

The image is a painting by Bruno Liljefors, depicting a white dog, possibly a Samoyed, lying down in a landscape. The dog is the central focus, rendered with thick, expressive brushstrokes. The background consists of dark, textured brushwork, suggesting a rugged or wooded environment. The overall style is characteristic of the Swedish School of Painting.

*Bruno Liljefors |
Isrännen*



Bruno Liljefors was seen as the leading animal painter of his generation both in Europe and America. In Sweden, his works have remained the centrepiece of many collections, with an unwavering appreciation of his passionate observation of nature, combining an in-depth study of the intricacies of Swedish flora and fauna with a fluidity of expression, expertly capturing the transient moments of action, as well as the minutia of his beloved homeland.

Unlike many Nordic artists of his generation, Liljefors received a high level of international praise and recognition in his own lifetime, with works in major museums around the world. Hiram Blauvelt, the American conservationist and collector, who founded Hiram Blauvelt Art Museum in New Jersey, visited and interviewed Bruno Liljefors in 1926 for an article entitled ‘Greatest of Wild life painters’ for the *American Magazine of Art*. He praised Liljefors as ‘more than an artist; he is the keen naturalist gone out a-painting. He sees with the eye of a John Burroughs and records these peerings for us ordinary people to look upon’.¹ Blauvelt went further: ‘never has there been a painter of Liljefors’ marked genius in presenting wild life in all the stark truth of nature’, something he believed nature painters of the previous generation, such as Edward Landseer or Rosa Bonheur, were unable to achieve in comparison.²

Born in Uppsalla in 1860, Bruno would always maintain a connection to the surrounding countryside and animals of his home. He would pursue his artistic career at the Royal Academy in Stockholm in 1879, however in time, like many young Swedish artists of this period, became dissatisfied with the study of academic plaster models and male nudes, which he saw as estranged from nature and modern art practices. He would quit the academy in 1882, deciding to travel Europe instead. His first visit was to Düsseldorf, which had been the Mecca for Swedish realist artists of the previous generation. Here he met Professor C.F. Deiker, a fellow animal painter and hunting enthusiast. Writing home to his parents from Germany he proclaimed: ‘A picture should impress by its idea, and by the lifelike manner in which it is executed, not pedantically because nature is not pedantic... We are going to paint our pictures straight from nature. This is what the greatest artists in Paris are doing, and in fact it’s the only way if you want to get anywhere’.³

After less than a year abroad, having visited Germany, Italy and briefly Paris, he returned home for the summer in 1883. It was here he found himself a small cottage outside Uppsalla and started to work on paintings directly from his observations, taking long walks and hunting trips through the countryside of Uppland, returning to his studio to transcribe from his mind’s eye. His main project of this summer was *Goshawk and Black Grouse*, which was accepted into the Salon in Paris the following year.

By 1887, Liljefors was already renowned as the most famous Swedish animal painter. It was during this year he would marry Anna Olofsson and the two would honeymoon at Grez-sur-Loing, the artist colony just South of Paris. Here they would spend time with Bruno's friend Carl Larsson as well as other expatriates. On their return, Liljefors would paint Anna amongst a meadow, the variety of brushwork illustrating the influence the prevalent style in France was having on his work (Fig.1).

In June 1895 Bruno divorced his wife and married her sister, Signe Olofsson, they would go onto have a large family and live together till Bruno's death in 1939. From July 1895 to March

1896, the newly married couple lived on the small remote island of Idö, on the Eastern edge of the Västervik archipelago. The pair would endure the winter of 1895 on the island and it is here that our painting was likely realised. Painted en-plein air, in late winter, on one of his daily hikes or perhaps aboard a small boat. It shows the *Isränna* (or channel/chute) broken in the sea, which would freeze during winter, connecting the small islands of the archipelago together, often thick enough to walk on. The *Isränna* are cut, still to this day, as paths through the ice and ways of supplying those who remain on the islands during winter.

Liljefors tightly crops the format of the painting to focus the viewer's gaze on the *Isränna*, as if floating down its channel at speed. The perspective angled down towards the water's edge, where the ice sheet meets the channel. The work is a celebration of the harsh wilderness of ice that would have surrounded the two newlyweds. A painterly expression of the predominant colours of Swedish winter, illustrating Liljefors's masterful ability to show movement and light, with fluid brushstrokes and a subtle paired back palette of whites and greys.

