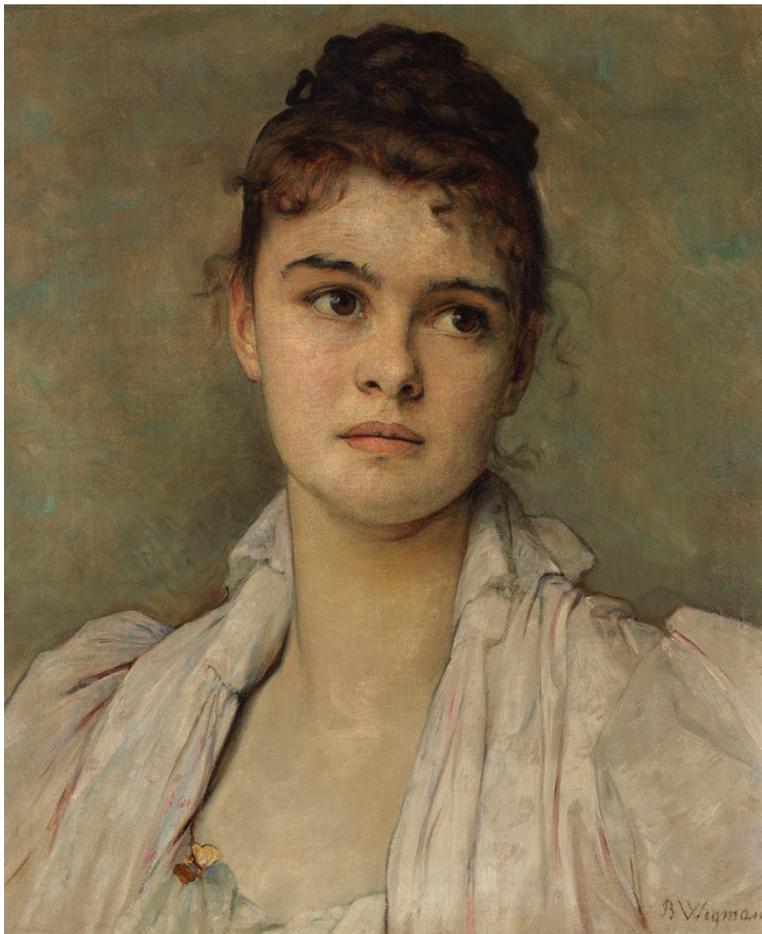


## BERTHA WEGMANN

Soglio, Switzerland, 1846 – 1926, Copenhagen, Denmark

### *Portrait of a young woman*



Circa 1895-1900

Oil on canvas, 57 x 45 cm

Signed lower right, 'B Wegmann'

#### **Provenance:**

Private collection, Denmark

Private collection, UK

## Bertha Wegmann |

### *Portrait of a young woman*

Although born in Switzerland, Bertha Wegmann moved to Denmark with her family when she was just five years old. She received no formal training, but by the age of nineteen was taking lessons from artists in Copenhagen, including Frederik Christian Lund (1826-1901). In 1868, she moved to Munich to complete her professional studies and would then continue onto Paris. Her initial artistic career was aided by the support of affluent Jewish families in Copenhagen, the Melchior and Trier, who were successful business owners and were acquainted with the artist's father.<sup>1</sup> It was her portrait of her own sister however that would see her breakthrough as a renowned professional painter, both at home and abroad, transforming her into the “portraitist of the bourgeoisie”.



Fig.1 Bertha Wegmann, *Portrait of Jeanna Bauck*, 1881, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

Her first success in the Paris Salon came in 1881, exhibiting under the Francophile name of ‘Berthe Vegman’ and receiving an honourable mention for her portrait of Jeanna Bauck (fig.1). In the summers of 1881 and 1882, Bauck and Wegmann lived together at the *Hôtel de la Marie* in Écouen in the Île-de-France, a short train ride from Paris. It was during their time in Écouen that Wegmann started to use a greater intensity of light in her work as well as a faster and more fluid brushstroke, undoubtedly influenced by impressionist works she had experienced in Paris.



