment in Schjerfbeck's artistic evolution, revealing the foundations of a visual language that would secure her place among the great innovators of modern portraiture.



GOTTFRID KALLSTENIUS

(Västervik 1861 – 1943)

Plum Twigs

1895

Oil on canvas laid on board

56.5 x 42.5 cm

16 ³/₄ x 22 ¹/₄ in.

Signed lower right: 'Kallstenius'

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Gottfrid Kallstenius trained initially with Edvard Perséus (1841-1890), before joining the Swedish Royal Academy in 1884. Here he would flourish, receiving medals for his early works in 1887 and 1888. Exhibiting internationally whilst still a student at the Academy, he received a gold medal at the International Exhibition in Munich in 1890. He would continue to exhibit internationally throughout his career, receiving gold medals at the World Exhibition in St. Louis in 1904, in Munich in 1905, Buenos Ares in 1910 and San Francisco in 1915. Artistically and politically aligned with the Academy, Gottfrid nevertheless managed to maintain a good relationship to those artists who had instigated the formation of the Swedish Artists’ Association, in opposition to the Academy. He would take on the role of the Association’s secretary from 1899 to 1910, teaching there from 1898 through to 1904. He would then become a teacher at the Academy in 1910, appointed vice-professor in 1912.

It was at the Academy where he would meet Gerda Roosval and the two would marry in 1891, the same year he had graduated with a travel scholarship, together undertaking a study trip to France and Italy. In Paris Gottfrid absorbed the new developments of the French avant-garde, studying in Raphael Collin’s private studio school.

Whilst in Rome, Carl Bildt, the historian and Swedish envoy to Rome, asked whether Kallstenius would decorate the chapel of a monastery dedicated to the Swedish Saint Bridget; however Gottfrid declined, considering himself not mature enough for the task. During his time in Italy, Kallstenius wrote a letter home to the Academy, lamenting the lack of national art within Sweden, but praising those that painted its unique landscape, “one branch of art could perhaps be said to be national, and that is landscape painting, the lyricism

of painting”. On his return home in 1894, Kallstenius embraced the national romantic mood that was beginning to take hold among artists within Sweden. The painting here presented is like a symphony in green, a painterly expression of all that he had been absorbed during his time in Paris, applied to his surroundings on the island of Borsö. The influence of Japanese woodcuts on the composition is clear, with the low branch breaking into the immediate foreground of the viewer, a device that he would utilise in his decoration of Villa Lugnet in Saltsjöbaden. The close attention to the differing shades and intensity of light illustrates the influence of his time painting outdoors in Grez. This work stands at a pivotal point in Kallstenius’s transition from the painterly plein-airism that he had garnered in France and prior to becoming a disciple of the National Romantic movement; in this period the artist established himself as the lyrical painter of the Swedish archipelago, particularly the Småland coast, sanctifying the pine trees, rocks and sea, as well as celebrating the light of the North.



GERDA KALLSTENIUS-ROOSVAL

(Kalmar 1864 – 1939 Västervik)

View from Borsö

1895



Oil on canvas laid on panel

18 x 50 cm

7 1/16 x 19 11/16 in.

Certification by the artist's estate on the verso

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By the summer of 1895, when the present view was executed, Gerda Roosval-Kallstenius (1864-1939), was already an established and cultured artist. She had studied in Paris, lived in the bohemian artist's colony of Grez-sur-Loing, and travelled extensively in Italy. Having returned from their time abroad in 1894, Gerda and her husband stayed on the island of Borsö in the Trosa archipelago with their two young children in the summers of 1895 and 1896, where they rented a small fisherman's cottage called "Borsö-Lina". During these summer days, Gerda worked on a series of landscape paintings known as "Borsö sviten" (The Borsö suite), which would be exhibited at the World Fair in Stockholm in 1897.

Our *View from Borsö*, was produced separate to this series, and exudes the plein air style that she had developed during her stay in France. It is one of a handful of her works that survive from her family's stay on Borsö, with her capacity to paint there seemingly limited, Klingberg, her biographer, suggests this was due to the demands on her as a young mother. A reminder that despite the relative freedom enjoyed by female Swedish artists at this time, there were still unavoidable societal and family pressures that complicated their careers.

