

# VILHELM HAMMERSHØI

COPENHAGEN 1864 – COPENHAGEN 1916

*Vilhelm Hammershøi showed himself from the start to be an independent and distinctive artistic personality. He made his first appearance in 1885 with Portrait of a Young Girl, a painting of his sister Anna, now in the Hirschsprung Collection. The outline is blurred and the color reduced to shades of gray in which are mixed hints of green, yellow, and red that closer examination shows to be a profusion of color. Seen through the eyes of that time, it was in motif, color, and technique unusually unostentatious in its simplicity, but despite its subdued expression it possessed an unaccustomed assertive force. Hammershøi's originality and talent amazed the modern artists of the time, who caused a stir by sending the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts a letter of protest when the portrait was not awarded the Neuhausen Prize.*

*The following year, painter and critic N. V. Dorph (1862–1931) described Hammershøi prophetically as consciously representing something new:*

*It is typical of both the most recent literature and the most recent art that the moods treated are predominantly gloomy, or perhaps it is the poetry of monotony that is presented. The fine, delicate grayish colors and the subdued, cool tones in a treatment about whose floating, gentle character there is an almost unhealthy wistfulness, a kind of controlled melancholy that stands in the sharpest contrast to the bold, full use of the brush and the jovial, resplendent colors used by the painters of the Breakthrough.<sup>1</sup>*

*Soon afterward, Hammershøi began painting architecture, and with this his range of motifs, forms of expression, and painterly preferences were fixed in all their essentials.*

*Hammershøi grew up in the security of a bourgeois Copenhagen family and enjoyed understanding and encouragement from his mother, who at an early stage ensured good art instruction for him. He lived during a time in which the traditions inherited from the Golden Age and C. W. Eckersberg were still very much alive. Hammershøi attended the academy for five years from around 1880, but it was in De frie Studieskoler he received the crucial equipment that enabled him to follow an independent course of development. His work amazed his teacher P. S. Krøyer, who found both him and his art rather odd, but he was wise enough not to try to persuade him to change tack.*

*It can be seen from Hammershøi's paintings that even at an early stage he was profoundly conversant with older art, especially that of 17th-century Holland. This was well represented in Copenhagen in the Royal Collection of Paintings in Christiansborg Palace (subsequently Statens Museum for Kunst) and the private Moltke Collection, both of which had already been of great significance to the artists of the Danish Golden Age. The Royal Collection of Prints and Drawings was also accessible to the young artist and provided a rich source of inspiration. Hammershøi continued his studies during visits abroad: to Germany in 1885, to Holland and Belgium in 1887, and to Paris in 1889, where he was represented in the World Fair by four of his paintings. They made such an impression*

on the far-sighted French critic Théodore Duret (1838–1927) that Duret visited Copenhagen the following year to see more.

Hammershøi's highly developed visual talents allowed him quickly and effortlessly to perceive the essential qualities in both older and more recent art. His preference was work of simplicity in composition and artistic effects, especially ancient Greek art, the Dutch artists Vermeer van Delft (1632–1675) and Pieter de Hooch (1629–1683), and among the moderns James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), a reproduction of one of whose paintings had attracted his interest in 1883. Sympathetic insight and enthusiasm, however, he was well able himself to exploit for his own purposes.

Two major events took place in 1891. He married Ida (1869–1949), a sister of the painter Peter Ilsted, whom he frequently used as his model. And he became a cofounder of Den Frie Udstilling, with which he remained for the rest of his life. A contributory reason for the establishment of this first alternative periodic exhibition was that his painting *Syende ung pige* (Young Girl Sewing) had been rejected by the Charlottenborg exhibition in 1885.

Accompanied by Ida, he spent considerable time in Paris, then proceeded to Tuscany, where he became familiar with Florentine art. After this experience, Hammershøi painted three ambitious figure paintings, *Artemis*, 1893–1894 (Statens Museum for Kunst), *Tre unge kvinder* (Three Young Women), 1895 (Ribe Kunstmuseum), and *Fem portrætter* (Five Portraits), 1901–02 (Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm), important works that are still the subject of a great deal of discussion. Though he produced relatively few large-scale compositions, Hammershøi painted a large number of simpler pictures, portraits, landscapes, and interiors before his death in 1916 at the age of only 51. Thanks to his participation in the major Scandinavian and international exhibitions in Berlin 1891, St. Petersburg 1897, the London Guildhall 1907, Brighton 1912, and New York the same year, there was a considerable interest in Hammershøi's work at the time.

It is the interpretation of Hammershøi's work that presents the greatest challenge. What is available in the way of factual information on his life and work provides no answer to the most burning questions raised by his art. The important critic and museologist Karl Madsen (1855–1938), who was one of his early champions, formulated the aim of the painters of the Breakthrough with the dictum "more truth, greater seriousness, profounder honesty." This also fits Hammershøi, but it is not the whole truth, and Madsen is no more informative in an article he wrote about the artist in 1899.<sup>2</sup> Hammershøi was an aesthete; he was exclusive not only in his art but also personally, and he was not ambitious for public honors.

Hammershøi's artistic individualism is typical of the age, and his paintings contain features that are met in the writing of author Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847–1885), who gained significance outside Denmark in the 1880s. Hammershøi is regarded by most people as a symbolist.<sup>3</sup> His paintings are experienced as poetical and emotionally charged. It is typical that, irrespective of motif, he creates an enigmatic atmosphere, an intellectual tension that invites interpretation, such as was provided by the literary historian Henrik Wivel in 1996 when he viewed Hammershøi's art as expressing a new intellectual idealism. Others have pointed to similarities with a painter from Hammershøi's own time, the

Belgian Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921). It would fit well if it were possible to demonstrate that he was interested in the landscapes of Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), which in the Scandinavia of that day awoke the greatest interest in Sweden. Thereby a palpable link would be created via Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) with the so-called metaphysical painting of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) and the surrealists. This potential interpretation, however, is rejected by Poul Vad (1988). Meanwhile, it remains an open question whether the metaphysical dimension in Hammershøi's work was intentional or unconscious.

In his day, Hammershøi was among the Danish artists known abroad, partly through the efforts of his patron, dentist Alfred Bramsen (1851–1932). It is also well known that the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) took a great interest in him. Hammershøi was never forgotten by later generations and was included in the 1960 Paris exhibition *Les sources du XX siècle*. But he was “rediscovered” in the 1980s when Roald Nasgaard and Kirk Varnadoe became interested in Scandinavian symbolism. The result was the mounting of major exhibitions on the subject in Europe and the United States, whereby transatlantic cultural links were reestablished. An enthusiastic international interest arose in Vilhelm Hammershøi, whose work attracted great attention in exhibitions in the United States in 1983 and 1998.

E.F.

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<sup>1</sup>En Strømændring in *Tilskueren*, pp. 400–406.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Madsen, *Vilh. Hammershøi in Kunst*, vol. I, 1899.

<sup>3</sup>One of a group of writers and artists who concern themselves with general truths instead of actualities, exalt the metaphysical and the mysterious, and aim to unify and blend the arts and the function of the senses.