



BEDA STJERNSCHANTZ  
Porvoo, 1867 – 1910, Helsinki

*Winter landscape*



Signed and dated lower right, 'Beda /93'

Oil on canvas, 44 x 61 cm

*Provenance:*

Purchased at Bomans Glas och Konsthandel, Karlstad, Sweden, 1960-1970;  
Sweden, private collection

## BEDA STJERNSCHANTZ | WINTER LANDSCAPE

The emergence of Symbolism in the early 1890s saw a return to a form of romanticism, to enigmatic motifs, rebelling against the realism of the previous two decades. The aim, at least from artists, was to convey a new point of view, imbued with spirituality and mysticism, abandoning the imitation of nature, and seeking new angles of approach through form, harmonious lines and colour. The synthetism that Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard developed came to revolutionise art in Paris in the 1890s. However, it was not just French artists that fostered these new ideas, young Nordic artists, particularly in Finland, would be strongly influenced during their time in Paris and became pioneers of this new movement, one such leading light, now



Fig.1 Beda Stjernschantz, *Self-portrait*, 1892, oil on canvas, Helsinki, Ateneum Art Museum

sadly forgotten, was Beda Stjernschantz. Thanks to recent research by Itha O’Niell, particularly on Beda’s letters, and Anna Maria von Bonsdorff, on her landscapes, a much broader picture of this traditionally mysterious artist is appearing.<sup>1</sup>

Stjernschantz came from an impoverished noble family, with little means to support their many children. From an early age she sought out instruction in the arts, but due to the untimely death of her father, she had to work to fund her own education. This was not made easier by a back injury sustained in early childhood which left her diminished in stature and disabled for life, hampering her throughout her career.<sup>2</sup>



Fig.2 Students of the Art Society's Helsinki drawing school, around 1890, who would go on to be Finland's leading symbolists, From top left: Karin Maria af Björkesten, Karin Hirn (née Åberg), Agnes Nordenskiöld, Sigrid Granfelt, Anna von Bonsdorff (née Ahlman), Beda Stjernshantz, Magnus Enckell, Väinö Blomstedt and Lilli Procopé.

After studying at the Finnish Art Society's Drawing school in Helsinki and then privately under Gunnar Berndtson – alongside Ellen Thesleff, Magnus Enckell and Väinö Blomstedt (see Fig.2) – Stjernschantz travelled to Paris in 1891 at her own expense. Following in the recent footsteps of her friend and “kindred spirit”, Magnus Enckell who had already settled there.<sup>3</sup> Thesleff and Stjernschantz arrived in Paris in November of that year, moving into a small four-bedroom apartment at 207 Boulevard Raspail, in the artists district of Montparnasse, which they would share with their close friends and fellow artists Anna Bremer and Sigrid Granfelt. Spending long days hard at work in the Académie Colarossi and their own shared studio. Although the lessons tended towards the traditional, the académie became a hot bed for a new style that hit the young students like a wave, Symbolism. Väinö Blomstedt and Pekka Halonen, would join their Finnish compatriots for New Years celebrations of 1892, however it was Enckell, Thesleff and Stjernschantz who would pioneer this new movement within the Finnish circle.



Fig.3 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The Poor Fisherman*, 1879-1881, oil on canvas, Paris, Musée d'Orsay

In Paris Stjernerantz would crystallise her own theory on the future of art, writing later:

*“... the goal of symbolism was to rediscover painting’s own natural laws. Painting should be above all painterly. Not coincidence but beauty and feeling should determine its lines and colour. Painting should above all be decoration, but the artist should also expose their whole soul in their creative work”.*<sup>4</sup>

Marja Sakari, former director of the Ateneum, states that it was the work of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes which influenced the young Stjernerantz the most, with his “classical monumentality and simplicity. Including his frescoes in the Sorbonne, his painting *The Poor Fisherman* in the Luxembourg Museum, but also Édouard Manet’s *Olympia*” and that Beda’s “first stay in Paris was marked by a need to concentrate and to seek a new form of expression”.<sup>5</sup> It is clear from Stjernerantz’s own writing that she strove to discover and absorb as much as she could during her first Paris sojourn, from Carrière and Whilster, to Gauguin and the Nabis.<sup>6</sup> However, it was not just art that influenced her, she was by all accounts a great bibliophile and her notebooks from



Fig.4 Beda Stjernschantz, *Girl sitting*, 1892, oil on canvas, Helsinki, Ateneum Art Museum

Paris, show that she fully immersed herself in the works of Viktor Rydberg, Oscar Wilde, Goethe, Baudelaire, Nietzsche and Plato. Particularly drawn to the teachings of Buddhism and new ideas being formed in Theosophy. As well as reading religiously the newly published symbolist art and literature magazine, *Taarnet*, published by the Danish author Johannes Jørgensen, which ran from 1893-1895. Far from an artist on or from the periphery, Beda was engaged in the exciting developments concurrent throughout Europe.

