Hammershøi

The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) has recently acquired a 1905 painting by the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916), the first by this artist in a Canadian public collection: *Interior with Four Etchings:*

The etchings are arranged on the wall above an elegant side-table, upon which stand three pieces of Royal Copenhagen porcelain. The details of the etchings cannot be seen, but the upper two appear to be portraits. Light comes in from the window on the left, giving a subtle violet tinge to the grey walls and emphasizing their white trim. To the left of the table stands Hammershøi's wife Ida. She faces away from us, and we cannot see what she is doing. Perhaps she has just placed the plate on the table and has turned to look out of the window; perhaps she has taken something to the window to look at. The sunlight on her neck is vaguely erotic. Everything is balanced: the shadows share the space with the light; the blue-white porcelain complements the red-brown frames; the human figure suggests movement in a room that is otherwise completely still.

To celebrate this acquisition, the gallery is exhibiting this picture alongside 25 other Hammershøi paintings, all except one coming from the National Gallery of Denmark (*Statens Museum for Kunst*). The exhibition runs from April 16 to June 26, 2016. This is one of the most impressive exhibitions I

have seen in recent years. I apologize that my enthusiasm has led to another long post. However, it contains more to see than to read.

Hammershøi is quite different from other painters. His palette is austere. The main colors are, gray and white and black. On one of the walls in the AGO exhibition is a commemorative poem by Sophus Clausen written in 1916. The poem, at least in the English translation, is unremarkable except for occasional lines:

> How sweet to know that blacks and greys
> Give shelter to the light and let it stay
> …
> Gray is not grey nor is black ever black.

The greys in a Hammershøi painting are subtly tinged, often with violet, sometimes with yellow, occasionally with pink or green. On the predominantly grey background, objects are delineated in subdued browns. The most striking characteristic of the paintings is the way that they represent light. Light seems almost to move through the painted surfaces, filling out the space, defining what is present, bringing people into existence, and leaving without a sound.

The restricted palate of Hammershøi's paintings lead his friend Karl Madsen, an artist and historian, to suggest that he was Denmark's first "neurasthenic painter" (quoted in Vad, 1992, p. 73). The diagnosis of neurasthenia was popular at the time (Harris 2013). Its various symptoms, both physical (fatigue, dizziness) and mental (anxiety, melancholy), were attributed to a weak nervous system, unable to cope with the stress of modern urban life. The diagnosis is out of fashion nowadays, though similar symptoms occur in modern disorders such as chronic fatigue syndrome and dysautonomia. Although Hammershøi was quiet and withdrawn, he was far too productive to be considered neurasthenic. Nevertheless, his paintings

have a tranquility that can provide respite from the hubbub of city life. They might represent a cure for rather than a result of neurasthenia.

In this posting, the paintings in the exhibition have been photographed within their frames; other paintings by Hammershøi and paintings by other artists are shown without frames.

Early Life

Hammershøi was the son of a prosperous Danish businessman. He displayed an early talent for drawing, and his family arranged for him to have lessons from the painter Niels Christian Kierkegard, a cousin of Søren Kierkegaard. The drawing on the right (Vad, 1992, p 11), from when Vilhelm was 11 years old, illustrates his early appreciation of light and shadow.

He continued his studies both at the Royal Danish Academy of Art and in the Free Study Schools. One of his teachers, P. S. Krøyer remarked that

> I have a pupil who paints most oddly. I do not understand him, but believe he is going to be important and do not try to influence him. (quoted in Vad, 1992, p 24)

His 1885 *Portrait of a Young Girl* (his sister Anna) was entered into competition for a prize at the Academy. Though it did not win, it was acclaimed by his fellow students, who protested the judges' decision. It is a remarkable painting: the face and posture are sensitively portrayed; the muted palette of the background gently situates the figure; the hands suggest both rest and tension. Anna's left hand steadies the image and allows the picture's transition from three to two dimensions.

In the autumn of 1888, Hammershøi stayed with his friend Karl Madsen, who lived in an old house just north of Copenhagen. There he painted his first “interior” – a picture of an old stove with an open doorway leading into a brightly sunlit room. The light seems almost personified – it enters the other room, comes through the door, pauses on the floor and casts a shadow toward the stove. The painting makes the viewer long to go into the next room to see whence the light comes from. This type of painting was to become Hammershøi’s signature style. Though an accomplished painter of portraits and of architecture, Hammershøi is most famous for pictures showing the effects of light on lonely rooms.

