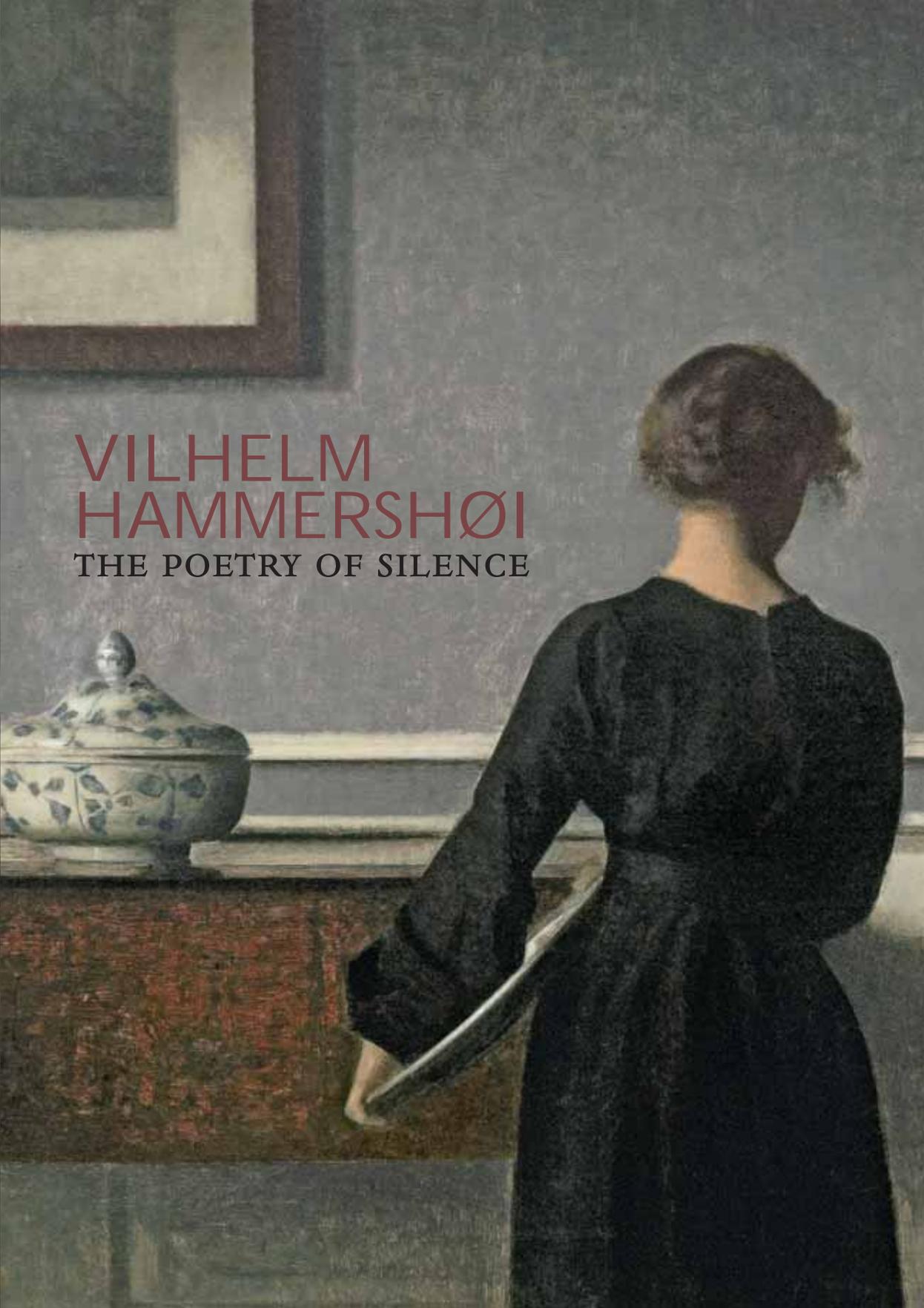


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VILHELM  
HAMMERSHØI  
THE POETRY OF SILENCE

# VILHELM HAMMERSHØI

## THE POETRY OF SILENCE

SACKLER WING OF GALLERIES  
28 JUNE – 7 SEPTEMBER 2008

### An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Written by Helena Bonett  
Education Department  
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#### FRONT COVER

Cat. 39

*Interior: Young Woman seen from  
Behind (detail), c.1904*

Randers Kunstmuseum, Randers  
Photo Niels Erik Høybye

#### BACK COVER

Cat. 34

*View of the Old Asiatic Company or,  
The Asiatic Company Buildings (detail), 1902*

Private collection, on deposit at the Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen  
Photo Pernille Klemp

Royal  
Academy  
of Arts

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'For some time now Vilhelm Hammershøi (b. 1864) has had his admirers in England. His art is well known nearly all over the world. Last summer in the great International Exhibition at Rome he was one of the few artists who obtained the highest prize of the exhibition. Hammershøi's discreet choice of colours harmonises well with the old-fashioned type of room which he usually paints.'

Hammershøi's entry in the catalogue for an *Exhibition of Work by Modern Danish Artists*, Public Art Galleries, Brighton, April–July 1912

### INTRODUCTION

The exhibition of Danish art at the Brighton Public Art Galleries in 1912 was one of a series at this progressive gallery showing modern art from all over Europe. The glowing praise heaped on Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916) – as an artist 'well known nearly all over the world' – may come as a surprise to us now, when his name is hardly known. This is the paradox of Hammershøi. While his work may appear now to be gentle and calm, a lyrical 'poetry of silence', for his contemporaries this very silence was provocative and even controversial. It was because of the rejection of *Young Girl Sewing* (1887; cat. 7) and *Bedroom* (1890; cat. 10) by the exhibition jury of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts that The Independent Exhibition (Den frie Udstilling) was set up in 1891 by Hammershøi's friends, in opposition to the Academy's annual exhibition held in the Charlottenborg Palace in Copenhagen. But Hammershøi was not part of any group and always maintained his independence, producing work that unsettled not only the establishment but even his friends. No one knew where to place him, and because he could not be fitted into a 'canon' of art, he was largely forgotten. Since the 1980s, his work has been rediscovered and has undergone a reappraisal both in Denmark and around the world.

