



**Helene Schjerfbeck**  
**20 July – 27 October 2019**  
**The Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler Galleries**

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The Royal Academy of Arts will present a survey of the long and productive career of Finnish artist Helene Schjerfbeck (1862 – 1946). This will be the first solo exhibition of Schjerfbeck's works to be held in the UK. Celebrated as one of the most famous and highly regarded artists in Finland, it will be a rare opportunity to see Schjerfbeck's paintings together.

The exhibition will feature around 65 portraits, landscapes and still lifes, charting the development of Schjerfbeck's work from a naturalistic style inspired by French Salon painters in the early 1880s, to a radically abstracted and modern approach from the turn of the twentieth century onwards. Throughout her career, Schjerfbeck exhibited internationally and was particularly successful in the Nordic countries and across mainland Europe; however, she has remained largely undiscovered in the UK.

The exhibition will be organised in five sections. *Paris, Pont Aven and St Ives* will show Schjerfbeck's early works which demonstrate the influence of the naturalistic painting of Jules Bastien-Lepage, as well as unconventional landscapes that indicate her growing interest in the materiality of paint, such as *Shadow on the Wall (Breton Landscape)*, 1883 (Niemistö Collection). The earliest work in the exhibition will be *Two Profiles*, 1881 (Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki), depicting Schjerfbeck's lifelong friend and fellow painter Marianne Preindelsberger. There will also be striking examples from her time spent in the artists' colony of St Ives, Cornwall in the late 1880s where she stayed with Marianne and her husband Adrian Stokes RA. A highlight will be *The Convalescent*, 1888 (Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki). Exhibited at the Paris Salon that year, the painting was extremely popular, but it marked a style of painting from which Schjerfbeck would soon turn away.

The second section, *Moments of Silence*, will bring together larger canvases, creating private, reflective encounters that Schjerfbeck painted after her permanent move back to Finland in 1896. Following a period teaching at the Finnish Art Society's drawing school in what is now the Ateneum building in Helsinki, Schjerfbeck moved with her mother to the rural town of Hyvinkää in 1902. Here, her style began to evolve into a more modernist approach, with canvases divided into areas of flat, often luminous colour. In the first decade of the twentieth century, a sequence of paintings of her mother shows this dramatic change with a flattening of space and simplification of form that bears traces of Whistler's influence. These works will include *My Mother*, 1902 (Moderna Museet, Stockholm) and *My Mother*, 1909 (Private Collection).

In the central gallery, *Self-portraits* will feature a series of 17 progressively abstracted and increasingly raw works painted throughout her life, from the age of 22 to 83, that reveal Schjerfbeck's fascination with aging and the physical deterioration of the self. These works show her journey from impressionistic beginnings with the earliest work, *Self-portrait*, 1884-85 (Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki), to the pared down confidence of such later paintings as *Self-portrait, Black Background*, 1915 (Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki). In her final years she executed more than twenty abstracted self-portraits, creating striking and haunting images with confrontational gazes. What is believed to be one of the last self-portraits is also included, *Self-portrait in Black and Pink*, 1945 (Private Collection). These later works demonstrate her own sense of isolation, having moved to Sweden during the Second World War, and bear evidence of her study of Old Masters, such as El Greco and Rembrandt.

*The Modern Look* will focus on portraits of family, friends and models made between 1909 and 1944. They are formal, painterly explorations that capture an atmosphere as much as a likeness. Schjerfbeck was inspired by diverse sources including such journals as *L'Amour de l'art*, *Marie Claire* and *Chiffons*. She also referred to paintings from earlier centuries, sometimes basing her own works on these. With mask-like faces, the notion of masquerade is a recurring theme and is typified in *The Skier (English Girl)*, 1909 (Sven-Harrys Konstmuseum, Stockholm), which also registers Schjerfbeck's interest in 18<sup>th</sup> century painting and the Rococo revival. She freely fused varied imagery with her own observations, memories, and imagination, often giving the subjects fictional titles, for example *Måns Schjerfbeck (The Motorist)*, 1933 (Sven-Harrys Konstmuseum, Stockholm), which depicts her nephew who had neither driver's license nor car, or referring to 'types' like *Circus Girl*, 1916 (Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki).

