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## Helene Schjerfbeck: Biography writes the Artist and her Art

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My presentation focuses on Helene Schjerfbeck in terms of how the biographical research of art history has emphasised the artist's life. I examine, with some examples, how Schjerfbeck became established in Finland's art scene in the 1910s, first as a representative of the 'marginal' artist genre of female artists. Secondly, I view how Schjerfbeck came to be evaluated as an artist genius, although that term was generally reserved for male artists. I also delve into Schjerfbeck's life-map, which consists of work, dreams, expectations and memoirs, including memoirs of travels but also of her body, and the painful disease she suffered. The material I use is part of a larger context. It opens the roads into her life; besides the self-portraits, portraits and correspondence, there are press reviews and some books, such as the early monograph on Schjerfbeck, written in 1917 by Einar Reuter under the pseudonym H. Ahtela.

There has been a strong tendency to read an artist's life through their art and *vice versa*. The American art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau has noted how this tendency has emphasised looking at self-portraits and portraits made by many artists, and this is no less the case with Helene Schjerfbeck. Her works have been interpreted as disguised self-portraits that refer, for instance, to the hip disease she suffered during her early childhood or to the romantic disappointments of broken engagements and other relationships, even potential love affairs. The main questions of my article concern how Schjerfbeck's art and her value and place in art history have been given meaning through her critics and biographers.

My hypothesis relates to the discourse of the hermit which has its roots in the myth of the modern artist – for example Vincent van Gogh – formed by the modern Western art market. It is the representation of a mentally- or bodily-suffering artist and, especially in Schjerfbeck's case, a modest 'old' woman. The national art scene classified her works as 'moderate modern art', within the certain idea of 'good new painting'. I consider, with some references, how Schjerfbeck gradually came to be represented as an artist genius – as a round-shouldered, female figure – and how this was slowly written into the narratives constructing Finnish national art, as well as art history, at a time when men dominated the art scene.

My argument is that it is not only the national art market that produced and applied the myth of the artist that connected with the universal discourses of a nervous woman, of disease and suffering: this myth was constructed in a transnational context. There were also issues of power and the norms relating to gender and class – in Schjerfbeck's case concerning middle-class women, the private and the public, masculine and feminine – that strongly defined the works made by female artists at that time.