



ERNST SÖDERBERG
Hamburg, 1889 – 1967, Katrineholm

Portrait of Carl Wilhelmson

Oil on canvas,
Signed and dated, 1917,

Provenance:
Sweden, private collection

ERNST SÖDERBERG | PORTRAIT OF CARL WILHELMSON

Ernst Söderberg was the son of a cabinet maker, Johan Fredrik Söderberg and his wife Elisabetha Gesellgen, born in Hamburg. He trained as a decorative painter in Germany from the age of fifteen, studying at the Kunstgewerbeschule (vocational arts school) in Hamburg from 1908 to 1909. Finding work with Wilhelm Köppen, a German decorative artist specializing in art nouveau style, on various monumental projects between 1912 and 1914. With the outbreak of World War I, Söderberg returned to Sweden, where he sought to gain further experience and instruction studying at Carl Wilhelmson's private art school in Stockholm.

This portrait, painted in the summer of 1917, was the year in which Soderberg moved from Carl Wilhelmson's private painting school in Stockholm to the Valand School of Art in Gothenburg. A move that was most likely instigated by his teacher, who had been director of the Valand School from 1896 to 1910. With limited ability to travel due to the ongoing war in Europe, it would have been an opportunity to engage with a different artistic milieu in Gothenburg that were in many ways pushing the boundaries of modern art in Sweden, including the likes of Maj Bring, Mollie Faustman and Henrik Sørensen, and the help of important patrons like Charlotte Mannheimer.

Carl Wilhelmson was well regarded by his students as an innovator, in tune with the developments in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, having studied under Maurice Denis and Paul Sérusier at the Académie Julien in the 1890s. The idiosyncratic moustache and piercing blue eyes of the sitter in our painting, coupled with the distinctive physiognomy, makes a marked likeness to Wilhelmson himself. Confirmed further when we consider other portrayals of the artist, such as his own *Self portrait* from 1908 (Fig.1), portraits by his other students, not to mention photographs that survive (Fig.2). Even his *Self Portrait with palette*, now residing in the Galleria degli Uffizi, where, older and clean shaven, his distinctive blue eyes still hypnotise the viewer (Fig.3).

