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Hugo Simberg

The Model Warming Up, ca. 1906

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HUGO SIMBERG

Hamina 1873 – 1917 Ähtäri

The Model Warming Up

Oil on canvas

67 x 43 cm

26 3/8 x 16 15/16 in.

Signed lower right: Hugo Simberg

Provenance

Hotel Kämp, Helsinki, Finland;

Private Collection, Finland

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Hugo Simberg's *The Model Warming Up* transforms an intimate studio interlude into a scene of striking psychological and visual tension. A naked model is bent over a tiny stove, desperately trying to warm herself during a posing-break. Rather than presenting the nude as an idealised, static object of academic study, Simberg captures the body in a moment of interruption: chilled, vulnerable, and deeply human. The figure is couched over with arms outstretched towards the diminutive heater, her body forming a long, sinuous arc that imbues the composition with its intrigue. The pose is neither theatrical nor conventionally graceful, yet it possesses an unexpected elegance, its natural beauty found precisely in its informality.

Her pale body is set against a quadrant of negative space painted in rich earthy colours of muted greens, greys and ochres. Simberg's handling of flesh is especially delicate, numbing blue shadows gather along the legs and torso, whilst the faintest traces of warmth appear on her hands—the minuscule heater surpassing its expectations. The contrast between the model's marbled skin and the dark stove intensifies the palpable frigidity of the scene. The warmth becomes an invisible agent in the setting—a sacred force, alluring as the object of desire yet tauntingly inefficient. Nearby, a willfully ignored heap of black clothing with its latent promise of warmth becomes another silent presence, communicating that this is but a brief chance for the woman to absorb all the heat available to her.

As with many of Simberg's artworks *The Model Warming Up* contains a humorous element.¹ The tiny stove, almost absurd in scale, appears feeble to the task of warming the exposed figure, let alone the room, while the model's single-minded posture gives the scene an almost ritualistic quality, as though she were a worshipper making obeisance to the modest source of heat. The model is standing on a platform which further accentuates the diminutive size of the object and her distance to it. Yet this humour never compromises the tenderness of the image. Instead, Simberg elevates a fleeting domestic moment into something poetic: a mediation on the body not as ideal form, but as living, tender and susceptible.

The composition is resourceful, allowing the viewer to consider the relationship between negative space, objects and subject—while retaining a formal sophistication. The strong verticals of the panelling, the block-like juniper platform, and broad ochre plane at the right of the composition creates a complex geometric structure, juxtaposing her anatomical curvature. The result is a painting of rare charm and nuance, offering a behind-the-scenes vision of artistic life that feels at once candid, modern and deeply affectionate.

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