



Issue No. 1/2015

Helene Schjerfbeck: The Brightest Pearl of the Ateneum's Collection

Susanna Pettersson // PhD, Museum Director, Ateneum Art Museum

Published in *Helene Schjerfbeck, Reflections*. Edited by Naoki Sato. Tokyo: Kyuryodo Publishing, 2015, 202–205.

Helene Schjerfbeck is one of the most important artists in the Ateneum Art Museum's collection. Today, her works arouse unreserved admiration the world over. Schjerfbeck is associated with vision, integrity and the notion of blazing one's own trail. She saw what others were doing but did what she wanted to do – regardless of public response.

However, Schjerfbeck's position in the European, Nordic or even Finnish art field was not always so self-evident. When she was born in 1862, Finland was a Grand Duchy of Russia. The populace spoke Swedish, Finnish and Russian, while the intelligentsia who had travelled widely in Central Europe also spoke French fluently. Literature, theatre and music blossomed. Yet the situation was different when it came to art. There was not a single public art collection in the country, the number of private art collectors could be counted on the fingers of one hand and the few exhibitions that had been held were relatively modest.

This article focuses on the history of the acquisitions of Schjerfbeck's works, primarily in regard to the collection of the Finnish Art Society, which formed the basis of the Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery collection. One could assume that the acquisitions made for the collection reveal something essential about the expectations surrounding the artist, the artistic concepts of the day and how they changed. Schjerfbeck was recognised early on as a highly gifted artist – so we may well consider how this is reflected in the history of the collection.

The Finnish art field takes shape

The most important single event in the development of the Finnish visual art field was the establishment of the Finnish Art Society in 1846. This was a case of transplanting the *Kunstverein* movement, which was popular in German-speaking parts of Europe, into Nordic soil. Similar associations had been established in other Nordic capitals as well: in Copenhagen in 1825, Stockholm in 1832 and Kristiania (Oslo) in 1836.¹

¹ Pettersson, Susanna, *From the Finnish Art Society to the Ateneum: Fredrik Cygnaeus, Carl Gustaf Estlander and the roles of art collections*. Helsinki: The Finnish Literature Society and the State Art Museum, 2008, 54–55; 67–89.

The main ideas of the art society movement were to bring art close to the people and to support contemporary artists. The most popular forms of activity were arranging exhibitions and organising art education. In Finland, the Art Society also took on the responsibility of gathering a collection and developing a system of grants for artists' foreign trips.²

Schjerfbeck's path first crossed that of the Finnish Art Society in 1873, when this artistically gifted girl enrolled as a student at the Society's drawing school in Helsinki. The school, which had been set up less than 30 years earlier, was undergoing a period of transition. The instruction was based on classical concepts of art and the European academic painting tradition. There was a desire to boost the volume and quality of instruction by adding lessons in the art of antiquity, perspective and anatomy.³ Serious efforts were being put into a reform of art education, alongside a broad discussion comparing the instruction and methods available in Finland with those offered elsewhere, primarily using France, Germany and Belgium as role models.⁴

There was also an urge to expand greatly the Art Society's art collection. It had begun to grow in the late 1840s, gaining official status in 1868. The first catalogue describing the collection was published in 1873 amid a public discussion of the collection's significance for Finland. Art was seen as a way to lift the pre-independence nation up to join the 'community of civilised countries'. The collection did not yet have its own building, but was instead displayed at various apartments around Helsinki. This situation had to change. After many twists and turns, the art collection and school gained their own building, the Ateneum, which opened to the public in October 1888.⁵

Towards an integral collection

Schjerfbeck studied for four years under sculptor Carl Eneas Sjöstrand. She then continued for a couple of years with painter Adolf von Becker at a private academy in Helsinki. The most important step in her artistic career was moving to Paris in 1880, where she began studying at the Académie Colarossi. The same year the Art Society acquired the first Schjerfbeck work for its collection. It was *Wounded Warrior in the Snow* (1880), which depicted the 1808–09 Finnish War from the viewpoint of a young soldier who has collapsed into the snow. In giving a face to the misery and desperation of war, Schjerfbeck grasped a subject that touched every Finn. As a result of the war, the country was handed over from Swedish to Russian rule in 1809. There was interest in history and a desire to portray it visually.

By the time she moved to Paris, Schjerfbeck had become acquainted with the key movers and shakers of the Finnish art scene. She knew who acquired works for the Art Society collection and who decided on grants for artists. She also knew that the aim of the Art Society's decision-makers was to create a collection that would depict in a rich, interesting way historically significant events, various kinds of heroic tales, landscapes and people, as well as stories from the national epic, the *Kalevala*. They sought to form a collection that would be as consistent and logical as possible.