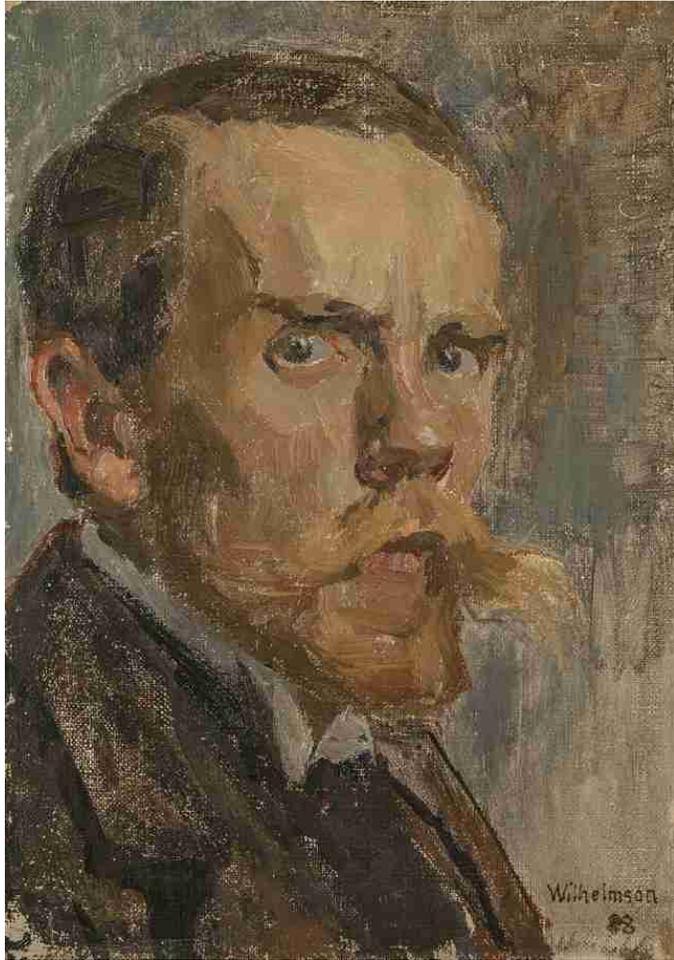


Fig.1 Carl Wilhelmson, *Self portrait*, 1888, Göteborg, Gothenburg Museum of Art

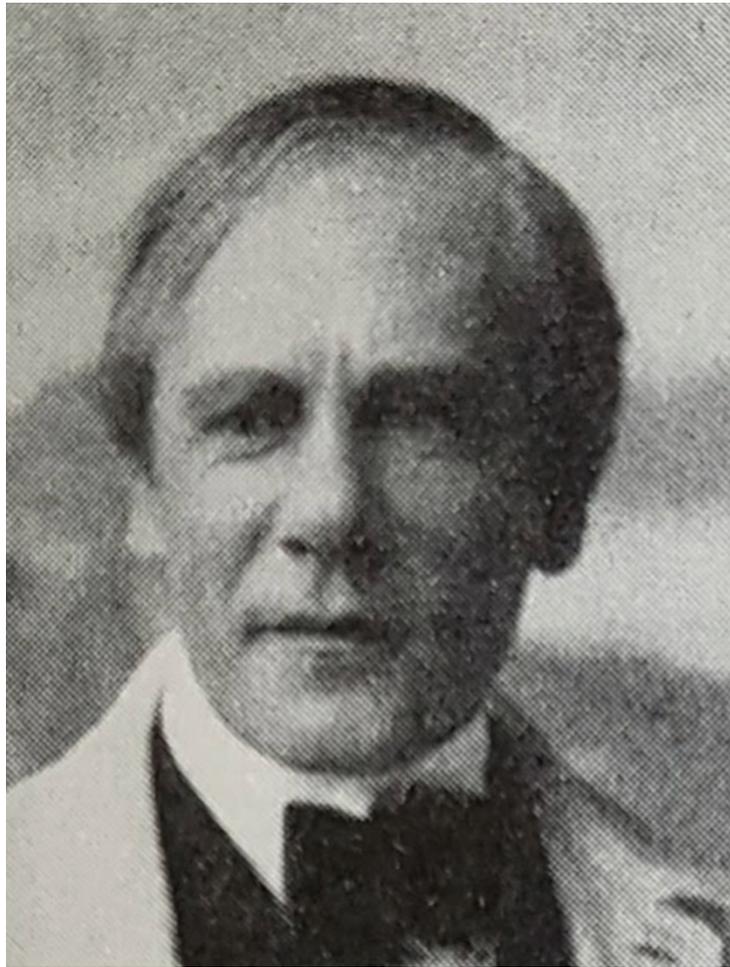


Fig.2 Photograph of Carl Wilhelmson, Svenska konstnärer, detail, 1928

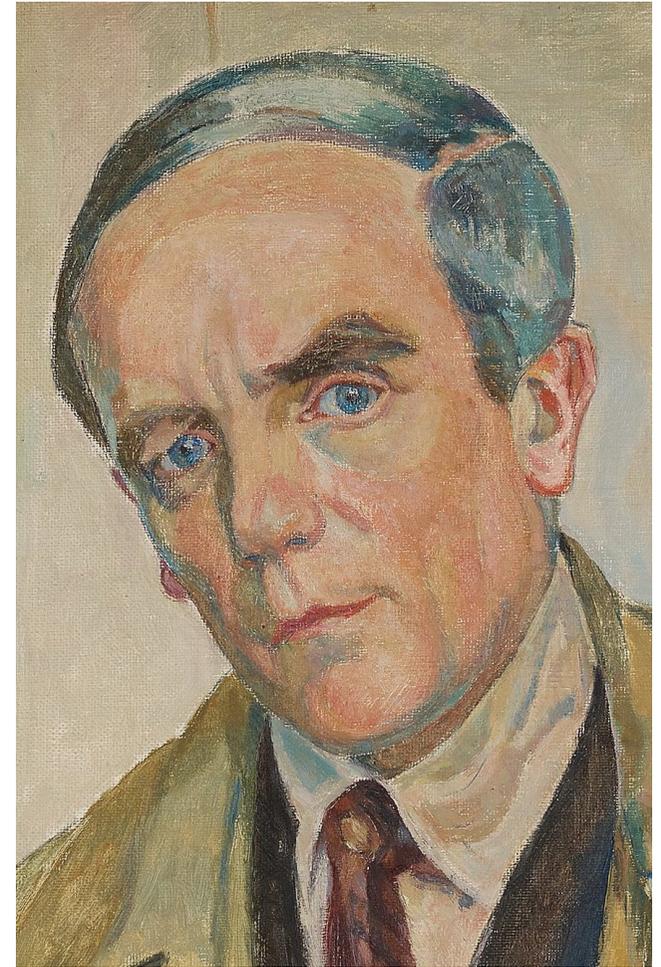
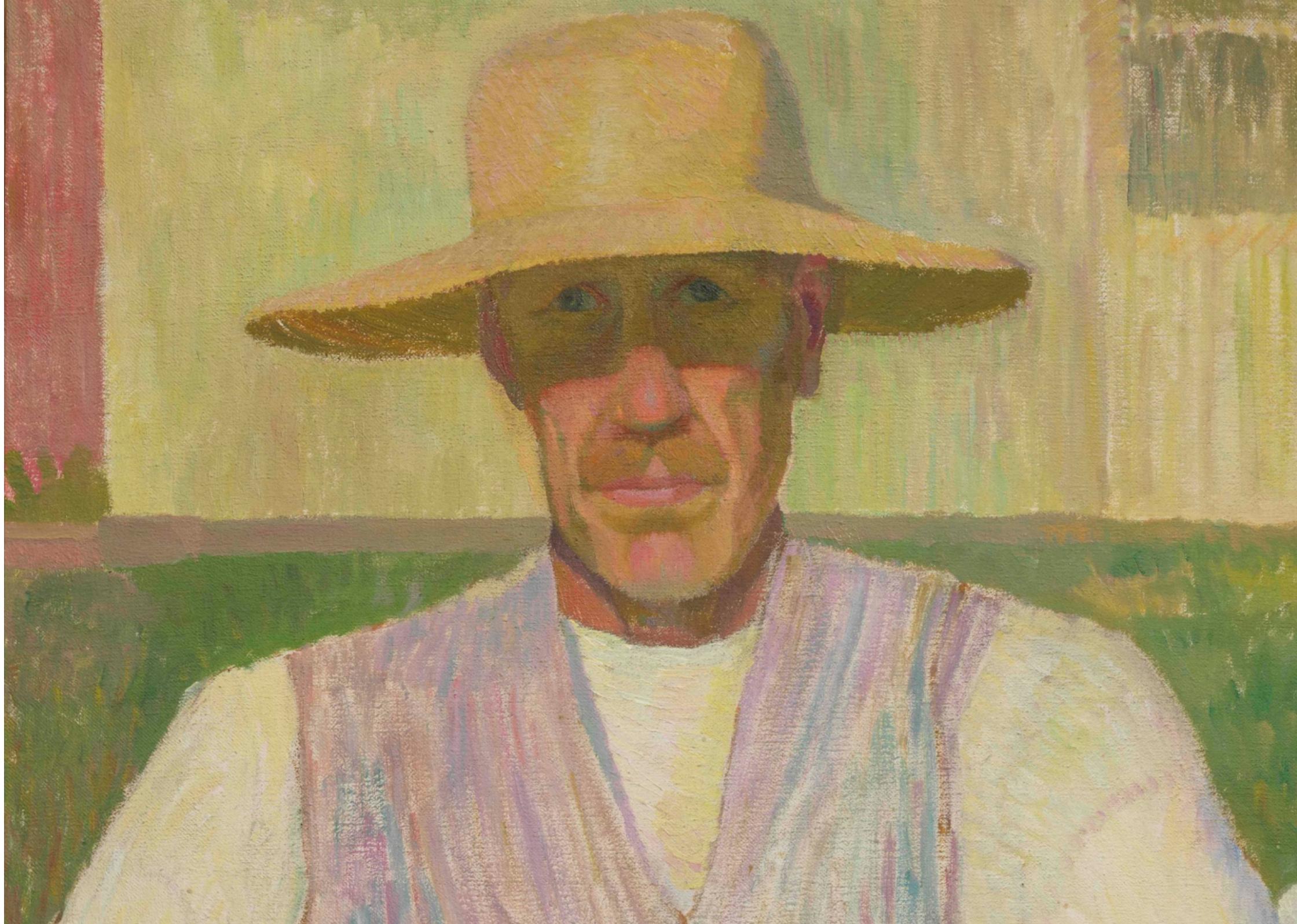


Fig.3 Mollie Faustman, *Carl Wilhelmson's Self Portrait from 1927* (copy after Wilhelmson's original in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), private collection





Most likely painted during a summer visit by Wilhelmson. The portrait presented here is an ode to his mentor, in part utilising the pointillist style that Wilhelmson became renowned for, adapted by Soderberg and made his own, playing with the viewer's perception of the picture plane throughout. The face, portrayed with short dashes of pure colour in different directions following the contours of the features, is reminiscent of Vincent Van Gogh's *Self Portrait with grey felt hat* (Fig.5), an artist greatly revered by Wilhelmson's students. Soderberg guides the viewer's eyes from the sculptural form of the face down through long loose pointillist stripes of violet and cerulean to the lyrical folds of Wilhelmson's waistcoat and shirt, reducing the colour and increasing the frugality of the brushstrokes as the viewer's eye drifts down. This use of stripes as a compositional ploy is seen in Wilhelmson's own work, perhaps most famously in *Church goes in a Boat*, from 1909 (Fig.5).

Fig4 Vincent Van Gogh, *Self portrait with grey felt hat*, 1887, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum

Soderberg goes further, with a stronger disregard for drawn line, allowing pure colour to create form. These colour forms are accentuated further in the background, where blocks of vibrant pink and green create the cabin and grass behind. The dramatic shade line of the straw hat almost vibrates with a pinkish hue of the bright light reflecting off Wilhelmson's cheeks.

This portrait symbolises the close relationship and understanding between the young Soderberg and his much-admired teacher, illustrating the exchange of ideas that was facilitating the development of modernism in Sweden. Soderberg's work today is not well known outside of Sweden but is represented in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.



Fig.5 Carl Wilhelmson, *Church goes in a boat*, 1909, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum