

Bertha Wegmann (1847-1926) and Contemporary Female Artists

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Bertha Wegmann. Photo: Det Kgl. Bibliotek



Bertha Wegmann was Swiss by family and Danish by life's circumstances. When she was five years old, the family emigrated from Soglio in Graubünden in southern Switzerland to Copenhagen, where she was initially taught by her art-loving father. The father then made sure she first received classes with the drawing teacher F.F. Helsted (1809-75) and later the genre and history painter F.C. Lund (1826-1901), who helped establish her contempt for authorities:

Well, Father wanted me to learn how to paint, and so he placed me with the history painter F.C. Lund! A terrible place to put me – frankly! [...] God have mercy, he treated me poorly! "Fool! Idiot! Mindless Individual!" were just a few of the words constantly hailing down on me. "Ha, should such a person be a painter! No, she should be a cleaning woman! Cleaning woman, she seems better suited for that!" This went on from morning to evening, un-

*til I actually felt like an idiot and became more and more confused and unhappy and therefore did more and more stupid things, so that he, the madman, became more and more choleric and unbridled. I was terribly unhappy in that period of my life. After all, I was nothing more than a child of about 15 years."*¹

The referral to expensive and inferior private drawing and painting schools was the rule for aspiring female artists, who were not given the opportunity to apply for admission to the Academy after they had completed their initial training. Regardless of the scope of the talent, the male teachers often considered it their noblest task to make the young women realize that life as an artist stood in opposition to their gender and that their place in life was subject to the man's opportunities for expression. The period was among Wegmann's most unhappy, and her rescue came, paradoxically, in the form of an involuntary deportation to Munich, which developed into a 13-year stay from 1867-80:

*Then [there] was an old lady, a Mrs Trier, who caught sight of my distress and despair, and she resolutely declared that this was quite simply irresponsible. If this continued, I would be completely destroyed in a relatively short period of time. She got a lot of people interested in me, wealthy people. And so, they decided to take care of my education [...] But it had to be cheap. And then it turned out that Munich was the cheapest location to place a young girl who wanted to learn how to paint.*²

Mrs Trier was born Melchior and the sister of businessman Moritz Melchior (1816-1884), who together with her brother, Moses Melchior, was among the most prominent and wealthy businesspeople of the time in Copenhagen. This family became Wegmann's most prominent patrons, supporting her stay abroad and accommodating her in their home during the summer. The artist forged a lifelong friendship with Melchior's daughters, and the connection cannot be overstated for her career path. A gesture Wegmann acknowledged by, among other things, painting the family's portraits, which today stand as some of the main works in her oeuvre.

Mlle Jeanna Bauck. Photo: Nationalmuseum, Stockholm



After the years of education in Munich, Wegmann finally came to Paris, and her participation in the annual Salon in 1881 was a splendid debut. Under the more French-sounding name, Berthe Vegman, she exhibited the Portrait de Mlle Jeanna Bauck, 1881, (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, inv. no. NM 2828), which garnered her an acclaimed “Mention Honorable” in her first attempt. At this time, she was studying at the École de Dessin et Peinture pour Femmes, an art school led by Madame Trélat de Lavigne and popular with the female Scandinavian artists. It was the prestigious triumvirate of French painters, Leon Bonnat (1833-1922), Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) and Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884), who supervised the Académie Trelat,

created as a progressive alternative to the Academy of Fine Arts, École des Beaux Arts, where female artists were not admitted until 1896.

It was primarily the acquisition of the French naturalism that triggered the stays in Paris for the Scandinavian artists, including the female ones, where they were taught at drawing and art schools by the most popular painters exhibiting at the annual Salon de Paris. Here the female artists learned to maintain a number of classical academic principles but under the strong influence of the opportunities for commissioned work in the official exhibition life primarily based on the awards of the annual Salon and with an attention to the appeal of the avant-garde for the private art market among gallerists, art dealers and collectors. A representation of reality that may have contained a colouristic sensitivity to light and colour, but which was created with the use of a classical technique. Bonnat, who periodically supervised most Nordic artists of this period, both men and women, and who later became Director of the French Academy of Fine Arts, greatly appreciated the Scandinavian female artists. In 1880, the Swedish landscape painter Johan Ericson (1849-1925), who lived in the city, wrote to the Director of the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts, Johan Boklund: *“Bonnat has said that he is quite surprised that there are such talented painters from the Nordic countries, he has never seen such fine support for womenfolk before and said that there must be an excellent academy and excellent teachers.”* Perhaps an indirect compliment to Bonnat himself, as he very well knew that many of the female artists’ Scandinavian teachers, like himself, were originally students of Thomas Couture (1815-1879), but nonetheless it was also a recognition of a remarkable Nordic female talent in the city during this period. In the catalogue for the Salon exhibition the following year, Wegmann states her sister’s address in Copenhagen as her reference and must have returned home from Paris. And it was with a portrait of her sister, she now won a third-class medal – in a year where no first-class medal was awarded. A great achievement and the highest honour any female Scandinavian artist achieved at the Salon in the



period 1878–1889. The award gave the Danish exhibition committee at Charlottenborg the impetus to reward Wegmann the Thorvaldsen Exhibition Medal the following year, the highest honour one could achieve at the Spring Exhibition, where she exhibited the portrait the following year. This led to her being the first woman to be elected to the Academy's Plenary Assembly in 1887, an election assembly which, among other things, met when members of the Academy Council were to be elected, and later the same year she was elected to Charlottenborg's Exhibition and Censorship Committee, which until now had been exclusively reserved for men. She exhibited at the Salon in Paris again in 1885 and 1886, both times under the Francophile name

Berthe Vegman and provided her address in Copenhagen. From letters, it can be seen that in those years she was most often in Breslau (modern-day Wrocław) in the Silesian mountains of the then German Empire, where a young friend's family had built her a studio. The catalogue of 1885 states that she was born in Switzerland, and the year after that she was born in Switzerland to Danish parents. One senses she did what she could to distance herself from her German connection and influence – with the Franco-Prussian War still a close memory. The change of her name in the exhibition catalogues is a clear indication of the French influence on Wegmann, and several contemporary sources highlight the French influence on her work in the schools she established in both Munich and Copenhagen.