'Hammershøi, however, from the very first moment knew how to obtain respect for himself among the older fellows, both by his stubborn silence and by his head strong manner of drawing, which, with its soft shading, already contained hints of the delicate beauties in his later, peculiar manner of painting.'

The artist Emil Hannover on Hammershøi at the Royal Danish Academy

### EARLY LIFE

From the beginning of his life Hammershøi displayed abundant artistic talent, which his father and particularly his mother, Frederikke, encouraged. Hammershøi's two younger siblings, Anna and Svend, also supported their brother by posing for him, and Frederikke collected a scrapbook of newspaper clippings relating to his work throughout her life. From the age of eight, Hammershøi received drawing lessons and was taught by a variety of artists, including Niels Christian Kierkegaard (1806–1882) who was himself taught by Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), the foremost artist of the Danish Golden Age.

As Denmark moved towards a liberal democracy in the early nineteenth century, the country saw a nationalistic flourishing in the arts and sciences. This produced the Danish Golden Age (c. 1800–50),

represented by such artists as Eckersberg, Constantin Hansen (1804–1880) and Christen Købke (1810–1848). In 1879, Hammershøi began his training at the Royal Danish Academy where the artists of the Danish Golden Age had also trained. In 1883, he also joined the Independent Study Schools (De frie Studieskoler), which had been set up the previous year in opposition to the conservatism of the Academy. Despite their anti-conservatism, the tutors at the Independent Study Schools, including the artist Peder Severin Krøyer (1851–1909), were confused and taken aback by Hammershøi's painting, Krøyer apparently comparing his figures to 'butter or lard in moonlight' and 'foetuses in alcohol'. However, as Krøyer later remarked to one of the other tutors, 'I have a pupil who paints most oddly. I do not understand him, but believe he is going to be important and do not try to influence him.'

**Cat. 5** Although this portrait of his nineteen-year-old sister Anna was Hammershøi's first large-scale painting, it already displays many of the motifs he was to make use of for the rest of his life, such as the white door and black dress. The painting was his competition entry for the Academy's spring exhibition prize for 'A female portrait, three-quarter view, lifesize'. The three-quarter-length portrait had been a traditional subject for the artists of the Danish Golden Age, and Hammershøi may well have seen Købke's *Portrait of the Artist's Sister, Cecilie Margrethe Petersen, née Købke* (1835). However, while Købke's sister sits in a static pose and looks directly out at the viewer, Anna, in a more animated position, stares beyond us, as though in a dream. Hammershøi's distinctive, sombre palette also contrasts with the bright colours of the traditional Golden Age portraits. Most importantly, Anna has no occupation. Traditionally, the sitter would be surrounded by objects with their hands occupied in some fashion, providing the potential for a symbolic reading. By removing these details, Hammershøi leaves no aids for interpretation other than Anna's expressive yet introverted face and hands.

Hammershøi did not win the prize for this painting. Karl Madsen (1855–1938), an art critic and friend of Hammershøi at the Academy, wrote that Hammershøi had 'with this portrait thrown the general public and the academic method of art the gauntlet and placed his conception of what is artistic and beautiful so unequivocally on view as nobody hitherto has dared in this country'. The painting was so provocative that a group of 41 artists associated with the Independent Study Schools signed an open letter to the Academy protesting against the decision not to award Hammershøi the prize.

Why do you think Hammershøi's contemporaries found this painting so provocative? Do you find anything provocative about it now?

Why do you think Anna is wearing a black dress? What effect does this have on the composition?

'As you perhaps know I go to Krøyer's school every day from 8.30 to 4; then I dash home and eat supper and then it's on to the Academy where I draw from 5.30 to 7.30, and besides that I am studying French which, however, I will be stopping shortly.' Hammershøi in a letter to his elder brother Otto, 1883

**Cat. 5**  
*Portrait of a Young Woman.*  
*The Artist's Sister Anna*  
*Hammershøi, 1885*  
 Oil on canvas  
 112 × 91.5 cm

The Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen  
 Photo © The Hirschsprung Collection,  
 Copenhagen/DOWIC Fotografi



## PARIS AND LONDON

In June 1890, Hammershøi became engaged to Ida Ilsted (1869–1949), who was the sister of his friend and fellow Academy student, Peter. They were married in September 1891 and immediately set off on their honeymoon, only returning to Denmark in March the next year. In fact, the journey was less of a honeymoon than a tour of major European artistic centres and their museums, in which Hammershøi immersed himself. As soon as he and Ida arrived in Paris, for example, Hammershøi went off to paint an Ancient Greek relief in the Louvre (cat. 14).

Before they arrived in Paris the couple spent three weeks travelling through Holland and Belgium, visiting Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, Bruges and Antwerp. Hammershøi had previously been on a solo trip to the Netherlands and Belgium in 1887, and travelled extensively in Europe during his lifetime. He was fascinated by Dutch Golden Age artists, such as Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675; fig. 1), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/9–1682) and Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684), and spent a lot of time in the museums in the Netherlands and Belgium.

While his Danish contemporaries such as the artist Jens Ferdinand Willumsen (1863–1958) admired the new modern art that was being produced in Paris, Hammershøi thought much of it ‘a lot of trash’ and concentrated his time and effort on the art of the past. As he wrote to his mother from Paris in 1891:

You mustn't be afraid that I shall lose my independence, it is in no danger. But I have travelled to Paris in order to see a great deal and also to learn something. But I think I will learn more from the old art than from the new. Of the many ideas that are about I haven't seen much, but only heard that there were many ideas about.

Hammershøi had previously met the influential French art critic Théodore Duret (1838–1927) when he had won a prize for *Young Girl Sewing* (cat. 7) at the 1889 Paris World's Fair (Exposition Universelle), which had ironically been rejected by the more conservative Royal Danish Academy's exhibition jury. Duret subsequently visited Copenhagen in 1890 and described Hammershøi as a ‘master of the first rank’. Through Duret and the French art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel (1831–1922), Hammershøi had a means of entering the Parisian art scene. However, he did not take up the opportunity, and never returned to Paris again.

On the other hand, when Hammershøi and Ida visited London (from October 1897 till May 1898) they found a place with which they had a strong affinity. It may be that the famous London fog attracted Hammershøi, whose paintings often appear as though seen through a kind of mist. As a young child, he had also been fascinated by the novels of Charles Dickens (1812–1870). However, as in Paris, Hammershøi was not interested in any of the artistic groups of the time in London, except for one painter, James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), an American

“There is a small Impressionist and Symbolist exhibition here at the moment which is a lot of trash. I should hope for the Symbolists that it is a very bad exhibition. Most of the paintings look like jokes.”  
Hammershøi in a letter from Paris, 1892

artist who had moved to London when he was 21 years old. Hammershøi was interested in many of Whistler's paintings, such as *Arrangement in Grey and Black. Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871), which he recreated in his own portrait of his mother, *The Artist's Mother, Frederikke Hammershøi* (1886).

Whistler had also faced some harsh criticism for his individual manner of painting. The art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) wrote of Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket* (1875): ‘For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.’ Whistler consequently sued the critic for libel. Hammershøi naturally felt an affinity with Whistler, who, like him, had been criticised by the establishment. Yet one of the main reasons Hammershøi sought out Whistler on this occasion was that he was president of The International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers. Hammershøi had painted *Two Figures* while in London and wanted it exhibited at the society's first exhibition.

**Cat. 22** In March 1898 Hammershøi wrote from London to his brother Svend:

The one picture I am painting away at, and which I have worked on since we came back here after Christmas, is a kind of double portrait of Ida and myself, although my back is almost completely turned to the viewer; and, actually, they are not intended to be portraits in the strictest sense. I am fairly satisfied with it.

As with all portraits, this painting demands a double reading: both biographical and art historical. From a biographical point of view we can read much into the couple's relationship. Vilhelm appears to be looking intently at Ida, while her eyes are lowered in an almost modest way. Her hand rests on the empty table and light is reflected from the gold wedding ring on her finger. She has been painted in a delicate, smooth style with an unknown light source shining onto her forehead and neck. Hammershøi, on the other hand, has represented himself as though he is the viewer of the painting, contemplating Ida. Quite a large section of the canvas is taken up by his back, which is painted in a sombre black.

This portrait seems to allude to some of the conventions found in depictions of Christ's Last Supper. As in Eckersberg's *The Last Supper* (1839–40), which hung in Hammershøi's parish church, it was common to have a divine light shining onto Christ, with the apostles facing towards him, their backs turned to the viewer. Seen in this context Ida's illuminated forehead gives her a celestial expression and the shape of her face and the slight smile on her lips as well as her calm demeanour lend



Cat. 22  
*Two Figures (The Artist  
and His Wife), or Double  
Portrait, 1898*

Oil on canvas  
72 × 86 cm

ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Aarhus  
Photo Ole Hein Pedersen

her something of the divine. By placing Ida in the position of Christ, Hammershøi upsets the viewer's habitual notion of spirituality. The lack of clutter in the painting and the gleaming, white tablecloth reveal a personal spirituality.

In many depictions of the Last Supper, including that of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), the tablecloths often have strong creases in them, as does the tablecloth in *Two Figures*. Tablecloths in Hammershøi's time, however, would also have been made of quite thick material that was typically starched, so the depiction of the perfectly creased tablecloth could also be showing Ida's good housekeeping.

Hammershøi says that these are not portraits 'in the strictest sense' and we can see that this 'portrait' of Ida does not resemble the earlier portrait (cat. 12) very closely. Do you think that Hammershøi has stylised her face? If so, why? Does she remind you of any other representations of women in art history?

Why do you think there is nothing on the table? What effect does this have? What is the dark shadow in the bottom left-hand corner?

Do you think this painting represents a happy relationship? Why?

Unfortunately, Hammershøi's attempt to contact Whistler failed because the latter was away in France, and consequently *Two Figures* missed its opportunity of being exhibited in London. This did not stop him from returning to London often, however, particularly after the English concert pianist Leonard Borwick (1868–1925), who had sought Hammershøi out after seeing a reproduction of *Interior* (1899; cat. 25) while he was on a concert tour in Denmark, had become a friend and patron.

## ARCHITECTURE, GEOMETRY, LIGHT

In an interview in 1907, Hammershøi explained his pictorial choices:

What makes me choose a motif are ... the lines, what I like to call the architectural content of an image. And then there's the light, of course. Obviously, that's also very important, but I think it's the lines that have the greatest significance for me. Colour is naturally not without importance. I'm really not indifferent to how [the motif's] colours look. I work hard to make it look harmonious. But when I choose a motif I'm thinking first and foremost of the lines.

Due to the thin pigment Hammershøi used in some of his paintings, the lines that he drew to define the structure of the composition can sometimes be seen. Eckersberg often employed the mathematical ratio known as the 'Golden Section' to compose his paintings, a ratio used to create perfect classical proportion and seen in such paintings as his *The Last Supper*. Hammershøi, on the other hand, preferred a more naturalistic

composition, or one that was deliberately distorted in such a way as to unsettle the viewer.

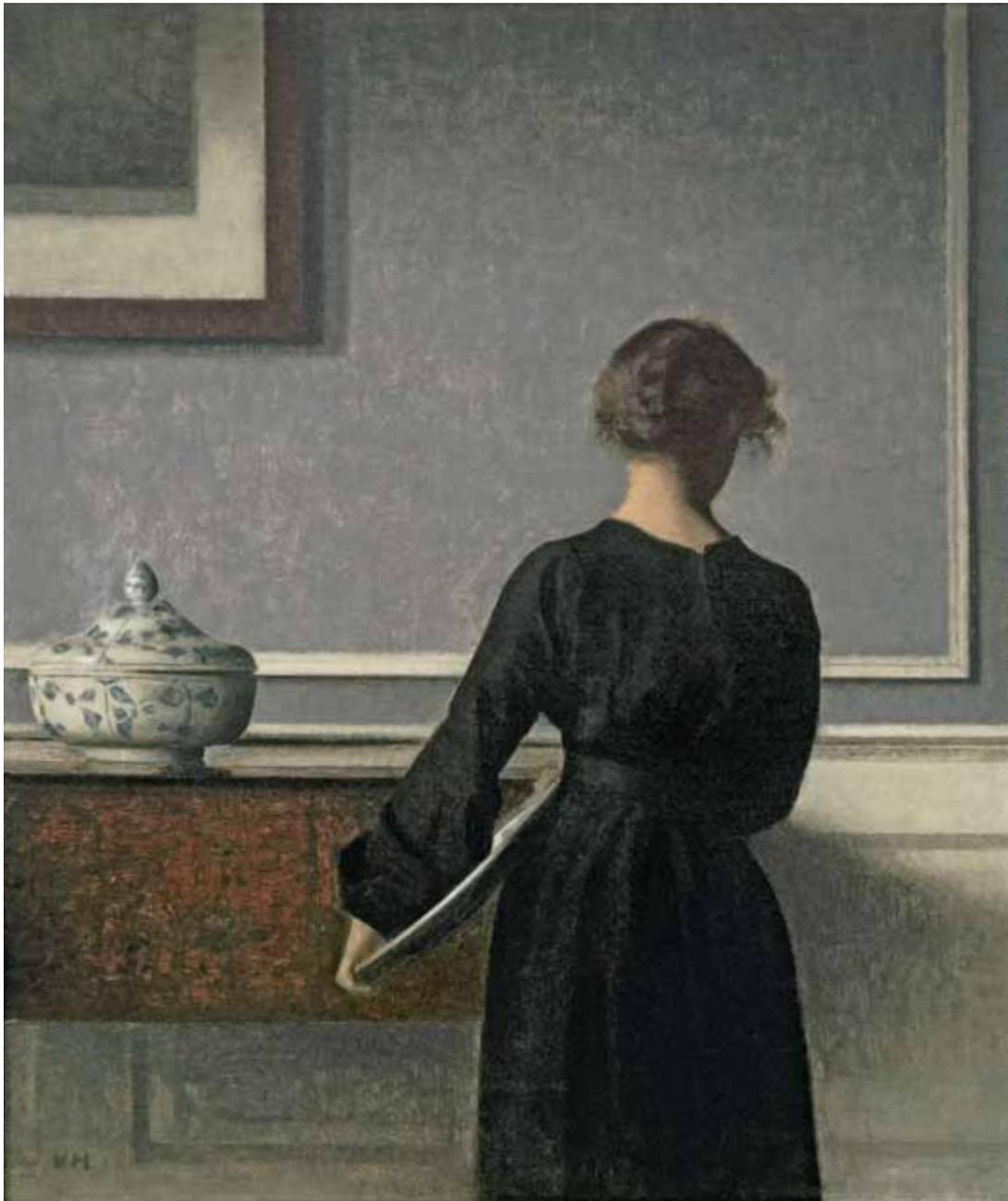
'If only people would open their eyes to the fact that few good things in a room give it a far more beautiful and finer quality than many mediocre things.'  
Hammershøi in an interview, 1909

**Cat. 39** The subject of this painting revolves around the lines created through the juxtaposition and cropping of objects. Our eye is drawn from the top left of the painting to the bottom right, as each object points, in a sense, towards the female figure. Although Hammershøi has chosen a strict geometric composition, he has not necessarily altered the actual surroundings to fit in with an idealised structure, as Eckersberg might have done. The painting bears comparison with many of Vermeer's works, such as fig. 1. However, while Vermeer created a clear foreground, middle and background through the careful placing of objects within space, Hammershøi does not provide us with such distinct visual spaces.

In Hammershøi's painting we have the impression that we are looking at a stage set that is missing many of its props. We are unable to tell how close the woman is standing to the wall, or why she would be

**Fig. 1**  
JOHANNES VERMEER  
*A Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman* ('The Music Lesson'), c.1662–65  
Oil on canvas  
73.3 × 64.5 cm  
The Royal Collection © 2008.  
Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II  
Photo Royal Collection Picture Library





**Cat. 39**  
*Interior. Young Woman seen  
from Behind, c.1904*  
Oil on canvas  
61 x 50,5 cm  
Randers Kunstmuseum, Randers  
Photo Niels Erik Høybye

standing facing a wall with a large plate under her arm. However, the lack of detail lends an immediacy to the painting, and to the figure in particular. Her arm is completely stretched out to hold the plate, which nestles in the curve of her hip and waist. The viewer feels empathy with the sensation of holding something in this way. On the other hand, we are looking at her back, and the sense that she is lost in thought makes us feel voyeuristic. The punchbowl to her left acts as a rounded volume that counterbalances her figure and contrasts with the rectangles that compose the rest of the painting. The legs on the piano are hidden, which gives the impression that it is floating, a motif that had been taken to its extreme in *Interior. Strandgade 30* (1901; cat. 30).

Vilhelm and Ida had moved into the first floor of Strandgade 30 in September 1898, and it was in these rooms that he explored every architectural form he could find (see, in particular, cats 23, 28, 32 and 38). In this painting and in *Resting* (1905; cat. 45), Hammershøi introduced a new sensuality in his figures that contrasted with his cool geometry. Like Caspar David Friedrich's (1774–1840) *Woman at the Window* (1822), where light hits the back of a woman's neck, the necks of the women in Hammershøi's paintings are sensual. The loosened hair and slightly undone dress are eroticised all the more by the coolness of the surroundings.

What do you think the woman is thinking? What is she looking at?

Do you feel empathy for her or do you feel like a voyeur watching her?

The punchbowl is the only object that is painted in detail. What effect does this have?

How do the shape of the punchbowl and the figure of the woman relate to one another?

Around 1902, Hammershøi returned to larger-scale canvases, which he had used for some earlier works. It was in this year that he was working on *Five Portraits* (1901–02), one of the largest paintings ever produced by a Danish artist. It may be that his choice of subjects necessitated a larger format as he started work on some paintings of impressively grand buildings.

**Cat. 34** The first half of the Asiatic Company building had been designed and built in 1738 by the architect Philip de Lange (1704–1766) in a late baroque style. In 1781 an adjoining warehouse was built in the same style that created a sense of symmetry. Hammershøi had previously rented a room in a building designed by de Lange, and was later to move into the Asiatic Company building with Ida in 1913. As with the period architecture of Strandgade 30 and its old furniture, Hammershøi was interested in the architecture of the past because of its simplicity and beauty.

Cat. 34  
*View of the Old Asiatic  
Company or, The Asiatic  
Company Buildings, 1902*  
Oil on canvas  
158 × 166 cm  
Private collection, on deposit at the  
Ordrupgaard, Copenhagen  
Photo Pernille Klomp

**'In their majestic  
harmony of design,  
in the rhythmical balance  
and disposal of masses,  
it is as if the painter  
had borrowed for  
the upraising of the  
monuments on the  
canvas some of the  
constructive genius of  
their original architects.'**  
Leonard Borwick in his  
preface to the catalogue  
for Hammershøi's  
exhibition at E.J. van  
Wisselingh & Co. Gallery,  
London, 1907



The Asiatic Company was situated directly opposite Vilhelm and Ida's flat on Strandgade 30. The viewpoint of this painting, however, is from the road facing towards the building, rather than from the windows of their flat. Hammershøi used a photograph of the building, as he did for some of his other works, as a reference for this painting. Although the buildings themselves, with the gatehouse in the centre, are perfectly symmetrical, the viewpoint is slightly aligned to the right. On the far right and left, the corners of two buildings act rather like the wings of a stage. The view of a ship's mast through the empty space in the centre is almost abstract. No pavement or cobbled stones have been painted on the ground, and there are no people to be seen. In its pure geometry, this painting takes on something of the abstract.

In another version of this painting Hammershøi did not include the ship's mast. Why do you think he included it in this version?

Would you say Hammershøi is deliberately making the painting bare-looking? If so, why?

### 'THE UNCANNY'

On their third trip to London in 1905–06, Vilhelm and Ida found lodgings on the second floor of 67 Great Russell Street. The flat faced the British Museum and Hammershøi made two paintings of the view (cats 50 and 51).

**Cat. 50** In this painting we see the view down the side of the British Museum, along Montague Street. The perspective is only slightly raised, as though the artist were standing with his easel in the road. The road, however, is deserted; there is no trace of humanity. Our gaze is also barred in several ways. Our eye follows the high railings, a psychological barrier, from the left to the centre, where we expect some kind of focal point. The centre is, in fact, even vaguer than the edges, and the blank facades of the houses on the right do not give us a better understanding of the scene.

By focusing our attention on the bare street running alongside the British Museum, Hammershøi is upsetting our preconceptions of what a proper subject of a painting should be. In the foreground of the painting he uses the technique of scumbling, applying thin pigment with a dry brush so that the ground on the canvas shows through. This technique makes the foreground indistinct, creating distance between the viewer and the subject. The fragility of the trees and buildings, which look as though they might just fade away, gives the painting an ephemeral beauty. The painting is at once mysterious, haunting and uncanny, evoking sensations shared by many of his other architectural paintings, such as *An Old Warehouse, Christianshavn* (1909; cat. 62).

What effect does the tree covering the centre of the painting have on the composition?

'Today I have found a place I like and where I believe I can get something done.'  
Hammershøi on 67 Great Russell Street, 1905

**Cat. 50**  
*Street in London, 1906*  
Oil on canvas  
58.5 × 65.5 cm

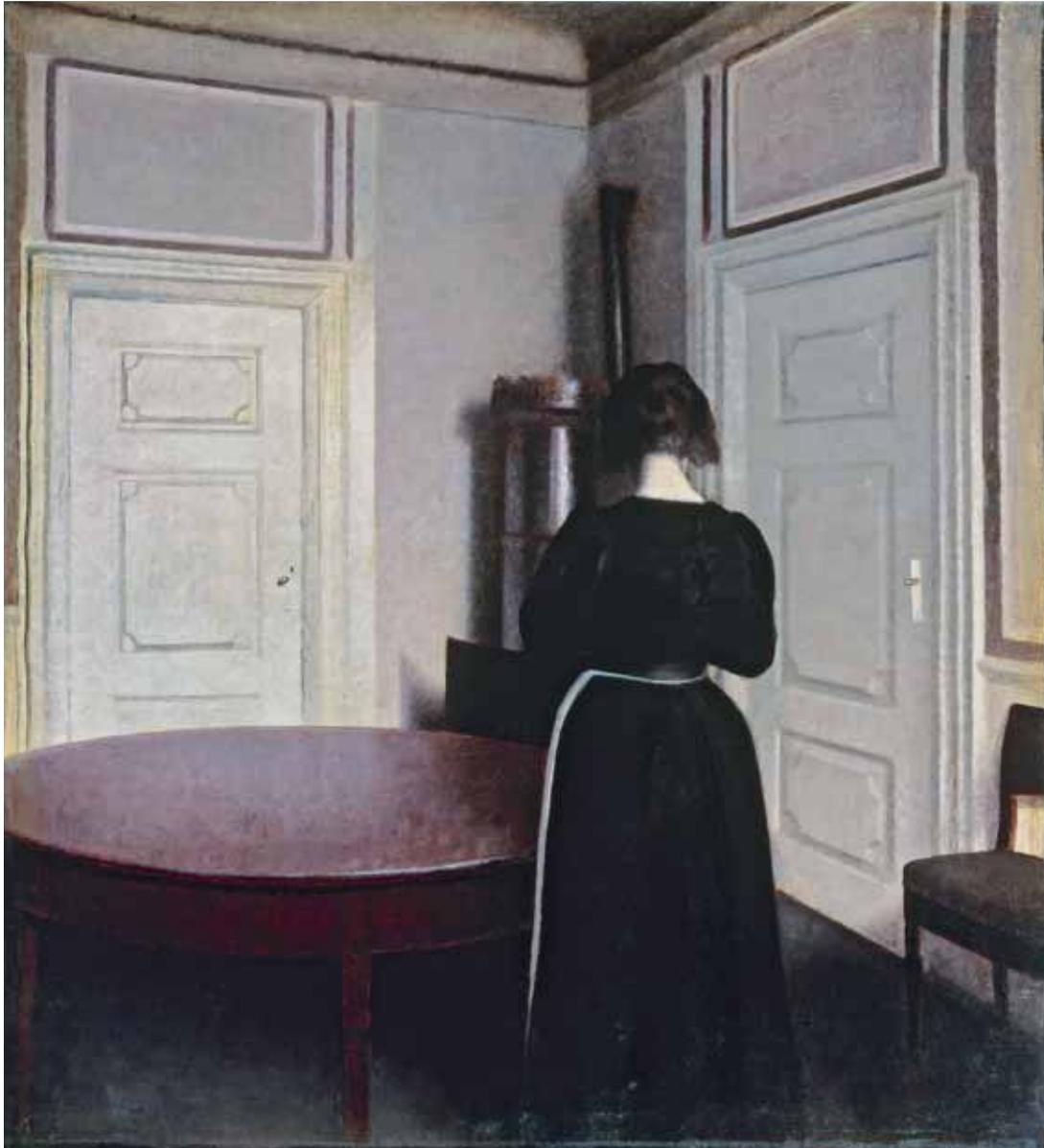
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen  
Photo © Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek/Ole Haupt



'This uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression ... [the uncanny is] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.'  
Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', 1919

Why do you think Hammershøi did not paint any people in his architectural paintings?

In 1919, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) wrote an essay on 'The Uncanny', in which he investigated the unusual sensation of uncanniness. Deriving from the German word for 'unhomely', uncanniness is the feeling of finding the familiar frightening. Freud cited the German author E. T. A. Hoffmann's (1776–1822) stories as representing the uncanny. Like Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), with whom Hammershøi was often compared, Hammershøi presents us with the familiar in such a way that it becomes somewhat terrifying.



Cat. 25  
*Interior*, 1899  
 Oil on canvas  
 64,5 × 58,1 cm

Tate. Presented in memory of Leonard Borwick by his friend through the National Art Collections Fund, 1926  
 Photo Tate, London 2007

Cat. 25 Hammershøi painted over 60 interiors of the flat in Strandgade 30. Before moving in, the couple had the eighteenth-century wall panelling and mouldings, as well as the doors and window frames, painted white. They also had the rest of the walls and ceilings painted grey and the floorboards stained dark brown. We can see that from the start Hammershøi had a very particular purpose in mind for these rooms, which were more like a gallery or stage set than a home. He used six rooms in the large flat to paint in, altering the settings by opening or closing doors and rearranging furniture. In this painting we can see the room which he also used, among others, for *Interior, Strandgade 30* (1908; cat. 58). Consequently, when we look at his interiors of Strandgade 30 the layout of the flat can seem confusing.

Interiors showing women performing domestic activities were fashionable at the time, with many of Hammershøi's contemporaries painting them, including Anna Ancher (1859–1935) and Viggo Johansen (1851–1935). They typified domesticity, making the viewer feel secure. There was also a tradition of domestic interiors in art of the Dutch and Danish Golden Ages, as well as in the subject matter of artists such as Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), whose work Hammershøi would have seen during his time spent in the Louvre in Paris. Yet Hammershøi turns the traditional domestic scene on its head. In his paintings, closed doors and back-turned figures serve as barriers (rather like the railings and building facades in his painting of the British Museum [cat. 50]). In the manner of a traditional scene, a table is included, but it has nothing on it and there are no chairs around it. A woman in an apron is there, which indicates domesticity, but her back is turned to us so we cannot see what she is doing. The doors are closed, preventing us from seeing a way out. The claustrophobia is increased by the darkness of the floor, which does not correspond with the light shining on the doors or on the woman's neck.

In paintings such as *Sunbeams or Sunshine. Dust Motes Dancing in the Sunbeams* (1900; cat. 28) or *Interior Looking out on the Exterior, Strandgade 30* (1903; cat. 38), a sense of confusion is heightened by the fact that we see layer upon layer of windows. Windows often function in genre paintings as a link between the domestic interior and the outside world, but here they are abstracted in such a way that the exterior can never be reached.

How do you think the light areas in the painting relate to each other?

This painting originally did not have a figure in it and the table was much larger. Why do you think Hammershøi introduced the figure to the composition?

Does this painting remind you of any of your own feelings? If so, what?

## BEYOND THE INTERIOR

As well as the many interiors and architectural paintings that Hammershøi made, he was also interested in depicting landscapes, many of which he painted while on his summer holidays. Again, as in the interiors, Hammershøi separates the viewer from the subject by creating a horizontal plane and an empty foreground (see, for instance, *Landscape. Gentofte* [1906; cat. 49]). However, in some landscapes there does seem to be a reaction against an overt naturalism or realism, which could be seen to evoke Symbolist ideas.

**Cat. 54** While this painting of two trees does appear realistic in many ways, the unusual composition and cropping of the picture gives the trees a heightened sense of meaning. Appearing more like a dreamscape than a place in reality, it could be argued that Hammershøi's landscape paintings and many of his other works are not realistic at all, but are in fact symbolic, or even metaphysical. Hammershøi's art bears some resemblance to the works of symbolist, metaphysical and surrealist painters such as Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901; fig. 2), Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), Max Ernst (1891–1976) and René Magritte (1898–1967), particularly Hammershøi's *Landscape from Refsnæs* (1900) and *Landscape: View of Lejre* (1905).

'In this art, scenes from nature, human activities, and all other real world phenomena will not be described for their own sake; here, they are perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial Ideals.'  
Jean Moréas,  
'The Symbolist Manifesto',  
1886

**Fig. 2**  
ARNOLD BÖCKLIN  
*The Isle of the Dead*, 1880  
Oil on canvas  
111 × 155 cm  
Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland  
Photo Peter Willi/ The Bridgeman Art Library



**Cat. 54**  
*Young Oak Trees*, 1907  
Oil on canvas  
55.5 × 77 cm  
Private collection  
Photo Roy Fox

In this painting the viewpoint is low; consequently, we feel as if we are looking up at the trees. Why do you think Hammershøi chose this unusual viewpoint?

Do you think the trees symbolise something? If so, what do you think that is? If not, why not?

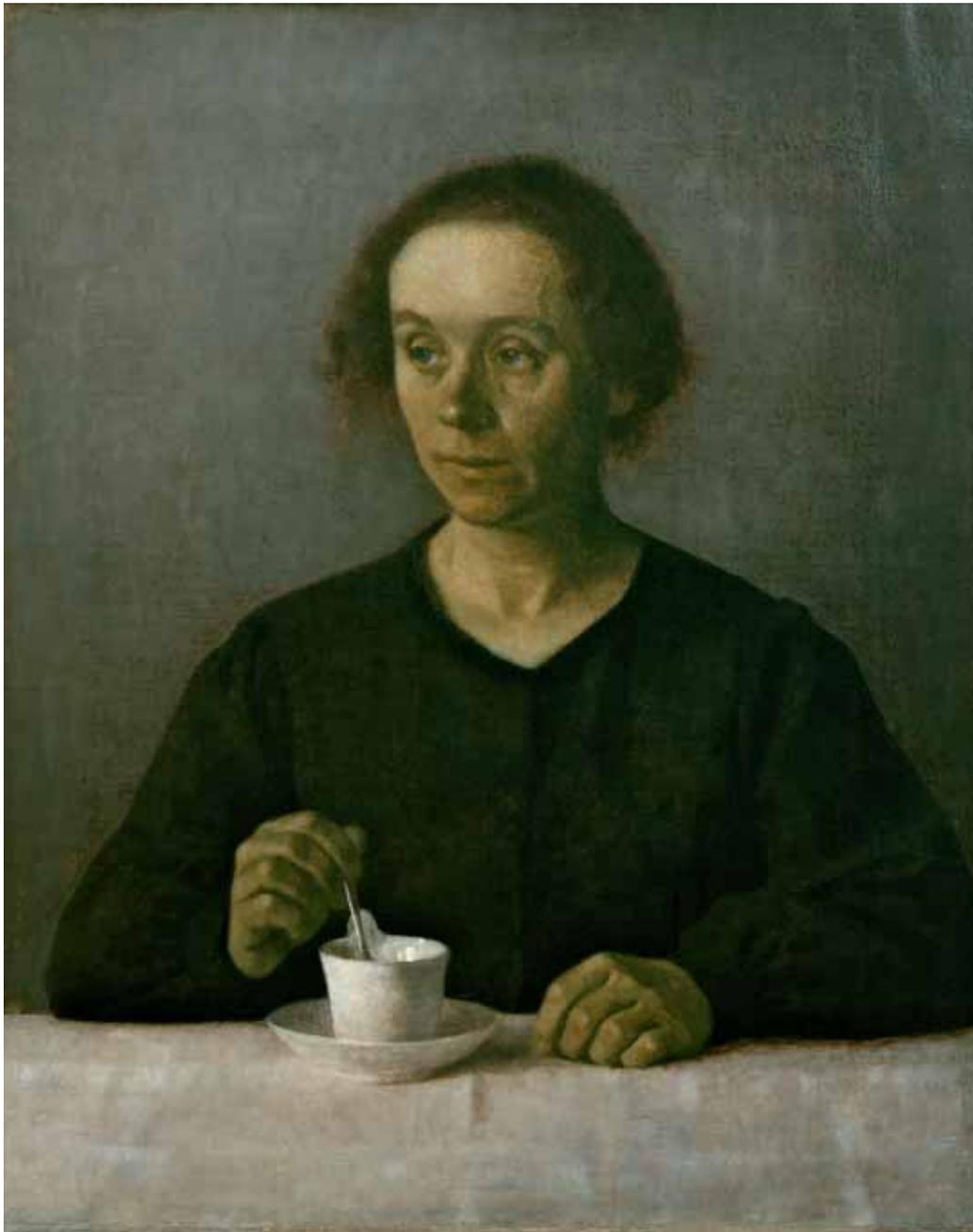
'When Otto then goes to the country at the end of the month I am remaining behind alone. Vilhelm has been so kind as to offer me space with them; but I do not think I shall accept as I would be in constant fear of Ida having one of her attacks.'  
Frederikke in a letter to Anna, 1895

## 'NEURASTHENIA' AND THE MODERN WORLD

In 1886, in a review of the spring exhibition at Charlottenborg, Karl Madsen proclaimed Hammershøi to be a major proponent of what he called 'neurasthenic painting'. 'Neurasthenia' was diagnosed in 1869 by the American neurologist, George Miller Beard (1839–1883). Symptoms included fatigue, anxiety, impotence and depression. Many believed this new 'disease' to be the result of the stresses of modern life; a consequence of increased industrialisation and urbanisation.

**Cat. 56** In comparison with the earlier portraits of Ida (such as cat. 12), here we see her grown older and more careworn. She had undergone surgery the previous year, and this painting seems to reflect some of the





**Cat. 56**  
*Portrait of Ida Hammershøi*,  
 1907  
 Oil on canvas  
 80 × 64 cm  
 ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Aarhus  
 Photo Ole Hein Pedersen

**Fig. 3**  
 CONSTANTIN HANSEN  
*Portrait of a Little Girl, Elise Købke, with a Cup in Front of Her*, 1850  
 Oil on canvas  
 39 × 35.5 cm  
 Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen  
 Photo Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst/Hans Petersen



stresses she had recently felt. She was also often prone to ‘attacks’, possibly of anxiety, although this is not clear. She and Vilhelm also had no children, although it is not known why.

Although this painting bears a strong resemblance to Hansen’s *Portrait of a Little Girl* (fig. 3), there is a marked difference between the confidence, or perhaps naivety, of Elise Købke, and the abstracted gaze of Ida. Yet while Ida looks weighed down, paradoxically she also looks sturdy and strong.

How has Hammershøi created this apparent conflict in this portrait? Unlike Hansen’s smooth and refined brushwork and bright colours, which make Elise’s face glow, Hammershøi’s dark colours and dry brushmarks represent an older woman’s face. The dark green hue of Ida’s skin also gives the impression of her being unwell. The contradictory sense of her strength probably derives from the way her body fills the width of the picture. In a slightly earlier version of this painting, Hammershøi had actually painted a large dark frame around the composition, showing how important the framing device was for him.

From the late nineteenth century a new type of woman was beginning to emerge: feminism was becoming an important political subject. (Women gained the vote in Denmark in 1915.) In this painting Ida does not cook for anyone, clean for anyone, make tea for anyone. She sits in her own space, not defined by any domestic duties, stirring her drink for herself. This painting was kept by Ida after Vilhelm’s other property had been auctioned off following his death in 1916, which indicates that it was her own property and was important to her.

How do the colour and tone of Ida’s hands and the cup, saucer and spoon compare?

What sort of comment might Hammershøi have been making by following Hansen’s portrait so closely?

If we see Ida as appearing ‘careworn’ in this portrait, how do you think Vilhelm’s representations of women alone in interiors might relate to this, if at all?

Cat. 44 Hammershøi painted his first empty room in 1888 at Karl Madsen's house (cat. 9). Empty rooms were painted by other artists of the Danish Golden Age, but only as studies to which they could add figures at a later date. To paint as many empty, or almost empty, interiors as Hammershøi did was considered highly irregular by his contemporaries. As a critic wrote of this painting when it was exhibited at the Guildhall in London in 1907:

Hammershøi is an artist of larger ambitions, with whom the passion for spacing amounts almost to a mania. A considerable portion of his exhibits ... should be termed studies or exercises in spacing rather than pictures, yet they are not always quite successful even as studies. Quiet and reticence are rare and delightful qualities in art, but ... they pall when they are too openly advertised, and Hammershøi advertises them consistently ... Even the charming *Open Doors* seems only an exceedingly clever and original 'symphony in white' ... and lacks the significance it might possess were it an isolated experiment by some artist who was not always content to work so.

The critic here draws a comparison with Whistler's series of paintings entitled *Symphony in White*. However, while Whistler's paintings included figures, Hammershøi's subject matter is the rooms and doors themselves. Photos of Strandgade 30 show that Vilhelm and Ida had plenty of furniture, pictures on the walls and other objects. Like props in a stage set, however, Hammershøi removed or rearranged these objects to create his compositions.

With the open doors and window in the background, this painting bears strong comparison with works by Dutch Golden Age artists such as Samuel van Hoogstraten (1626–1687) and Emanuel de Witte (1617–1692). In Hoogstraten's *The Slippers* (c. 1654–62) we see through two open doors and light is cast across the floor. While in De Witte's *Interior with a Lady Playing the Virginal* (c. 1665–70) we can see through a series of open doors with light cast intermittently on the floor to a window in the background.

In Hammershøi's painting, however, everything but the doors has been removed; there are far fewer objects than there are in Hoogstraten's and De Witte's works. The doors are open, but they do not reveal anything. We see through an open door to a window beyond, but another door blocks our view so all we can see is a strip of light. The doors themselves are illuminated and the entire picture plane is rendered in consistent detail, so no one area has more importance than another.

The critic in the quote above felt that Hammershøi's works were too repetitive. Why do you think Hammershøi chose to paint so many pictures of Strandgade 30?

In cats 29, 58 and 60 we can see the same viewpoint through the open door, but in these paintings there are female figures in the composition. Why do you think Hammershøi did not have any figures in this composition and what effect does this have?

'I have always thought there was such beauty about a room like that, even though there weren't any people in it, perhaps precisely when there weren't any.'  
Hammershøi on painting empty rooms, 1907

## HAMMERSHØI'S LEGACY

Hammershøi's 'mania' for continuously painting subjects that some regarded as pointless exercises shows that his work was unusual at the time. When looked at in comparison with artists such as Georges Seurat (1859–1891), Edward Hopper (1882–1967), or even the Surrealists, Hammershøi's paintings seem modern. They also bear some relation to photography and film, and were a great influence on film-makers such as the Danish film director Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889–1968).

If Hammershøi had not had such avid collectors and promoters, such as the dentist Alfred Bramsen, who also became his biographer, he might not have been able to be so prolific. Bramsen wrote in his posthumous biography of 1918 on Hammershøi's reception in Denmark:

The Danish Paris committee's behaviour became the occasion for my personally taking the painter's representation abroad in hand in the future; but neither in that manner did it always come off without resistance, as a consequence of narrow-mindedness and animosity at home.

Cat. 44  
*White Doors or Open Doors*  
(*Strandgade 30*), 1905  
Oil on canvas  
52 × 60 cm  
The David Collection, Copenhagen, B309  
Photo Pernille Klemp



## CONCLUSION

Hammershøi has often been seen as an anti-modern figure. In contrast to the bright colours of artists like Henri Matisse (1869–1954) – who was only a few years younger than Hammershøi, but who outlived him by almost forty years – Hammershøi's tonal painting might appear painstakingly laboured and old-fashioned. Modernist artists were famous for breaking with tradition. Hammershøi, on the other hand, created a dialogue between his work and these traditions.

Even now, however, Hammershøi is difficult to place. Perhaps a Symbolist, a modernist, an existentialist, or just a loner, Hammershøi produced work that continues to provoke the viewer and to present us with an interpretation of modern life that becomes increasingly relevant to our ever-changing world.

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Cat. 56  
*Portrait of Ida Hammershøi*  
(detail), 1907

ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Aarhus  
Photo Ole Hein Pedersen