In the summer of 1892, whilst many of her compatriots took the opportunity to travel home, Beda remained in France with Anna Bremer and Sigrid Granfelt, travelling to Grez sur Loing.

The artist's colony which had become a home away from home for many Nordic artists over the previous decade. Spending the summer there, Beda painted every day, focussing diligently on her work, such as the *Girl sitting* (Fig.4) now at the Ateneum. From 1892 onwards, according to O'Neil, her works had two distinct themes, simultaneously producing realist and symbolist paintings.<sup>7</sup> This coincides with the writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who surmised in 1893, that: "Today, two things seem to be modern: the analysis of life and the flight from life...Reflection or fantasy, mirror image or dream image".<sup>8</sup> In this way Beda's own artistic production can be seen to reflect the dichotomy of this newly emerging modern world.

Inspired by her time in the crucible of modernism and motivated to produce important work in her homeland, Beda returned to Finland full of confidence. Evident in her *Self-portrait* from 1892 (Fig.1), showing a young bright artist with a self-assured gaze, painted on her return for the Finnish Art Society.



Fig.5 Photograph of Beda Stjernschantz in her studio, circa 1893. Image: KKA/CAB

During the early spring of 1893, Anna Bremer and Beda stayed with Ellen Thesleff in Murole near Lake Ruovesi. According to letters, brought to light by O'Neill's research, we see that the trio quickly sunk back into their familiar roles from their time living together in Paris, with Beda and Anna preparing the meals, as Thesleff was inept in this department.<sup>9</sup> A photo taken later in the summer 1893 (Fig.6) shows Ellen Thesleff with Sigrid Granfelt at her house, both with their hair cut short and wearing ties. Needless to say that these were driven independent women who wanted to produce art at the highest level and push boundaries. Writing to her sister Gerda, Beda gives us a full description of these cold early spring days painting:



Fig.6 Photograph of Ellen Thesleff, in the foreground, and Sigrid Granfelt behind, at Thesleff's home in Murole, near Lake Ruovesi.

*"I am delighted to be in the country! I paint diligently, although it is sometimes a little eerie to stand outside for several hours, especially when there is a storm like it has been in recent days. You put everything aside to hunt for things lying around from time to time ... Up to your knees in snow. I can only get to a couple of my motifs on skis. Then it is a free spectacle to see me with an easel, box, and canvas on my back, a large painter's parasol in my hand, skiing away without poles up and down the slopes. I have never skied with a parasol up before!"<sup>10</sup>*

A testament to her commitment to painting her own landscape and the reality of what that meant during the Finnish winter/spring, it also reveals Beda's motivation to produce only "great" art. An ambition that would sometimes work against her, when her works did not reach her own high standards. Writing to her sister again in July 1893, she laments:

*"If I never get to publish my reflections, what will become of me? I cannot start and exhibit meaningless landscapes and portraits forever. I despise myself for such work. It contains nothing of my soul and what value does it have. One might as well exhibit glossy pictures"<sup>11</sup>*





Fig.7 Ellen Thesleff, *Aspens*, 1891, oil on canvas, Helsinki, Ateneum Art Museum

It was during this time, in the early Spring of 1893, with her closest friends, that Beda most likely produced our *Winter landscape* presented here. Depicting a seasonal transition across one of the surrounding lakes near Ruovesi, with snow still on the ground, and the first larch buds clinging to the trees. This peaceful depiction of a Finnish landscape is imbued with a deep sense of mysticism. One of the early depictions of Ruovesi, it would become a place of pilgrimage for Finnish artists from the mid 1890s onwards, with Gallen-Kallela building his studio there in 1895.

Although Beda's works are not traditionally perceived as Symbolist before 1895, this early landscape illustrates the strong influence Paris had on her work and her pioneering vision, with the emergence of these flat colour planes, bold metamorphic shapes and philosophical undertones, reminiscent of Halonen or Blomstedt's landscapes produced nearly a decade later. The influence of 'Japansim' is also clear

through the high horizon line, evident in her other known landscape from this trip, *April study* (Fig.8), in this sketch the narrow form echoes the elongated format of Japanese woodblock prints.

Ellen Thesleff's composition *Aspens*, painted in 1891, prior to their travel to Paris is an interesting comparison with *Winter landscape* and *April Study* of 1893. The similarities in the subtlety of the colour palate and the smokey depiction of the trees is evident, however Stjernschantz, painting two years later, goes further, pushing boundaries within her landscapes. The painterly background with the deft subtle shades of white, the burnt umber of the trees, and the light blue of the icy river give an ethereal quality, starkly contrasted with a purposeful breaking of the foreground through the man-made structure of the larch fence – a symbol of Finnishness. The lyricism of which is almost metamorphic, echoing the rolling hills in the distance. *Taarne's* publication of 1893 asserted that "Landscape is a state of mind", a mantra that Beda clearly follows in *Winter landscape*.<sup>12</sup>

With photography and film gaining prominence in the field of representation, so landscape artists directed their efforts towards the great questions of existence and sought to direct the viewer to a new perspective. As von Bonsdorff puts it, “the ordinary landscape turned into something mysterious or frightening ... the soft twilight wraps the landscape in its silent mantle and creates a mystic atmosphere”.<sup>13</sup>

O’Niell suggests that Beda often struggled with the disparity between her high ambitions, her frustration when not achieving these aims, and her subsequent faltering of self-esteem and belief.<sup>14</sup> Today the landscape paintings of Beda are hardly known, remembered more as a portrait painter, however the first retrospective of her work, held in 2014, made clear her aspiration to be seen as a landscape painter by the number of these works that were brought together. In fact, this was the profession she would list at Ellis Island, during her processing into the United States in 1904.



Fig.8 Beda Stjernschantz, *April study*, signed and dated 1893, private collection

Von Bonsdorff asserts that these paired-back landscapes are unique compared to the subjects of her Finnish contemporaries, “one sees how the depicted motif almost completely loses its meaning and the landscape becomes anonymous – and enigmatic”.<sup>15</sup> In this way, according to von Bonsdorff, she joins the ranks of Carrière, Wojciech Weiss and especially the swede, Ivan Agueli.



Fig.9 Beda Stjernschantz, *Lasinpuhaltajat (Glass blowers)*, 1894, oil on canvas, Kokkola, K.H. Renlund Museum

During the subsequent winter, of 1893-4, Beda Stjernschantz was forced to remain in Finland due to her finances, unable to travel with friends returning to Paris. Sakari suggests that it is from this moment that Stjernschantz began to feel the anguish and isolation of her chosen path as an artist.<sup>16</sup> Not able to pursue her artistic dreams to their fullest extent due to her financial situation and lack of market success. However, Stjernschantz did not concede, turning her attention instead to the subjects around her and it was during these years, 1894-1896, that Beda produced some of her most iconic work, *Lasinpuhaltajat (Glass blowers)* (Fig.9), from 1894, which would be presented at the World Fair in Paris in 1900, now in the K.H. Renlund Museum collection. And the mesmerising portrait of *Irma* (Fig.10) dated to 1895-1896, now in the Ateneum.



Fig.10 Beda Stjernschantz, *Irma*, 1895-1896, oil on canvas, Helsinki, Ateneum Art Museum



Fig.11 Beda Stjernschantz, *Överallt en röst oss bjuder* (*Everywhere a voice comforts us*), 1895, oil on canvas, Helsinki, Ateneum Art Museum

Always resourceful, Beda went out of her way to find local alternatives to the inspirational villages and towns that captivated many symbolist artists travelling in Brittany – which she would read about in letters from friends and in various art journals. Setting off in the summer of 1895, with Anna Bremer, to the island of Ormsö, off Estonia’s west coast. Though the scenery proved underwhelming, the island’s inhabitants, dressed in traditional folk costume, offered rich ethnographic inspiration. It was here that Stjernschantz conceived *Överallt en röst oss bjuder* (*Everywhere a voice comforts us*), painted the same year (Fig.11). The work depicts children beneath a chestnut tree, one girl lost in music as she plays the zither, with a line of windmills in the background. The painting’s stillness, muted greenish-grey palette, and simplified forms lend it a dreamlike quality — brought to life by the strong colours of the folk costumes. Erkki Anttonen suggests the title refers directly to the idea of Synaesthesia, which emphasises the connection between sounds, colours and art, perhaps alluding to the poem of Eliphaz Lévi and the symbolist concept of correspondence: “In nature, nothing is silent for him who follows its laws: the stars have their writing, the flowers of the wild have a voice”.<sup>17</sup> Presented in Helsinki, the work received a largely positive reaction from critics, although it was singled out for being too rigid.



Fig.12 Beda Stjernschantz, *Pastoral*, 1897, oil on canvas, K. H. Renlund art collection

During 1897–98, supported by a travel scholarship, Stjernschantz travelled to Italy, where she painted *Pastoral* (1897), a work inspired by Viktor Rydberg's philosophical essays (Fig.12). The painting, her most ambitious Symbolist statement, depicts Pan playing the flute, Echo gathering flowers, and, in the background, a Narcissus figure, crowned like Antinous, staring into the water. Merging classical mythology with the spirit of Italy's quattrocento, the canvas evokes an eternal spring, a lost golden age of youth, beauty, and harmony. Thanks to further funding, Beda Stjernschantz was able to travel to Paris once again in 1900, presenting *Glass blowers* in the Petit Palais at the Exposition Universelle.



