

Through My Travels I Found Myself: Helene Schjerfbeck
with Maria Wiik and Ellen Thesleff

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Finnish Women artists were able to build their careers in Finland in the early 20th century, and this essay will focus on the topic on Helene Schjerfbeck's (1862-1946) and her artist friends trips to Paris, Pont-Aven in northern France, Fiesole in Italy, and St Ives in Cornwall in England at the end of the 19th century.

These trips abroad were an essential part of becoming a professional artist, not just because of the training but also how staying years abroad helped them to work on a professional basis attending exhibitions, befriended fellow artists from international backgrounds and especially how they saw collections in museums and got to know the international contemporary art of the European art circles in Paris, London and Florence.

Finland was a home to many successful professional women artists, but among them Helene Schjerfbeck is quite exceptional: during her long career, which stretched from the 1870s to the 1940s, she executed over a thousand works of art, painting almost every day. Today we have listed 730 of her works in our catalogue raisonné from 2012.

I will mainly focus on Schjerfbeck but I will also tell something about her life-long friend and colleague Maria Wiik and her pupil and later a colleague, Ellen Thesleff, a younger generation artist with whom she spent some time in Florence in 1894. After their trip, Italy became a second home for Thesleff as we will see in the art works in the exhibition.

In general, Schjerfbeck's career can be divided in two: first to the French influenced naturalism at the beginning, and second, to increasingly pared-down, figurative modernism from the early 1900s onwards. Her engagement with the methods of contemporary artists, as well as with the old masters and the ancient and 'primitive' art of fresco, while studying and working abroad in France, Britain and Italy in the 1880s and 1890s led Schjerfbeck in a new artistic direction, which she later described as 'the path to the synthetic'.^[1] Which she found after settling in the small and lively town in Hyvinkää in Finland in 1902.

Before this very important phase in her life Schjerfbeck had been travelling abroad in different places and lands. Her interest was more and more focused on Old Masters such as Holbein, Velazquez and Frans Hals, as you can see in the copies she made in European

museums while traveling. After her return to Finland in 1894, she entered a transitional period and it was not until she gave up her teaching post at the drawing school run by the Finnish Art Society and moved away from the capital in 1902 that she was able to dedicate herself fully to painting.

After the turn of the 20th century Schjerfbeck's art took on an increasingly bold and spare aesthetic, with sweeping areas of oil paint and tempera. She produced a great series of works between 1902-1915. At this point Schjerfbeck had found her style and practice, and as their compositions became simpler, her paintings' layers and surfaces grew more complicated.

Although Schjerfbeck's works may have a calm, serene appearance, characterised by a simplification of forms and soft areas of colour, she was always willing to experiment with new techniques, at times ruthlessly reworking her canvases with a brush, palette knife or cloth, even on occasion with sandpaper. These physical painterly methods and her intense focus on materiality are part of the sustained working process she developed throughout her career, and this experimental way of painting led her towards a modernist mode before many of her contemporaries.

Helena Sofia was born on 10 July 1862 in Helsinki, the third child of Svante and Olga Schjerfbeck. Her father served as an office manager in the engineering workshop of the state railways. In 1866, at the age of three, Schjerfbeck fell down a flight of stairs and broke her left hip. She was bedridden for several years and, because doctors failed to treat her injury properly, suffered from a limp for the rest of her life. As a result, Schjerfbeck could not attend an ordinary school. To comfort her, her father gave her some drawing implements. In later life, she remarked that when you give a child a pencil, you give her an entire world.^[2]

Early on, the Schjerfbeck-family had decided that they could only afford to educate Helene's older brother Magnus, who was studying to become an architect. It was therefore of the utmost importance that Helene should study at the drawing school with no tuition fees. When her teacher Lina Ingman noticed her pupil's extraordinary skill, she took her drawings to Adolf von Becker, the leading art educator in Finland. Von Becker was astonished and arranged a free scholarship for the eleven-year-old to attend the Finnish Art Society's drawing school. Schjerfbeck became the school's youngest student. The exhibition includes some of her earliest drawings, and a painting and drawings she did in Adolf von Becker's private academy in Helsinki.