Schjerfbeck had tried historical painting in many of her works from the 1870s, but began quite soon to distance herself from the idea of depicting historical events. Her new paintings told a story quite different from heroic tales or battles. Increasingly, her themes became more everyday than exalted, and were stripped of everything extraneous. Reviews of her exhibitions were sceptical, even negative. No wonder that acquisitions of Schjerfbeck works for the collection dried up almost immediately. She watched from the sidelines as the Art Society collection bought up works by a group of artists with whom she had studied.⁶ This reveals how the Art Society's collection was used as a means of narrative. The need to give the country a face and to create a history for its people was emphasised.

² Pettersson 2008, 80–89.

³ *Finska Konstföreningens Matrikel 1874*, 14; *Finska Konstföreningens Matrikel 1877*, 24–26.

⁴ Estlander, Carl Gustaf, 'On illustrative art and methods of learning it', *Finska Konstföreningens Matrikel 1874*, Helsingfors: Finska Konstföreningen 1874, 18–32; *Finska Konstföreningens Matrikel 1876*, Helsingfors: Finska Konstföreningen 1876, 4.

⁵ Pettersson 2008, 90–136.

⁶ Pettersson 2008, 324–329.

Difficulty in selling, fear of exhibiting

Throughout the 19th century, the Finnish Art Society held a near-monopoly role in the Finnish art scene. It trained artists, gave them grants and bought their work. At this point it had no competitors as there were no other large public collections in the country, and private collectors did not yet play a significant role in supporting artists financially. Thus the Art Society was able to shape the national concept of good art.

This aroused a variety of reactions among artists. Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), one of the leading painters, complained that intendant Berndt Otto Schauman (1821–1895), who was responsible for the Art Society collection, did not understand new French painting at all.⁷ While Finnish artists studying in Paris saw what was happening in the new art scene, the Art Society's decision-makers clung to the ideals of classical art. No wonder, then, that they began to be seen as behind the times. The art field was split between the conservative powers and the progressive seekers of change.

Schjerfbeck's relationship with the Art Society was also conflicted. This becomes clear through her broad correspondence with friends and relatives. The tone of her letters ranges from hope to despair. She clearly represented a new way of painting, but one that received insufficient support. She badly needed income from the sale of her works and would have liked to see them included in the society's collection – but held a sceptical view of the experts in charge of it.

'In 4 years' time they [the Finnish Art Society] have bought 110 marks' worth from me and even then for a gallery, underpriced from an owner – I can't afford to paint, I have to be a servant, a nurse and a seamstress and when for once things look brighter, that I could take part, then I've sold myself into imprisonment. Don't the galleries have other tasks besides amusing tourists? Doesn't the development of artists mean anything?' (to Maria Wiik, 28 January 1914)⁸

The primary target of criticism was the Art Society collection's first intendant, Schauman, and the organisation's secretary, Johan Jakob Tikkanen (1857–1930). The mistrust in these men that becomes clear from her letters grew over the years, as one disappointment followed another. As an artist, Schjerfbeck called on the Society to take responsibility for artists. This was more than understandable considering its dominant position in the field. On the other hand, the artistic community's wishes for the Art Society greatly exceeded what it could do in response. It had scant financial resources and was only able to enlarge its collection each year within certain limits.

The Society faced growing criticism over its concentration of power and its duplicity of roles and responsibilities. Tikkanen, for instance, worked in three different fields. First, he was responsible for art history studies at the University of Helsinki, where he taught future art historians. Secondly, he served as the Society's secretary from 1891 to 1920, deciding on acquisitions and arranging exhibitions over the course of three decades. He also wrote art criticism, evaluating the work he saw exhibited publicly. From the artist's standpoint, this was hardly an ideal situation – on the contrary.

'How right you are when you speak of the museum men, the critics. They kill everything that is individual/personal, beautiful and alive; they take the ready-made success.' (to Einar Reuter, 2 November 1919)⁹

Schjerfbeck was uncertain about showing her paintings, wary of exhibition openings and fearful of public criticism. She clearly needed more support and encouragement from exhibition organisers. Experiences of loneliness remained in her mind for a long time.

⁷ Kortelainen, Anna, *My So-Called Heart: Albert Edelfelt's Letters to his Mother, 1873–1901*. Helsinki: Otava 2001, 105–108; 116–119; 131–134.

