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NATIONALMUSEUM @
With the generation of the “Opponents”, watercolour painting experienced a heyday in Sweden in the 1880s. The technique lent itself perfectly to marking a clear break with what the members of that group considered old-fashioned. The medium of watercolour made the move away from history painting, held in such esteem by the Academy, more pronounced — the shift from darkness to the light of plein-air painting could not have been made clearer. Although Anders Zorn (1860–1920) had already come a long way in his development at the beginning of the decade, the medium achieved its real breakthrough with Carl Larsson’s watercolours October and November, which won him a third-class medal at the Paris Salon of 1883. Zorn had enjoyed success at home as early as 1880 with his watercolour In Mourning (Fig. 1), but it would be a few years before he realised his full potential and progressed from promising to masterly. Over that time, he developed a growing freedom in his brushwork as he became less and less indebted technically to the internationally successful waterclourist Egron Lundgren, who had been a crucial source of inspiration.

Fig. 1 Anders Zorn (1860–1920), In Mourning, 1880. Watercolour on paper, 42 x 31 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMB 383.
The Nationalmuseum has in the last few years acquired a number of watercolours from this period, enabling it to offer a more in-depth survey of both Zorn and the phenomenon as a whole. The works in question are two figure studies by Zorn and one by Jenny Nyström, together with two portraits by the less well-known Carl Hedelin and Arvid Nyholm.

The two watercolours by Zorn were both painted on the artist’s travels: *Mephisto* (Consul Dahlander) (Fig. 2) in Madrid, and *Bedouin Girl* (Fig. 3) in Constantinople. Zorn went to Madrid from London in 1884, hoping to secure lucrative portrait commissions there. *Mephisto* was not one of them, but rather, judging from Zorn’s own words, a sudden whim, painted in a single morning. In a letter to his wife Emma, he wrote that he

> had taken supper with the Swedish consuls. I am sleepy and fuzzy-headed – this morning I couldn’t paint what I was supposed to, but then Consul Dalander from Valencia came up to the studio and, as a joke, I painted him as Mephisto, quite a pretty joke in fact.³

Although this watercolour depicts a named individual, it does not primarily have the feel of a portrait. It is more like a *portrait historié*, in which Zorn, half-jestingly, seems to have allowed the appearance of the sitter to determine the final character of the image. The picture is concentrated around the intense gaze, which – combined with the costume and the headgear – conveys a diabolical expression.

*Bedouin Girl*, too, seems to be built up with the subject’s gaze as its central element, perhaps even more markedly so. Zorn painted it in 1886 in Constantinople, where he was honeymooning with his bride Emma. It was difficult to find female models to paint, with the result that there are few images in that genre from the trip. Zorn often got round the problem by having Emma pose in clothes bought from local bazaars.⁴ *Bedouin Girl*, however, represents a model hired locally.

Fig. 2 Anders Zorn (1860–1920), *Mephisto (Consul Harald Johan Dahlander)*, 1884. Watercolour on paper, 34.2 x 26.2 cm. Purchase: Sara and Johan Emil Graumann Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2070.

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What, then, do these new acquisitions tell us about Zorn as a watercolourist? To begin with, it would seem that they were not commissioned, but rather painted on Zorn’s own initiative. It is not unlikely, therefore, that he felt greater freedom with these images than when working on portrait commissions (which is not to say that he had no intention of selling them). A possible indication of this is the simplicity of his overall approach in the two watercolours. As pictorial ideas, they seem driven by a desire to achieve the maximum of visual impact with the minimum of means. Apart from the actual costumes, there are no props in either of the pictures; rather, Zorn has concentrated in quite a particular way on his subjects who, though not portrayed in full length, take up the whole of the picture space. What is more, these paintings differ in character from the majority of Zorn’s other genre pictures or portrait studies from Madrid or Constantinople (this mainly applies to Bedouin Girl, as the Mephisto motif is not in fact directly linked to Madrid). For the most part, those images tend towards the picturesque, or else seem geared to fulfilling Scandinavians’ expectations of southern beauty and thus result in stereotypes of one kind or another.

It is interesting to consider Bedouin Girl as a picture both from, and rather of, the Orient. Far more than in any of his other watercolours from Constantinople, Zorn seems to have given pride of place here to the visual idea itself. The representation is strikingly simple (if we wished to, we could presumably count the number of brushstrokes), and yet powerful in effect. Spontaneously, one might perhaps think that Bedouin Girl carries a different meaning from images of women with more explicitly erotic allusions, but the fact is that, in the West, the veil was regarded as an item of clothing with the potential to seduce.\(^5\)

Fig. 3 Anders Zorn (1860–1920), Bedouin Girl, 1886. Watercolour on paper, 30.5 x 22 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2698.
Fig. 4 Jenny Nystöm (1854–1946), *Woman in an Armchair*, c. 1884. Watercolour on paper, 47.2 x 31.8 cm. Purchase: Ulf Lundahl Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2704.
Around Zorn and in His Footsteps

The next newly acquired watercolour is a work by Jenny Nyström (1854–1946). It shows a woman in an armchair in a studio (Fig. 4). The accessories are typical of an artist’s setting, and fashionably Japonist in style, with the decoration of the screen, fan and urn. It has not been possible to establish the woman’s identity, but she could conceivably be a fellow artist – partly in view of her short hair, which is usually seen as an expression of emancipation. Technically, this watercolour is one of the most advanced of Nyström’s paintings. The brushwork is light and offhandedly assured, producing an image worked out in much the same way as Zorn’s Mephisto: from the face, which is elaborated in detail, the painting gradually becomes more summary out towards the edges. We can imagine that, like Zorn’s picture, it was produced spontaneously in the artist’s own studio, with a friend as the model.

Arvid Nyholm (1866–1927) is now an almost forgotten artist. In part, this has to do with the fact that he emigrated to the United States at a relatively young age. As a student, along with a few friends from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, he turned to Anders Zorn in the summer of 1890 to ask him for lessons, a request to which Zorn agreed. Nyholm was already a skilled watercolourist, but his meeting with Zorn and the friendship that arose between them set their stamp on the rest of his artistic career. Zorn is said to have recommended Nyholm for commissions he himself felt obliged to decline. The portrait Child with a Hat was painted the year after Nyholm’s summer with his mentor, and bears clear traces of Zorn’s technique. Alongside the similarities, though, the painting’s strengths and its immediacy in relation to its subject show that Nyholm was no pale imitator (Fig. 5).

The fifth and final watercolour recently added to the collection is a portrait painted by Carl Hedelin (1861–1894). According to an inscription on the back, it represents the artist Mina Carlson-Bred-
Hedelin grew up in poor circumstances, and although he was seen as very promising (especially as a watercolourist), he never managed to make a living as an independent artist. When his father died, he was forced to support his mother from a very young age, and in 1886 he had to break off his studies prematurely to earn a regular income as a draughtsman in the Palaeobotany Department of what is today the Swedish Museum of Natural History. The watercolour now acquired is dated 1884, placing it in the period before Hedelin cut short his studies. The portrait captures the sitter at a moment when she seems surprised at her encounter with the portraitist, or at something he has said. A subtly rendered moment in the guise of a portrait which, in the most modest way, captures the spirit of an entire artistic epoch.

Notes:
1. The Opponents were a grouping of students from Sweden’s Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the 1870s and 1880s, who together wrote an appeal for a reform of art education.
2. October and November are now in the Gothenburg Museum of Art, to which they were given as part of Pontus Fürstenberg’s collection. Fürstenberg had bought them, unseen, through an agent in Paris. The same year, the Nationalmuseum was also able to acquire examples of the acclaimed new watercolour art in the form of Carl Larsson’s In the Kitchen Garden and The Old Man and the Nursery Garden.