Fig.13 Beda Stjernschantz, *Elevated Railway*, 1904-1905, private collection

In 1903, at the age of 35 years old, having sold twenty paintings at auction, and packed her easel and paints, she sailed out of the Turku harbour, along with many other Scandinavian immigrants, to New York. Beda's time in New York has long been an enigma, residing there from 1903-1905, it has been traditionally described as artistically unproductive. Having told her family and friends she was giving up painting to work as a governess, Beda went to great pains of bringing her own artist materials and listing to customs officers her official occupation as a 'landscape painter'.<sup>18</sup> In reality she was consistently painting whilst aboard and hoped to exhibit a number of works at the artist's guild in New York in 1904, such as *Elevated railway* (Fig.13), although this was ultimately unsuccessful, finding the New York market as unforgiving as Helsinki.<sup>19</sup> O'Niell suggests that Beda, as a most enterprising character, used to living on a shoestring, perhaps thought a secure job as a governess may well have been the only way to pay for a study trip to this bustling metropolis and to find further inspiration for her work.<sup>20</sup> Writing home to her mother Alma in 1904 from New York, she states:

"I love painting so much! Every time I look at my colours or pictures, I long to just paint, but then when I have to paint, all the energy disappears and I feel so alone".<sup>21</sup>

This rising sense of disillusionment and deepening sorrow gradually took hold and returned with her to Finland. In 1910, at just forty-three years old, Beda Stjernschantz sadly took her own life — bringing a unique artistic voice to a premature end.

*Winter Landscape* stands as a rare and poignant example of Beda Stjernschantz's early Symbolist landscapes. Painted shortly after her formative time in Paris, it illustrates a subtle yet profound shift away from academic realism toward a more introspective and metaphysical vision. Its quiet mysticism and simplified forms anticipate themes later explored by her male Finnish contemporaries, such as Gallen-Kallela, Hugo Simberg and Pekka Halonen, yet with a uniquely personal voice. As an early and powerful embodiment of Symbolist ideals by a pioneering woman artist, *Winter Landscape* affirms Stjernschantz's rightful place in the canon of modern Finnish art.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana, Beda Stjernschantz: bakom gallergrinden*, ed. by Itha O’Niell, exhibition catalogue, Amos Anderson Museum, Helsinki 2014.
- <sup>2</sup> Salme Sarjas-Korte, *Sieben Finnische Malerinnen*, exhibition catalogue, Statens Museum for Kunst and Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1983, p.61
- <sup>3</sup> Marku Valkonen, *The Golden Age: Finnish Art 1850-1907*, p.57
- <sup>4</sup> Sarajas-Korte 1966, p.143
- <sup>5</sup> Marja Sakari, *Biografiskt lexikon för Finland 2. Ryska tiden*, 2009 (<https://www.blf.fi/artikel.php?id=4129>)
- <sup>6</sup> See *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana*, ed. by Itha O’Niell, exhibition catalogue, Amos Anderson Museum, Helsinki 2014.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28
- <sup>8</sup> See translation of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s writing in 1893 in *Modernism*, Malcolm Bradbury and James Macfarlane, New York 1991, p.71
- <sup>9</sup> Itha O’Niell, in *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana*, p.33
- <sup>10</sup> Letter from Beda to her sister Gerda, dated 11.4.1893, referenced by O’Niell in *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana*, p.33
- <sup>11</sup> Letter from Beda, dated 19.7.1893 referenced by O’Niell in *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana*, p.33
- <sup>12</sup> Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, ‘Nocturne – Beda Stjernschantz landscape’, in *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana*, p.178
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.163
- <sup>14</sup> Itha O’Niell, *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana*, p.33
- <sup>15</sup> Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, ‘Nocturne – Beda Stjernschantz landscape’, p.178
- <sup>16</sup> Marja Sakari, *Biografiskt lexikon för Finland 2. Ryska tiden*, 2009 (<https://www.blf.fi/artikel.php?id=4129>)
- <sup>17</sup> Erkki Anttonen, ‘Finnish Artists and their connections to theosophy before the second world war’, in *Spiritual Treasures: Esotericism in the Finnish art world 1890-1950*, ed. by Nina Kokkinen and Lotta Nylund, Helsinki 2020, see translation and extract of Eliphas Lévi’s poem ‘Les Correspondances’, originally published in 1845, p.56
- <sup>18</sup> Itha O’Niell, *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana*, p.66
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66
- <sup>21</sup> Beda to Alma Stjernshantzille 4.02.1904, referenced in Itha O’Niell, *Beda Stjernschantz 1867-1910: ristikkoportin takana*, p.72