

An oil painting of a young woman's head and shoulders in profile, facing right. She has dark, curly hair and is wearing a dark brown garment with a prominent yellow-green scarf. The background is a textured, dark greyish-blue. The word 'COLNAGHI' is printed in white at the top.

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August Johnsson

*Portrait of a Young Woman in Profile, possibly Alma
Ekberg*

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AUGUST JOHNSON

Sweden 1873 – 1900

Portrait of a Young Woman in Profile, possibly Alma Ekberg

Oil on canvas
48.2 x 40.5 cm
19 x 16 in.

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Likely executed by August Johnsson (1873-1900) during the final years of his brief but remarkable career, this evocative portrait captures a young woman in profile with a striking sense of quiet introspection. Thought to depict the Swedish artist Alma Ekberg (1876–1942), the work offers a compelling glimpse into the close-knit artistic circles of Lund at the turn of the twentieth century, where many of southern Sweden’s emerging painters trained and worked alongside one another.

The composition is marked by a refined simplicity. Set against a dark, undefined background, the sitter emerges softly from the shadows, her face illuminated by a restrained and meticulously rendered light. Johnsson avoids overt sentimentality, instead conveying character through subtlety: the thoughtful upward gaze, the gentle modelling of the features, and the harmonious balance between light and darkness. The result is a portrait of unusual psychological depth, imbued with a sense of stillness that invites prolonged contemplation.

The painting exemplifies distinctive qualities of the finest Nordic fin-de-siècle portraiture. Eschewing status or narrative, the work privileges mood, atmosphere, and inner life. Johnsson’s handling is confident yet delicate, demonstrating a sensitivity to both form and emotion. The muted palette and intimate scale further enhance the painting’s contemplative character, creating an image that feels at once personal and timeless.

If the identification is correct, the sitter is Alma Ekberg (1876–1942), an artist who studied under Fredrik Krebs in Lund before continuing her education in Copenhagen and Dresden. Her presence here enriches the portrait’s historical significance, connecting two artists whose careers developed in tandem within the vibrant cultural environment in southern Sweden, although it would turn out to be a tragically brief phase.

Widely regarded as one of the most promising young Swedish painters of his generation, August Johnsson received the prestigious Hertliga Medal in 1897 at the age of twenty-five, yet his career was cut short when he died from tuberculosis just two years after. According to contemporary accounts, Johnsson destroyed a substantial portion of his work before his death, leaving only a small surviving body of paintings and pastels. Their scarcity is further compounded by the fact that Johnsson rarely signed his works, making questions of attribution particularly significant. As a result, authentication has often relied upon the testimony and records of his close friend and fellow artist Herman Österlund (1873–1964), whose inscriptions and identifications have played an important role in preserving Johnsson’s surviving oeuvre.

This rarity lends particular importance to the present portrait, which stands as a poignant example of the artist’s sensitivity and poetic vision, qualities that earned him recognition as one of the leading voices of the so-called “Scanian twilight” generation. More than a likeness, the painting is an intimate meditation on presence and personality, preserving a fleeting moment from a rich artistic milieu and burgeoning career whose promise was curtailed.

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