



Independent

The works of these extraordinary women artists enriched



Helene Schjerfbeck (photo above),
Self-Portrait with Red Spot, 1944,
oil on canvas, 18 x 15 in.

Ellen Thesleff (photo above),
Self-Portrait with Hat, 1935,
oil on canvas, 17 x 15 in.

Visions

By Janet S. Rauscher

the cultural life of Finland's first century.



ALL PAINTINGS: ATENEUM, FINNISH NATIONAL GALLERY

Sigrid Schauman (photo above),
Self-Portrait, undated,
oil on canvas, 16 x 13 in.

Elga Sesemann (photo above),
Self-Portrait, 1946,
oil on cardboard, 30 x 27 in.



AS FINLAND MARKS ITS CENTENNIAL, ATTENTION inevitably will turn to its cultural “Golden Age,” when artists—resisting attempts to align the nation more closely with the Russian Empire—endeavored to develop and disseminate a distinctive sense of collective identity. Such work was undertaken predominantly by male artists; concurrently, Finnish women artists were forging their own paths. This spring, the exhibition *Independent Visions: Helene Schjerfbeck and Her Contemporaries from the Collection of Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery*—curated by Anu Utrianen and organized by Dr. Susanna Petersson for Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery—will introduce Scandinavia House visitors to four seminal Finnish women artists. Born between 1862 and 1922, these artists witnessed and responded to dramatic changes in Finnish society and in artistic spheres, both domestic and international.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, Tsar Nicholas II sought to restrict the grand duchy of Finland’s relative autonomy. He faced significant resistance from Finns and in 1906 agreed to shift the nation’s legislative body

Opposite page:
Helene Schjerfbeck,
Californian I, 1919,
oil on canvas,
15 x 15 in.

Above:
Helene Schjerfbeck,
Maria, 1909, oil on
canvas, 22 x 29 in.

Helene Schjerfbeck,
The Seamstress,
Half-Length Portrait
(The Working Woman),
1927, oil on canvas
26 x 20 in.



Helene Schjerfbeck,
Girl from Eydtkuhnen II, 1927, oil on canvas, 28 x 21 in.

to a unicameral parliament elected through universal suffrage. Finland thus became second only to New Zealand in granting the vote to women, who were also eligible to seek and hold office; in the election of 1907, nineteen women attained parliamentary seats. Full independence for Finland came ten years later, in the wake of the October Revolution, but this milestone was followed by a civil war the next year. During and immediately after World War II, Finland fought two wars against the Soviet Union—the Winter War (1939–40) and the Continuation War (1941–44)—as well as the Lapland War (1944–45), waged to force Germany’s withdrawal from the country. Against the backdrop of these sociopolitical transformations, artists developed a dizzying array of movements—from Impressionism, Naturalism, Realism and Symbolism late in the nineteenth century to Fauvism, Cubism and Expressionism in the early decades of the twentieth. Although the art critics of the time, and many of the art historians who followed, primarily chronicled and lauded the careers of male artists, Finnish women outpaced the former in adopting modernist trends, several of which they introduced to Finland’s cultural realm.

Prominent among these artists was Helene Schjerfbeck (1862–1946). At



Helene Schjerfbeck,
Costume Picture II,
1909, oil on canvas,
35 x 25 in.

■ *Schjerfbeck retained the Naturalist practice of depicting subjects based on direct observation.*

a time when most of the nation's artistic attention was focused on Romantic nationalism, she sustained an international focus. Unlike their male colleagues, she and her peers were not encouraged to depict the historical, literary or folkloric subjects that would contribute to the project of Finnish nation-building. Instead, they painted in the French region of Brittany in the early 1880s, even before the arrival of Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard, and adopted tenets of Naturalism: using a lighter palette and more forceful brushwork than they had learned in their academic training and documenting rural life based on direct observation. (Many male Finnish artists who felt the same pull of the "pure" or the "exotic" would travel to the region of Karelia, seeking—and documenting—an "authentic" Finland as part of the nationalist project.)



Sigrid Schauman,
Nude, 1954,
oil on hardboard,
22 x 11 in.

Opposite page:
Sigrid Schauman,
Model, ca.1958,
oil on hardboard,
15 x 9 in.





Above:
Sigrid Schauman,
Garden in Töölö District, 1946,
 oil on paper, 15 x 21 in.

Sigrid Schauman,
Italian Landscape, 1930s,
 oil on canvas,
 glued on cardboard,
 17 x 14 in.

Opposite page:
Sigrid Schauman,
Italian Landscape "Volterra",
 1909, oil on canvas,
 17 x 19 in.



For several years in the 1890s Schjerfbeck taught art in Helsinki and her training introduced Finnish students to the trends that they would encounter during their own studies in Paris. This instruction represented a new and important step for art education in Finland: students began traveling to studios on the continent more prepared to understand and participate in current international styles and movements. Around the turn of the century, Schjerfbeck retired to the privacy of her home and studio, but over the course of her long career she kept abreast of artistic trends. Following her Naturalist period, she developed a modernist aesthetic: simplified forms, often with thick outlines reminiscent of Synthetism (developed in part by Gauguin and Bernard in the 1880s) and a generally muted palette. Schjerfbeck retained the Naturalist practice of depicting subjects based on direct observation—her friends, family and neighbors served as models—and thus portraits of women, as well as self-portraits, feature prominently in her oeuvre.

MARIA (1909)—THE SIMPLIFIED COMPOSITION OF WHICH suggests a solidity that is almost at odds with the sense of immateriality conveyed by the palette and painting style—features both the modernist aesthetic and the atmosphere of quietude typical of Schjerfbeck's paintings. Depicting anonymous subjects and non-specific scenes, such works differ greatly from the paintings that most Finnish nationalist critics preferred, which relied on subject—landscapes, folktales, the Finnish



Elga Sesemann,
Interior, 1940s,
oil on canvas,
20 x 14 in.

| *The profile view that Schjerfbeck employed is reminiscent of that used in Whistler's Mother.*

peasantry—to promulgate the national character. Still lifes like *Red Apples* (1915), one of the artist's rare experiments in colorism, and *Still Life in Green* (ca. 1930), for example, are works that are not about their subject matter so much as they are about color, shape, line and composition. These paintings are typical of Schjerfbeck's work in that they respond much more to international modernism and to the work of her continental peers than to patriotic demands. In *Costume Picture II* (1909), for example, a vase with flowers disappears from the painting's right edge, suggesting, perhaps, the influence of Japonisme. *The Seamstress, Half-Length Portrait* (1927) is among Schjerfbeck's works that are often compared to those by James Abbott McNeill Whistler; here, the profile view that Schjerfbeck employed is reminiscent of that used in Whistler's *Mother*, and a similar sense of tranquility and stillness prevails—with this work, Schjerfbeck demonstrated her familiarity with this iconic painting and responded to it with a work in her own style.

DURING THE 1920S, SCHJERFBECK WAS ESPECIALLY ENGAGED with periodicals from Paris, and many of her portraits from this decade, including *Girl from Eydtkubnen II* (1927), reflect the fashionable, independent modern woman, well-dressed and wearing makeup, she encountered in these publications. This example also reveals the influence of Cubism and of African art: the model's garment—and, indeed, the woman herself—are strikingly stylized; in areas the forms seem constructed from fractured elements, and her nose is similar to those that appear in many works of the period, when African art was especially popular with Parisian artists. *The Teacher* (1933) is more simplified. The subject's facial features are outlined in a black that is reminiscent of Synthetism, and her hair is hardly discernible from the painting's seemingly unfinished background. The sitter avoids the viewer's gaze, as is typical of many of the artist's portraits and self-portraits, including *Californian I* (1919); this sense of reserve, even anonymity, ensures a focus on the work's style rather than its subject. Despite the paintings' titles, which bestow identities of sorts on the sitters, nothing in the images hints at occupation or personality.

Self-Portrait, Black Background (1915), by contrast, reveals the subject's profession through the cup of painting tools visible just over her right shoulder. This self-portrait was commissioned to hang in the Finnish Art Society's conference room; perhaps the intention for this work to be publicly displayed prompted the striking directness and confidence—perhaps even defiance—that it exudes. The painting's public setting might also explain a visage that seems younger than the artist's age at the time. More frank are Schjerfbeck's late self-portraits, including *Self-Portrait with Red Spot* (1944), which chronicles

an aging body. Here, the artist's bald head is sketched against a brown halo of sorts, which also conceals the right half of her face. Although the sitter is frontal, her outsized left eye avoids the viewer's gaze. The overall effect is of a diminishing body that dissolves into the background. Schjerfbeck's late self-portraits, like this one, painted only two years before her death, close the artist's decades-long experimentation with modernist styles.