Of the works known from this period, the majority are seascapes or intimate depictions of fishermen's cottages. Yet *View from Borsö* displays a notably freer and bolder painterly sensibility, executed with immediacy on the shoreline of the island itself. The elongated composition is animated by an expansive space, which seems to stretch beyond the confines of the canvas, opening onto the distant islands of the archipelago through a delicate veil of silvery-blue light. Calm water dominates the foreground, its glass-like surface dissolving reflections into soft atmospheric bands of colour, while a low horizon

of trees emerges through the haze as little more than evocative silhouettes. Broad clouds drift across the sky; their luminous forms echoed in the shimmering surface below. Painted with fluid, decisive brushwork and a keen sensitivity to the effects of light, the work privileges mood and aesthetic sensibility over topographical precision, recalling both the Impressionist landscapes Gerda admired in Paris and the plein-air experiments of her fellow Nordic artists in Grez-sur-Loing.

There is no doubt that the landscape depicted here was of very personal importance to the artist, representing a summer sanctuary for her young family, however, *View from Borsö* also stands as a clear example of the international spirit and attitude that Gerda maintained throughout her life. She would become renowned in her later career for society portraits of friends and fellow artists, however these early landscapes exude a coalescence of the ideas she had absorbed on her travels, now applied to her own landscape.



PER TELLANDER

(Sweden 1879 – 1951)

Lake, Forest, and Tree

Oil on panel

44 x 33 cm

17 ⁵/₁₆ x 13 in.

Monogrammed lower left: 'P. T.'

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Per Tellander’s *Lake, Forest and Tree* presents a vision of the Nordic landscape distilled to its most essential and poetic elements. Rising in solitary majesty at the centre of the composition, a single pine tree stands silhouetted against the fading light of dusk, its warm russet foliage glowing like an ember against the cool blues and violet striations of the surrounding world. The painting transforms a familiar Scandinavian scene into a monumental image, where nature appears suspended in a moment of profound stillness.

The composition is remarkable for its simplicity and balance. The slender trunk ascends vertically through the picture plane, creating a powerful axis that divides the landscape while simultaneously uniting earth, water, forest and sky. Behind it stretches a dense band of dark woodland, rendered in rhythmic vertical strokes that evoke the endless coniferous forests of the North. Beyond this, the sky unfolds in delicate gradations of colour, shifting from pale yellow at the horizon to deep twilight blue above. These subtle transitions imbue the scene with an atmospheric luminosity, suggesting the lingering northern light that persists long after sunset.

The artist’s treatment of colour is particularly evocative. The fiery orange crown of the pine emerges with striking intensity from the cool tonal harmonies of the composition, creating a compelling interplay between warmth and cold. Reflected in the still waters below, the background dissolves into soft bands of mirrored colour, reinforcing the sense of silence and contemplation. The lake acts not merely as a geographical feature but as a reflective surface that doubles the tranquility of the scene, drawing the viewer into its meditative calmness.

Although devoid of human presence, the painting possesses a deeply emotional character. The solitary tree a resilient protagonist embodying perseverance, and the enduring relationship between the nordic landscape and those who inhabit it. Standing alone yet firmly rooted, it evokes a sense of dignified independence, its silhouette recalling the symbolic role that trees often play within Scandinavian art as emblems of permanence amidst the passage of time. The work encapsulates the distinctive beauty of the Nordic landscape, with its vast forests, still waters, and luminous skies, while conveying timeless introspection. Both serene and monumental, it invites prolonged contemplation, offering viewers a moment of quiet refuge within nature’s enduring grandeur.

Tellander’s fascination with such pared-down motifs was deeply rooted in his life in northern Värmland. Although he studied at the Artists’ Association School in Stockholm between 1907 and 1908 and briefly associated with *De Unga* (“The Young Ones”), a group of progressive artists challenging the conservatism of Swedish art, he spent much of his later life in relative seclusion after settling in Kärbackstrand in 1914. Dividing his time between farming and painting, he developed a highly personal artistic language shaped by an intimate knowledge of the forests, lakes, and rivers that surrounded him. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Tellander was less concerned with depicting specific locations than with capturing the emotional and spiritual character of the Nordic landscape, where even the simplest motif is worthy of profound contemplation.

The painting also reflects broader currents within Nordic art at the turn of the twentieth century, when artists increasingly viewed the North as a realm of authenticity, purity, and spiritual renewal.

As Symbolism and Synthetism supplanted French-inspired naturalism, Nordic painters embraced simplified forms, radiant colour, and grand compositions to express the distinctive character of their environment. Within this context, the solitary pine emerged as one of the defining symbols of Nordic painting. Like the snow-covered forests of Gustaf Fjæstad and Pekka Halonen or the visionary landscapes of Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Tellander's *Lake, Forest and Tree* transcends topographical description to become a symbol of quiet transcendence. The steadfast pine, standing proud against the encroaching dusk, serves not only as a feature of the landscape but as an emblem of endurance, independence, and the mystique of the Nordic wilderness itself.