⁸ Levanto, Marjatta (ed.), *An Artist is a Labourer of Emotion: Helene Schjerfbeck's Art and Life*. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery 1992, 57.

⁹ Levanto 1992, 57.

'When I was 18, everybody attacked me [...], nobody said that I was young. And I wanted to "rise up in rebellion and go on my way", to get away from all of them, all of them who just sat and judged.' (to Einar Reuter, 7 November 1924)¹⁰

Contradictory feedback was also associated with the works bought by the Finnish Art Society in 1888. *The Convalescent* was purchased for the Society's autumn exhibition. At that point, there were 11 members on the acquisitions board. The painting of a little girl recovering from a fever was acquired for 800 marks¹¹ and put on display in the newly-built Ateneum building. Later the same work was awarded a bronze medal at the Paris World Exhibition. A breakthrough seemed to be at hand.

Finnish critical views of the picture were sceptical, though. Was an ill girl a worthy subject for a painting? And was the child even depicted in the correct manner? To viewers accustomed to the idealised human images of the Romantic era, the artist's new way of painting seemed rough and unfinished, even insulting toward the Finnish people.

Despite the criticism, Schjerfbeck stuck to her own way of painting. Landscapes were simplified, still-life arrangements stripped of anything unnecessary and individuals unmasked to show their directness and sensitivity.

'Sometimes it is said that I am modern. I don't know what modern looks like, I only know that the next work has developed from the previous one, through the experience that I have achieved.' (to Helena Westermarck, 2 November 1916)¹²

Schjerfbeck's worries about making a living were genuine, but she was not alone with this problem. Most artists struggled with similar challenges. They all needed studios, artistic supplies, models and food. And Schjerfbeck's situation was not hopeless. The Art Society's occasional acquisitions did not guarantee a basic livelihood, but fortunately she found understanding of her art in other venues. Most important of these was the Turku Art Museum, which opened in 1904 and which acquired many of her major paintings. She was also kept busy with many private commissions. In the 1910s, Schjerfbeck also gained support from art dealer Gösta Stenman. A major private show at Stenman's salon in 1917 was a success.

'Stenman has now closed the exhibition. And I have received so much sympathy. Heart-warming, the words of friends. [...] It was indeed also a show of strength, a performance.' (to Einar Reuter, 9 October 1917)¹³

Art pioneer

Schjerfbeck saw at close hand how much her artist friends appeared at exhibitions, how they sold their work and how they were written about in the press. Belonging to the art world's inner circle advanced matters: for instance working on the Finnish Art Society's acquisitions board nearly always meant a better chance of selling one's own work. Schjerfbeck left committee memberships and other positions of responsibility to others, as influencing matters behind the scenes was not her way. She concentrated on painting.