SCHJERFBECK'S COLLEAGUE ELLEN THESLEFF (1869–1954) WAS similarly devoted to international modernism; she became an early adopter of Expressionism, particularly colorism, which did not become prominent in Finland until around 1910–12. When Thesleff first arrived in Paris, in 1891, Symbolism—a movement that focused on the unseen, including imagination, spirituality, and dreams—was *en vogue*, and she adopted a Symbolist approach. Thesleff was among many European artists who shifted from a Symbolist to an Expressionist mode, increasingly seeking to convey not an objective, observable reality but subjective thoughts and emotions, and



In this new direction, Thesleff was likely inspired by Wassily Kandinsky.

by the first decade of the twentieth century the spare palette of her Symbolist-inspired works was giving way to pure, bright colors laid down with more readily visible brushstrokes and thick swathes of paint applied with a palette knife. In this new direction, Thesleff was likely inspired by Wassily Kandinsky, who was prominent among the pioneers of Expressionism and whose work she would have encountered in an exhibition in Helsinki in 1906, if not earlier. *Italian Landscape* (1900–10), painted during one of the many periods when the artist lived and worked in Italy, is an early example of the artist's use of color in an expressive, rather than mimetic, vein; the painting reflects her experience of the landscape rather than the landscape as observed. *Ball Game (Forte dei Marmi)* (1909), set in seaside Tuscany, is similarly decorative and dreamlike, the limited palette conveying a tranquil mood. The natural,



Opposite page:
Elga Sesemann,
The Flower Seller,
1946,
oil on cardboard,
21 x 17 in.

Elga Sesemann,
Street, 1945,
oil on canvas
28 x 21 in.



light-filled setting and the subject—outdoor exercise in the nude—suggest a theme that is at once classical, evoking ancient Greece, and modern, as outdoor nudity was considered an antidote to a rapidly urbanizing world.

THESLEFF ALSO USED A LIMITED PALETTE IN *Self-Portrait with Hat* (1935), in which vibrant color is eschewed in favor of a wealth of subdued shades applied with brushstrokes of equal variety. Thesleff meets the onlooker's gaze with narrowed eyes that project confidence—and perhaps skepticism or suspicion. The serious tone of this work differs from that in *Finland's Spring* (1942), which dates to the period of the Continuation War. From a profusion of sketchily applied marks of pink and blue emerges a blond maiden who embodies the young nation; in concert with the title's allusion to spring, the cheerful palette and the energetic brushwork, this figure strikes an auspicious tone.

Thesleff's experimentation was not limited to Expressionism; from 1907 she also worked in the medium of colored woodcuts. This exploration was encouraged by her friend Gordon Craig, the English artist and graphic



Ellen Thesleff,
Finland's Spring,
1942, oil on canvas,
28 x 21 in.

Opposite page:
Ellen Thesleff,
Marionettes, 1907,
wood cut, 36 x 36 in.



Ellen Thesleff,
Italian Landscape,
1900–1910 (possibly
turn of the decade),
oil on cardboard,
12 x 12 in.



Ellen Thesleff,
Ball Game
(*Forte dei Marmi*),
1909, oil on canvas,
7 x 17 in.



Ellen Thesleff,
Self-Portrait,
1916, oil on canvas,
19 x 15 in.

designer who commissioned *Marionettes* (1907) for the theatrical periodical *The Mask*. Although many artists use printmaking as a means of achieving a suite of nearly identical prints, Thesleff printed the colors in *Marionettes* together, rather than sequentially. In this way, no two sheets printed from the same block are identical.

LIKE THESLEFF, SIGRID SCHAUMAN (1877–1979) WAS AMONG Finland's early Expressionists. A student of Schjerfbeck's at the Finnish Art Society's drawing school, she studied abroad following her brother Eugen's assassination of Governor-General Nikolai Bobrikov, appointed by Nicholas II to curtail Finnish efforts toward autonomy. Beginning in 1908 she also traveled to Italy, where she painted with Thesleff. *Italian Landscape "Volterra"* (1909) dates from this period. The outlines that define the building at left and the prominent tree at right, as well as the expanses of color (on the whole mimetic) that they contain, respond to Synthetism. Schauman's travels—particularly her encounter with the work of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, artists at the forefront of Orphism, a coloristic offshoot of Cubism—encouraged the brightening of her palette. In the artist's *β*, from the 1930s, the



Sigrid Schauman,
Elisabeth Wolff, 1940,
oil on canvas, 17 x 13 in.

geometric solidity of her earlier work has dissolved into a profusion of hazy colors; conveying a perceived experience seems to have become more desirable than depicting observable reality.