From 1873 to 1877 Schjerfbeck studied diligently at the drawing school, where she copied model-book drawings and plaster casts. At the drawing school she met Helena Westermarck, who was to become

one of her lifelong friends. It was probably to distinguish herself from Westermarck that Schjerfbeck began to spell her first name 'Helene'. Schjerfbeck's interest in historical narrative paintings and her predilection for the large dimensions favoured in art salons reveal her ambition as a young woman. However, these genres, although high in demand in Finland, were considered suitable only for male artists. Schjerfbeck's ambition to make a career for herself as a professional artist became concrete in Paris which became her favourite place.

In all she spent nearly six years there, and often longed to return in later life although she never did. First she enrolled first at Mme Trélat de Vigny's private studio for ladies, and in January 1881 Schjerfbeck moved to the Académie Colarossi, where the chief instructor was Gustave Courtois. In the evenings, Schjerfbeck and her friends enjoyed the opera, concerts and visiting the Louvre and Luxembourg museums as well as contemporary art exhibitions. They found a particular favourite in the medieval interiors at the Musée de Cluny. *Girl with a Madonna* (1881, Helsingborg Museum, Sweden), one of her early works from this period, showing a young girl dressed in a medieval costume, is probably a product of inspiration from the Musée de Cluny.

A typical academy work from Academie Colarossi is the *Spaniard* (1881, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum) and a major work from this period the *Mother and Child* (fig.1). This is showing Schjerfbeck's skill and also a theme she preferred in those days, the mother with a child. This is probably painted in the Parisian house she lived in.

In July 1883 Schjerfbeck visited the artists' colony of Pont-Aven, along with her friend Maria Wiik. They stayed in Pont-Aven intermittently until mid-1884 and later described this period as a turning point in her artistic development.

Here they started to explore the new possibilities of *plein-air*



fig.1
Helene Schjerfbeck
Mother and Child
1886
Oil on canvas
72,5 x 92 cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum, Collection
Montgomery
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Hannu Pakarinen



fig.2

fig.2
 Helene Schjerfbeck
The Door
 1884
 Oil on canvas
 40,5 x 32,5 cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis

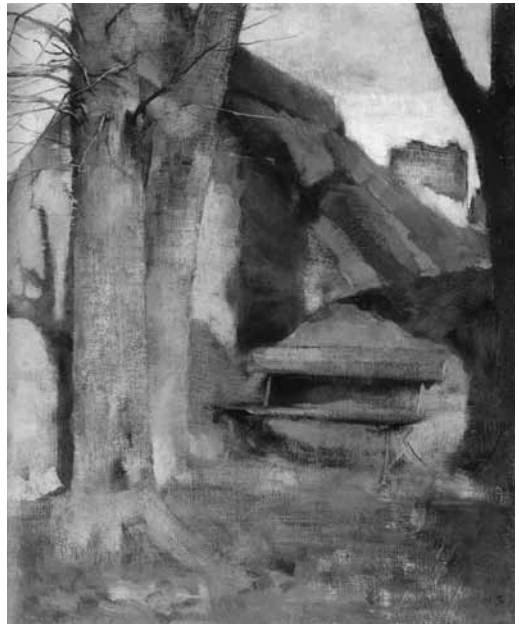


fig.3

fig.3
 Helene Schjerfbeck
Shadow on the Wall (Breton Landscape)
 1883
 Oil on canvas mounted on wood
 45 x 38 cm
 Private collection



fig.4

fig.4
 Maria Wiik
In the Church
 1884
 Oil on canvas
 56 x 46,5 cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum,
 Herman and Elisabeth Hallonblad Collection
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen

painting, producing small landscapes and interiors. The paintings Schjerfbeck made in Brittany have a notable assurance, their subject-matter evolving from typical Breton figure scenes to new and innovative ‘landscapes’, entirely unpopulated like *The Door* (fig.2), and *Shadow on the Wall* (fig.3), a close-up landscape with a few trees and an empty bench. Maria Wiik chose to paint the children in the church praying (fig.4) and also a moving scene of *Farewell, Study for The Obstacle* (1883, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum).