Fig.2 Bertha Wegmann, *Madam Anna Seekamp*, portrait of the artist's sister, 1882, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst

In the Salon of 1882, Wegmann won a third-class medal for the portrait of her sister Anna Seekamp (fig.2), in a year when no first-class medals were given. She would remain the only Nordic woman artist to receive a medal from the Salon jury for the entire 1880s. It was in the Salon catalogue of this year that she was also listed as a noted art teacher, helping to instruct other Nordic women artists in France during this period. Carina Rech suggests that Wegmann's influence, shows that Nordic women artists had a greater impact on their sister compatriot painters' than previously thought, and were much more integral in their professional developments than the 'sporadic supervision by the teachers at the private academies in Paris'.<sup>2</sup>

This praise from the Salon and its critics was the dream of many artists and represented a true breakthrough for Wegmann onto the international art scene; however, as Vibeke Röstrop has said, it became a double-edged reception. Wegmann was seen as innovative and exotic by the French, whilst being condemned as "Frenchified" by her Danish compatriots at home.<sup>3</sup> This being said, in 1883 Wegmann received the *Thorvaldesenke Udstillingsmedalje* at the annual Charlottenborg exhibition in Copenhagen, the highest honour awarded by their committee. By 1887 Wegmann was elected as a member of the Charlottenborg exhibition committee and became a member of its jury. As the first female artist to be elected to the Danish Royal Academy, she would use this powerful position at the heart of the establishment to create an art school for women within the Academy.

Wegmann would remain unmarried for her entire life, choosing instead to form close companionships with women. The first and perhaps most important was with Jeanna Bauck (fig.3), whom she met whilst completing her studies in Munich. They would go on to live and study together, travelling in Italy and then settling in France in the early 1880s. Wegmann and Bauck would remain close throughout their lives. The nature of this relationship has been much discussed in recent years, with some suggesting that it was both an emotional companionship, as well as sexual relationship, although there is no definitive evidence for this. It may have been more pragmatic, the social pressures on professional women artists after they married were restrictive, with practical and legal implications on woman's ability to exercise an occupation. Carina Rech suggests that this was one of the main motivations for Bauck and Wegman, to form a long partnership that negated the need to marry or be dependent on a man.<sup>4</sup> Emilie Boe Bierlich states that international exchanges with friends and colleagues, were essential for Wegmann in order for her to find work, this demanded freedom to travel, and it was this freedom that gave her the ability to escape societal expectations and to 'paint in different styles, speak different languages and live with the partners of her choosing'.<sup>5</sup>



Fig.3 Bertha Wegmann, *Portrait of Jeanna Bauck*, 1887, Copenhagen, Hirschsprung collection