Like Schjerfbeck, Schauman became a teacher—in Helsinki’s Free School of Arts, which was founded as a modernist alternative to the more traditional and patriotic Finnish Art Society school; she was also a prolific art critic and was

among the founders, in 1956, of the artists group Prisma, which was focused on French-inspired modernism, particularly the use of strong, bright colors. In the same decade, Schauman began painting nudes, following a career devoted to landscapes and portraits. *Model* (ca. 1958) employs the backside of a nude woman to explore various shades of yellow, red, green, blue and purple. There is a hint of classical contrapposto in the model’s bent left knee, but the work—in the unfinished, sketchy quality of the background, the thin lines scratched through the paint with a palette knife, the profusion of colors and the enigmatic setting created by three vertical bands of color—places the painting within a twentieth-century context.

THE ARTIST’S UNDATED SELF-PORTRAIT ALSO FEATURES AN unusual composition: the work is very tightly cropped at the top, and what could have been nearly a three-quarter view dissolves into an expanse of blank canvas below Schauman’s shoulders. (The work might appear to be unfinished, but the artist’s red signature—partial though it perhaps is—suggests that she brought it to a state of completion.) The background is an undefined field of reddish brushstrokes, and an unnatural green features prominently on the sitter’s face, perhaps forming a shadow. Schauman’s lips and eyes are void of expression; beyond the unsettled mood created by the colors, and the energetic, almost frenetic quality of the brushwork, the work reveals nothing of her emotional, cognitive or psychological state. Similar qualities infuse *Elisabeth Wolff* (1940), a portrait of Schauman’s daughter, whose face betrays no hint of emotion and whose shoulders dissolve into an area of unfinished canvas that extends up the right side and reveals the grid that the artist used in planning and executing her composition.

By contrast, *Garden in Töölö District* (1946), which provides more an impression of the experience of a garden than a particular view of such, seems to convey comfort or optimism, despite its setting in Helsinki, which had been subject to aerial bombing during the Second World War. The effect is serene

From Naturalism to postwar abstraction, Finnish women took radical steps [toward] modernism.

and decorative—almost joyous in its explosion of color—and provides quite a different impression of the postwar city than that offered in nearly contemporaneous works by Elga Sesemann (1922–2007). In *Street* (1945) and in *Flower Seller* (1946), the anonymity of Sesemann’s figures and the lack of detail in the buildings do not betray the works’ settings, but it is tempting to read them as views of Helsinki. (Sesemann had moved from Viipuri to Helsinki in 1940, after the former was ceded to the Soviet Union at the end of the Winter War; she studied at both the school founded by the Finnish Art Society and at the Free School of Arts.) In these scenes, the paint is applied thickly, primarily in short strokes that seem to fly in every direction; through this style, the chaos of war is evoked, and the nearly empty streets suggest melancholy. Each work features an area of brightness on its horizon, however, and the more vibrant palette of *Flower Seller*—in addition to its title—suggests an optimistic sense of return to “normal life” in the wake of war.

PAIN IS LESS THICKLY APPLIED ON THE ARTIST’S SELF-PORTRAIT of the following year, though variations within fields of color remain. A small patch of light illuminates the left side of Sesemann’s face, drawing the viewer’s attention to her slightly parted lips and closed eyes. The work has an aura of mystery; perhaps, given the artist’s interest in music (shared with many Expressionists), it is a scene of listening. A similar sense of uncertainty pervades *Interior* (1940s), in which patches of color vaguely define walls, floor, furniture and even the figure at the right. Something of the tone of Schjerfbeck’s depictions of dimly lit interiors, void of action, remains, though the degree of abstraction is far greater.

From Naturalism to postwar abstraction, Finnish women took radical steps in the direction of modernism. In the late nineteenth century, while the nation’s male artists were expected to participate in the nation-building project, perhaps artists like Schjerfbeck and Thesleff sensed, and seized, the freedom to produce works of art that responded more to international ideas than to national consciousness. Their early adoption of Naturalism and Expressionism, respectively, brought avant-garde trends to Finnish art well before their male peers adopted such. Even after Expressionism was accepted by most representatives of the Finnish art world, women artists like Schauman and Sesemann were active in maintaining its legacy and prioritizing cultural production during and in the immediate aftermath of war.

Janet S. Rauscher is associate editor and interpretive manager at the Princeton University Art Museum. She holds an M.A. in the history of art from Indiana University, Bloomington, where her research centered on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finnish art.