

EDVARD ERIKSEN

1876–1959

135. *The Little Mermaid*

(*Den lille havfrue*)

Replica in half size after the original from 1910–1913

Patinated bronze, H. 96 cm

PROVENANCE: Bruun Rasmussen Auction 786, 2008, lot 24, ill.

LITERATURE: Jens Erik Sørensen (ed.), *Dansk skulptur i 125 år*, Copenhagen, 1996, p. 97; Per Eilstrup, *The Little Mermaid. Her Story, the Writer and the Fairy Tale*, Copenhagen, 1994; Egon Eriksen, *Edvard Eriksen og Den lille Havfrue – liv og kunst*, Copenhagen, 1998; Egon Eriksen, *The Little Mermaid of Copenhagen and Her Family*, Maribo, 2001; Christopher Bramsen, *Hans Christian Andersen's the Little Mermaid, From Fairy Tale to National Monument*, Copenhagen, 2010.

This figure is a smaller and later version of Eriksen's most famous sculpture, *The Little Mermaid*, from 1910–13. The subject is the mermaid from Hans Christian Andersen's well-known fairy tale, first published in 1837. It is about the fate of the youngest daughter of the sea king. At the age of fifteen, she is allowed to rise out of the ocean to admire the world of human beings while sitting on a rock in the moonlight. Here she falls in love with a beautiful young prince, whom she eventually saves from drowning in a shipwreck. Now she is tempted to become human and gain an immortal soul, this being possible only if someone falls deeply in love with her. If not, then she must die, her body dissolving into foam. She carries out her plan with help from a witch (by means of a magical drink), who demands her tongue in return for transforming her fishtail into two legs. The mermaid swims to the prince's palace, swallows the potion, and faints. When waking up with her new legs she is found by the prince, who takes her to his court, eventually spending a lovely time with her. Everyone admires her beauty and extraordinarily graceful dance. Although the prince is engaged to marry a neighboring king's daughter, he takes the mermaid with him on the ship sailing to her country. The princess is beautiful, but he mistakes the princess for the girl who saved his life, and their engagement is announced. The mermaid's heart breaks, and at sunrise the following morning, she hurls herself into the sea, where her body dissolves in foam. However, she does not die but is welcomed by the "daughters of the air." She is invited to join them to eventually gain an immortal soul doing noble deeds.

In the age of Romanticism, imaginative beings—such as mermaids and elfin maidens—inspired poets, painters, and choreographers as symbols of man's temptations. Hans Christian Andersen's mermaid is by far the most famous, and over the years, Eriksen's mermaid has become the symbol of Copenhagen. In 1989 Disney produced a popular animated movie based on Andersen's story, but the studio gave it a happy ending.

On a waterside promenade in Copenhagen, Eriksen's original bronze figure is mounted on a large granite stone amid similar stones. She longs for her sisters in the deep and thinks of the price she paid to become human. The statue was commissioned by Carl Jacobsen (1842–1914), founder of the Ny Carlsberg brewery in Copenhagen, who was famous as an art patron. He turned his vast private collection into a public museum, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, dedicated to modern and ancient sculpture. Since then it has devel-

oped into one of the finest museums in Denmark, housing Danish Golden Age and French Impressionist painting as well.

The idea of the mermaid sculpture came to Jacobsen in 1909 as he attended a ballet at the Royal Theatre based on Andersen's fairy tale, choreographed by Hans Beck (1861–1952), with music by Fini Henriques (1867–1940). With the prima ballerina Ellen Price (1878–1968) in the title role, the ballet was a great success, performed more than 50 times. Jacobsen very much admired female dancers of whom he had commissioned earlier statues. In Elsinore, close to the castle of Kronborg, stands a fountain with several dancers by Rudolf Tegner (1873–1950), and a group statue of dancers by Carl Bonnesen (1868–1933) is at the Carlsberg Brewery in Copenhagen, both also commissioned by Jacobsen.

In the spring of 1910, Eriksen had a model in clay ready for Jacobsen to approve. However, Jacobsen was not content because she had legs, not a mermaid's fishtail. The sculptor did not entirely follow Jacobsen's demand but turned her feet into fins. Originally Eriksen wanted the dancer Ellen Price to be the model, but according to Eriksen's son, she refused to pose in the nude, so once again he chose his wife. By the fall of 1910, the figure was finished and cast in bronze the following year. Finally, it was placed at Langelinie, a walking promenade at the northern end of the old Copenhagen harbor, close to the Citadel. The festive inauguration took place on August 24, 1913, to Jacobsen's delight.

As the popularity of the mermaid statue continued to rise, Eriksen was often asked to make replicas, which he agreed to do, but only smaller than the original. His will stipulates that his heirs and descendants adhere to this decision. There are statuettes of a height of 10 inches in bronze and in porcelain, the latter produced by the Royal Danish Manufactory of Porcelain (Royal Copenhagen). In the 1930s, Eriksen allowed his original foundry, the firm of Lauritz Rasmussen, to produce it half size, which is about 39 inches. There are approximately 70 such casts, all made from the artist's original form, supervised by himself or later by his descendants. In the beginning, this version of the mermaid figure was mounted on a granite stone, but from the 1960s, the "stone" was cast in bronze, as is the case with the figure now in the Loeb collection. When Lauritz closed down in 1966 the casting of the mermaids was taken over by one of the firm's pupils, Holger Rolsted (1915–84), who had his own foundry beginning in 1945. As the Loeb figure bears The Rolsted stamp, it must be dated between 1966 and 1984. Eriksen also made a version in the format 4:5 for Osaka in Japan, which is placed close to the water. Quite small versions are sold as tourist souvenirs.

Today Eriksen's figure is not the only mermaid statue located on the Copenhagen waterfront. In 2006 Bjørn Nørgaard (\*1947), known for the series of tapestries on Danish history in the palace of Christiansborg, made a modern, distorted version of the mermaid, placed not far from the original. In 2009, another mermaid appeared at the Copenhagen harbor, a bronze cast after the figure (in Statens Museum for Art) modeled in 1921 by Anne Marie Carl Nielsen (1863–1945), wife of the famous Danish composer Carl Nielsen (1865–1931). More true to Andersen's story, her mermaid is very young and with her big tail appears startled in the moment the transformation begins. Her presence outside the Royal Library's modern building (called "The Black Diamond") is because the library houses the first editions of Andersen's tales and the musical work of Carl Nielsen. According to old legends, mermaids were said to be frequently in the waters leading to Denmark's naval harbor.

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