Jenny Nyström, *The Convalescent*

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Jenny Nyström (1854–1946) was a portrait painter and a pioneering picture-book artist, the first person in Sweden to make a profession of illustrating children’s books. Her classicist visual language had a decisive influence on the emergence of the mass-produced image in the country. Firmly rooted in the academic tradition and familiar with its formulas, she removed its solemn stamp of high culture and carried over history, religious and genre painting into the more modest world of the illustration.¹

**Convalectsents**

Around the turn of the 20th century, convalescing women and girls were a popular theme in visual art. In the painting *The Convalescent* from 1884 (Fig. 1), now acquired by the Nationalmuseum, Nyström has chosen to represent the subject from the narrative perspective of the classicist tradition, with an idealised young female figure at centre stage, hovering between life and death.² The seriously ill patient is contrasted with the shamelessly healthy-looking and pretty girl standing by her side. The invalid looks upwards, trustingly placing her fate in God’s hands. The picture is full

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Fig. 1 Jenny Nyström (1854–1946), *The Convalescent*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 154 x 115 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7303.
of overt symbols, like the dead potted plant set against the bouquet of living flowers. The compositional pattern, centred on the histrionic body language and facial expressions of the figures, has its roots in an older anecdotal tradition. In early 19th-century genre painting, the figures often pose as they do here, on a kind of spotlight stage, creating a sense of distance. Many of Nyström’s fellow women artists were to question this kind of stereotyped female ideal. In Eva Bonnier’s (1857–1909) images of sickness, we find unembellished, everyday depictions, as for example in Reflection in Blue (1887), another work in the Museum’s collections (Fig. 2). The women in Bonnier’s painting are represented as subjects with a strong sense of purpose and integrity, and not as frail objects. They are portrayed from a realist perspective, placing us as viewers in the same room as the person who is ill.

The New Woman
In the 1870s and 1880s, women artists and writers had managed to carve out considerable space for themselves on the public art scene, shaking the male norm of the artist to its foundations. The many representations of convalescents should therefore be linked to the major backlash that came in the 1890s against the “New Woman” – the professional woman of the day. Misogynous subjects like this ultimately had to do with norms regarding the female body and the construction of prevailing views of femininity. In the 19th century, two important images of women took shape: the weak, delicate and sickly upper-class woman and the strong, dangerous and infectious woman of the lower classes. The convalescent became a symbol of subordination, of the fragility of “womanliness”, and hence proof of women’s inability to participate in public life. These pictures can be seen as a reaction to the emancipation of women at that time and an attempt to return them to the home and the private sphere. In the work of the Symbolists, women became a sign of the timeless, of the “eternal female”. The new fe-

Fig. 2 Eva Bonnier (1857–1909), Reflection in Blue, 1887. Oil on canvas, 80 x 64 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 1702.
male stereotypes of the turn of the century were madonna, muse or whore, since, according to the polarised and binary gender norms of the time, “woman” was either a primordial maternal force – the “life-giving mother” – or a dangerous elemental being that lured men to their destruction.

**The Paris Salon**

Jenny Nyström’s training included studies at the Gothenburg Museum School of Drawing and Painting (now the Valand Academy of Arts) and, from 1873 to 1881, at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. There, she won the royal medal for the competition subject *Gustav Vasa as a Child before King Hans* (Fig. 3). Nyström received a travel scholarship from the Academy in 1882 and moved to Paris, where she exhibited at the annual Salon. In 1886 she returned to Stockholm and married Daniel Stoopendaal, a medical student. In 1893, their son Curt was born.

It was during her time in Paris that Nyström painted *The Convalescent*. The same year, 1884, she had a self-portrait accepted for the Salon. She no doubt submitted several paintings that year, presumably including *The Convalescent*, but only her self-portrait found favour with the jury. Many artists at that time chose to submit self-portraits, as they were an important way of marketing their art. Since the late 19th century, this had been the best means of establishing one’s “brand” on the European art scene.

Jenny Nyström was a skilled entrepreneur and made her mark as an illustrator while still at the Academy, at the beginning of the 1880s. With *The Convalescent*, she deliberately turned her back on history painting and attempted to cater for the taste of the Salon public and their interest in tear-jerking subjects and dazzling technical bravura. It is interesting to compare the large painting with a study of a young girl by Nyström, that was acquired for the Nationalmuseum in 2013, with the title *Study for The Convalescent* (Fig. 4). If the two works are painted by the same hand, however, there are crucial differences between them. Compositionally, *The Convalescent* has its basis in drawing and is constructed from a classicist, academic perspective. The figures are plastically modelled and highly idealised. The study of the young girl, by contrast, is painterly in character; its technique is sketchy and its representation of the figure realistic. In my doctoral thesis, *Det ambivalenta perspektivet: Eva Bonnier och Hanna Hirsch-Pauli i 1880-talets konstliv* (The Ambivalent Perspective: Eva Bonnier and Hanna Hirsch-Pauli on the Art Scene of the 1880s), I discussed the question of the aesthetic of the sketch, of what should be considered finished or not – a central theme in the art debate of the 19th century. The academicians regarded the sketch as something unfinished, as a step in the working process towards achieving the fini, the “licked” surface of the completed work of art. The modernist avant-garde equated the sketch and the finished work, while painters of the *juste milieu* – the “happy medium” – had difficulty deciding when an image was to be regarded as finished. If the study is by Nyström, she could have painted it either while at the Academy in Stockholm, or a few years later in Paris. August Malmström, one of the professors at the Academy, attached considerable weight to the sketch in his teaching and had his students work on preparatory studies in oil. Malmström in turn was influenced by his mentor, the French academicist Thomas Couture, who claimed that the sketch had spontaneous qualities which the artist should take pains to retain in the finished artwork. Above all, our study of a young girl recalls the *juste milieu* model studies.
that were the staple diet of students at the Académie Colarossi, where Nyström first trained on her arrival in Paris.

Both the large painting and the smaller study are important additions to the Nationalmuseum’s collections, making a valuable contribution to our understanding of Jenny Nyström’s development as an artist and of the multifaceted artistic life of the 1880s.

Notes:
1. In 1996 I curated the exhibition Jenny Nyström: Painter and Illustrator at the Nationalmuseum. In the catalogue, the emphasis was on Barbro Werkmäster’s groundbreaking research into Jenny Nyström and the Swedish picture-book tradition. See Jenny Nyström: Målaren och illustratören, (exh. cat. no. 593), Margareta Gynning (ed.), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 1996.