

## JULIUS EXNER

1825–1910

### 26. *Portrait of the 13-Year-Old Gudrun Reading, 1905*

(*Portræt af den 13-årige Gudrun læsende*)

Oil on canvas, 12½ x 9½ in. (32 x 24 cm)

Signed lower right: Exner 1905

PROVENANCE: Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 688, 2000, lot 1436, ill.

In 1882, Julius Exner exhibited a picture at Charlottenborg entitled *En lille pige læser sine lektier* (*A Little Girl Doing Her Homework*). The whereabouts of this picture is unknown, nor do we have any information concerning its motif, materials, or measurements, and we do not know whether the child doing her homework in that painting was dressed in national costume.

However, shortly after the turn of the century, Professor Exner took up the motif again. A little girl engrossed in a book or deep in her own thoughts and holding the book in her hand appears repeatedly in the work of his later years. The model seems to be the same in each case, a girl called Gudrun. She figures in the two paintings in the Loeb collection, in which she is nine and thirteen years old respectively.

The figures in Julius Exner's numerous portrayals of everyday life all appeared in colorful local costume, intended to underline the national Romantic idea behind the picture. But Gudrun was painted wearing her own clothes and apparently always in the professor's residence at Charlottenborg, in the artist's own home, not only in his studio.

Who was Gudrun? We do not yet know. Her name has just come to public attention on account of the appearance of the present work. The reverse of the picture carries a penciled inscription: "Gudrun 13 år" (Gudrun 13 years old)—nothing else. Enquiries of the artist's great-grandson, a well-known Danish architect, confirmed the idea that a nine-year-old Gudrun was painted in the professorial residence but at the same time disproved the theory that she was a member of the family, not even a grandchild.<sup>1</sup> According to census returns, Gudrun was not a member of any of the other families then living in the Charlottenborg complex with the Kongens Nytorv 1 address.<sup>2</sup> And yet Gudrun must have been a frequent visitor to Julius Exner and his wife, Inger Henriette Sophie Jensine Ringsted, over a period of four or five years or more. The serious little girl in her warm winter dress and white school apron must have been a familiar and much appreciated model for the artist.

By way of contrast to the 1901 picture in which a great deal has been made of the interior in which she is sitting, Gudrun is here seen alone against a dark maroon background, which allows attention to be concentrated on her dainty figure and gives the viewer the opportunity of taking pleasure in the many carefully blended colors used, from the dust blue, olive green, and black harlequin pattern of the sleeves of her dress to her lustrous brown hair, which corresponds to the leather binding of the book. The shadows from the many folds in the apron and the exquisite work in it point the way to the fair

skin of her round, rosy-cheeked face. Her eyelashes and eyebrows are of the same brown as her hair, which is crowned by a narrow red ribbon tied in a bow at the top of her head. The artist's long experience of portraying figures in the exquisitely made national costume and his innate sense of the narrative quality of color does not fail him even when he is to reproduce the everyday dress of a little girl.

S.L.

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Professor Johannes Exner for this information.

<sup>2</sup>National Archives, Copenhagen.