Interestingly, these more radical paintings Schjerfbeck kept for herself and did not show in an exhibition until much later in 1917. In Paris, she had much admired the art of Jules Bastien-Lepage, having seen works by him in the Salon of 1883, the year she made her debut there. Schjerfbeck was delighted to meet the celebrated artist himself at Pont-Aven. Although she had only a couple of small paintings to show him, Bastien-Lepage commented, ‘these paintings have fine things alongside fierce things’. Schjerfbeck never forgot this and repeated his



fig.5
Helene Schjerfbeck
The Convalescent
1888
Oil on canvas
92 x 107 cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Yehia Eweis

words in a letter to Westermarck decades later.^[3] Schjerfbeck's paintings from 1881-85 show that she was freeing herself from the academic requirements of polish, accuracy and detail. They are executed with the broad, square brush strokes that were to become her hallmark, as in her first self-portrait in oil on canvas.

After Pont-Aven, in 1887 Schjerfbeck made the first of two visits to the artists' colony at St Ives in Cornwall. Her visit was brought on by her sadness following a broken engagement to an artist whom she had met at Pont-Aven the previous year. She rigorously destroyed all correspondence that mentioned her fiancé and urged everyone in her circle to do the same. So thoroughly was this done that his identity is still uncertain today.

She arrived in Cornwall to stay with a friend from Paris days and Pont-Aven, Marianne Preindlersberger, now married to her husband the English painter Adrian Scott Stokes. One of her major works from St Ives, *The Convalescent* (fig.5), was shown in the Paris Salon with the title *Première verdure*. Although painting in a naturalist manner, Schjerfbeck emphasises the work's symbolist content, and it marked a new departure in her career towards a more psychological, introverted approach. She returned to the subject later on in 1938-39 to make a lithograph version of it.

Schjerfbeck and Wiik returned to Paris to take part in the Salon. Interestingly one small painting from 1889 by Maria Wiik shows an artist's studio with furniture and easel rendered in pale tones (p.49). The room is awash with light filtering through delicate curtains in front of two large windows, making it ideal for painting. I believe this could be Wiik's and Helene Schjerfbeck's shared studio in Paris in 1889. Although its time and place remain slightly vague, this small and intimate piece painted in spring – the time of daffodils and tulips – was emblematic of the great dream of many women artists: to work in

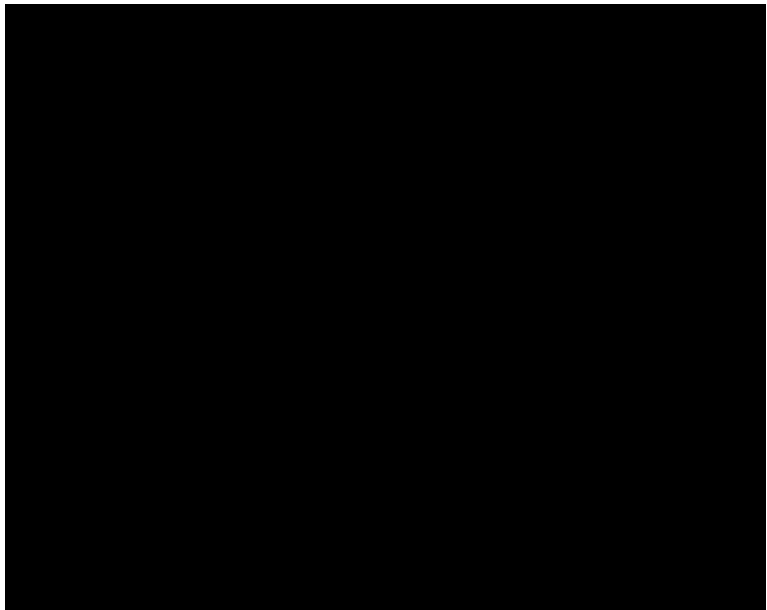
fig.6
Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
The Poor Fisherman
1881
Oil on canvas
155,5 x 192,5 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
©RMN-Grand Palais (Musée
d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski



fig.7
Helene Schjerfbeck
Fiesole Landscape
1894
Oil on canvas
37 x 54 cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum, deposit
from private collection
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Hannu Pakarinen



fig.8
Ellen Thesleff
Spring Night
1894
Oil on canvas
38 x 46 cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum, Herman
and Elisabeth Hallonblad
Collection
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Hannu Pakarinen



peace and concentrate on painting. While many woman artists rented studios together for practical reasons, the companionship and collegiality were important for many.

From 1888 to 1894, opportunities for further travel allowed

Schjerfbeck to expand her knowledge of the art-historical periods that interested her. This time, her aim was to study and copy from the admired Tornabuoni frescoes by Sandro Botticelli, which had been discovered at the Villa Lemmi in Florence in 1873 and brought to the Louvre in 1882.

For artists of the 1890s, then, the urge to try tempera, gouache and watercolour did not merely stem from a desire to learn new techniques. Many experimented to re-create on canvas the thin, matte surface of real fresco, and considered these new working processes a morally uplifting, even spiritual, practice. One prominent exemplar of this 'fresco-inspired palette' was also the Frenchman Pierre Puvis de Chavannes who, by the 1860s, had developed a specific painting technique to create the illusion of 'true' fresco by using a thick, dry, matte paint layer with a greyish tonality in works painted on a canvas support that could then be attached to the wall. His most important public murals were in the Panthéon, the Sorbonne and the Hôtel de Ville, Paris, and his iconic and enigmatic easel painting *The Poor Fisherman* (fig.6) was required viewing for all young art students in Paris in the 1890s. She would certainly have been aware of *The Poor Fisherman* from Paris. Many painters such as Schjerfbeck admired his works.

Understandably, Schjerfbeck wished to experience for herself the early Renaissance frescoes by Fra Angelico at the monastery of San Marco in Florence and to see the works of Botticelli in the Galleria degli Uffizi.

Schjerfbeck's sojourn in Florence was to be her last painting trip abroad. She was accompanied by a younger artist Ellen Thesleff, with whom she painted in the monastery in San Marco copying Fra Angelico's frescoes. Schjerfbeck painted mostly landscapes on this trip like the *Fiesole Landscape* (fig.7). Here we see Thesleff's ascetic palette and her misty way of approaching landscapes (fig.8), which must have influenced Schjerfbeck. As we can witness in her painting *Churchgoers* (1895-1900, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum).

In the autumn of 1894 Schjerfbeck returned to Finland, where for financial reasons she accepted the position of chief instructor at the drawing school. As well as illness, in this period Schjerfbeck also struggled with her role as an artist, as she tried to find her own style, experimenting with different mediums and subject matter.

Finally, in 1902, she gave up her teaching post and moved in June with her mother to Hyvinkää, a small, lively town with good railway connections about thirty miles from Helsinki. Furthermore, her mother's modest widow's pension freed her from the need to take on full-time work. She was now finally able to dedicate herself completely to art, and this resulted in a remarkable and productive stage of her career, in which she developed a style that synthesised all the

fig.9
Helene Schjerfbeck
Granny
1907
Oil on canvas
57 x 51 cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum, Yrjö and
Nanny Kaunisto Collection
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Yehia Eweis



influences she had assimilated in preceding years. She also frequently hosted artists, visitors and her circle of acquaintances and was never short of inspiring sitters for her paintings.

One artist who was compared with Schjerfbeck in her lifetime was James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Schjerfbeck's move towards a softer, almost misty treatment, and her reduction of her colours to black, earthy tones and white meant that she was often compared to Whistler by critics. Schjerfbeck's painting *Granny* (fig.9) shows her new enthusiasm to a very matt and flat surface with muted soft tones.

Schjerfbeck produced a series of simplified and concentrated works including *The Seamstress (The Working Woman)* (1905, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum). One cannot avoid comparing these works with Whistler's almost puritanically austere portraits of his mother. Both artists' paintings convey the same quietness, the same flat colour fields and composition, the same type of interior and static mood. But whereas Whistler used wet layers and what he called his 'sauce', which he made from thinned paint, Schjerfbeck uses dry paint, rubbed into the canvas, and her contours are hazy, conveying a more dreamy and silent atmosphere.

