

MARGRETHE JENSEN

Oslo, 1876 – 5th April 1926

Pæoner (Peonies)



c.1918

Oil on canvas, signed lower right, 76 x 93 cm

Provenance:

Norway, private collection

Exhibitions:

“Vaarutstillingen”, Kunstnerforbund (Artists’ Association), Kristiana/Oslo, Spring 1918

“Statens Kunstutstilling 1919”, Kristiana/Oslo, autumn 1919, no. 56

Literature:

Reproduced in *Ukens Revy*, 14th June 1918, Kunstnerforbund exhibition review;

Mentioned in review of the Kunstnerforbund Spring exhibition by Jappe Nilssen, in *Dagbl*,

13.5.1918; *Katalog over Statens 36. Aarlige Kunstutstilling 1919*, exhibition catalogue, autumn 1919, p.11, no. 56

Margrethe Jensen |

Pæoner (Peonies)

When Margrethe Jensen passed away suddenly from heart failure in 1926 her life was briefly summarised in *Tidens Tegn*, an Oslo Newspaper, stating that she would be sorely missed, especially in the annual Autumn exhibition (Høstutstillingen) at the National Museum in Oslo, where she had exhibited for over 12 years.¹ Like many artists of her generation in Norway, Jensen travelled to Paris as a young artist, however the details of this trip are quite vague. We know that she left Harriet Backer's painting school around 1900 and this is probably when she travelled to France. Harriet Backer was a hugely influential figure on the younger generation, with her students calling her "our Cezanne".² It was at Backer's school that Jensen studied, alongside the likes of Nikolai Astrup, Harald Sohlberg, and many others.

In contrast to her short obituary, where her life is summed up in less than twenty lines as a soft natured woman who painted flowers, we know that Jensen was in fact very well admired by important Norwegian art critics of the time and continually mentioned in exhibition reviews. One of these was Jappe Nilssen, perhaps the most influential Norwegian art critic and writer of his generation. Nilssen, who was a close friend of Edvard Munch and Oda Krogh, was considered one of the leading 'Kristiania Bohemians'. Along with Jens Thiis, director of the National gallery, he was also one of the main organisers, of Munch's major exhibition in Oslo in 1909, which included one hundred of his paintings. It was this exhibition, held while Munch was in a clinic in Copenhagen following a psychotic episode, which set the artist on the path of national and international success. The fact that Jensen's work was continually highlighted by one of the leading standard bearers of modern Nordic art, Jappe Nilssen, in his exhibition reviews from 1913 through to 1920, should not be understated. These reviews clearly demonstrate that Jensen was highly regarded within artistic circles in Oslo at this time.

Despite this praise during her lifetime, Jensen today is not represented in any major museum; in fact her work has almost disappeared entirely. Her known oeuvre, as her obituary states, seems to consist mainly of flower paintings, however she uses this subject matter, traditionally orientated towards female artists, and reinvigorates it with bold colour, light and a strong use of impasto. Her entry for both the Artists' Association Spring exhibition (Kunstforeningen Vaarutstilling) of 1918

and the annual autumn exhibition of 1919 at the National museum, was *Pæoner*, which is the work presented here. Jensen depicts peonies growing in the foreground of a landscape, with a vista between two pine trees of the Oslofjord beyond. The thick impasto of the petals is juxtaposed against areas of bare canvas in the trees and background behind, using pure colour to create compelling depth. The work suggests an in-depth knowledge of colour theory: the bright whites of the peonies, with a touch of pink at their hearts, are thrust forward, towards the eye of the viewer, here contrasted against the dark greens and flashes of pure ultramarine within the flower's leaves. It was this bold approach, to an everyday subject matter, that captivated the critics when the painting was first exhibited in 1918, and saw it garner high praise in the press.

