Julia Beck’s Painting *Autumn Day* and 19th-Century Transnational Naturalism

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*Carina Rech*
Curator

Fig. 1 Julia Beck (1853–1935), *Autumn Day*, signed 1883. Oil on canvas, 77 × 107.5 cm. Gift of the Friends of the Nationalmuseum 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7614.
In the autumn of 1883, the Swedish artist Julia Beck painted the genre scene Autumn Day, depicting a woman in profil perdu and a dark overcoat standing in a garden landscape (fig. 1). The model’s fashionable hat and matching gloves indicate that she belongs to the urban middle classes, which makes her form a marked contrast to her rural environment. She is positioned in a cabbage patch in front of a plastered stone wall, separating the kitchen garden from the surrounding village and a group of trees, some of which have already lost their leaves. The simplicity of the subject corresponds to the painting’s muted palette, dominated by earthy and green tones in the depiction of the garden and the almost monochrome grey in the rendering of the cloudy sky. The picture is devoid of any narrative content and appears peculiarly still. The almost statuary motionlessness of the depicted woman, who seems lost in thought, contributes to the tranquil and melancholic atmosphere of the autumnal scene. However, two compositional elements – the off-centre position of the staffage figure as well as the diagonal of the slightly sloping garden wall – disrupt the overall harmonious impression of the genre scene, creating a subtle sense of tension. The artist has chosen to paint this rather humble subject on a large and demanding scale, which indicates that, from the beginning, the painting had been conceptualised as an exhibition piece.¹

**Reconsidering Grez-sur-Loing from a transnational perspective**

Julia Beck painted Autumn Day in the garden of Hôtel Chevillon, a guesthouse in Grez-sur-Loing, located on the outskirts of the Fontainebleau Forest near Barbizon. In the early 1880s, the picturesque village that could conveniently be reached by train from Paris was a popular gathering place for international artists, in particular Nordic and anglophone painters, who escaped the metropolis, preferably during the summer months, to work outdoors. In Swedish art historiography, the artists’ colony in Grez-sur-Loing has often been described as a creative laboratory, in which a progressive generation of young artists shook off their academic training and immersed themselves in plein air painting. Here, Swedish artists such as Carl Larsson, Bruno Liljefors and Karl Nordström adopted themes of rural life popularized by the painters of French naturalism and the juste milieu, experimenting with a freer stylistic facture informed by French impressionism as well as asymmetrical compositions and dramatic foreshortenings inspired by Japanese prints.

Following the publication of the doctoral dissertation *Grez-sur-Loing Revisited* by art historian Alexandra Herlitz in 2013, the international character of the artists’ colony and the cross-cultural exchanges between Nordic and anglophone artists have been
more strongly emphasised, both in research and exhibitions, replacing previous notions of one-sided influence from the centre to the periphery with a more nuanced understanding of transnational flows, circulations of ideas and creative cross-fertilization. As a consequence, we have become more aware of the creative exchange among foreign artists in France, their networks and their impact on the local art scene. Rather than studying exclusively what foreign artists took with them when returning to their countries of origin, we also need to acknowledge what they left behind and how they shaped the Parisian art scene in return. Herlitz has studied how foreign artists developed the Grez style in dialogue with French masters, most notably Jules Bastien-Lepage, creating sentimental scenes and melancholic landscapes characterized by a harmonious and mild tonality, an often-prominent greyish-silvery sky and solitary figures implying introversion and contemplation. Julia Beck’s painting *Autumn Day* can be considered a prime example of the Grez style, as it exhibits all the above mentioned thematic and stylistic traits associated with the movement. In *Autumn Day*, but also in her wider production from Grez-sur-Loing, most notably her river landscapes, Beck has transferred into paint what compatriot artist and publicist Georg Pauli later defined as the Grez school’s defining pictorial theme – the “still life” in a broader sense:

A nature without traces of violent effects, silver grey and beaming in all its monotony. [...] One should never come across a canvas or study of this school with any dramatic situation, never an atmosphere with striking effects. Everything flows smoothly like the Loing River [...], everything is decent sober, nice, often enough with a certain elegiac emphasis.

