



AXEL HILLESTRÖM

1874 – 1959

Archipelago Sunset

Circa 1920

Signed lower right,
watercolour on paper, 360 x 600mm

Provenance:

Sweden, private collection

Axel Hilleström | *Archipelago Sunset*

Axel Natanael Hilleström Johnsson was a Swedish landscape painter whose work focused primarily on coastal environments, particularly the west coast archipelago. Born in Gothenburg in South-West Sweden, he worked largely in watercolour and developed a consistent visual language centred on atmosphere through a striking use of colour. His practice aligns with a broader Scandinavian landscape tradition developed in the late 19th and early 20th century that looked to depict the unique landscape of the North. Thought to have been largely self-taught, little is known of Axel Hilleström – although it is recorded in the *Svenskt konstnärslexikon* that he first trained as a doctor at Uppsala University and then the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. We know that by 1920 Hilleström had established himself as an artist and illustrator. In this respect, his career can be directly compared to that of Oskar Bergman (1879-1963), who was also largely self-taught. Both artists represent a generation of Swedish painters whose work evolved independently of academic systems, shaped instead by close observation and sustained engagement with landscape.

The work presented here, *Archipelago Sunset*, exemplifies Hilleström's masterful approach to watercolour through a composition in which dark, simplified rock formations in the foreground and middle distance hold our gaze whilst slowly leading the eye toward the changing light of the horizon. The expansive sky is rendered with layered washes that transition from cool blue-green tones to warmer reds and oranges, indicating dusk, while horizontal cloud bands introduce a rhythmic structure across the picture plane. The water reflects these tonal shifts through restrained modulation, demonstrating Hilleström's controlled use of watercolour to build depth and luminosity. The absence of human figures or signs of activity reinforces his focus on landscape as an autonomous subject. Twilight seems to have been a preferred subject, encouraging an exploration of atmosphere and spatial depth, to create an almost otherworldly vista. Although Hilleström was not widely known outside Sweden during his lifetime, his work has remained present in national collections and has received increased attention in recent years through auctions and exhibitions. His landscapes contribute to an understanding of early twentieth-century Swedish modernism as a field that valued restraint, technical clarity and line, with a close observation of natural conditions.

