

## Vilhelm Hammershøi: Interior, Strandgade 30 and Its Artistic Resonance

*Vilhelm Hammershøi moved into an apartment on the second floor of Strandgade 30, Christianshavn, Copenhagen, in 1898. He lived there for the succeeding ten years. The apartment's simple, sparsely furnished, classicising interior spaces of intercommunicating rooms illuminated by obliquely filtered light served as motifs for his hushed, quasi-monochromatic, non-narrative art.*

The room which provides the setting for *Interior, Strandgade 30* lies at the rear of the apartment; its window gave onto the courtyard. Its architectural simplicity penetrated by shafts of light through the single window served either as the stage for a single figure who usually stands off-centre, as in this painting, or is seated, as in *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor* (1901; The National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen). Alternatively, devoid of any human presence, it becomes the framework for studies in the dramatic articulation of light and atmosphere, as in *Moonlight, Strandgade 30* (1900–1906; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and *Study in Sunlight* (1906; The David Collection, Copenhagen).

The model for the figure who inhabits this room is Hammershøi's wife Ida. Little is known about Ida. She accompanied the artist on all of his foreign travels, providing invaluable information about the couple's experiences, artistic interests and activities in her regular correspondence with her mother-in-law, and she served from 1891 as his primary model. In *Interior, Strandgade 30*, Ida is shown reading. Her downward gaze conveying complete absorption in her book excludes any direct communication with the viewer. Rather, her dark, vertical form, which echoes the rigorous geometric pattern established by the architecture of the door and window frames, transforms her into an inanimate component within the composition. The only animate element is the sunlight which streams into the room, establishing the highlights of this seemingly monochromatic study in varying shades of white, grey and black.

Hammershøi's embrace of the potency of a muted palette and spare composition derive in part from his admiration of the art of the American-born artist James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) which also informed his first visit to London in 1897–1898 in order to meet Whistler, who was the founding president of the recently established International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers. Although this meeting did not occur, Hammershøi's work was shown at the 6th annual exhibition of the International Society in 1904.

Hammershøi revealed little of his artistic influences and pictorial sources, nor of his interest in or sympathy for contemporary artists. To be sure, he admired Dutch 17th-century artists such as Pieter de Hooch, Emanuel de Witter and Johannes Vermeer, and demonstrated similarity of approach with that of certain French and Belgian contemporaries, for example, Eugène Carrière (1849–1906), Ferdinand Khnopff (1858–1921) and Xavier Mellery (1845–1921). However, apart from Whistler, little is known of or recognised about possible relationships or affinities with the work of his British contemporaries. Hammershøi visited England six times. He was exposed to the work of major contemporary British artists such as G. F. Watts (1817–1904) and made the acquaintance of others, including Edward Stott (1855–1918), the painter of poetic rural idylls to whom he was introduced in 1904 by Leonard Borwick (1868–1925), the internationally acclaimed concert pianist, and collector and informal agent of Hammershøi in the United Kingdom. The enthusiasm of Hammershøi's most important patron, the Danish dentist Alfred Bramsen (1851–1932), for the work of William Nicholson (1872–1949), invite consideration of affinities between the latter's rigorously simplified views of the South Downs in Sussex made c. 1908–1909 and Hammershøi's reductionist landscapes.

*Interior, Strandgade 30* summarises the major components of Hammershøi's art: a rejection of the interior genre scenes imbued with narrative in favour of the manipulation of light and the communication of silence. There were certain British contemporary artists, such as Frederick Cayley Robinson (1862–1927) and Gwen John (1876–1939), whose sparsely described interiors populated by silent, un-demonstrative figures illuminated either by an intensely concentrated light source or one diffused through opaque windows hold certain parallels to Hammershøi's interiors at Strandgade 30. However, it is telling that it was a reviewer of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, on 4 April 1907, who declared that in a consideration of the nature of modern art, "*It is to the modern of moderns, Wilhelm [sic] Hammershøi, that we must turn.*" The British critic, T. Martin Wood, writing in *The Studio* in September 1909, provided justification for this claim by identifying the Danish artist as the leading exemplar of a new genre of modern art, the 'modern interior painting'. For in this new genre, realism is disrupted, temporality disregarded, and the human presence merely inferred. Martin Wood concludes that "*the painter [Hammershøi] is a poet.*"



By MaryAnne Stevens  
Curator and art historian



## The Provenance

In the early 1900s, Vilhelm Hammershøi had achieved some degree of success, and he had no difficulty selling his paintings. However, he increasingly preferred to sell to a few trusted art dealers. Among them was Otto Lemming (1860-1906), who conducted his business on Bredgade and Østerbrogade in Copenhagen. According to Hammershøi's mother, Frederikke Hammershøi, Lemming purchased seven of the painter's interiors just in the year 1900 and one more the following year. The painting here was undoubtedly among these paintings since it carries Lemming's easily recognizable label. But Lemming must have bought more than these eight paintings, because during the years 1900-03 he could report the sale of twelve of Hammershøi's interior paintings to the press. Among the works sold was a painting entitled *Formiddagssol* (*Morning Sun*), which Lemming sold in July 1901. This painting may well be identical to the painting now up for auction.

When Hammershøi's most eager supporter and greatest collector, Alfred Bramsen, began to seriously register the painter's works in connection with the memorial exhibition in 1916, it was no longer possible to obtain information about the paintings that Hammershøi had sold directly to art dealers around the turn of the century.

Therefore, Bramsen was unable to include the interior paintings bought by Lemming in his large catalogue of Hammershøi's works in 1918. Because of this, we cannot follow the path of this painting before it in 1916, or shortly thereafter, was given to Anny Margareta Eleonora Vieth, b. Dalgreen (1886-1959), the wife of stockbroker Otto Martin Vieth (1863-1946). The painting was probably given by a family member or close friend as a reminder to the couple of their previous apartment at Havnegade 15, where they lived from July 1909 to July 1916.



By Jesper Svenningsen

MA and PhD in Art History

Jesper Svenningsen is currently working on a manuscript about the art trade and exhibition business in Copenhagen from 1870 to 1920.



## The Magnetic Painting of Vilhelm Hammershøi

The most fascinating thing about Vilhelm Hammershøi is his ability to create a reflexive, magnetic atmosphere; one that tends to free us from our human condition. His intimate interiors, seemingly empty in appearance and animated simply by a subtle play of light and shadow, evoke a relationship with the world beyond time and space. Vilhelm Hammershøi's poetic painting *Interior, Strandgade 30* – with a woman engrossed in her reading – truly questions the universe: the everyday scene is sublimated to the point of becoming an experience of meditation, spirituality even, on the origins of the world (symbolised by the crystalline, supernatural light that flows in through the window) and the fatality of the human being (the closed door to the right of the composition providing a reminder of our blind fate). This masterpiece, born of a symbolism rooted in reality, suggests the idea of a mystical aspiration, a form of deep and sincere expectation, a kind of longing linked to a questioning of an existential order. The woman reading expresses the strong desire to step out of oneself and the melancholy delight in measuring one's powerlessness – feeling blue. This desire is the fruit of a proud modesty, of silence, of obsessive dreams, ideals even. From such a cerebral experience, simultaneously happy and sad yet always coveted, springs a singular state of mind born of lyricism. The atmosphere of this painting is therefore benevolent. It corresponds to the psychic disposition in which the person charged with this quest finds herself, as well as to the décor that surrounds her. In other words, it designates a place both inside and outside, visible and invisible. With Vilhelm Hammershøi, this notion of atmosphere takes on a strongly abstract connotation, favouring the strange, the mysterious. *"The real is the invisible,"* wrote French author Camille Flammarion in *Urania*, a bestseller in 1889. This is precisely the point of Vilhelm Hammershøi's painting. Thus, *Interior, Strandgade 30* "presents itself to those who, sometimes at least, midway along the journey of our life of which Dante speaks, stop, wonder where they are and what they are, seek, think and dream", to quote the conclusion of the novel.



By Frank Claustrat

*Ph.D. Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne University, is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art History at Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 University (France), Art Critic (Connaissance des Arts magazine), and Exhibition Curator. In particular, he is recognised for his knowledge of Nordic art and expertise in Finnish and Scandinavian Art. Cross of Commander of the Order of the Lion of Finland (2009)*

# The Photographic Painting

Interview with  
Gertrud Oelsner and Annette Rosenvold Hvidt

*Shortly after the engagement with Ida Isted, Hammershøi painted the central work *Portrait of Ida Isted, Later the Artist's Wife* (1890). Two photographs with a similar motif have since been found in the archives. One of these photographs is marked with lines from a pencil and was presumably taken by Hammershøi himself.*

*Photo: The Archives of the Hirschsprung Collection / The National Gallery of Denmark*



*Since the first photograph was introduced to the world in 1826, the medium's ability to capture special moments and evoke memories has captivated people around the world. Vilhelm Hammershøi was also fascinated by photography and used it actively throughout his career as a tool to create his art.*

Hammershøi's paintings are actually so intertwined with the medium that one could argue that his works may appear more photographic than photography itself. This is the suggestion of Gertrud Oelsner and Annette Rosenvold Hvidt, respectively Director of the Hirschsprung Collection and Art Interpreter at the National Gallery of Art. The two women have collaborated on writing the book *Hammershøi: På sporet af det åbne billede (Hammershøi: In Search of the Open Image)* from 2018, which sheds new light on the famous painter by examining his use of photography. This is an aspect of Hammershøi's entire body of work that until now has been overlooked in the art history literature.

*"In the past, photographs have rarely been perceived as having an aesthetic and pictorial significance in themselves and in relation to his work. This probably stems from a notion that the artwork of Hammershøi mainly refers to itself and not to any other sources. Therefore, it may have seemed a little compromising for Hammershøi that he used photographs to paint after – and it is quite clear in some cases that he has been inspired by their aesthetics,"* says Gertrud Oelsner.

An example of this is the work *Portrait of Ida Isted, Later the Artist's Wife* (1890), which today is recognized as one of Hammershøi's most significant paintings. In the archives of the Hirschsprung Collection, two photographic recordings have been found with Ida in exactly the same position as in the painting – and the photographs have even been drawn upon with lines to help transfer the motif to a canvas.

In his time, photography was a relatively new medium, and the streets of Copenhagen were teeming with photographic studios. Placing his work in such a close relationship with the medium is therefore not only a question of technique but also becomes a challenge to an otherwise commonly held view that he was an outsider during his own lifetime.

*"In the past, Hammershøi has been regarded as an artist who was not in a dialogue with anyone but himself. For us, his use of the photographic medium becomes a way in which we can place him in such a dialogue with the rest of the world – because it shows that he was actually a product of his time. A number of other artists of the time were similarly interested in exploring the possibilities that existed in the photographic medium,"* says Gertrud Oelsner.

## The Picturesque Copenhagen

In addition to being inspired by amateur photographs, Hammershøi was also the owner of an extensive collection of postcards and photographs. Many of the items in the collection had been acquired in a bookstore located at Købmagergade 62 and depicted Copenhagen's picturesque older houses and backyards.

Copenhagen – and especially the neighbourhood of Christianshavn – would prove to be of great importance to Hammershøi. Not only did the city shape his and his wife Ida Hammershøi's life; this is also where Hammershøi painted some of his most iconic works at Strandgade 30.

Throughout his life, Hammershøi lived in eight different places in the Danish capital. The apartment at Strandgade 30, where he lived during the period 1898–1908, is undoubtedly the most famous of his homes. Here, in the middle of Christianshavn's waterfront and working-class quarters, he seemed to find his place within the old historic buildings. In an interview with the magazine *Hjemmet (Home)* in 1909, he said: *"Personally, I love things that are old, old homes, old furniture, the very distinctive atmosphere that permeates all this."*

The apartment served as both a residence, studio and motif. Especially three rooms are connected to his art: the largest room called the hall, a living room in the wing of the building and a smaller living room facing Strandgade. In *Interior, Strandgade 30* (1900) the motif consists of a section with a window and a closed door in the wing. The different rooms of the apartment were, of course, a great source of inspiration for Hammershøi: Of the 142 paintings he made during the years he lived in the apartment – about 66 motifs depicted this place.

The ties between Hammershøi's interiors and his postcard collection can particularly be seen in the postcards' countless images of backyards and paned windows. In an interview with the magazine *Hver 8. Dag (Every 8th Day)* in 1907, Hammershøi described the "lines" of these images as being crucial to his choice of motifs. To bring out the most important elements in the painting, he edited furniture, door handles and paintings on the walls in and out of the rooms to tighten his motifs and make them appear as pure, geometric structures – almost as if the painting had been given the full treatment in Photoshop. He also used cropping and only dealt with the specific section of a room that he found interesting. In this way, he integrated a visual expression known from photography into his paintings.

*"In several paintings, he has painted a motif and subsequently chosen to fold some of the canvas behind the frame. The images are often cropped in the middle of a piece of furniture or other elements, and this is a very photographic method of work – first 'taking the picture' and then allowing oneself as an artist to frame the subject in a different way,"* says Annette Rosenvold Hvidt.

## Colour Blots and Oyster Shells

Hammershøi's works are characterized by the lack of a narrative. Instead, the focus is on natural phenomena such as light and darkness, which particularly interested the artist in the years following his move to Strandgade 30. In the apartment's rooms, he used his brush, paint and canvas to create a light that poetically occupies the entire room and envelops it in a mysterious, milky-white mist. The use of this whiteness and light is something that according to the two authors can also have been inspired by photography.

*"I think his use of colour is as much about inspiration from the photographic medium's sensitiveness to light and darkness as it is about its greyscale. It is somewhat reminiscent of the process that takes place in darkrooms, where the motif of a photograph can materialize before your eyes or end up being overexposed. In the same way, Hammershøi works with something fragile, delicate and unprocessed in his paintings,"* says Annette Rosenvold Hvidt.

In a eulogy in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* in 1916, the artist Joakim Skovgaard wrote about a visit to Hammershøi's studio: *"On this occasion, I saw Hammershøi's painter palette. And I'll never forget it. There were four grey and white blots of colour, carefully separated from each other on the palette. The strange thing about them was that there were layers upon layers of colour and that*



Vilhelm Hammershøi's friend, the artist Valdemar Schønheyder Møller, took many photographs of Hammershøi's sister Anna. Here it is Vilhelm Hammershøi dressed in a costume. The photo was probably taken in the home of the Hammershøi family on Frederiksberg around 1885–1886. Photo: The Royal Danish Library.

*these layers had been oddly smoothed so that it looked as if four oyster shells had been placed on the palette. But with these colours, he created the beautiful images that I admire."*

The image of the colour blots is by no means exaggerated; they are a central part of Hammershøi's works, which include countless shades of white. When the painting *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor* (1901) was cleaned before an exhibition in 2012 the conservator found more than 40 different tones of the colour in the picture.

Hammershøi explained his use of colours – or the lack thereof – in the previously mentioned interview with the magazine *Hver 8. dag* (Every 8th Day) in 1907: *"Why do I use so few and muted colours? I frankly don't know. It's quite impossible for me to say anything on the matter. It feels natural to me. In purely colouristic terms, I absolutely believe that a painting works best the fewer colours are used in it."*

## Capturing the Intimate

A central element in the paintings of Hammershøi is the introverted female figure, who often has her back to the viewer. After Hammershøi was engaged to Ida Hammershøi (b. Ilsted) in 1890, she became the primary character in his motifs. In the early years of his career, however, it was alternately his mother Frederikke Amalie Hammershøi and especially his sister Anna Hammershøi, who appeared in the paintings. His brother Svend Hammershøi, who himself was a painter, was also a central part of his cast of characters.

Anna Hammershøi was, for instance, the main character in the debut painting *Portrait of a Young Girl* (1885). In the years 1885–88, she also appeared in several of Hammershøi's paintings and a string of photographs taken by Hammershøi's friend, the artist Valdemar Schønheyder Møller. In the same way as the photographs, Hammershøi portrayed Anna by zooming in on her face. This creates an experience for the viewer of getting a little too close to the subject – as if breaking into her personal space.

*"In the archives, there is a group of photographs that are linked to the very personal and intimate. His paintings may have been inspired by the fact that the photograph can get very close to a person in a way that can seem almost transgressive. But at the same time, there is a sort of embedded distance since the women in his paintings are often introverted and frequently have their back to us. He manages to transfer this duality to and works with it in his paintings in quite a fine way,"* says Gertrud Oelsner. This particular mixture of distance and intimacy can also be seen in Hammershøi's portraits of people with their back turned – such as the painting *Portrait of the Artist's Sister Anna Hammershøi Seen from Behind*, which was sold at auction at Bruun Rasmussen in November 2018.

Gertrud Oelsner and Annette Rosenvold Hvidt call the Hammershøi family the "perhaps most photographed family" of their time. The countless preserved photographs in the archives of the Hirschsprung Collection reveal the family's frequent visits to Copenhagen's many photographic studios, and especially the four Hammershøi siblings were photographed a lot. However, the new medium proved popular in general among the bourgeoisie, where portrait photographs were used for many things, such as business cards.

The archives with the photos of the Hammershøi family offer an insight into the visual culture of the day – an adjective that also clearly describes the culture we live in now. Perhaps this is the reason why the works of Hammershøi continue to entice us today, more than 100 years after Vilhelm Hammershøi's death.

*"This preoccupation with understanding and examining oneself through the photographic medium is certainly not unfamiliar to the times we live in now,"* says Gertrud Oelsner.

*"Simultaneously, we can recognize both the modern and photographic in his works – but we can also long for the simplicity that characterized the time they were made in,"* says Annette Rosenvold Hvidt.