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Alexander Roslin (1718–1793). The Artist and his Wife Marie Suzanne Giroust Portraying Henrik Wilhelm Peill, 1767. Oil on canvas, 131 x 98.5 cm. Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Sophia Giesecke Fund, Axel Hirsch Fund and Mr Stefan Persson and Mrs Denise Persson. Nationalmuseum, NM 7141.

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Cat in a Summer Meadow

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Fig. 1 Bruno Liljefors (1860–1939), *Cat in a Summer Meadow*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 61 x 76 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 71 28.
In 1992 the Nationalmuseum acquired five paintings by Bruno Liljefors. Four of them – Red-Backed Shrike, Corncrake, Chaffinches and Willow Warbler – were mounted together, while the fifth, Nestlings of Red-Backed Shrike (Fig. 4), was purchased separately. Originally though, the last-mentioned painting was framed together with the newly acquired Cat in a Summer Meadow and the composition of four bird studies. To begin with, these six paintings constituted the largest known set of the kind of animal studies, mounted together, which Liljefors executed in the 1880s, and of which only a few intact examples now exist. The acquisition of Cat in a Summer Meadow (Fig. 1) is also important in the sense that it means that the painting Nestlings of Red-Backed Shrike (Fig. 2) can now be experienced in the way Liljefors intended (Fig. 3).

Cats and dogs are the only domesticated animals given a prominent place in Liljefors’ pictorial world. There are clear differences, though, between his images of the two. Dogs figure primarily in scenes related to hunting, and act at the hunter’s command. Cats, on the other hand, usually appear as independent predators. Liljefors’ love of felines is well documented, and the way he depicts them seems to reflect a painstaking process of observation that gives his representations of cats a subtle sensitivity compared with those of dogs.

From its position in the lower right-hand corner of the painting, our Cat in a Summer Meadow appears to have its gaze locked on a quarry outside the picture. Judging from its posture, it is moving very slowly. Although unconventional perspectives were something very much associated with Liljefors in the 1880s, it is difficult to find compositions from that period which place the most meaning-bearing element so far from the centre of the image.¹ What, then, can Liljefors’ intention with this arrangement have been? Allan Ellenius, in Liljefors: Naturens om livrum (Nature as Living Space), recounts how the commissioner of another cat subject (Cat in a Flowering Summer Meadow, 1884) complained that

Fig. 2 Bruno Liljefors (1860–1939), Nestlings of Red-Backed Shrike, 1887. Oil on canvas, 60.5 x 46 cm. Purchase: Axel Hirsch Fund. Nationalmuseum, nm 6874.
“there was ‘too little’ in the picture, making the surroundings desolate.”

Ellenius adds that “Liljefors commented on this criticism in a letter to Zorn, explaining that the cat stalking its prey makes a ‘better impression’ without a lot of unnecessary details.” In the newly acquired painting, which is dated three years later, the artist has taken this idea a step further. In the 1884 painting, he placed the flowers in an even pattern across the entire picture surface. In the later one, the vegetation is painted with less emphasis on the representation of individual details and with no evident thought for the decorative effect that informed the earlier picture.

As in *Cat in a Summer Meadow*, the perspective of *Nestlings of Red-Backed Shrike* and the arrangement of its different elements strike us as unconventional. The young birds are perched high up in the picture, and below them we see a sandy bank over which a plant spreads its green leaves. The five nestlings are painted in great detail, while the vegetation is characterised by more economical brushwork. In the lower part of the canvas, the artist has used suggestive brushstrokes to represent an intricate mass of foliage.

Scanning the whole of the picture surface with our gaze, we notice a striking contrast between the birds, with the area around them, and the lower portion with the leaves. I have found no other example of Liljefors’ work from the 1880s in which the focus fades away as markedly as in *Nestlings*. Even on its own, a segment of the periphery in a painting like *Cat in a Summer Meadow* may be comprehensible to the viewer. But if the lower part of Nestlings were to be taken out of context, it is uncertain whether that would be the case. A conceivable explanation for the way the focus is made to dissolve downwards through the picture is that Liljefors wanted to use the optical disposition of the human field of vision as a starting point for both viewing and representing the subject. A simple test shows that, if that was his intention, he has succeeded. Focus on the birds and note at the same time how, without lowering your gaze in the slightest, you perceive the foliage below them. In all probability, your perception of the lower part of the image would have been identical even if the artist had painted
the leaves with great attention to detail. Such an intention possibly also explains the arrangement of the picture. Placing the birds high up creates a single, larger periphery, rather than two smaller ones corresponding to a little less than the upper and lower halves of the painting. There are thus fewer parts for the eye to relate to.

What significance, then, does remounting the pictures have for our understanding of them? Liljefors himself does not seem to have written or said anything about the thinking behind arrangements of this kind. Research has suggested that they may be modelled on Japanese Harimaze woodcuts – woodblock prints of several images on a single sheet, intended to be cut out and glued in an irregular order on screens, which are often gilt.

I have not found any example among the arrangements preserved where two pictures have counterparts in the other. Liljefors has, where necessary, balanced the individual hues. The blue patch of sky in Nestlings would probably, as the only element of blue, have been too luminous, but it is subtly balanced by blue accents in the form of flowers or dabs of pure colour scattered across the left-hand picture. On the inside edges of the paintings, a certain type of brushwork seems to transcend the boundary between them and make them parts of a single whole. Towards the top, the upper edges of a patch of soil in the left-hand picture and some greenery in the right-hand one form a diagonal that cuts across both images. Perhaps the most interesting device for getting the paintings to work together is the artist’s use of different degrees of focus. The meaning which these have when we examine each picture on its own remains when we view the two together, but now an additional explanation also emerges. The passages painted least sharply in the pictures turn out to be immediately to the right of the cat and to the left of the birds. Liljefors has thus made the images dependent on one another, without allowing them to encroach on each other. As far as the nestlings are concerned, the simply painted area in the upper right of the cat picture shifts the focus onto them. Even more importantly perhaps, this virtually “empty” area allows the branch the birds are perched on to seem to reach in across the other painting.

With the acquisition of Cat in a Summer Meadow, a work of art has been recreated and the two pictures now appear in a very different light. The ideas behind the compositions become clear, and the whole which they form constitutes perhaps the most interesting example of how Bruno Liljefors worked with varying degrees of focus. The two paintings demonstrate what an exceptional eye he had for nature and our perception of it. It is often noted how reluctant Liljefors was to represent animals anecdotally. Cat in a Summer Meadow, together with Nestlings of Red-Backed Shrike, shows how the “Harimaze principle” seems to have offered a logical solution to this. It makes it possible to depict species living in each other’s vicinity without imposing on the viewer a sequence of events that evokes associations with human stories, and to focus instead on different manifestations of the conditions in which the individual animals live.

Notes:
1. In Liljefors’ later work, the animals are often placed markedly outside the centre of the picture, but this should be linked to the concept of camouflage, which became one of his most important basic themes.
3. Ibid.