In 1888, the dentist, writer and art-collector, Alfred Bramsen, bought his first painting by Hammershøi. Over the next quarter century, he was an unflagging promoter of Hammershøi’s work. After Hammershøi’s death in 1916, Bramsen arranged for the first catalogue of the paintings. Artist and patron were totally unlike: one introverted, reticent and solitary, the other gregarious, confident and worldly-wise.

With this patronage, Hammershøi became self-sufficient, and in 1891 he married Ida Ilsted, the sister of a fellow artist,

Peter Ilsted. Following the wedding, Vilhelm and Ida went to Paris for six months. They then returned to Copenhagen, living for a while in the Hammershøi home together with Vilhelm's mother.

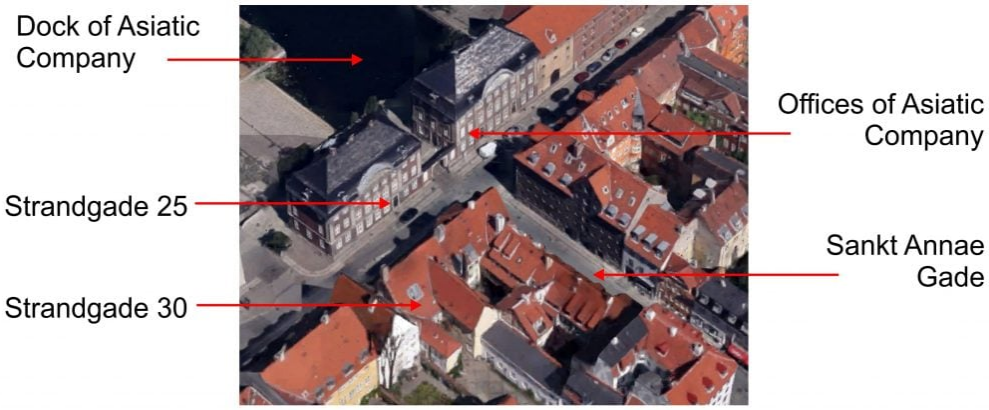
Over the next few years, Hammershøi painted landscapes, portraits and architecture. In 1897 Bramsen commissioned a painting of Kronborg castle in Helsingør (Hamlet's Elsinore). Hammershøi produced a masterpiece in terms of its striking perspective and subtle color.

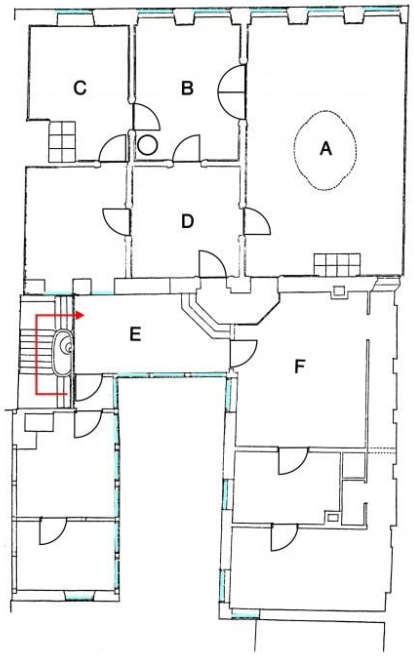
Strandgade 30

In December 1898, Hammershøi rented an apartment on the second floor of an old building on Strandgade in the old dockyard district of Copenhagen called Christianshavn. The building had been constructed in 1636. Hammershøi was likely pleased that his home originated in the time of Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch. The apartment was spacious and endowed with windows

facing in all directions. As well as a home, it served as both studio space and subject matter for his art.

The building still exists. The following figures show its location on a google world-map, as well as a recent photograph (from Wikipedia) and the floor plan of the apartment (from Vad, 1992, p 187, with several revisions based on another published plan: the position of the window in room F corrected, the door between B and F doubled, and room D divided).

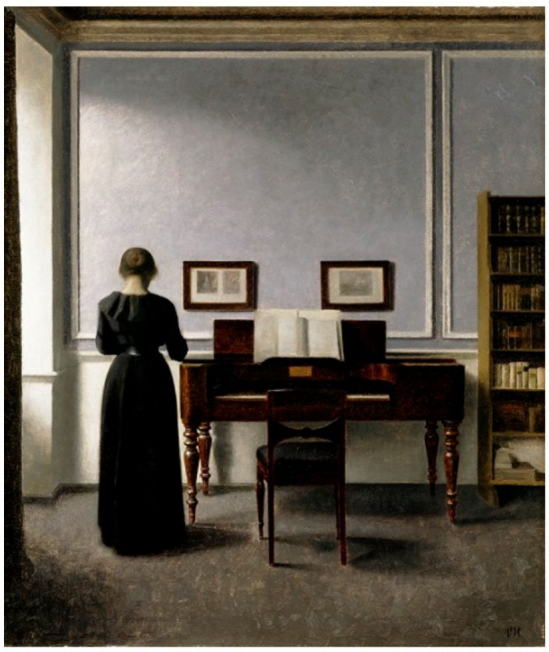




Strandgade 30, Copenhagen

In his new apartment, Hammershøi began to paint the interior pictures that became his most recognizable images. Many of the pictures were painted in Room F facing the window and door. In some the room is empty; others include a portrait of Ida sitting or standing to the left of the window. *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor* 1901 (in the AGO exhibit and illustrated on the right) shows Ida working at some task at a table. The painting is both realistic and impressionistic. The old house had shifted slightly over the years, and the painting shows clearly that the door is slightly askew. Yet it is impossible to tell the subject of the etchings or the focus of Ida’s concentration.

This view painted with the room empty is the subject of some of Hammershøi’s most famous pictures, such as *Dust Motes Dancing in the Sunbeams* (1900, Ordrupgaard, Denamark) and *Moonlight, Strandgade 30* (1906, Metropolitan Museum)



The AGO painting *Interior with 4 Etchings* (1905) was painted in Room A. Over the years the arrangement of the furniture changed. An earlier painting *Interior with Piano, Strandgade 30* (1901), illustrated on the right, shows the same view but with a piano and a bookcase rather than a table. Hammershøi tended to simplify his pictures as he grew older. His later paintings show less detail and a more restricted palette.

Interior with the Artist's Easel (1910) was painted in Room B looking toward Room A. It is a variation on a theme long used painting: the artist at his easel. Yet here there is no artist other than the light coming in the window. Since we can only see the painting from its back, we have no idea of its subject. The true subject of the actual painting is the bowl on the table in the far room. The shape of the bowl and the reflections of the light upon its curves are rendered exquisitely. If this were a photograph rather than a painting, the bowl would be in focus, and the easel in the blurred foreground.

Hammershøi's new apartment was directly across from a striking building that housed the offices of the Asiatic Company. This was the subject of several large architectural paintings. The 1902 version in the AGO exhibition shows the offices in fog. The buildings are visible but the dockyard behind them, accessed through the arch, is obscure. Masts of ships are faintly visible in the harbor-fog. Other versions of this painting show the buildings without the fog.

Sources

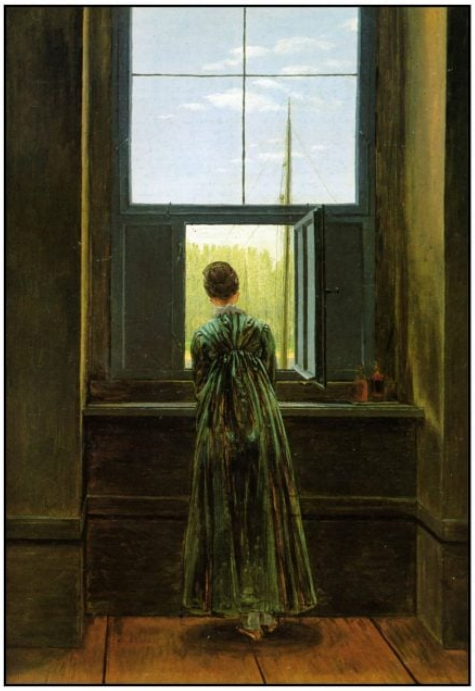
Hammershøi is often considered as isolated from the history of painting, as someone whose work was without either precedent or following. Yet all persons are part of the past they learn about, and all are made by the present that they experience. And everyone affects the future.

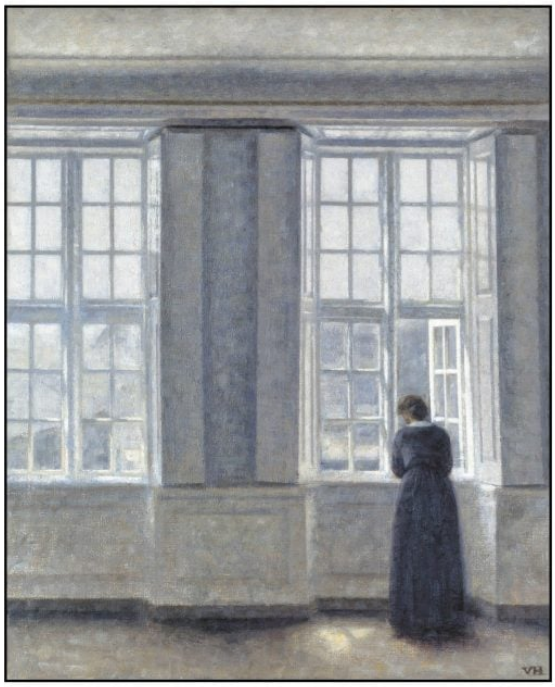
Hammershøi's paintings ultimately derive from the great paintings of the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th Century, when Vermeer and de Hooch depicted the effects of light coming through windows onto people. Hammershøi's paintings study the way light plays on domestic interiors, but the interiors are minimal rather than extravagant, the light is cool rather than warm, and the people are either absent or unobtrusive.

In the late 19th Century, James Abbott McNeill Whistler

(1834-1903) had begun to work with a restricted palette. His most famous painting is entitled *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871). In Hammershøi's 1886 portrait of his own mother the color is even more subdued and the background even less detailed.

Many of Hammershøi's interiors include a representation of Ida viewed from the back. This motif derives from the *Rückenfigur* ("figure viewed from the back") used in German Romantic painting, most characteristically by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). Most of Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren* are in landscapes, but occasionally they are in domestic interiors. The following illustration compares Friedrich's *Woman at a Window* (1822) with Hammershøi's *The Tall Windows* (1913). The latter was painted after Hammershøi had moved across the street to Strandgade 25.





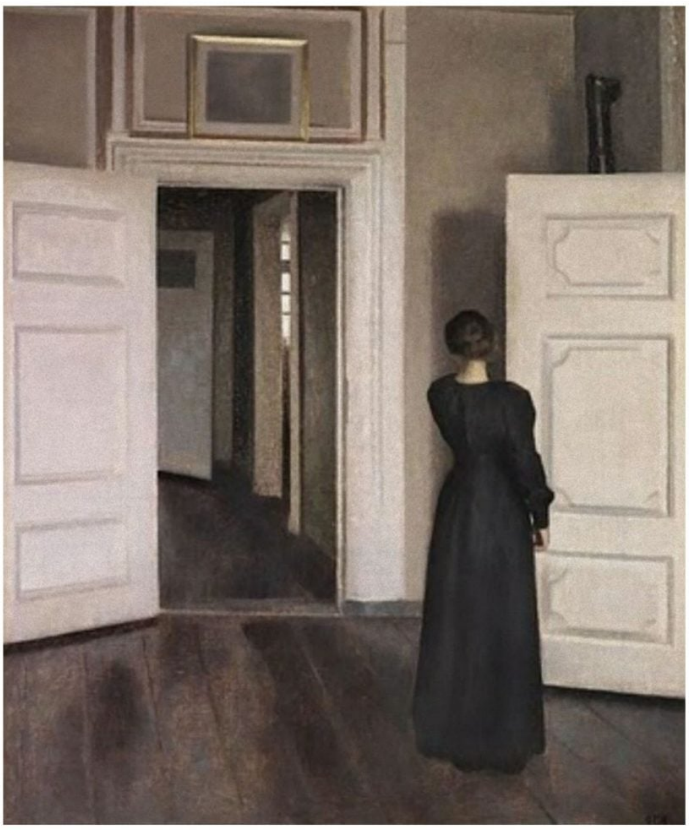
The *Rückenfigur* can be used for various purposes (Koerner, 1990, pp 233-244; Prettejohn, 2005, pp 54-59). One is to provide a foil for the viewer to enjoy the same perceptions as the artist who painted the picture. The *Rückenfigur*

is not just a represented object in the picture, but also the embodied subject of the aesthetic experience of the picture – we look *with*, rather than merely *at* the *Rückenfigur.* (Prettejohn, 2005, p 56).

In some sense the *Rückenfigur* obscures what the painting is about. We see the man rather than the sunset. We feel that we have come late – the glories of the sunset have already been seen and we can only imagine what the experience was like (Koerner, p. 233).

The presence of Ida in Hammershøi's paintings differs from Friedrich's *Rückenfigur.* Most importantly, Ida usually stands or sits on the edge of the painting rather than in the center. She complements rather than obscures the picture's subject. She gives the image a sense of intimacy: we are sharing her domestic space. We get a sense of her existence: the small tasks that make up the domestic day. She gives a human ground

to what we see and prevents it from becoming too abstract.



Sometimes, as in the *Interior with a Woman Standing, Strandgade 30* (1905) painted in Room A looking into Room D, the viewer feels uncertain. By which door has she come in? Which door is she about to go out? The woman seems “caught in the moment of deciding which door to pass through” (Alsdorf, 2016, p. 271). Although this uncertainty derives simply from the static nature of the representation, it resonates with our inability to know what is in the mind of another person.

This particular problem fascinated the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). In a recent article, Bridget Alsdorf (2016) considers Hammershøi’s interior paintings in relation to Kierkegaard’s book *Either/Or* (1843). The title of the book highlights the idea of uncertainty. In the section of the book entitled *Shadowgraphs*. Kierkegaard wrote about the difficulty in representing in art the inner state of another

person, especially the state of “reflective sorrow.” Kierkegaard’s idea is that art can only represent such a state of mind indirectly. He likens the process to a “shadowgraph:”

> It is this reflective sorrow I now propose to draw out and render visible, so far as that is possible, in some pictures. I call them ‘shadowgraphs’, partly to remind the reader by the very designation that I am summoning them from the dark side of life, partly because, just like shadowgraphs, they are not visible straightaway. If I take a shadowgraph in my hand, I gain no impression from it, can form no real idea of it; it is only when I hold it up to the wall and look not at the immediate image but at what appears on the wall, it is only then that I see it. Similarly the picture I want to show here is an inner picture which can also only be detected by looking through the exterior. There may be nothing striking about the exterior, it is only when I look through it that I discover the inner picture, which is what I want to show, an inner picture too refined to be visible on the outside, woven as it is of the softest moods of the soul. If I look at a sheet of paper, to outward observation there may be nothing remarkable about it; it is only when I hold it up to the light of day and see through it that I discover the delicate inner picture which is as though too insubstantial to be seen immediately. (p. 130)

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard is quite unclear about the nature of a shadowgraph. On the one hand it might be like a transparency or silhouette through which light is projected to give an image on another surface; on the other hand it might be like a watermark seen when paper is held up to the light. In either interpretation, the image is not immediately apparent but only occurs when light is passed through the artistic representation. Kierkegaard’s metaphor is as ambiguous as the title of his book.

Kierkegaard then goes on to consider the state of reflective sorrow in three characters from literature. His bravura

descriptions of their invisible state of mind *either* subvert his claim that such states cannot be represented in art *or* clearly demonstrate the process of the sympathetic shadowgraph.

Alsdorf also considers what Hammershøi might be trying to represent in his interiors by relating them to another section of *Either/Or* entitled *The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage*. In this section, Kierkegaard's character Judge William compares romantic love with married love: the one an ever-changing erotic quest, the other an unchanging relationship. Hammershøi interiors certainly suggest the timeless intimacy of the latter.

Hammershøi's images have a mystical aura to them. They are delicately balanced between serenity and disquiet. Perhaps a little like meditation when one begins to feel an underlying eternity but still senses the sorrows of the real world.

Many critics have remarked about the lack of narrative in Hammershøi's paintings. When the rooms are empty, we cannot know what has happened in them; when the rooms contain a solitary person, we have difficulty seeing what she is doing and we cannot know what she is thinking.

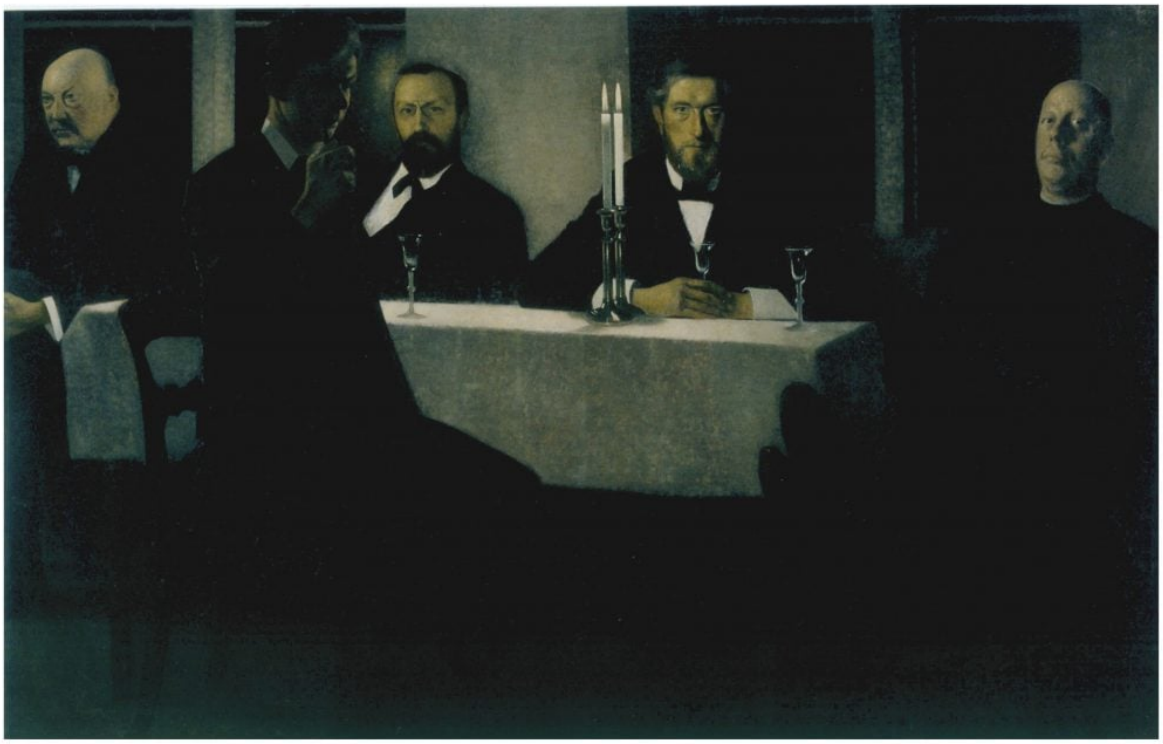
Yet there is an emotional force in the paintings that no amount of exegesis can attenuate. The emotions are like those aroused by music. Hammershøi appreciated music, and counted the English concert pianist Leonard Borwick among his friends. We do not fault music for lack of narrative or the absence of simple interpretation. Hammershøi's paintings fit very well with quiet music. Try them with the beginning of the Allegretto from Grieg's 1887 Violin Sonata Opus 45 (Ingolf Turban and Jean-Jacques Dünki):

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Sonte-C-Moll-Allegretto-espressivo-alla-Romanza-beginning.mp3

Portraits

Hammershøi was an accomplished and sensitive portraitist. The 1907 portrait of Ida with a teacup illustrates clearly the intimacy of their relationship. She stares off into space. We cannot know what she is thinking; perhaps even she does not know. The initial impression is of sadness although another version of the same portrait perhaps shows the hint of a smile. The portrait is very affecting. There is something timeless and classical about its serenity, but it is also quite momentary and individual. We can almost hear the clink of the spoon as she stirs her tea.

The 1901 portrait at the left is of J. F. Willumsen, a friend and fellow-artist. The strength of the gaze is clearly represented, but the portrait is otherwise unremarkable. However, this picture was a study for Hammershøi's largest painting entitled *Five Portraits*, completed in 1902 and presently in the Thiel Gallery near Stockholm. This fascinating painting shows four colleagues seated around a table at night in front of the windows in Room A. Karl Madsen is on Willumsen's right. In front of the table, Hammershøi's brother Svend is seen in profile. The two colleagues on the edges of the painting are the architect Thorvald Bindesbøll and the painter Carl Holsøe. The latter has his feet up on a chair, and his shoes give the painting a striking three-dimensional tension. The group appears to be gathered for after-dinner drinks, following a late but not last supper. The painting's darkness contrasts with the lightness of most of Hammershøi's interiors (and makes it difficult to obtain a good representation – I have done my best):



The most striking aspect of this group portrait is that no one interacts with anyone else. Each person seems completely engrossed in his own thoughts. Monrad (2012, p. 29) quotes a review of the painting's first exhibition:

> The situation is more or less this; there has been profound talk about something or other that has moved everyone deeply, and they are now waiting for a conclusive word from a sixth party.

The sixth party could be the painter. This interpretation is possible, but Monrad discounts it as not in keeping with Hammershøi's general lack of narrative.

Robert Rosenblum (in Fonsmark et al., 1998, p. 45) remarked:

> The effect is like standing before a tribunal, which comes into fixed, focal focus with the hypnotic stare of Willumsen.

It is unsettling to be judged by a painting.

Despite its starkness, I find the picture comforting. Each

person exists within his own intense solitude. Yet, as in the daylight pictures, the play of light on the faces and the table serves to bring them all together.

After Hammershoi

Hammershøi died of cancer in 1916. Bramsen donated his collection to the Statens Museum for Kunst in 1917. But fashions change, and in 1930 the paintings were returned to the donor. Hammershøi came to be considered only a minor artist in Denmark; in the rest of the world he was almost completely unknown. His reputation only began to change in the early 1980s when a retrospective exhibition of his paintings was mounted at Ordrupgaard, a gallery just north of Copenhagen, and other exhibitions were held in North America.

Hammershøi had little direct effect on subsequent artists. His friends Carl Holsøe and Peter Ilsted continued to paint interiors, though their pictures were more detailed and less affecting than those of Hammershøi. In France, Pierre Bonnard and Eduard Vuilliard painted domestic scenes. One might even consider the possibility of an artistic movement called “intimism’ (Hvidt, in Monrad et al., 2012, pp. 197-218). Yet their paintings lacked Hammershøi’s simplicity of color and the underlying mysticism.

The American Edward Hopper (1882-1967) painted pictures that are imbued with a similar mood to those of Hammershøi. They depict the same lonely silence, the same play of light on simple interiors, and the same existential anxiety (Rosenblum in Fonsmark et al., 1998, p. 42). Yet Hopper was likely unaware of Hammershøi’s work. Their relationship is an affinity rather than a direct connection. The following illustration compares Hammershøi’s *Ida in an Interior with Piano* (1901) with Hopper’s *City Sunlight* (1954).

To me the glowing color spaces of Hammershøi's paintings presage the completely abstract paintings of Mark Rothko. Rosenblum (1975) has suggested that a tradition in art that is particularly "northern," one that sees light as cool rather than warm, one that tends towards abstractions, one that goes from Friedrich to Rothko. Rosenblum does not mention Hammershøi in his book, but we could easily place him along this path.

The Danish film director Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968) was profoundly affected by Hammershøi's images (Balló et al. 2006). The closing scene of his 1ast movie *Gertrud* (1968; Schamus, 2008) ends on an image that could easily be a Hammershøi painting. The movie, based on a 1906 play by the Swedish writer Hjalmar Söderberg (1869-1941), concerns the passionate life of a woman who sought the freedom to love whomever she wished to love. At the end of the movie, the elderly Gertrud, living as a recluse, is visited by her old friend Axel Nygren. She returns his letters; he burns them: they say goodbye. The final minute can perhaps serve as our farewell to Hammershøi

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Gertrud-final-scene.mp4

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