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Helene Schjerfbeck – Painting the Immaterial and Eternal

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This paper discusses how Helene Schjerfbeck's art and artistry is connected to the turn towards medium – that is when 'material' became a part of the content – as one of the main signifiers of Modernism in European art. Schjerfbeck had an exceptionally long career stretching from the 1870s to the 1940s. Her expressive brushstrokes, concentrated colour and the solid line of her charcoal did not quiver, even when she worked on her last paintings.

Schjerfbeck's art has stimulated a great deal of new research. One reason for this may be that her art seems timeless, individual and profoundly modern and it was produced with a strong sense of materiality.

My focus is on Schjerfbeck's journey to Italy in 1894 where her interest in materiality and new painting practices led her to explore different mediums, such as charcoal, watercolour and tempera. In fact she considered tempera an 'ideal' medium for keeping the surface translucent and matte and this became the distinctive modern expression for which her art is known. Moreover, art was being developed to express a new kind of aesthetic language that took its inspiration not only from new techniques but also from the old and 'ancient', such as frescoes.

I also focus on Schjerfbeck's adaptation of the more achromatic range of colours which was broadly used during late the 19th century and which carried certain connotations such as harmony, melancholy, stillness, silence and immateriality.

Schjerfbeck was constantly looking for inspiration from different eras. She shared the same kind of artistic dialogue with the Old Masters as Manet, Degas, Carrière and Whistler. She referred repeatedly to Holbein, Hals, Rembrandt and Velázquez, as well as to contemporary life, fashion, French art magazines, photographs, printed material and art books – all the popular media of the 20th century.

Schjerfbeck's series of paintings from Italy in 1894, includes *Cypresses*, *Fiesole*, in which a hazy vaporousness wraps the scene in a mist, removing from the landscape all that might indicate place and time. A harmony is achieved using grey tones. *Cypresses* may also be seen as the culmination of her search for a new expression, the haze pointing to a Symbolist notion of the *estompe*, emphasising the 'immaterial' quality of landscape.

The long process of developing her modern mode peaked during the years 1890–1905. It is, however, clear that Schjerfbeck's explorations with fresco art in the 1880s gave her in the 1890s a new way in which to express timelessness by means of *transfer to medium*. For Schjerfbeck, the hazy and transparent works of the 1890s had started an artistic process which found its true form in the intense subdued works of her late oeuvre. Her preoccupation with seriality continued when she repeated many of her earlier works, such as *The Seamstress* (1905, 1927) and produced several paintings based on the Old Masters, such as El Greco. Choosing the right mode of referring to the past, and mastering both medium and canvas, were constant concerns for Schjerfbeck.