

L. A. RING

1854–1933

102. *Johanne Wilde at Her Loom, 1889*

(*Johanne Wilde ved væven i en stue i Hornbæk*)

Oil on canvas, 15³/₄ x 14³/₄ ins. (40 x 37.5 cm)

Signed and dated lower right: 89 L A Ring.

Inscribed on back: *Naar du begynder at glemme din gamle Ven, lad dette Billede minde dig lidt om ham igen. Til Ellen Wilde den 31/12 1892 fra L.A. Ring (When you begin to forget your old friend, let this picture remind you a little of him again. To Ellen Wilde 31/12 1892 from L.A. Ring).*

PROVENANCE: Ellen Wilde, Johanne Wilde's small daughter (gift from the artist, 31 December 1892); Amtsforsvalter A. Wilde (1910); Arne Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 491, 1987, lot 244, ill. on the front page of the catalogue; Connaught Brown, London; Sotheby's, *The Scandinavian Sale*, Sale LO1132A, London, 6 June 2001, lot 23, ill.

EXHIBITED: Charlottenborg, Decemberudstillingen 1889 (no catalogue); Connaught Brown, London, *Northern Spirit II*, 5 November–12 December, 1987, no. 7, ill.

LITERATURE: H. Chr. Christensen, *Fortegnelse over Malerier og Studier af L.A. Ring 1889–1910*, Copenhagen, 1910, no. 166 (described as *Dame ved Væven i en Stue i Hornbæk*, owned by Amtsforsvalter A. Wilde); Finn Terman Frederiksen, *Før solopgang*, Randers 1995, p. 15.

Johanne Wilde's husband, Alexander Wilde (1855–1929), was employed by the Ministry of Finance, but he was also a productive and talented amateur painter. For that reason, he had for a time rented a studio in Knabrostræde in the center of Copenhagen next door to L. A. Ring. There the two artists got to know each other and became friends. The friendship led to the Wildes hospitably opening their home at Frederiksberg to Ring. He dined there regularly, celebrated Christmas and the New Year with Alexander and Johanne Wilde and their three children, and even accompanied the family when they moved to the country for the summer.

Young Mrs. Wilde looked after the painter and encouraged him during his frequently recurring bouts of depression. Ring's biographer, Peter Hertz, tells how the company of Johanne Wilde and the children—the two boys and little Ellen, their youngest, who became L. A. Ring's special favorite—gave him a sense of “tranquillity and happiness such as he had rarely known before in his life. But at the same time a restless yearning for something still more perfect that was beyond his reach.”¹ Hertz more than hints that Ring was in love with Alexander Wilde's wife, but at the same time he makes plain that this love was one-sided and could never be fulfilled. Instead, the painter had ongoing conversations with Johanne Wilde on subjects relating to the meaning of life and the expression and practice of art. In his longing for the unattainable, Ring even visited areas of Jutland where Mrs. Wilde had lived as a child and a girl, and about which she had told him.

In letters he wrote to her while traveling around the country, Ring often returns to an endless discussion between them about “sunshine pictures” and “gray-weather pictures.” Mrs. Wilde maintained that there was too little sunshine in Ring's pictures, while he defended himself by maintaining that overcast weather presented him with a much greater array of more painterly possibilities. The following is a passage from a letter to Johanne Wilde from Ring during an excursion into the countryside: “Today, I only managed

to smear a few colors on and to draw a little. Then the sun came out and I had to stop, but I hope that the weather will be better tomorrow, that is to say that it will be overcast so that I can paint again. You must forgive me, I know that you want sunshine, but neither am I myself keen on overcast weather throughout the day, only a little during the morning, and so our wishes can coincide after all.”² This must be said to have happened in the present sunny work, executed in 1889 in the Wildes’ summer residence at Hornbæk on the north coast of Zealand.

During March of that year, L. A. Ring and painter N. P. Mols (1859–1921) held a retrospective exhibition in the Copenhagen Art Society, Kunstforeningen. After that, with his friend Karl Madsen, Ring took his first journey abroad via Holland and Belgium to Paris, partly in order to visit the World Fair. (Ring exhibited in the Danish pavilion, as did Alexander Wilde, despite his being a self-taught painter.)

There are many diligent women busy with domestic duties in Danish art. The tradition for interiors is long and varied and derives from the 17th-century genre paintings in the bourgeois Netherlands, so much admired by Ring and his contemporaries. L. A. Ring had seen such pictures on his travels, but his portrayal of the beautiful woman in the summery room, where the solemn dark red of the walls is contrasted with the smiling late morning light streaming in through light lace curtains, is different. Nor is it quite like the other two interiors in the Loeb collection: Carl Bloch’s portrayal of his parents in the living room from 1855 (Fig. A) and Christian Mourier-Petersen’s interior from the ironing room at Holbækgaard (Fig. B), made only a few years after Ring’s work. The depiction of the elegant clothier Bloch and his wife, dressed in a bonnet and busy knitting in their well-furnished, middle-class home, is a typical genre painting composed with a focus on the figures and with an implied meaning entirely in the tradition of Marstrand (Carl Bloch’s teacher) and the old Dutch masters.

Christian Mourier-Petersen’s ascetic work, on the other hand, has no anecdotal content. Everything there is about the play of the light and the shape of the room. The women ironing and sewing are not essential to what the painting has to say but are simply pictorial accessories in line with the mirror on the wall, the basket of washing, the coal scuttle, and the sparse furnishing in the unembellished ironing room. Nor is L. A. Ring’s work anecdotal, but in contrast to the other two interiors there seem to be suggestions of ill-defined emotional undercurrents in his picture.

The young woman appears to be alone in her universe—and yet not quite. Her husband is invisibly but unavoidably present on the wall in front of her in two of his canvases, respectfully reproduced by his friend and colleague. Two sea-blue, grayish-green poetical coastal landscapes, still on their stretchers, are here imbued with an infinitely greater significance than the gold-framed paintings in the Blochs’ living room and the small rococo mirror reflecting the light at Holbækgaard.

Johanne Wilde is dressed in a light brown dress of a sophisticated cut, made in a soft, glossy material that attracts the sunshine and reluctantly lets it go again. The elegant dress both hides and emphasizes her beautiful figure and endows her entire feminine presence with an unmistakable erotic aura. In addition, there is about her person and the room in which she is sitting a striking feeling of intense presence that is not found in the other two works. She is sitting sideways on her chair, bending over the warp and the colorful linen or woolen yarn as though in the processes of making up her mind on the final composition of her work. Her expression is one of reflection. Prior to this, she has clearly made a series of rapid movements to gather the materials and place them at a convenient distance for her work. A drawer with its contents has

been taken out of a cabinet behind her and placed on a small stool under the window, and she seems to have spun around to the loom in such haste that the chair has only partly come with her.

L. A. Ring's portrait of Johanne Wilde in the family's North Zealand summer residence emerges as a vision exquisite in its colors and apparently rapidly committed to canvas, at once static and living. There are various features in the work that suggest the influence both of traditional Dutch interior painting and the new, light-fled French painting, but the actual story and conception of the work are Ring's entirely. He has painted a picture that can be seen exclusively as the delightful portrait it is, of a beautiful woman at her loom. But it can probably also be seen as a pictorial representation of the balance between two so imponderable concepts: distance and intimacy.

In 1892, the painter's regular visits to the Wilde family came to an end when the family moved to the island of Møn off the south coast of Zealand, where Alexander Wilde had been appointed acting district revenue officer. Perhaps L. A. Ring celebrated a last New Year's Eve together with his faithful friends, on which occasion he wistfully presented this work to their little daughter Ellen.

*When you begin to forget your old friend, let this picture remind you a little of him again. To Ellen Wilde 31/12 1892 from L. A. Ring).*³

S.L.

¹Peter Hertz 1934, p. 220.

²Peter Hertz 1934, p. 228.

³Inscription on the reverse of the painting.



FIG. A Carl Bloch
The Artist's Parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bloch in Their Sitting Room
Loeb Collection



FIG. B Christian Mourier-Petersen
Ironing Room in an Old Country Mansion
Loeb Collection