The exhibition will conclude with *Still Life*, a poignant group of pictures that echo the sense of mortality and decay that pervades Schjerfbeck's self-portraits, which she was working on at the same time. *Three Pears on a Plate*, 1945 (Private Collection) is the final painting she ever made.

### **Helene Schjerfbeck biography**

Helene Sofia Schjerfbeck was born in Helsinki in 1862. In 1872 Adolf von Becker, a Finnish painter, was shown Schjerfbeck's drawings and at eleven years old secured her a place at the Finnish Drawing School. In 1877 she moved to von Becker's private academy. In 1880 she travelled to Paris and studied at the Académie Trélat and the Académie Colarossi. Much of her time in the 1880s was spent between Paris, Pont-Aven and Finland, except for the late 1880s when she went to St Ives, Cornwall. In 1887 an exhibition at the Institute of Painters in Oil Colours in Piccadilly, London, included one of her paintings and she exhibited there again in 1889 and 1890. Schjerfbeck travelled to St Petersburg, Vienna and Florence in the early 1890s before returning to Helsinki to take up a teaching position at the Ateneum drawing school. In 1902, she moved to Hyvinkää, north of Helsinki, to care for her mother. Whilst in Hyvinkää she met art dealer Gösta Stenman who became closely involved with her work. Her first solo exhibition took place in 1917 in Helsinki which was considered a critical success. In 1925, Schjerfbeck moved to Tammisaari on the west coast of Finland where she continued to paint on a daily basis. Her second solo exhibition took place in 1937 in Stockholm. A major exhibition of 120 works was then planned in the United States in 1939 but was cancelled due to the outbreak of the Second World War. With the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland in the same year, Schjerfbeck was temporarily evacuated and was later persuaded by Stenman to move

to Sweden. She died at the age of 83 in 1946. Ten years after her death, she was chosen to represent Finland at the Venice Biennale in 1956.

### **Organisation**

The exhibition is organised by the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and the Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki. It is curated by independent art historian Jeremy Lewison, with Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, Chief Curator at the Ateneum Art Museum, Désirée de Chair and Sarah Lea, Curators at the Royal Academy of Arts.

The exhibition will travel to the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, in November 2019.

### **Catalogue**

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with contributions from Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, Rebecca Bray, Désirée de Chair and Jeremy Lewison.

### **Dates and Opening Hours**

**Press View: Wednesday 17 July 2019, 10am-1pm**

Open to public: Saturday 20 July – Sunday 27 October 2019  
10am – 6pm daily (last admission 5.30pm)

Late night opening: Fridays until 10pm (last admission 9.30pm)

### **Admission**

Full price £13.50 (£12.00 excluding Gift Aid donation); concessions available; under 16s go free; Friends of the RA go free.

### **Tickets**

Tickets are available daily at the RA or by visiting [www.royalacademy.org.uk](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk).

Group bookings: Groups of 10+ are asked to book in advance. Telephone 020 7300 8027 or email [adultgroups@royalacademy.org.uk](mailto:adultgroups@royalacademy.org.uk).

### **Images**

Publicity images for the *Helene Schjerfbeck* can be obtained from Picselect, the Press Association's image service for press use. Please register at [www.picselect.com](http://www.picselect.com) and once registered go to the Royal Academy folder in the Arts section of Picselect.

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to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. Its public programme promotes the creation, enjoyment and appreciation of the visual arts through exhibitions, education and debate.

The Royal Academy launched a new campus as part of the celebrations of its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary year in 2018. Following a transformative redevelopment, designed by the internationally-acclaimed architect Sir David Chipperfield RA and supported by the National Lottery, the new Royal Academy of Arts reveals more of the elements that make the RA unique – sharing with the public historic treasures from its Collection, the work of its Royal Academicians and the Royal Academy Schools, and its role as a centre for learning and debate about art and architecture – alongside its world-class exhibitions programme. [Royalacademy.org.uk](http://Royalacademy.org.uk)

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**28.03.19**