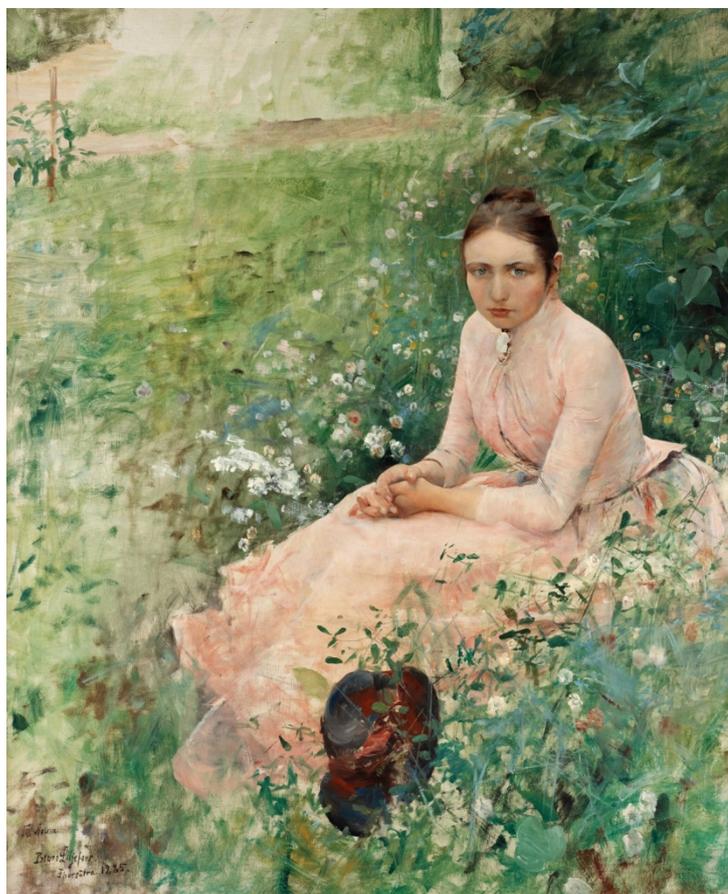


Fig.1 Bruno Liljefors, *Anna*, 1885, private collection





Fig.2 Bruno Liljefors, *Morning*, 1894, Stockholm, Thielska Galleriet

Unlike many of his works, which started life as landscapes and were then supplemented with portrait-like depictions of animals observed in the wild or from his own menagerie, our painting stands as a rare example of his landscape oeuvre. Whether it was originally imagined to be absent of his beloved animals is unclear, however the fact it remained in the artist's studio framed and untouched until his death is a clear sign that he believed it to be much more than a study. Holding on to cherished works was not unusual for Liljefors, who presented another work from this period to Ernest Thiel in 1901, seven years after it had been painted (Fig.2). Landscape painting had been reinvigorated in Sweden by the 1890s, fanned by a national romantic fervour which saw the promotion of particularly Nordic subjects. However, our work stands apart from these, with such a stark composition and original concept, as a bridge between his landscapes and his animal paintings, using the same fervour for which he approaches his depictions of fauna, to present this symphony of white and grey.

As seen in his early painting of the River Grez, *By the beach. A Spring Day* from 1884 (Fig.3), Liljefors was an early advocate of the Japanese style and Japanese culture, that was sweeping the artistic circles of Europe at this time. Painted eleven years prior to our painting, it shares the same unexpected composition, alluding to his knowledge of Japanese woodcut prints that would become an important source of inspiration throughout his career. For Pontus Grate, curator and art historian who wrote extensively on the Liljefors, it was the way in which these Japanese artists "sought to capture the transient moment by adopting surprising perspectives, asymmetrical compositions and fleeting movements", which had such an impact on Liljefors' and his Swedish contemporaries.





Fig.3 Bruno Liljefors, *At the beach. A Spring day*, 1884, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

Grate singles out this concept of the microcosm as an important feature of Liljefors' work, the "emphasis was on a fraction, a detail, as being all that our senses are capable of retaining of the infinite variety of the world; but a detail that signifies the whole, that incorporates the world within itself – that *is* the whole. In this way the spectator is stimulated to active participation, and to infer for himself the infinite from the finite".⁴ This idea is manifest in *Isrånna*, which is more akin to proto-abstraction than the concurrent artistic production of the 1890s.