Schjerfbeck kept in touch with the international art and read international periodicals, mainly in French, and corresponded widely with colleagues and friends. Her inability to travel perhaps made her even more interested in international art and exhibitions. She was an avid reader of artists' biographies, among them those of Van Gogh and Gauguin.

In the 1910s Schjerfbeck took part in group exhibitions as often as possible, both in Finland and abroad. And from 1913 onwards, Schjerfbeck began to receive more attention, at home, with appreciative reviews in the press, and abroad. It was at this moment that

the art dealer Gösta Stenman purchased several works directly from Schjerfbeck and curated an exhibition of Finnish modernism at the Ateneum that became a real triumph in 1915.

Schjerfbeck's status as an artist was further enhanced when the board of the Finnish Art Society commissioned a self-portrait from her for its collection; she delivered this in 1915 (p.17). Schjerfbeck included a Holbeinesque text on the work's black background giving her name in worn, classical lettering, as if on a tombstone. This is the backdrop to her self-assured pose, her bright vermilion brush pot and a lock of unruly hair, as if to contrast both the past and the vital present within the same painting.

Schjerfbeck's first solo exhibition was organised by Stenman in his art gallery in 1917 – the year that Finland gained independence from Russia. The show became a turning point in her career, both financially and artistically. The reviews were excellent. Schjerfbeck was described as a strong artist in pursuit of her own truth, even a 'master'. According to the catalogue, an impressive 159 works were displayed, including *The Costume Picture I* (1908-09, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum) and *The Woodcutter I* (1910-11, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum), and the exhibition was also a resounding success in terms of sales.^[4] After a fifteen-year break, in 1917 Schjerfbeck again visited the Ateneum, where she was most taken by paintings by Cézanne and Gauguin.

A new phase started and as the years passed Schjerfbeck became increasingly interested in fashion and fashion magazines, inspired in particular by the 1920s flapper girl identity and the growing numbers of working women. In *The Fortune-Teller (Woman in Yellow Dress)* (fig.10) these elegant, independent women and androgynous models



fig.10
Helene Schjerfbeck
The Fortune-Teller (Woman in Yellow Dress)
1926
Oil on canvas
65,5 x 51 cm
Finnish National Gallery /
Ateneum Art Museum, Yrjö and
Nanny Kaunisto Collection
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
Hannu Pakarinen

began to intrigue her. She subscribed to such French fashion magazines as *Marie Claire*, *Chiffons* and *La Mode pratique*.

Schjerfbeck began corresponding with Dora Estlander, the daughter of her cousin Hanna. They also met often and became close. Estlander was a stylish *garçonne* with whom Schjerfbeck could discuss fashion and whom she used as a sitter in many of her paintings, like in *Elegant Lady (Dora)* (1928, Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation, Helsinki). This productive period was overshadowed by grief when she learned that Maria Wiik died the same year, and her brother Magnus in 1933.

To conclude, during her sixties, Schjerfbeck produced some of her best works exploring modern identity: modern women in their professional guise and modern men as dandies. Although her subject-matter still encompassed still-life, portraiture and landscape, increasingly in these late years Schjerfbeck turned to herself as subject.

Schjerfbeck had not travel abroad after 1895. However, her interest stayed on international art and she was a keen follower of the modern art scene. She continued to be inspired in, for example, El Greco, Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh. Schjerfbeck's memories and knowledge of art books and magazines created the visual repository of the sources on which she based her long career as one of the most individual and prominent artist of her age.

Helene Schjerfbeck participated in exhibitions in Paris, Milan and Rome. The second world war forced Schjerfbeck to consider leaving Finland for safety. In 1944 Schjerfbeck finally accepted Stenman's invitation and flew to Stockholm, settling at Saltsjöbaden.