OLOF JOHAN SÖDERMARK

(Landskrona 1790 – 1848 Stockholm)

Young Woman in Italian Costume

Oil on canvas

60.5 x 48 cm

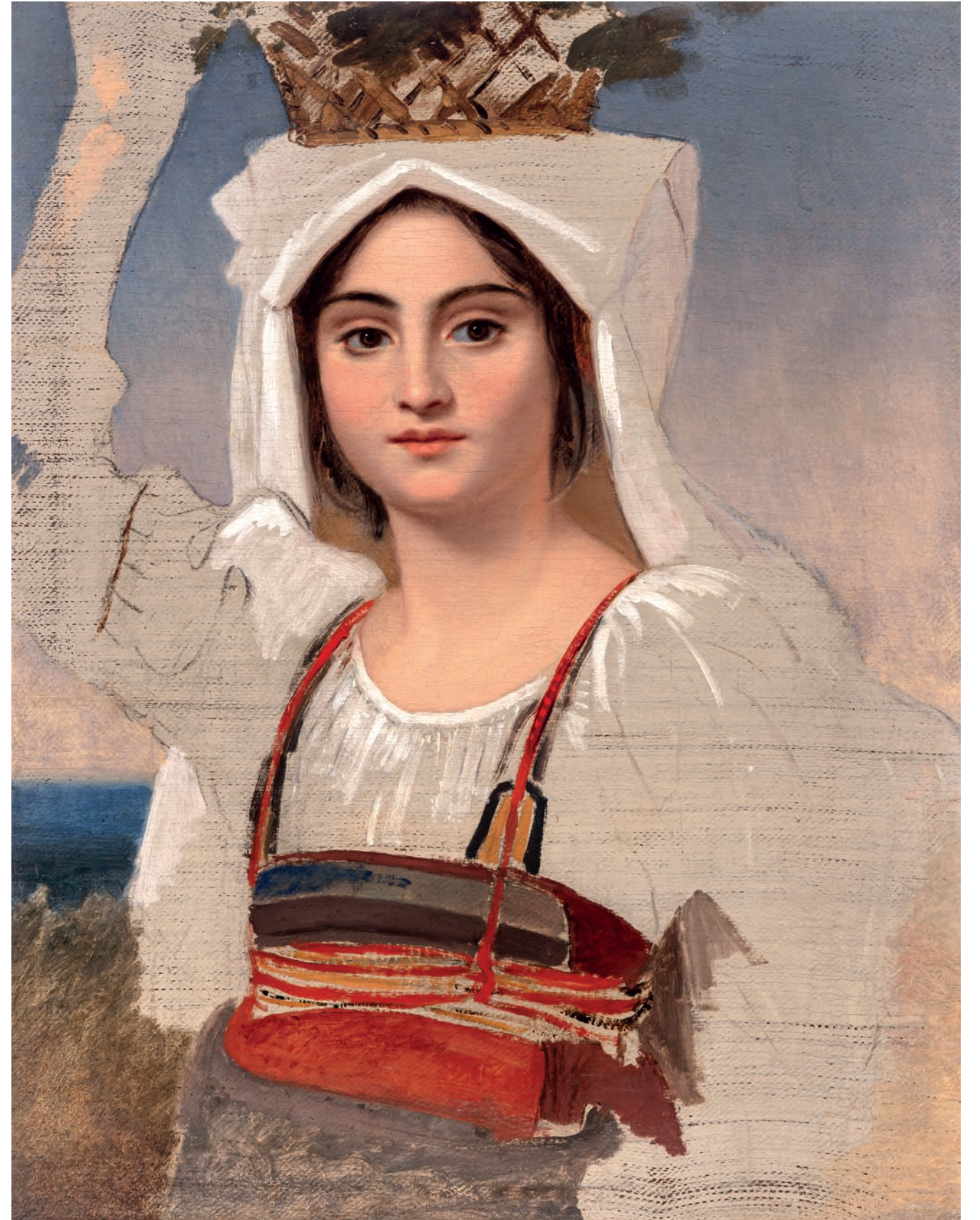
23 3/4 x 19 in.

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Olof Johan Södermark (1790-1848) was born in Landskrona and showed an early aptitude for drawing, entering the fortification corps as a cadet at the age of thirteen before enrolling at the military academy in Stockholm in 1805. Trained as a military draughtsman, he developed a precise and disciplined hand through the production of maps and topographical studies, before turning fully to painting. By the 1830s he had established himself as the leading portrait painter in Sweden, executing a wide range of society portraits of the royal family, the aristocracy, and the bourgeoisie, as well as many of the most prominent writers, musicians, and scientists of his time. Many of his portraits were exhibited at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, where, between 1829 and 1848, no fewer than sixty of his works were shown.

