



E. Tolin
Paris 1889.

ELLEN JOLIN

Stockholm, 1854 – 1939

Portrait of a French Woman



Signed and dated 'El.Jolin / Paris 1889' lower left,
watercolour and gouache on paper, 28 x 20 cm, framed: 61.5 x 53 cm

Provenance:

Private collection, Sweden

Ellen Jolin | *Portrait of a French Woman*

Ellen Jolin (1854–1939) was a Swedish painter, printmaker, and writer whose career exemplified the expanding opportunities for women artists in Scandinavia at the end of the nineteenth century. Born *Maria Helena Ellen Jolin* in Stockholm on 16th June 1854, daughter of actor, artist and playwright Johan Christopher Jolin and Katarina Jolin (née Wigert). Exposed at a young age to the arts, Ellen began private lessons under Fredrik Scholander and Carl Hansen, as well as the renowned Kerstin Cardon before enrolling at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. Cardon had been one of the first women to be enrolled in the academy, when women artists were accepted in 1864, far before the rest of Europe.



Fig.1 Photograph of Ellen Jolin, 1901, Svenkst Porträttgalleri XX

Ellen Jolin's fellow students included other future influential women artists, including Karin Bergöö, later to become Karin Larsson. The two were clearly close friends, as it was at a ball held by Johan Jolin, Ellen's father, that Karin and Carl Larsson first met.¹ Whereas Karin travelled to Paris in 1882 to study at the Acadmie Colarossi, visiting Julia Beck in Grez-sur-Loing, Ellen would not travel until 1889. The year of the Exposition Universelle in Paris, of Eiffel tower fame, at the age of thirty-five.

However, once in Paris, Jolin quickly enrolled at the Académie Julian under Jules Joseph Lefebvre, who won the Grand prize at the Exposition Universelle that same year. The Académie was one of the few private art schools open to women at the time. There Jolin quickly absorbed the emerging artistic movements and aligned herself with the group of determined Scandinavian women artists who sought professional training in Paris.

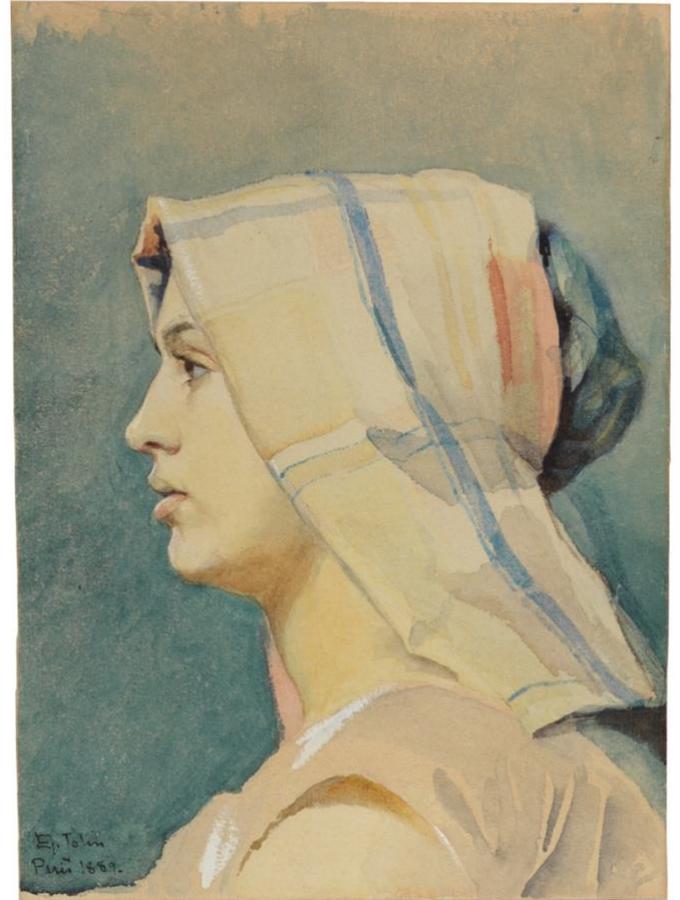


Fig.2 Jules Lefebvre, *Graziella*, oil on panel, private collection

Among her earliest works from this period is a finely rendered watercolour presented here, *Portrait of a French woman*. The painting depicts a young woman in profile, her features modelled with remarkable subtlety and restraint. This masterful command of watercolour, using transparent layers to build form and allowing light to animate the pigment surface, explains why this would become her preferred medium. The soft transitions between shadow and illumination reveal her sensitivity to natural light and her understanding of colour, qualities likely reinforced by her training under Lefebvre. Although the woman depicted is almost lifelike, there is a clear allusion through the profile of the face, with its strong silhouette, to renaissance profiles and in turn classical antiquity, recalling works in the Louvre that young students at the Académie Julian would study, including the *Venus de Milo* (fig.3). There is also a direct comparison with the work of Jules Lefebvre, who favoured this side profile in his female portraits (see fig.2).



Fig.3 *Vénus de Milo*, detail, Musée du Louvre, Paris

After Paris, Jolin would continue travelling, visiting Belgium, England, and even North Africa. However, her favoured source of inspiration was Italy, exploring the cities of Venice, Florence, Siena, and Rome, and producing views she discovered during her walks, capturing the atmosphere for clients back home. Returning to Sweden for a short period in 1892, she and Emma Löwstädt-Chadwick organised a joint exhibition, where Jolin presented seventy watercolours from her Italian sojourn. Her international reputation was further strengthened the following year when she exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893), in the watercolour section of the Swedish pavilion of the Palace of Fine Arts, *The Baptistry of Sienna*.² Alongside, Carl Larsson and Anna Boberg.

Jolin's art, characterised by refined composition and delicate use of colour, often depicted landscapes, city scenes, and travel motifs. Her career developed during a transformative period for women artists in Sweden, as access to formal art education expanded. As art historian Ingrid Ingelman notes, "from 1864 to about 1930 there were slightly more than half as many women students as men enrolled at the Academy," reflecting both women's growing emancipation but also the social limitations still shaping their training and careers.² Yet, as Ingelman also observes,

these artists “had to struggle on two fronts, against both external and internal resistance,” contending with prejudice, limited professional opportunities, family pressures and a lack of institutional support.³

Despite these challenges, Ellen Jolin established herself as one of Sweden’s most internationally active women artists of her generation, exhibiting in Paris, Vienna, Chicago and Berlin. Her works and writings from her extensive travels, including North Africa, would eventually be published in her *Från studiefärder i medelhafsländer* (*From Study trips in Mediterranean countries*), printed in 1911. Jolin’s works are represented today in major collections within Scandinavia, including the Nationalmuseum and the Moderna Museet.

¹ See <https://www.karinlarsson.se/carl-larsson-och-karin-traffas/>

² Ingrid Ingelman, “Women Artists in Sweden: A Two Front Struggle”, in *Women’s Art Journal Vol.5 No.1*, Spring-Summer 1984, p.1-7

³ Ibid.