

# VILHELM HAMMERSHØI

1864–1916

## 39. *Interior, Strandgade 30, 1899*

(*Interiør, Strandgade 30*)

Oil on canvas, 26 x 21¼ in. (66 x 54 cm)

PROVENANCE: Overretssagfører Konrad Levysøhn; Arne Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 457, 1984, lot 96 (described as: *Interiør med kvinde stående ved bord*).

EXHIBITED: Den Frie Udstilling 1899, no. 49; Kunstforeningen, *Vilhelm Hammershøi*, Copenhagen 1916, no. 142; Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador L. John Loeb, Jr.*, 1994, no. 7.

LITERATURE: Sophus Michaëlis and Alfred Bramsen, *Vilhelm Hammershøi, Kunstneren og hans Værk*, Copenhagen 1918, no. 198 (described as: *Stue (Sitting Room)*); Poul Vad, *Hammershøi, værk og liv*, Copenhagen 1988, ill. p. 186 (English edition 1992); Peter Nisbet, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr.*, Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, p. 12, ill. on back cover.

## 40. *Interior of Woman Placing Branches in Vase on Table, 1900*

(*Interiør med kvinde, der stiller grene i et glas, Strandgade 30*)

Oil on canvas, 15¾ x 11¾ in. (40 x 30 cm)

Signed with initials lower right: VH

PROVENANCE: The English concert pianist Leonard Borwick, London; Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 465, 1984, lot 164.

EXHIBITED: Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr.*, 1994, no. 8.

LITERATURE: Sophus Michaëlis and Alfred Bramsen, *Vilhelm Hammershøi, Kunstneren og hans Værk*, Copenhagen 1918, no. 205 (described as: *Stue*); Poul Vad, *Hammershøi, værk og liv*, Copenhagen 1988, p. 264, ill. (English edition 1992); Peter Nisbet, *Danish Paintings of the Nineteenth Century from the Collection of Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr.*, Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1994, p. 12, ill.; Elisabeth Fabritius, *Vejen ud af fotografiets perspektiviske rum*, in: Ingrid Fischer Jonge and Gertrud With (eds.), *Verden set på ny, Fotografi og malerkunst 1840–1900*, Det Nationale Fotomuseum, Det Kongelige Bibliotek 2002, pp. 75–86.

In 1898, Hammershøi moved into a first-floor apartment at no. 30 Strandgade in the Christianshavn area of Copenhagen. It was here that such a significant number of his interiors was created that they are considered the most typical of Hammershøi's works in that genre. The house, built on two tall floors, dates back to the 17th century and is one of the oldest in this district. The living rooms overlook Strandgade and face northwest. Opposite are the splendid 18th-century buildings of the Asiatic Company, which Hammershøi also painted, and which today house parts of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In the apartment, the rooms, proportions and lighting are thus from the 17th century, while the panelling on the walls, the doors and the contoured door frames date from the 18th century. It is an exquisite example of Copenhagen architecture, and with the strikingly dominant aesthetic feeling that was characteristic of Hammershøi it is understandable that its simple beauty was sufficient in itself to serve him as a source of inspiration over such a lengthy period. The light in Scandinavia varies enormously over the year: short days in the winter and long days in the summer accompanied by many hours of twilight during the middle of summer. Hammershøi's rooms overlooking the street are in shadow until the afternoon, and only in the summer months does the sun enter directly. Similar lighting conditions were, incidentally, to be found in the house of Dutch painter Vermeer van Delft (1632–1675).

So the apartment provided Hammershøi with the best circumstances for painting a rich variety of interiors. Among the countless motifs are wall surfaces and parts of rooms with diverse amounts of furniture and numbers of paintings and objects. Sometimes the essential motifs are the doors, either open or closed, or the view through several open doors revealing light-filled rooms in the depths of the picture. The half-open door was a much-loved motif in antiquity and was also frequently used by another famous Dutch painter, Pieter de Hooch (1629–1683). When it is a question of composition, Hammershøi chooses to paint either frontally facing a wall, which is then seen parallel to the plane of the picture, or he chooses a corner in the room and then employs two-point perspective, and he alternates between a perspective from a standing and sitting position. His wife, Ida, shown in some of the pictures, always as a lone figure, always dressed in very few colours and always sitting or standing motionless.

These two pictures were painted in the same room, the central living room overlooking Strandgade, where we see the corner with the stove from two different angles. In *Interior of Woman Placing Branches in a Vase* the floor represents a significant part of the picture, and here the perspective shows that the painter has been standing. In *Interior, Strandgade 30* Hammershøi has been seated, something that supports the more intimate character of this painting. The tables are different, without doubt chosen on the basis of the respective compositional intentions. Ida Hammershøi, wearing the same black dress and white apron, has acted as the model in both paintings: in one, she is putting some sprays in a vase, while in the other, she is putting a china cup on the mahogany table. The bowl supported from the hip is one Hammershøi painted several times; the motif is well known in art history. The colour of the walls is different in the two paintings, yellowish in one, bluish in the other, which presumably merely tells us that Hammershøi was fairly free in his treatment of reality. We gain a good sense of the fine light streaming in through the windows from the street, especially in *Interior, Strandgade 30*, where it illuminates the white-painted doors, and where the jug (from the Royal Porcelain Manufactory), the cup and Ida's dress are reflected in the polished surface of the table and give plasticity to the thick material, which was no doubt made of felt, usually placed

beneath a table cloth. An 1899 variant of the motifs was shown in the New York exhibition as no. 18 (Bramsen & Michaëlis no. 196, owner the Tate Gallery, London).