Considering her age and poor health, she made an astonishing number of works in her final years, including portraits, views from her window, works after El Greco, some magnificent still-lives, and more than twenty haunting self-portraits in which she contemplated her own imminent end. She constantly worried about the fate of both her country and her relatives and yearned to be back in her homeland. She was never to see them again.

Helene Schjerfbeck died at Saltsjöbaden on 23 January 1946 from rapidly advancing stomach cancer at the age of eighty-three.

This essay is partly based on the following article: Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, "Fine Things Alongside Fierce Things", *Helene Schjerfbeck*, exh. cat., London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2019, pp.10-27.

[1] Letter to Ada Thilén, 6 July 1911, Åbo Akademi University Library, Turku.

[2] Letter to Einar Reuter, 13 September 1919, Åbo Akademi University Library, Turku.

[3] Letter to Helena Westermark, 13 April 1936, no.1647, Åbo Akademi University Library, Turku.

[4] H. Ahtela (Pseudonym for Einar Reuter), *Helena Schjerfbeck*, Helsinki, 1917.

旅をして見つけた自分：ヘレン・シャルフベック、マリア・ヴィーク、エレン・テスレフ

アンナ=マリア・フォン・ボンズドルフ

ヘレン・シャルフベック(1862-1946年)は19世紀後半に様々な国や地域を旅したが、こうした国外旅行は職業芸術家になる上で不可欠な要素であった。それはただの絵画修行ではなく、長期滞在することで、プロとして展覧会に出品したり、国際色豊かな芸術家仲間と交流したり、また様々な美術館のコレクションを見たり、ヨーロッパの同時代の美術動向に触れたりすることができた。

若くして絵の才能を見出され、11歳の時にフィンランド芸術協会の素描学校への入学が許可されたシャルフベックは、母国で基礎的な美術教育を受けた後、留学先のパリで芸術家としての道を切り開く。彼女はおよそ6年間をパリで過ごした。1883-84年には、友人のマリア・ヴィークとブルターニュ地方のボンタヴェンに滞在して戸外制作に取り組み、より大胆で革新的な風景画も生み出している。同地では、当時彼女が模範としていた自然主義の画家ジュール・バステイアンルパージュにも出会い、助言を得ている。

シャルフベックは婚約破棄という不幸に見舞われるも、1887年にはイギリスのセント・アイヴズに二度滞在している。同地で制作され、パリのサロンに出品された代表作《快復期》は、自然主義の手法で描かれながらも、より内面性に重きが置かれており、象徴主義へと向かうシャルフベックの画業の新たな出発点となっている。

1888-94年に、シャルフベックはさらなる旅行の機会を得て、過去の巨匠や美術史に対する関心と知識を深めた。パリではサンドロ・ボッティチェリのフレスコ画やピウヴィス・ド・シャヴァンヌのモニュメンタルな壁画を研究し、最後の国外旅行先となったフィレンツェでは、より若い世代の女性画家エレン・テスレフと共にフランジェリコのフレスコ画を模写している。

1894年の秋、シャルフベックはフィンランドに完全帰国する。生計を立てるためフィンランド芸術協会の素描学校の教師として働いた後、1902年に母親とヒュヴィンカーという小さな町に移住する。この地で制作活動に打ち込む中で、彼女はそれまでに受けた影響の全てを統合し、独自の様式を発展させた。そして1910年代には、国内外の多くのグループ展への参加や、フィンランド芸術協会からの自画像制作の依頼、そして初個展の開催などを経て、確固たる評価を確立していく。

1895年以降、二度と国外を旅することがなかったシャルフベックだが、生涯国際的な芸術への関心を失うことはなく、最新の美術動向をつかむことにも余念がなかった。彼女は、外国の美術雑誌や画集、評伝を熱心に読み、エル・グレコやポール・セザンヌ、フィンセント・ファン・ゴッホらからインスピレーションを受け続けた。そして、旅を通じた芸術体験の記憶と、情報収集による知識を基盤に、その長い画業において自らを刷新し続け、フィンランド近代における最も独創的で卓越した芸術家の一人であり続けたのである。

[抄訳：久保田有寿]