

Elisabeth Jerichau Baumann (1819-1881) and the Mermaid

Elisabeth Jerichau Baumann. Photo: Det Kgl. Bibliotek



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When the Polish-German Elisabeth Jerichau Baumann settled in Copenhagen in 1848, it was due to her marriage in Rome a few years before with the Danish sculptor Jens Adolf Jerichau. The couple lived together in Copenhagen from 1849 when Jerichau returned from Rome and took over a professorship at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. While her husband positioned himself through the affiliation with the Academy, Jerichau Baumann approached her career slightly differently.

She was a cosmopolitan who already at a young age understood that in order to be allowed to express her talent, she had to seek out internationally oriented art circles. Her education took place in Düsseldorf, to which she travelled from Poland,

while the subsequent acclaim came partly in Rome and partly in significant art cities such as Berlin, Paris and London. This cosmopolitan approach meant that she had difficulty gaining a foothold on the Copenhagen art scene. The art critics of the time were instead looking for nationally oriented subject matter and preferred a toned-down naturalistic painting style, which did not always harmonize with the artist's ambitions. Despite the requirement to adapt to a special Danishness in her paintings, Jerichau Baumann continued accommodating to a foreign aesthetic throughout her life when she participated in exhibitions in places such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom. As a female artist in a male-dominated profession, Jerichau Baumann knew early on that she had to compete with her male colleagues. Although there were certain expectations as to the type of motifs women ought to paint, based on their sensitive and feminine nature, Jerichau Baumann never allowed herself to be limited by the conventions of contemporary times. As a painter, she pursued a wide repertoire of subjects, and at the same time, she had a keen eye for the female figures, whether it was the allegorical Denmark, a nursing mother, or a reading girl in a local dress. Therefore, it is not surprising that she became the first Danish artist to so consistently thematise the mermaid and also endowed this figure with a sensuality that had not been seen before at these latitudes.

It is not known when Jerichau Baumann painted her first mermaid, but it seems likely that it was in connection with the Salon in Paris in the spring of 1861. There she exhibited a mermaid, and the figure caught the attention of a French art critic as a fateful creature, which, due to its attractiveness, would cause the 'Scandinavian Odysseus' to run aground. During the first part of the nineteenth century, the mermaid had primarily been a literary motif based on the mermaids of the Nordic legends, but gradually the mythical creature also found its way into popular literature,



e.g. in the serials of the Copenhagen dailies in the 1860s. Jerichau Baumann clearly understood the mermaid fascination of the period, and she was quick to interpret and translate this into a new visual imagery. The thematisation of this supernatural sea creature also found its way into the artistic community that characterized Jerichau Baumann and her sculptor-husband during the 1850s and 1860s. Among the works of Jens Adolf Jerichau, there is a small undated mermaid modelled in clay which in its pose has a lot in common with the auction's painting: A beautiful figure leaning gracefully against a stone.

During the 1860s and 1870s, Jerichau Baumann primarily experimented with two related types of mermaids, who, with their different faces, hair colours, and degrees of intensity in the gaze, are seen in a pose of waiting near the surface of the sea. With this mermaid figure, there was a certain spectrum in the interpretation of such an inexplicable creature that carried the tail fin of the fish, but at the same time was endowed with female attributes and a human psyche. Even the poet Hans Christian Andersen in 1837 established his preferred version with the fairy tale about *The Little Mermaid*, which has since been translated into many languages. While Andersen's very young and innocent mermaid sacrificed her life for the earthly prince, whose love she could not win, Jerichau Baumann's mermaids seem less selfless or sacrificial. Instead, they appear more self-conscious and alluring as they lie rocking near the surface of the sea, treacherously covering the reef that could cause ships to run aground.

The painting at this auction also belongs among one of the most captivating of these two types: Here we encounter a dark-haired seductress from the depths of the sea who does not intend to let any sailor escape again. However, it was not only sailors who would become fascinated with this supernatural creature. When the painting's future owner, the only 19-year-old Wanda Zahrtmann, first saw the painting in Jerichau Baumann's studio at Christmas 1861, she found it very difficult to forget the impression this work of art made on her.

Sadly, the young woman had lost both her parents some years before. And now she herself had an annual sum at her disposal to purchase art for, which was the reason she had been to see the artist's paintings. In a touching letter to Jerichau Baumann on Christmas Eve, Wanda Zahrtmann writes that she keeps dreaming of the mermaid – both while asleep and awake. But doubt fills her mind: If she decides to buy the painting, then she will be spending the entire annual amount



Photo: Glyptoteket

all at once. However, Miss Zahrtmann makes a quick decision and announces the same evening in another letter that she hopes to be able to contribute to the family's Christmas joy, as she has now decided to buy the mermaid.

When the annual exhibition at Charlottenborg opened in the spring of 1862, the mermaid was present and in the catalogue for the exhibition Wanda Zahrtmann was listed as the owner of the work. Her interest in art had probably been established at a very young age; and without a doubt, she shared that interest with her cousin Kristian Zahrtmann, who a few years later was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and also would come to play a significant role in Danish art. When Wanda married Count Christian Conrad Danneskiold-Samsøe in 1863, the painting of the mermaid accompanied her to the couple's home.

It was, in particular, the mermaid's gaze that had attracted the young, budding art collector, while the somewhat older and art-savvy Lucie Ingemann (a widow of the late B.S. Ingemann) also expressed her strong fascination with the dreamy gaze which the artist endowed her mermaids with. For Hans Christian Andersen it was also the eyes that became the focal point of the short poem he wrote about Jerichau Baumann's mythical creatures. The fascination with the mermaid, that he himself knew how to write about, but not to paint, is evident in the words of appreciation he sent to her. The gratitude was due to the fact that in 1868 the artist had donated one of her mermaid paintings as a birthday present to her long-time friend, who from the beginning had followed the line of mermaids leaving the studio. Hans Christian Andersen wrote:

*You master the splendour of colours!
A soul you have placed in the mermaid's eyes:
A wink from you, from the spirit's power!
My gratitude here expressed in mere words*

Today, it is still unknown how many mermaids Jerichau Baumann painted, as she exhibited several works abroad, including at the World Fair in London in 1862 and in Vienna in 1873. Two different types can be found in the collections of Danish museums, namely a version from 1863 at Brandts in Odense and a version from 1873, which hangs at the New Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen.