



VILHELM HAMMERSHØI

1864–1916

37. *Portrait of Miss Ellen Becker* (1890)

(*Portræt af frøken Ellen Becker*)

Oil, 21⁷/₈ x 17³/₄ in. (55 x 45 cm)

PROVENANCE: The painter Kristian Møhl (1876–1962); Arne Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 164, 1964, lot 68; Arne Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 316, 1974, lot 88, ill.; Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 721, 2003, lot 1156, ill.

EXHIBITED: Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen, *Vilhelm Hammershøi*, 1916, no. 67 (belonging to the painter Møhl).

LITERATURE: Sophus Michaëlis and Alfred Bramsen, *Vilhelm Hammershøi, Kunstneren og hans Værk*, Copenhagen 1918, no. 93 (as painted in 1890, described as *Portræt*); Susanne Meyer-Abich, *Vilhelm Hammershøi. Das malerische Werk*, Inauguraldissertation, Ruhr-Universität, Bochum, 1995, no. 87 (described as *Fräulein Becker*).

Hammershøi painted a fair number of portraits around 1890. Among them was one of a young woman, Miss Ellen Becker (1871–1946), whose subsequent married name was Faber. It is a head-and-shoulders portrait in which she is seen in three-quarter profile to the right with her face in shadow. She is wearing a simple white dress, the only ornament on which is a small upright collar; she wears no jewelery. The background is pale, grayish white with an admixture of bluish rose. Together with the shadow falling on the dress, Ellen Becker's dark hair and dark eyes form a contrast to the lighter parts of the painting. The colors of the complexion of the face are pink with a touch of violet. By means of a restrictive color scale, the artist has again created a harmony of color of great artistic beauty. With a shimmering reproduction of the shape, brought about by virtue of quite small differences in nuance in the individual colors, Hammershøi has endowed his painting with depth, atmosphere, and life.

In Bramsen's register of 1918 this painting is listed as number 93 and described as the final version of three in all. The other two are slightly smaller. Number 94 measures 16¹/₂ x 12¹/₄ in. (42 x 31 cm), and here the artist has included more of the young woman's figure and arms. Number 95, which measures 16⁹/₁₀ x 12¹/₄ in. (43 x 31 cm), is not described in any detail. They were both sold in 1916 in the artist's estate auction, and their present owners are unknown. No photographs of them have been discovered to allow comparison.

Bramsen also states that the painting in the Loeb collection was exhibited in Munich in 1892. He probably refers to the *IV. Internationale Kunstausstellung* in the Glaspalast at Munich that year, in which Hammershøi took part with four paintings, including as number 701 a portrait of a woman, also painted in 1890. However, according to the catalogue it was not that of Miss Becker but a portrait of the painter Elisabeth Wandel (1850–1921) (no. 100 in Bramsen's register).

Ellen Becker was the daughter of the pharmacist Ludvig Becker and belonged to the cultured middle classes. There is nothing to tell us how she came to know Hammershøi or why this portrait was painted. In 1910, at the age of almost 40, she married Dr. Knud Faber (1862–1956), who was the leading figure of the day in clinical science, a professor and consultant in Rigshospitalet, the State University Hospital of Denmark. The marriage was a harmonious and happy one. In his memoirs, Faber gives a beautiful description of her charm and the support she afforded him in all conditions of life. He especially emphasized the understanding she had for his work on behalf of the community and praised her strong character, which found

expression while he was gravely ill in 1914. The couple had an official residence in the hospital until 1932, after which she established a beautiful home at Østerbro near the Øresund coast. In 1911, Ellen Faber gave birth to a son, who became a doctor, as subsequently did a grandson.

The closed, somber quality of the young woman's face in Hammershøi's painting does not seem to have been characteristic of Ellen Becker, if we are to believe accounts of her personality and later photographs of her. Evidently, this is a typical feature of the artist's portraits from this period; it is also seen in those he painted of his friends Karl Madsen (1890, Statens Museum for Kunst) and Kristian Zahrtmann (1899, Statens Museum for Kunst). Both of these men were lively and quick-witted. This could be seen in their behavior and facial expressions and is apparent in photographs and other artists' portraits of them, for instance those by P. S. Krøyer and Viggo Johansen (1851–1935). Hammershøi, by contrast, sought seriousness and introspective qualities and did not re-create those features that superficially might seem to convey his models' personalities. The quiet, expressive grandeur that is a characteristic of Hammershøi's art applies also to his portraits, which, perhaps more than anything else, are pictorial art.

E.F.