Though Södermark officially retired from active duty in 1833, his military career appears to have given way to a largely inactive role during the 1820s. He taught drawing at the military academy, though only briefly. Between 1824 and 1828 he travelled to Paris and later Rome; an invitation from the sculptor Johan Niclas Byström (1783-1848) introduced him to the realities of artistic life and to the small colony of Swedish artists and writers living in the Eternal City. Södermark remained closely associated with Rome throughout his career, returning on several occasions between 1826 and 1847, and it was there that he produced his small but distinctive group of genre paintings.

His time in Munich (ca. 1832-1834) coincided with the accession of Prince Otto of Bavaria as King of a newly independent Greece, coinciding with a renewed academic interest in the interpretation of classical civilisation. Södermark appears to have worked intensively

during this period, which aggravated his already poor health, painting outdoors during the winter months, well before the plein-air practices of the later nineteenth century. He approached artistic life with the intensity of a latecomer. His initial training was as a sculptor, one of the more established avenues for an artist in Rome. Printmaking briefly held his attention, but it was in portrait painting that he most effectively applied his skills as a draughtsman.

His free and confident underdrawing is generally concealed in finished compositions. These included commissioned works, such as his portraits of the King and Queen (1831), as well as depictions of figures from his immediate circle. He painted the Swedish lyric poet Karl August Nicander in 1827 and the writer and reformer Fredrika Bremer in 1843. His portrait of Stendhal (1840; Palace of Versailles) is among his most notable works. Alongside this activity as a portraitist, Södermark executed a small number of genre scenes in Rome, typically representing southern European girls and women. Although these genre works were not formally included in Ludvig Looström's early account of the artist's production (Olof Johan Södermark. *Hans lif och verk*, 1879), they were nonetheless recognised and partially recorded, and a number are now preserved in museum collections, including Greek.



CARL EMIL ÖSTERMAN

(Södermanland 1870 – 1927 Stockholm)

An Academic Study of Pierre Louis Alexandre

Black chalk on paper

58 x 41 cm

22 ¾ x 16 ¼ in.

Signed lower right: 'EÖsterman'

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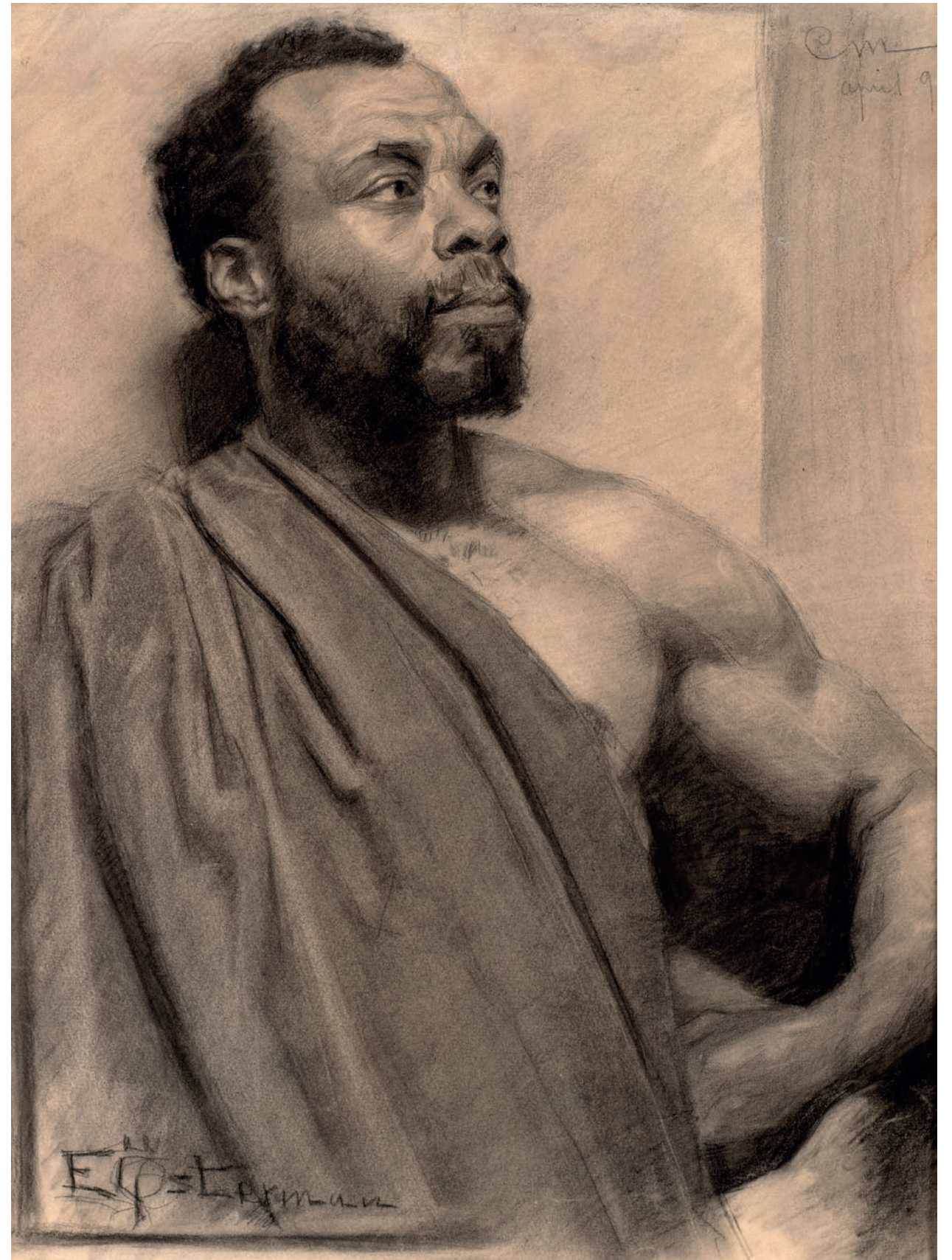
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Born in 1870, Carl Emil Österman (1870-1927) established himself as one of Sweden’s most accomplished portraitists, combining rigorous academic training with an idiosyncratic sensitivity to character and capturing expressions. Educated at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, he gained early recognition for his technical ability and subsequently travelled extensively throughout Europe, refining a style that balanced academic precision with psychological insight. While celebrated during his lifetime for official commissions and society portraits, some of his most compelling works are his intimate studies of individual sitters, where observation and humanity take precedence over his mastery of the academic form.