The young poet and artist Arnulf Øverland, writing for the *Verdens Gang*, about the Artists' Association's Spring exhibition of 1918, signals *Pæoner* out as the "best of the exhibition", with the "unusual quality of being finely and richly worked without having lost any of the freshness of the whole".³ This is seconded by Norup Eliassen, for *Ukens Revy*, where *Pæoner* is reproduced in black and white and praised as the exhibition's best work, "at the same time delicately and surely done".⁴ Nilssen who wrote in 1917 about the powerful nature of Jensen's works, again singles out *peonies* as the Spring exhibition's best picture, praising Jensen's use of colour.⁵

There is little doubt that Jensen was influenced by French art, both during her travels to Paris in the early 1900s and from the exhibitions of French artists held in Oslo. In particular the French exhibition of 1916, during World War I, organised by Walther Halvorsen, the influential Norwegian art dealer. This exhibition was pivotal for the dissemination of the latest trends from Paris into Norway, including Fauvism and Cubism, with works by Van Gogh, Matisse and Cezanne. The influence of all three can be felt here in this painting in different ways, but particularly where there is a clear lack of underdrawing, with form created directly on the canvas with bold blocks of pure colour purposefully placed.

It is not just the avant-garde works from Paris that can be seen to have influenced Jensen. There is no doubt that Edvard Munch's lyrical line and use of colour were closely observed by the younger artist. It is interesting to note that Munch did a series of peonies in 1926, seven years after our painting and in the same year that Jensen died.



Fig.1 Edvard Munch, *Woman with Peonies*, 1926, Munch Museum, Oslo

In his works from this series, you can see various links to Jensen's painting, including the trees in the background framing the scene, in *Four women in the Garden* (Munch Museum), the flattened perspective focussed on the peonies in the foreground in *Woman with Peonies* (Munch Museum) (Fig.21), as well as the use of a strong ultra-marine blue to highlight the leaves and other areas in *Woman with Peonies* now in the Fram Trust. The obvious connections between Munch and Jensen's approach, deserves greater research than can be included here, but it is intriguing to note.

Evidently Jensen's standing within Norwegian art suffered due to her tragic death at fifty years of age and this has affected her status ever since. However, up to this point her reputation had been steadily growing. Although she concentrated on a subject matter that has historically pigeonholed female artists – floral still lifes – like many female artists before her she used her own distinct and modern approach to elevate this genre. *Pæoner* therefore stands as a testament to a highly skilled artist, who deserves greater recognition today.

¹ *Tidens Tegn*, 07.04.1926, Nasjonalmuseet Archives, Oslo

² A. Öhrner, 'Il Faut Distinguer', in *Inspiration Matisse!*, exhibition catalogue, ed. by Anna Meister, Daniel Prytz and Karin Siden, Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag AB, 2015.

³ Review by Arnulf Øverland, 'Vaarutstillingen', 19.5.1918, Norwegian National Archives, "Utstillingens bedste er vel Margrethe Jensens Paeoner. Maaten hvorpaa den svaere blomsterbusk fylder landskapet er nydelig, og billedet har den aldeles ualmindelige egenskap at vaere fint og rikt gjennearbeidet uten at ha tapt noget av anslagetets friskhet" The best of the exhibition is probably Margrethe Jensen's "PEON". The way in which the light flower bush fills the landscape is lovely, and the painting has the quite unusual quality of being finely and richly worked out without having lost any of the freshness of the whole.

⁴ Review by Th. Norup Eliassen, 'Vaarutstillingen', 14.06.18, the painting is reproduced in black and white, "Of the few who rise above the average level, Margrethe Jensen deserves to be mentioned. Her pale yellow and redish "peonies" are perhaps the exhibition's best work, at the same time delicately and surely done."

"Av de faa haver sigover gjennemsniitsnivaacet fortjener Margrethe Jensen at naevnes. Hendes blekgule og rødlige "peoner" er kanske utstillingens bedste arbeide, paa samme tid naensomt og sikkert gjort"

⁵ Review by Jappe Nilssen, *Dagbl*, 13.5.1918, "Et av utsteillingens beste billeder et malt av Margrethe Jensen et stort blomsterbilde med hvitrode nydelige pænoer, nydelig avestemt i farven. og Margaretha Jensen et par gode og kraftige blomsterbilleder". He also comments on her work a year earlier, "a couple of good and powerful flower pictures" Jappe Nilssen, *Dagbl*, 16.10.1917.