Other contemporary female artists from Scandinavia were similarly seduced by the emancipated and avant-garde circles they encountered in France. For example, Finnish Helene Schjerfbeck's stay on the continent was undoubtedly also the happiest period of her life, and the fact that she permanently changed her name from the Swedish Helena to the French Helene, without an accent, though, indicates the personal influence the stay in Paris had on her.

Wegmann's importance in her own time can be seen in her participation in all of the major official exhibitions of the time, nationally and internationally, in addition to her regular participation at the Charlottenborg exhibitions from 1878 as well as all the domestic initiatives to promote female artists. She participated in the World Fairs in Paris in 1889 and 1900 and in Chicago in 1893, she was represented at the large Nordic Exhibition in 1888 and the City Hall Exhibition in 1901, both in Copenhagen. In addition, she participated in Kunstforeningen's first representative exhibition of eleven female artists in 1891 and the landmark Women's Exhibition at the same place in 1895. Here she had also had a solo exhibition with sketches and preliminary work nine years before and presented an impressive retrospective exhibition at Den Frie (The Free Exhibition) in 1911. Wegmann did not participate in the Salon exhibition in Paris in 1887 and 1888 but closed out the decade and her participation at the Salon in 1889 with a portrait as well as four works at the World Fair, which was also in Paris that year. A comprehensive article in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, the major art review magazine and reference work of the age described the Nordic contributions, and although the review of the Danish works took up more place than the other Nordic works combined, including the description of Anna Ancher's contributions, there was no mention of Wegmann this time around despite the fact that Ancher and Wegmann were the only Danish female artists to win a silver medal at the exhibition.

The lack of publicity stood in stark contrast to her popularity at the time when portrait painting became the stable foundation of her career. She herself answered the recurring question: "*It was*

*not at all my intention to become a portrait painter from the start. But as I said before: I was poor, and a random portrait study was the reason why I first got one then two commissions for portraits! [...] Before I knew it, 'I had made my bed', and I had become a portrait painter!"*³

The irony of fate was that already in her own time Wegmann became one of the most significant portrait painters of Danish Realism and among the first professional female artists who was requested, recognized and respected. When P.S. Krøyer (1851–1909) died, Wegmann was simply without competition within the field, and her portraits also became a reflection of the political, economic and cultural elite in Copenhagen among the nobility, politicians, academics and artists. The following is an observation of her solo exhibition in 1911:

*As you walk through the halls of 'Den Frie', the gaze meets one face after another: Councillor of State Melchior, Privy Councillor Vedel, Councillor of State Hegel, Supreme Court Attorney Halkier, Professor Julius Thomsen, Pastor Olfert Ricard, Managing Director Hagemann and Wife, Baron Zytphen-Adeler, Member of Parliament Herman Trier, Bishop Johannes von Euch, Mrs Liebe [...] It is – from the Nobility to Parliament – a very elegant, representative group, to which the art world has also made its abundant contributions: The composer, Professor Lange-Müller, Concertmaster, Professor Anton Svendsen, Sculptor, Professor August Saabye, Painter, Professor Otto Bache. One could go on for quite some time.*⁴

Wegmann documented the identity of an entire nation through her portraits without compromising her ideals and with great success. She herself stood physically outside the nation and watched it from afar for much of her life. Precisely this position, which already shaped her own contemporaries' perception of her, contains both the explanation for the overwhelming success and the paradoxical, subsequent removal from Danish art history – despite the legacy she left behind. Regarding this double perspective, Wegmann herself said: *"I was born in southern Switzerland but when I was five years old, I came to Denmark. I have Danish citizenship. That still doesn't make you Danish, but I feel Danish. I love being here, even though I sometimes also get a sense of belonging to another nation."*⁵

The extensive career, the medals, the public commissions and the admiration were not enough to safeguard the knowledge of her enormous talent for posterity, and only now is the interest in the artist beginning to spread beyond a narrow audience of art historians, researchers and a smaller art-interested public; a fate that is more the rule than the exception for the female artists of the period. Gender determined her fate, the art became foreign after the many and long stays abroad, and the level of subsequent recognition was determined by a nation she was not fully part of. This triple prejudice about nationality, schooling and gender places her in a different position than her contemporaries and has legitimized a marginalization to this day, where the rediscovery of Wegmann is only now taking place.

¹ "Da jeg var pige. Malerinden Bertha Wegmann fortæller" (When I was a little girl. The painter Bertha Wegmann tells her story), in, *Vore Damer*, no. 24, 11 June 1925.

² "Da jeg var pige. Malerinden Bertha Wegmann fortæller" (When I was a little girl. The painter Bertha Wegmann tells her story), in, *Vore Damer*, no. 24, 11 June 1925.

³ E.D.: Hvordan føles det at blive gammel? (How does it feel to get old) An Enquête, in, *Hver 8. Dag* (Every 8th Day), no. 20, vol. 30, 15 May 1924.

⁴ Th. M: "Bertha Wegmanns Malerier" (Bertha Wegmann's Paintings). Unknown daily paper, March 1911.

⁵ Christian Houmark: "Bertha Wegmann om Modeller og Portrætter" (Bertha Wegmann on Models and Portraits), in, *Berlingske Tidende*, 19 February 1923.