The present drawing depicts the figure long known as “Black Pettersson,” now identified through recent archival research as Pierre Louis Alexandre (1843-1905), a dockworker and professional model who posed at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts for nearly twenty-five years. Through extensive archival research conducted over recent decades, the model’s identity has now been established as Pierre Louis Alexandre (1843-1905), born in Cayenne, French Guiana, to an enslaved mother (prior to emancipation in 1848). Alexandre is believed to have arrived in Sweden during the 1870s, likely aboard an American merchant vessel, eventually finding work both in Stockholm’s harbour and as a life model at the Academy during the freezing unnavigable winter months. Alexandre became an extraordinary and recurring presence within Scandinavian art at the turn of the century. His distinctive features captivated generations of artists and students, resulting in more than fifty known depictions by figures including Anders Zorn, Oscar Björck, John Bauer, Albert Engström, Johan Krouthén, Karin Bergöö Larsson, and Carl Emil Österman himself. Far from anonymous academic exercises, these

portraits collectively form one of the earliest sustained visual records of a Black individual in Nordic art history.

Österman’s portrayals of Alexandre stand out particularly for their blend of psychological depth and technical sophistication. Executed with the assertive draughtsmanship of the artist’s mature hand, these works transcend conventional academic study to become complex individualised portraits. In the present sheet, Alexandre is depicted in three-quarter profile, his upward gaze lending the composition a sense of dignity and quiet command. Broad passages of charcoal are animated by subtle gradations of light and shadow, while the carefully modelled features, beard, and musculature give the figure a sculptural presence. The sweeping folds of drapery contrast with the exposed shoulder and chest, creating a compelling interplay between strength and softness. Far from an anonymous studio model, Alexandre emerges as a distinct individual whose authoritative presence dominates the composition. These portraits also illuminate the overlooked cosmopolitanism of late nineteenth-century Stockholm, revealing intersections of migration, labour, and artistic production scarcely acknowledged in traditional narratives of Scandinavian art.

Today, works depicting Pierre Louis Alexandre are increasingly recognised for both their artistic quality and historical importance, with examples housed in major Scandinavian museum collections, including the National Museum of Stockholm. As scholarship surrounding Alexandre continues to grow, these portraits stand not only as masterful works of Swedish painting and drawing, but also as important records of identity, visibility, and cultural exchange within Nordic art at the turn of the century. Yet beyond their socio-historical



value, the present sheet stands as a testament to Österman's gifts as a draughtsman and portraitist. Combining technical virtuosity with a profound sense of humanity, it captures not only the physical likeness of its sitter but also the self-assured poise that made Alexandre such a compelling subject for a generation of Scandinavian artists.

Moving Stillness

Nordic Painting & Drawing from the Late Nineteenth
Century to the Early Modern Period

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