



Struggle for Existence by Agnes de Frumerie

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Struggle for Existence by Agnes de Frumerie

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Fig. 1 Agnes de Frumerie (1869–1937) and Edmond Lachenal (1855–1948), *Struggle for existence (Source d'or)*, 1900. Stone ware, matt velvet opaque glaze, 84 x 74 x 25 cm. Purchase: the Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMSk 2362.

The Swedish sculptor Agnes de Frumerie (1869–1937), active in Paris at the turn of the last century, worked for several years with the French ceramicist Édmond Lachenal (1855–1948). One of the most spectacular works the two produced together was a relief in stoneware, almost a metre high, with matt velvet opaque glaze (“émail mat velouté”). The sculpture represents a group of naked figures in an arch-shaped opening. In the foreground there are people of various ages. With resigned expressions on their faces, they are holding and supporting each other. One man shakes his fist at the figures in the background, who are reaching out towards a dripping spring. The ones who are unable to reach it are pushed aside. The original title of the work was *La Source d'or* – The Spring of Gold – and in Swedish it has been called *Kampen för tillvaron*¹ – Struggle for Existence – apparently referring to a seemingly meaningless fight for existence and search for wealth, in which only the strongest survive. The sculpture is signed “Agnes de Frumerie 1900” at the bottom left and “E. LACHENAL Céramiste à Châtillon Seine 1900” on the back.²

Agnes Kjellberg was born in Skövde in 1869. Aged just 14, she moved to Stockholm to study at the Technical School, with a view to becoming an art teacher. At the age of 18, she was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. She won a state travel scholarship and installed herself in Paris in 1892 with her mother. Soon after this she married Gustaf de Frumerie, an artillery captain and later doctor of medicine, and the couple were to remain in the French capital for 30 years. In the 1890s the Frumeries mixed with the Swedish artistic avant-garde there. This included attending the Thursday salons hosted by fellow female sculptor Ida Ericson (1853–1927) and her husband William Molard in their apartment at 6 rue Vercingétorix. Among those who visited these salons were Strindberg, Zorn and Munch, and Paul Gauguin lived at the same address as the Molards. In the artistic world, Agnes

de Frumerie found herself at the centre of the Paris art scene.³ During her scholarship years, she reported everything in letters to the Academy.⁴ From 1893 she exhibited at the traditional Salon des Artistes Français, and from 1895 also at the new Salon National des Beaux Arts on the Champs de Mars. In addition, her work could be seen at the Salon de la Société des Arts Décoratifs. Frumerie was, moreover, very actively involved in the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, formed in 1881, exhibiting regularly there from 1895.⁵

It was long assumed that Agnes de Frumerie studied under Auguste Rodin. While she did not take actual lessons from Rodin, she was one of the Swedish sculptors who were most clearly influenced by the French master, realising early on how innovative he was. At one meeting, Rodin had advised her to work independently, and always from nature. She described him as “a latter-day Michelangelo, as unafraid and magnificent as he was, with the same contempt as he had for rules and the same ability to be himself amidst his contemporaries, who try in vain to imitate him.”⁶ Rodin’s influence is clearly visible in this relief. Just as in his *Gates of Hell*, the overall composition consists of a tangle of human bodies, gestures and gazes, and a mix of high and low relief. The ambition which sculptors had to create monumental works on great, universal themes reflected the mood of the times. As in Rodin’s work, the bodies and gazes express the figures’ despair at their hopeless fate.

Also typical of the period was the experimentation with different techniques in the applied arts, inspired to a great extent by Japanese ceramics. In the 1890s Édmond Lachenal started working with stoneware and a new type of glaze that became his trademark, “émail mat velouté” (matt velvet opaque glaze). The technique involved etching the glaze with hydro-fluoric acid, resulting in brightly coloured ceramics with matt effects. Another interesting aspect of Lachenal’s

business was his role as a “publisher” of sculptors’ works. The sculptors created the models in clay and plaster of Paris. These were then cast and reproduced in more enduring ceramic materials. Such collaboration between sculptors and ceramicists was especially important around the turn of the last century; ceramic sculpture was not as costly as casting in bronze and was therefore an ideal way of making works more widely available on the art market.⁷

The collaboration that took place between Lachenal and Frumerie from 1897 to 1908 was particularly fruitful. Frumerie showed her work several times in Lachenal’s exhibitions at the Galerie Georges Petit and in other displays. If Lachenal’s shows were where Frumerie could market ceramics, the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs was where she presented her sculptural works. Interestingly, *La Source d'or* was shown at both venues in 1900: in September of that year at the 19th exhibition of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs and in November at Lachenal’s 15th exhibition at the Galerie Georges Petit. No catalogues of these displays have been found, but it has been possible to identify *La Source d'or* by “Mme Frumerie” in press reviews of them.⁸

What happened to the work after that is unclear. The model is in the Västergötland Museum in Skara, to which Frumerie’s estate was donated after her death. The plaster model has an architectural frame, which for unclear reasons is not found in the ceramic sculpture, but which further emphasises the monumental character, typical of the period, of this unusual work.

Notes:

1. When the plaster model was registered at the Västergötland Museum on 10 April 1935, it was given the title *Kampen för tillvaron* (Struggle for Existence). My thanks to Göran Elisson and Jesper Nilsson at the Västergötland Museum for providing information about the model.

2. The sculpture was bought in 2017 from the Diva Fine Art Gallery, Paris. It had been on the art market since the early 2000s, before which it was



Fig. 1 Agnes de Frumerie (1869–1937) and Edmond Lachenal (1855–1948), *Struggle for existence (Source d'or)*, 1900. Stone ware, matt velvet opaque glaze, 84 x 74 x 25 cm. Purchase: the Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMSk 2362.

in private ownership. I am very grateful to Vibeke Röstorp for the information she has provided about the work in connection with its acquisition and the writing of this article. She was the first to publish the sculpture, in her article “La Suédoise Agnes Kjellberg de Frumerie (1869–1937), céramiste et sculpteur à Paris”, in *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de l’Art français*, 2005, Paris 2006. At that point, the work was referred to as *La Pluie d’or*, a name that subsequently accompanied it in the art trade and that was probably a result of confusion with the original title *La Source d’or*.

3. For a general introduction to Agnes de Frumerie, see Eva-Lena Karlsson, *Agnes de Frumerie: en mångsidig konstnärinna*, Skrifter från Skaraborgs länsmuseum, 5, Skara 1985; Eva-Lena Karlsson, *Agnès de Frumerie: Une artiste aux dons multiples*, Skaraborgs länsmuseum, Skara 1986; Agneta Boqvist (ed.), Irja Bergström, Göran Elisson, Eva-Lena Karlsson et al., *Kvinna och konstnär – Om Agnes de Frumerie och skapandets förutsättningar vid sekelskiftet*, Skrifter från Skaraborgs länsmuseum, 29, Skara 1998; Irja Bergström, *Skulptriserna: Alice Nordin och hennes samtida 1890–1940*, Makadam förlag, Göteborg/Stockholm 2012.

4. Röstorp 2006, pp. 300–315.

5. Vibeke Röstorp, *Le Mythe du retour: Les artistes scandinaves en France de 1889–1908*, Eidos, 26, Stockholms universitets förlag, Stockholm 2013, pp. 339–341.

6. Vibeke Röstorp, “Scandinavian Artists in France and their Connections with Auguste Rodin”, in *Rodin: Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and the Nordic Countries*, Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki / Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Stockholm 2015, pp. 127–138.

7. Martin P. Eidelberg and Claire Cass, *Edmond Lachenal & His Legacy*, Jason Jacques Gallery Press, New York 2007.

8. Mohammad Handjani, Diva Fine Art Gallery, Notice novembre 2017 (unpublished). Handjani points out that *La Source d’or* was mentioned in “Lettres et Beaux-arts”, *Le Monde artiste illustré: Musique – théâtre – beaux-arts*, 9 September 1900, vol. 40, no. 36, p. 566; R.M., “Nouvelle application de la céramique”, *La Science française*, no. 304, 23 November 1900, p. 202.