

VÄINÖ BLOMSTEDT

1871-1947, Helsinki

Winter landscape



Signed and dated, 1904
Oil on board, 39 x 49.5 cm

Provenance:

Possibly part of the collection of Gösta Stenman, Samling Stenman;
Stenman Art Salon (c.1919);
Private collection, Sweden
(For more information on the provenance see notes)

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Fig.1 Väinö Blomstedt, *Francesca*, 1897, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki

Väinö Blomstedt has often been labelled, alongside Marcus Enkell and Hugo Simberg, as one of the leading Finnish Symbolists of his generation. In reality Blomstedt found it difficult to discard certain conventions he had learnt and commit whole heartedly to the ideals of symbolist painting. In particular his work *en plein air* and his use of colour, which remained vibrant and true to nature throughout his career, in comparison to Enckell who boldly claimed that there were “no colours in nature at all”.¹

This painting sits within an interesting period for the artist, after some of his most famous symbolist works which made his reputation, such as *Francesca* (Fig.1) or *The Archer* from 1897 and 1898 respectively. *Winter landscape* would appear to be a divergence from his previous symbolist tendencies, however the emphasis on surfaces, as well as a purity of line and form reveal a psychological depth to the painting.² In particular the highly stylised anthropomorphic shape of the snow-laden pine, twisting and turning under the weight of the snow, an allusion to Finnish folklore where gods or creatures would reveal themselves through flora and fauna. This epitomises Blomstedt’s balance between this light-filled impression of the Finnish wilderness, painted in freezing conditions in situ, and the fantastical shapes of a symbolist dreamscape. This is a synthesis within his production that he seems to have found in the 1890s and would continue throughout his life, such as *Lake in the Wilderness* of 1895 (Fig.2).



Fig.2 Väinö Blomstedt, *Lake in the Wilderness*, 1895, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki



Fig.3 Väinö Blomstedt, sketch for *Japanese Reindeer* textile, c.1904, Design Museum, Helsinki

Like many Nordic artists Blomstedt travelled to and from Paris in the 1880s to experience what had become the European cultural capital, returning regularly to Finland. Paris had a formative effect on the young Finn, living and sharing studio space with his close friend and fellow painter, Pekka Halonen. Perhaps their most significant encounter during this time was with Paul Gauguin, who they met fortuitously in 1894 at a café they frequented. Gauguin had just returned from Tahiti and agreed to allow the Finns to join him in his studio to study, in turn meeting Gauguin's circle who would use his studio as a form of salon to discuss, drink and evaluate the future of art. The influence of Gauguin's "Primitivism" is clear in our painting, along with the knowledge of Japanese art, which both Blomstedt and Halonen studied closely in Paris and collections back home. The high horizon line providing a flatness to the image, alongside a strong focal point in the foreground, reminiscent of the compositions of Japanese wood block prints. This strong influence of Japonisme intrigued Blomstedt and is evident in his other work during this period, such as his sketch for *Japanese Reindeer textile* (Fig.3), c.1904, which references Japanese art through its closely cropped image and stylisation, much like our painting.³

There is also a strong emphasis on light and colour within our painting. Pekka Halonen's transition to a brighter colour palette at the start of the 20th century is well documented. Anna Maria von Bonsdorff writes how Halonen's use of colour became one of the most important elements in his work, influenced by the colourism of the Fauves and his time with Gauguin. On his return to Finland, Halonen and Blomstedt would often trek into the Finnish wilderness to paint, where they would study the dazzling effects of light on snow, as can be seen in *Winter landscape*.⁴ The influence of Blomstedt's time in Paris can also be seen within his brush strokes, which have more in common with those of Halonen, being free and painterly, almost pointillist in fashion when it comes to the dabs of colour within the sky. This fascinating technique adds undulations to the painting's surface that allows the colours of the sky to alter under different light. Von Bonsdorff states that it is this "rhythmical texture of the painted surface" that stood these artists apart from other Finnish symbolists.⁵



Fig.4 Akseli Gallen Kallela, *The Layer of the Lynx*, 1906, Gallen-Kallelan Museo, Helsinki

Finally, it is important to place this painting within the context of the Finnish identity at the time it was painted. In 1904 Finland was still an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire and would remain so until the revolution. During this period many Finnish artists were determined to establish a national cultural identity, perhaps the most forthright and celebrated for this role was Akseli Gallen-Kallela, who painted frescos for the Finnish pavilion at the Paris World Fair of 1900 with a clear political message for Finnish independence. Gallen-Kallela would go on to paint his Lake Keitele series (*Lake Keitele*, 1905, National Gallery, London) between 1905-1906 and along with other famous snow scenes (*The layer of the Lynx*, 1906, Museo Gallen Kallela), seeing the unique landscape of Finland as the greatest representation of its independence. A *Winter landscape* was painted a year prior to this famous series, when Blomstedt, at the age of 33, was already established as a teacher at the Finnish Art Association, guiding the next generation and helping to form this new national cultural identity. Therefore, *Winter landscape* can be seen as an emblem, at a pivotal point in Finnish art history, expressing the diverse ideas rising to the fore at this time in the country, be those aesthetic, psychological or national. Despite the importance of Blomstedt's oeuvre within Finnish art history, his works have not yet had the international recognition they deserve compared to his compatriots, Akseli Gallen-Kallela or Pekka Halonen.

NOTES



There are surviving labels on the reverse of the painting, two of which show the work was sold through Gösta Stenman's Art Salon, which was set up in Helsinki in 1919, therefore suggesting that it was bought by Stenman prior to this date and possibly directly from the artist. It may have been part of Stenman's Samling (personal collection).

¹ According to Blomstedt in a letter home, see M. Valkonen, 'Symbols dense as trees' in *The Golden Age: Finnish art 1850 - 1907*, 1992, p.57

² For a more in depth insight into Finnish symbolism see S. Ringbom, *Symbolism, Synthetism and Kaleva*, 2000, and B. von Bonsdorff, C. J. Gardberg, E. Kruskopf, A. Ringbom & M. Schalin (Eds.), *Art in Finland from the middle ages to the present day*, 2000, pp.216–227

³ L. Svinhufvud, *Japanomania in the Nordic countries 1875-1918*, ed. by G. P. Weisberg, A-M von Bonsdorff and H. Selkokari, 2016, p.197

⁴ A-M. von Bonsdorff, *Pekka Halonen*, 2008, p.137

⁵ Ibid.