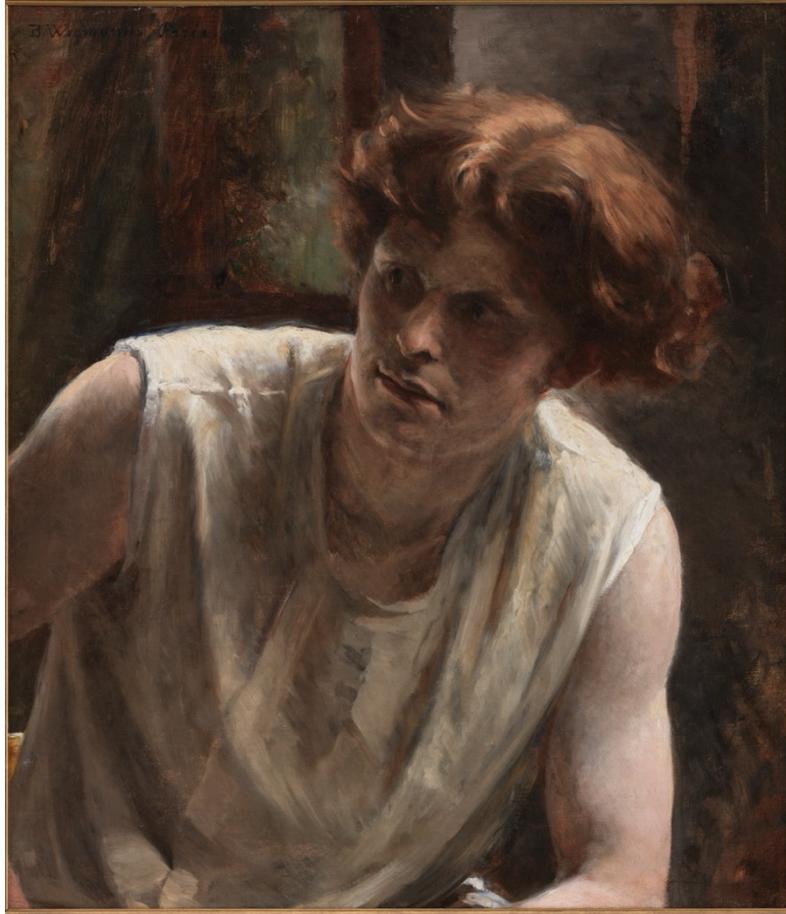


Fig.4 Bertha Wegmann, *Study of a female model*, 1879-1882, Copenhagen, SMK

The *Portrait of a young woman* presented here is undated, however Wegmann clearly incorporates to different painting styles that were concurrent in Europe at the time. Wegmann was influenced by the art she experienced during her travels, even visiting the studio of Manet during her time in France, although stating in a later interview that she did not care much for his art:

“I have always stuck to what was my own; there is in me a certain opposition to the views of others. But I learnt a great deal from the new assesment of colour”.<sup>6</sup>

In our portrait one sees the clear influence of Realism and Naturalism in the finely finished face of the sitter. This can also be seen as a compositional ploy, drawing the viewer’s eye into the work, however it is also evident in the handling of the hair, where single strands are visible.

This is juxtaposed by the free and impressionistic attention to light in the swift touches of blue, pink and white that dance within the sitters’ dress, as well as the free handling of the background. Recalling Wegmann’s *Study of a female model*, now in the SMK collection (fig.4), and dated to between 1879–1882, most likely painted shortly after her arrival in Paris. One can see the same painterly expression of light across the white blouse, using touches of pure colour to create form.



Fig.5 Bertha Wegmann, *Portrait of a lady*, formerly with Christie's London



Fig.6 Bertha Wegmann, *Portrait of a woman*, 1918, private collection

Perhaps the marked difference between this early painting and ours presented here is the presence of drawn line, which is more apparent in her mature works from 1900 onwards, such as *Portrait of a Woman* from 1918 (fig.6) and *Portrait of a lady*, recently sold at Christie's (fig.5). However both these demonstrate the expressive use of impasto and the thick surface evident in her later works, something that is not present in our painting, where the surface of the hair and face is almost polished.



Fig.7 Bertha Wegmann, *A woman reading at the tea table* (Hanna Lucia Bauck), 1899, private collection

In her recent article on Wegmann, Annette Rosenvold Hvidt compares her work to that of the virtuosa of impressionism Berthe Morisot, illustrating that Wegmann cannot be called an impressionist as her ‘so-called impressionist qualities are coupled with a high degree of Naturalism and Realism’, something we can see clearly in our portrait.<sup>7</sup> Rosenvold Hvidt points out that Wegmann does not just amalgamate different styles but formulates ‘her own independent mode of expression’, in this way she ‘takes things to the limit, making use of the strong points of each manner of painting’.<sup>8</sup> This idiosyncratic blend of styles is very apparent in our painting and brings forth comparisons with works around the mid to late 1890s, such as *Portrait of Otto Bache*, painted in 1895, now at Frederiksborg Castle, which received the silver medal at the Exposition universelle in Paris in 1900, and *Woman reading at the tea table* (Hanna Lucia Bauck), from 1899 (fig.7). In both works you can see the same naturalistic tendencies and precise line that pervade in the handling of our sitter, a delicate balance, unique to Wegmann, between realism and a more painterly expression.