This early experimentation with abstraction is more famously known internationally today by other prominent Swedish artists, namely August Strindberg and his works like *Wonderland*, painted in 1894 (Fig.4). It was Strindberg's article, *The New Arts! The Role of Chance in Artistic Creation* written in French and published in *La revue des revues* in Paris in 15th November 1894 that may have had an influence on the creation of our painting. In it Strindberg explains that one must give into the wild forces of nature, leaving room for chance, in order "to imitate nature's method of creation".⁵

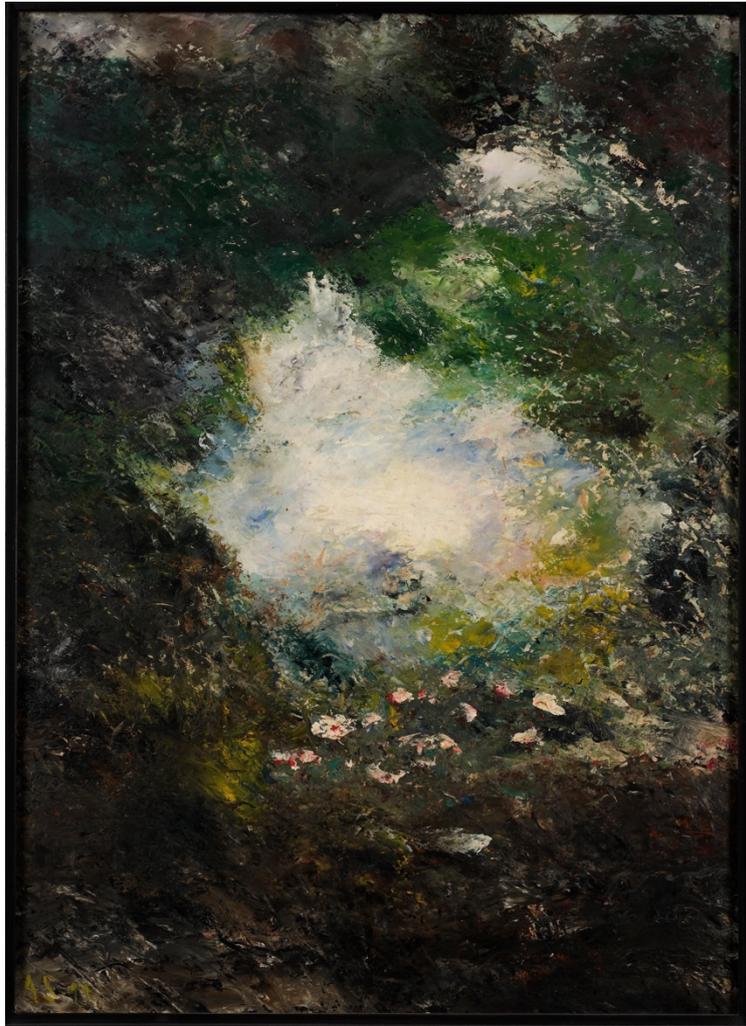


Fig.4 August Strindberg, *Wonderland*, 1894, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

This chimes with the words of one of the great contemporary Swedish poets of Liljefors' day, Ola Hansson, who said that one must "seek the great in the small, and the variety of creation that lies in a blade of grass".⁶ Liljefors focusses the viewers gaze on a subject that is often walked past, or ignored, forcing us to pause and see the sublime within this everyday scene. Grate states that this attitude had its basis in the influence of Japanese art which was 'imbued with the spirit of Zen Buddhism, whose innermost desire was to understand life spontaneously, intuitively, not with the help of reason or analysis but by way of meditation'.⁷ It is the philosophical spirit and importance given to these supposedly insignificant, but in fact, poignant details of nature, which Liljefors is able to capture so coherently and freely in our painting, giving it a timeless and mediative quality.

Writing about his own process at the end of his career in 1934, Liljefors highlighted the intricacies of nature within his early work: "All previous ideas of the beauty or ugliness of colors turned upside down by these wonderful combinations, like a legacy from the primeval times, telling me of the wood, the swamps the moss on the stones, and light sky between trees. One could never tire of looking into this world, where there was no bottom and no end, simply the eternal new".⁸ This painting can be seen in this light, a depiction of the sublimity of nature, a medicine against the ever-encroaching modern world.

NOTES

¹ Hiram Blauvelt, 'Bruno Liljefors – Greatest of Wild life painters', *American Magazine of Art* October 1926, Vol.XVII, no.10, p.505

² Ibid.

³ Pontus Grate, 'A spotlight on Bruno Liljefors' Early paintings', in *In the Realm of the Wild: The Art of Bruno Liljefors of Sweden*, ed. by Pontus Grate and Allan Ellenius, p.6

⁴ Ibid., p.8

⁵ August Strindberg, 'The New Arts! The Role of Chance in Artistic Creation', *La Revue des revues*, 15th November 1894, in *August Strindberg: Selected Essays*, ed. by Michael Robinson, Cambridge University Press: 2009, pp.103-107

⁶ Swedish poet Ola Hansson, quoted in Grate, 'A spotlight on Bruno Liljefors' Early paintings', p.8

⁷ Ibid., p.8

⁸ Direct quote from Bruno Liljefors, 1934, in *In the Realm of the Wild: The Art of Bruno Liljefors of Sweden*, p.9