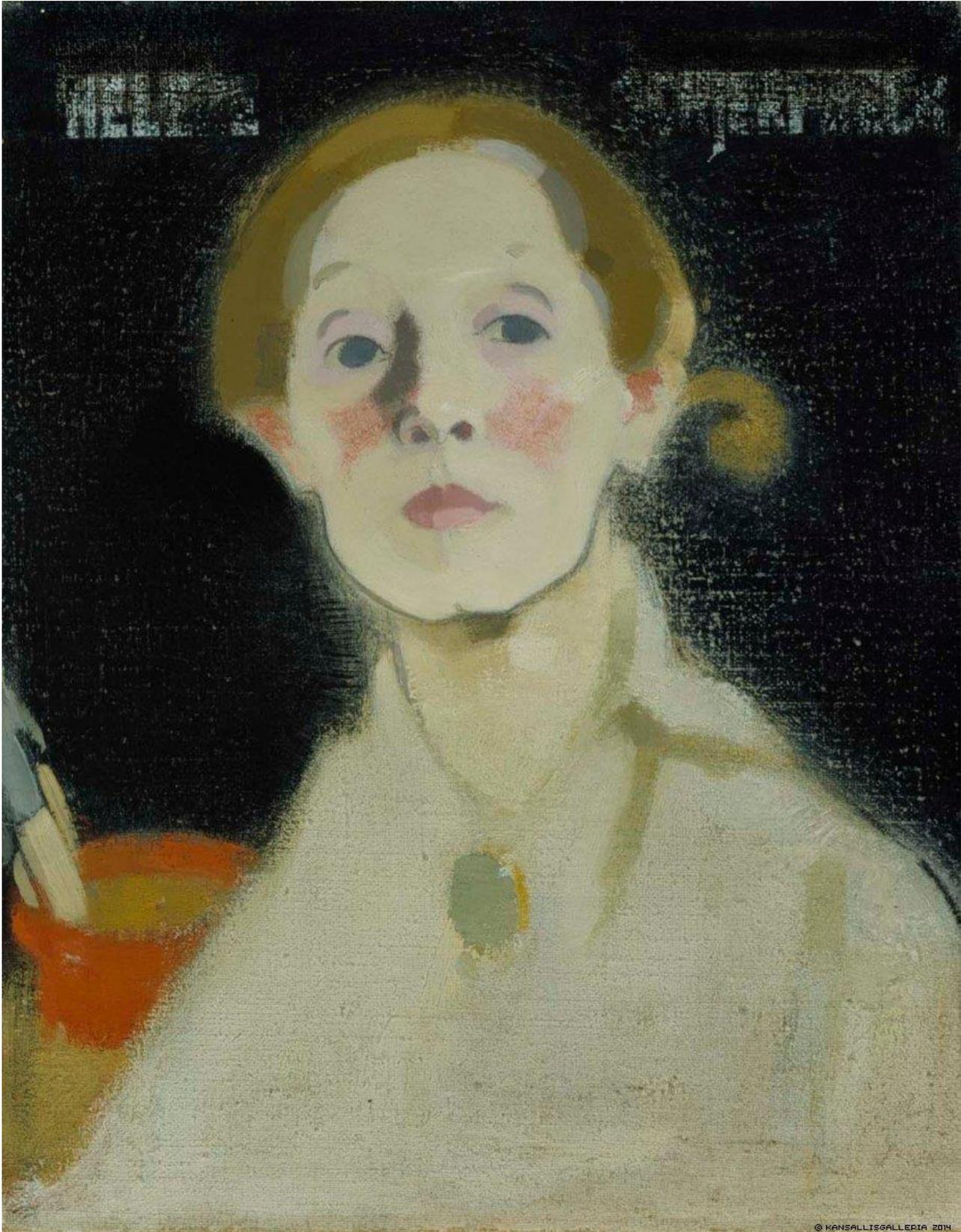
In the autumn of 1914, the Finnish Art Society commissioned a self-portrait from Schjerfbeck, to be included in a collection of self-portraits. For Schjerfbeck, the task was far from simple. She made many attempts at the painting. The first to be completed was the *Self-Portrait with Silver Background* in 1915, which ended up at the Turku Art Museum rather than in the Art Society collection. Schjerfbeck had to begin again. The background switched from silver to black and the view from semi-profile to frontal. Her name, painted in capital letters, emphasised the image of the artist with her head held high. When *Self-Portrait, Black Background* was finally finished later in 1915 and accepted into the Art Society collection, Schjerfbeck breathed a sigh of relief.

¹⁰ Levanto 1992, 57.

¹¹ *Finska Konstföreningens Matrikel* 1889, 1 and 11.

¹² Levanto 1992, 17.

¹³ Levanto 1992, 69.



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait, Black Background*, 1915. Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen.

http://kokoelmat.fng.fi/app?lang=en&si=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.muusa.net%2Fteos_1C004740-5B97-428F-857A-529E275FFBD5

She had earlier told her artist friend Maria Wiik that her nerves were 'in tatters' from uncertainty.¹⁴ There is no trace of this in the painting, though. Looking out of it is a self-confident woman who has chosen her own form of artistic expression and is not going to compromise it in the slightest.

Contemporary writers noted Schjerfbeck's exceptionality in all general descriptions of domestic art history. In 1912, Johannes Öhquist described her as a talented, promising artist who had shown 'great abilities in composition and depiction of character' in her historical-themed paintings. He considered *The Convalescent* to be the high point of her oeuvre.¹⁵ Ludvig Wennervirta, meanwhile, saw Schjerfbeck as a trailblazer who 'wrestled with up-to-date style problems' before others did and who was independent of the stylistic trends of her era. He compared her to Whistler, Hammershøi, Toulouse-Lautrec – and to Japanese woodblock artists. Wennervirta summed up his view by declaring that Schjerfbeck was an 'up-to-date expressionist art pioneer in our country'.¹⁶ Onni Okkonen also wrote of the artist's original style, describing it as synthetically pure and intelligent.¹⁷

However, this enthusiasm did not translate into acquisitions. The Finnish Art Society collection catalogue published in 1930 only listed eight of Schjerfbeck's works, far fewer than many male artists. Akseli Gallen-Kallela was represented by 39 pieces, Albert Edelfelt by 40 and Eero Järnefelt by 32.¹⁸ The paucity of acquisitions of Schjerfbeck paintings suggests that despite the positive feedback, there was not complete faith in the works.

The situation began to change after the artist's death. When the Ateneum Art Museum published a new collection catalogue in 1957, Schjerfbeck's *The Seamstress* (1905) was on the cover and the number of paintings included had grown to 18.¹⁹

From this we may conclude that decisions on expanding the Art Society collection were out of line with the art experts' publicly-stated views of Schjerfbeck's significance. Other artists – usually men – were placed to the fore. Many factors played into this, including the artists' status in the art world and its professional networks, the availability of funds and works, as well as the decision-makers' perceptions of good art. The unstable political situation, world wars and currency devaluations were also reflected in the collection's growth.²⁰ In Schjerfbeck's case one should also consider the paintings' subject matter. She painted whatever she wanted to paint, leaving the more popular themes to others.

'I could not illustrate the Kalevala, so I left it aside, it was deathly boring – maybe it will finish off Gallén [Gallen-Kallela]?' (to Einar Reuter, September 1932)²¹

Schjerfbeck took part in several exhibitions every year in Finland, but her real breakthrough came in neighbouring Sweden. A 1937 exhibition in the capital, Stockholm, presented nearly 100 of her works. This was followed by a show in Malmö the following year, and another in Stockholm in 1939. Critical opinion was by now firmly on her side. Among Finnish artists, only Gallen-Kallela and Edelfelt have been more written about than Schjerfbeck.²² Her expography confirms that exhibition activity was remarkably lively.²³

Just a couple of months after Schjerfbeck's death in January 1946, her works were featured in the Finnish Art Society's centennial exhibition. Now, for the first time, the selection of Schjerfbeck paintings included was as extensive and imposing as those by her male colleagues.²⁴ Since then, Schjerfbeck's stock has steadily risen, both nationally and internationally.

¹⁴ Holger 2011, 100. From a letter to Maria Wiik, 15 October 1915.

¹⁵ Öhquist, Johannes, *A History of Finnish Art*. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Kirja 1912, 446.

¹⁶ Wennervirta, Ludvig, *Suomen taide esihistoriallisesta ajasta meidän päiviimme*. Helsinki: Otava 1927, 443–446.

¹⁷ Okkonen, Onni, *A History of Finnish Art*. Porvoo: WSOY, 1955, 556.

¹⁸ *Ateneum art collections, catalogue*. Helsinki: Ateneum Art Museum 1930, 18–21; 29–31; 41–43; 67.

¹⁹ *Ateneum art collections, catalogue*. Helsinki: Ateneum Art Museum 1957, 81–82.

²⁰ *The Finnish Art Society and Art Academy's 1929 annual report*. Helsinki 1930, 8–9.

²¹ Levanto 1992, 27.

²² Isomäki, Irmeli, 'Helene Schjerfbeck expography', in the book *Helene Schjerfbeck 150 years*. Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse (ed.). Helsinki: Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery 2012, 361.

²³ Isomäki 2012, 362–375.

²⁴ *The Finnish Art Society's centennial exhibition 9.III.-31.III.1946: Finnish art from the 1700s and 1800s*. Helsinki: The Finnish Art Society 1946, 32–33.

Strengthening the Ateneum collection

The Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery's Schjerfbeck collection is the largest anywhere, now including 201 pieces. These include not only the artist's most iconic and best-known paintings, but also extremely rare, fragile sketches and drawings, which reveal the development of her hand. The collection also encompasses a large volume of literature, documents and archival material which forms a crucial resource for Schjerfbeck research.

The collection is constantly expanding through acquisitions and donations. Some of these are highly important: for instance, a collection donated in 2005 by Yrjö and Nanny Kaunisto includes 35 Schjerfbeck works. Such gifts have an incalculable significance for the Ateneum, as Schjerfbeck's works are rarely available otherwise. The Kaunisto bequest also included a fund whose earnings will be used to buy more works by gifted women artists in the future. In 2008, money from the Kaunisto Fund was used to purchase Schjerfbeck's 1915 still life *Red Apples* – a painting was born out of an uncompromising attitude.

'As I promised, I now send you Red Apples, but if Mr Reuter no longer cares for them, I'd like to get them back – quite simply – because, you see, they don't look like anything without sun.' (to Einar Reuter, 19 April 1915)²⁵



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Red Apples*, 1915. Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Henri Tuomi.

http://kokoelmat.fng.fi/app?si=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.muusa.net%2FE42_Object_Identifier%2FA-2008-647&lang=en

²⁵ Levanto 1992, 47.