Hammershøi's Strandgade paintings can be viewed as one or several sequences of motifs all with the same objective—of exploring the light and the room. They are pictorial constructions always with their emphasis on the static. This is substantiated by a comment from the artist himself, one of the few he made about his method: “What makes me choose a motif is just as much the lines in what I will call the picture's architectonic posture. And then the light, of course.”<sup>1</sup>

Looking at the composition, it is impossible to avoid regarding the Strandgade paintings as related to photography. It is quite obvious that like his contemporaries (Degas is the most famous) Hammershøi had long since acquired what people of the time called “the photographic view,” i.e. he worked by applying apparently random cuts to his motif. That he also used photographs as guides for his paintings is confirmed by a few surviving examples, including a scored network on a portrait photograph of Ida, which became the painted portrait from 1890.

If we look at the Strandgade interiors as a whole, it seems more likely that Hammershøi worked with other optical apparatus. On the one hand he might have used the easily transportable camera lucida, which projects the image directly down on to the canvas. Or it might be imagined that he examined his motifs and planned the general arrangement with the help of a camera obscura or the focusing screen of a large camera.<sup>2</sup> A motif such as the Loeb collection painting of the woman putting branches in a vase was scarcely created on the basis of direct observation. It is much more likely to have been found by viewing through the limited field of vision afforded by a lens. The use of optics would also explain why Hammershøi was at times tempted by quite extreme angles and introduced elements such as unfocused objects in the foreground that would have been excluded in a traditional painting. His predilection for an idiosyncratic cropping of his motifs is seen in other interiors from Strandgade more clearly than in the two paintings in the Loeb collection under discussion here, and this is also the case in the later paintings from his Bredgade apartment.

It was the painter David Hockney (b. 1937) who in 2001 launched the discussion on artists' use of optics since the Renaissance, originally to the horror of many art historians.<sup>3</sup> After having experimented with the use of a camera lucida to draw portraits, Hockney embarked on a more systematic examination of the use of optics in an earlier age, a use that has not only been forgotten but actually kept secret because the use of such aids has over the years been considered dishonest. Likewise, the direct use by painters of photographs as patterns from which to work has also been viewed with disapproval. In *Secret Knowledge*, Hockney emphasises time and time again that the use of optics leaves no trace, which could be the explanation for why there appear to be no surviving drawn or photographed preparatory studies for Hammershøi's interiors. In addition, Hockney points out that there is only a very slight depth definition in a camera lucida, and that the artist typically moves his apparatus several times while working. This means—still according to Hockney—that several vanishing points<sup>4</sup> appear in his drawing or painting that are unrelated to each other, whereby the artist in reality abandons classical perspective. On the other hand, a new dynamic emerges that gives the painter fresh possibilities.

It is my theory that Hammershøi used the aid of optics, and that in his late interiors he wanted to explore the artistic potential they offered him. His interiors appear to reproduce reality, but the suggestive atmosphere, which appeals to the viewer and which has invited so many interpretations, can very well be

due to the fact that they are not exclusively linear perspective constructions. Hammershøi created his own unique picture universe; he wanted to do more than recreate reality.<sup>5</sup> In actual fact, he was well on his way into an image creation touching on Cubism and other radical 20th-century innovations.

E.F.

<sup>1</sup>Stenographic interview with C.C. Clausen in the periodical *Hver 8. Dag*, 1907, p. 438.

<sup>2</sup>These theories were proposed in the catalogue for the exhibition in the National Photo Museum in the Royal Library, Copenhagen, in 2002, where I also wrote on the Skagen artists' relationship to photography and optics. The Ancher family possessed and used a still existing camera lucida, as did the Norwegian Skagen painters Fritz Thaulow (1847–1906) and Christian Krohg (1852–1925). The surviving parts of P.S. Krøyer's camera lucida are in Skagens Museum.

<sup>3</sup>David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge, Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, London 2001. With an unprejudiced eye and with unusual visual sensitivity, Hockney illustrated the subject on the basis of an enormous amount of pictorial material that he brought for discussion to various scientists who were able to confirm and supplement his results. The so-called Hockney-Falco thesis is now the subject of serious discussion in the art world.

<sup>4</sup>When photographing (or constructing a perspective of) a room, face to the back wall, the side walls—normally of the same height—seem to get smaller the farther away they are. If you put a rule on the lines of these walls they will all meet in one point: the vanishing point.

<sup>5</sup>I am continuing my explorations of Hammershøi's methods.