The dating of our work must therefore be after her time in Munich and Paris, with the influences of these sojourns clearly seen, yet prior to her later impasto filled works of the early 1900s. When she would more regularly sign her work without the double 'VV' used here, to a more calligraphic 'W'. The fashion of the sitter's dress, with the high collar and puffed shoulders, would also suggest a date around the mid to late 1890s. Prior to the more Edwardian and active lifestyle dresses that were popularised in Europe by the first decade of the 1900s. This would place the work at the height of demand for Wegmann's portraits both in Copenhagen and internationally where she would continue to exhibit.

The identity of the sitter remains a mystery, for now, although we know that Wegmann preferred to paint portraits of women she knew and in particular those she had admiration for. Speaking in the 1920s, she explained that women make far more interesting subjects for portraits: "The lady perhaps is the harder one. The ladies are the most complex, and they usually come to me when the external appearance they keep dreaming about is fading. And I am pained by this, because I understand them and so I care for them [...]. [We reveal our inner self through] our love – our vanity. Once I have found my way into these qualities, I will also have captured the outward appearance of the human being before me. Portrait painting is psychology. That is why it gets on one's nerves".<sup>9</sup> Here Wegmann portrays a young woman, strikingly beautiful, yet the drawing of the mouth, subtly tensed, with a side glance beyond the viewer, suggests an insecurity and provides an interesting psychological dimension to the portrait. Given the age of the sitter, and the many young women artists that Wegmann mentored over the years, it is plausible that our sitter may be a young aspiring artist in her own right, stepping in to model for the day. However, no artist has yet been proposed – the butterfly brooch at her breast, a tantalising clue to an unsolved identity.

Despite exhibiting to great acclaim internationally in her lifetime, including in Munich, Paris, Basel, Berlin, Minneapolis, Chicago, Stockholm and Copenhagen, as one of the foremost portrait painters of her day in Denmark, Bertha Wegmann was neglected by art historians until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like many women artists she has remained relatively unknown to a wider audience until the recent revision of her work, with a major monographic show at The Hirschsprung Collection in Copenhagen in 2022. This was pre-empted by the in-depth analysis of Wegmann's lifelong correspondence by Carina Rech, which has provided an important insight into this fascinating artist. Through this research and the discovery of refined works such as this, her oeuvre is now rightfully receiving the acclaim it deserves.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carina Rech, *Becoming Artists: Self-portraits, Friendship Images and Studio Scenes by Nordic Women Painters in the 1880s*, diss. Stockholm 2021, Makadam, Sweden, 2021, p.18

<sup>2</sup> Carina Rech, *Becoming Artists*, p.122

<sup>3</sup> See Vibeke Røstorp, “Third Culture Artists: Scandinavians in Paris,” in *Imagined Cosmopolis: Internationalism and Cultural Exchange, 1870s–1920s*, ed. Charlotte Ashby, Grace Brockington, Daniel Laqua and Sarah Victoria Turner, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019, pp.165–184.

<sup>4</sup> Carina Rech, *Becoming Artists*, p.21

<sup>5</sup> Emilie Boe Bierlich, ‘Art, Gender and Identity’, in *Bertha Wegmann*, exh. catalogue, ed. by Gertrud Oelsner and Lene Bøgh Rønberg, Strandberg, 2022, p.63

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Bertha Wegmann, ‘Malerinden Frøken Bertha Wegmann fylder 70 Aar’, *Kvinden og Hjemmet*, 22.11.1917.

<sup>7</sup> Annette Rosenvold Hvidt, “‘I have always stuck to what was my own’: Concerning Bertha Wegmann’s impressionism” in *Bertha Wegmann* ed. by Gertrud Oelsner and Lene Bøgh Rønberg, Strandberg, 2022, p.168

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.179

<sup>9</sup> Christian Houmark, “Bertha Wegmann om Modeller og Portrætter,” *Berlingske Tidende* (B.T.), 10 February 1923, Statsbiblioteket, in Emilie Boe Bierlich, “Art, Gender and Identity: Reassessing Bertha Wegmann’s place in art history”, in *Bertha Wegmann* ed. by Gertrud Oelsner and Lene Bøgh Rønberg, Strandberg, 2022, p.58.