If viewed in the wider context of the international artists’ colony, Julia Beck’s *Autumn Day* shows some striking resemblance to Lovell Birge Harrison’s *November* in terms of composition, placement of the figure, prominence of the meticulously rendered

![Fig. 3 Carl Larsson (1853–1919), *In the Kitchen Garden*, signed 1883. Watercolor on paper, 93 × 61 cm. Purchase 1883. Nationalmuseum, NMB 165.](image)
A colony of women

Julia Beck is a striking example of a previously marginalised artist, ignored by art historians for almost a century until being “rediscovered” and elevated to the canonical status of leading landscape painter of her generation.7 The gratifying reconsideration of Beck’s pivotal contributions to the creation of the Grez style has, however, caused the unintended side effect that other women artists active in the colony have once again been overshadowed, this time by a female peer.

In the 1880s, Grez-sur-Loing became a magnet for aspiring women professionals from Sweden, including the painters Karin Berggöö Larsson, Eva Bonnier, Emma Löwstädt-Chadwick and Gerda Rydberg Tirén, the sculptor Carolina Benedicks-Bruce and the actress Siri von Essen. Several of the artists had been friends since their student days at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. Julia Beck and Gerda Rydberg, for instance, had previously joined forces as
Interestingly, the painter Anna Cramér later recalled that Rydberg was a favourite model among her artist friends: “[...] she was a true beauty and possessed a personality full of freshness and character. It is natural that her image often haunted the latest art. If something truly beautiful was to be depicted, they said: ‘Yes, I did it using a photograph of Miss Rydberg.’” Cramér further emphasised Rydberg’s great artistic talent, stating that she executed “excellent studies”, which in the words of her

founding members of the academy club and as co-initiators of the student newspaper Palett-Skrap, alongside its first chief editor Carl Larsson. The informal gatherings and creative exchange among female and male students outside of the gender-separated classrooms were revived in the French countryside (fig. 4), where they found their most playful expression in the artists’ carnivals of Grez-sur-Loing. In a photograph taken at the carnival of September 1883, Beck and Rydberg appear in the second row, dressed in matching black costumes and devil horns (fig. 6).

It has been suggested that Rydberg modelled for Beck’s Autumn Day, as the woman in the painting bears some resemblance to the painter, even though she has turned her face away from the beholder (fig. 5). The identification seems plausible, because painter and model were close friends, and both are known to have stayed at Hôtel Chevillon in the autumn of 1883.

Fig. 6 Unknown photographer, The Artists’ Carnival in Grez-sur-Loing, September 1883. Nationalmuseum image archive.
In recent years, the Nationalmuseum has complemented its collection with several works by Gerda Rydberg Tirén, who previously had been poorly represented, thereby contributing to the revaluation of another important woman artist, whose production is closely linked to the artists’ colony in Grez-sur-Loing.\(^1\)

**Notes:**

1. According to a label on the back of the stretcher frame, the painting was exhibited in the ninth exhibition at Blanchs konstsalong in Stockholm.


3. Herlitz 2013, pp. 79–145.


6. Herlitz has argued that relations with artists from other nationalities in Grez became closer during the cold season, when not many compatriots were around, and she noted that Beck’s works “show a decisive affiliation with the international colony that was her base.” However, it seems that Herlitz was not aware of *Autumn Day*, as it is not discussed in her book. Herlitz 2013, p. 219.


10. Kåa Wennberg, who has published extensively on the artists’ colony in Grez-sur-Loing, has orally suggested this identification.

11. Cramér 1925, p. 82.

12. Cramér 1925, p. 82.

13. The painting was most probably executed around the same time as the corresponding work *Garden, Grez* from 1883 in the collection of Brucebo Foundation, Visby.

14. Apart from *Mallows by a Wall*, the museum purchased the paintings *A Mother* (NM 7501) in 2019 and *Portrait of a Woman* (NM 7569) in 2020.

Fig. 7 Gerda Tirén (1858–1928), *Mallows by a Wall*, 1883. Oil on canvas, 57.5 × 41.5 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2022. Nationalmuseum, NM 7675.