

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Helene Schjerfbeck  
(Helsinki 1862 – 1946 Saltsjöbaden)

*Head of a Man (Christ), 1898*

Pencil on paper  
11.5 x 9.5 cm  
4 1/2 x 3 6/8 in.

Provenance:  
Erkki Calonius;  
Thence by descent, until;  
Private Collection, Finland.



A central figure in Nordic modernism, Helene Schjerfbeck developed a highly distinctive style created largely at a distance from the currents of European modernism. Long admired in her native Finland, her international significance has recently been reaffirmed by the major retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which highlighted her psychologically charged portraits and striking formal language. As an important figure of the modernist women artists of her generation, Schjerfbeck occupies a pivotal position in the history of both Nordic art and modernism more broadly.

The present drawing, *Head of a Man (Christ)*, 1898, is a study for her Altarpiece *Resurrection of Christ* (fig. 1) in Ruotsinpyhtää Church in southeastern Finland, close to the city Loviisa to which the artist incidentally would be evacuated nearly fifty years later during the Second World War.

The sitter for the study, and subsequent altarpiece, was railway worker Johannes Lindfors. Lindfors is portrayed in the present drawing with short hair and a moustache adorning an otherwise clean-shaven face – then markers of a modern man – unlike the figure of Christ in the altarpiece, shown with archetypal auburn shoulder-length hair and beard. In both artworks, Schjerfbeck depicted Lindfors as a classically handsome and stoic man, here with a strong jawline and nose carefully rendered with striking contour lines, especially toward the lower right of the drawing, contrasted with the soft cross-hatching giving shape to his cheekbones and brow.

While Schjerfbeck was no stranger to using sitters from her immediate surroundings – extended family members, sanatorium staff, caretakers, factory workers have all featured in significant paintings in her oeuvre – she likely deliberated carefully over her choice of sitter for Christ. Lindfors' strong masculine features surely felt apt as inspiration for a personification of Christ, but the artist's biographical connection to the sitter's vocation warrants a passing note. Before Schjerfbeck was born, her father Svante Schjerfbeck had been a merchant in Ostrobothnia, a sub-region along the west coast of Finland, until bankruptcy forced the family to move to Helsinki in search of a new beginning. In the quickly industrialising capital, Svante Schjerfbeck found work managing the railway's machine workshop to support the family and later enable Helene to study at drawing school as an early teenager. In 1876, when Schjerfbeck was fourteen years old, her father died of tuberculosis. As a student at the Finnish Art Society Drawing School, Schjerfbeck painted at least three academic realist portraits of her father shortly after his death. Later in her career she also produced modernist works depicting her father based on a daguerreotype from the 1860s (fig.2 and 3). Beyond their shared connection to railway work, Svante Schjerfbeck and Johannes Lindfors also exhibit something of a physical resemblance – inviting the consideration that Schjerfbeck's Christ carries a paternal resonance.

At four years old, Schjerfbeck fell down a set of stairs and broke her left hip leaving her with a life-long limp and chronic pain. Due to her reduced mobility and awkward gait, throughout her life Schjerfbeck wrestled with perceptions of her femininity. In her early twenties she was engaged to an unknown English artist (Schjerfbeck burned all letters mentioning his name and instructed her friends to do the same). The engagement was broken off, due in part to her fragile health. Schjerfbeck used her lapsed engagement and other early romantic

disappointments as artistic inspiration. In the 1890s when her mobility issues worsened, she began to reassess her hopes and desires of partnership. Having travelled extensively in the preceding fifteen years to and from Paris – painting, drawing and socialising at Mme Trélat de Vigny’s ladies’ atelier where she wrote about enjoying visits by Jean-Léon Gérôme and Léon Bonnat and later studying at the Académie Julian – she now spent more and more time in Finland, absorbed by her burgeoning painterly language. Her idiosyncratic style, which paradoxically gives utmost credence to the subject’s physical presence while simultaneously cloaking them with a sense of privacy, is exemplified in Christ’s gaze in the present study: his direct eye contact with the viewer is resolute yet the slightly lowered eyelids suggest an almost inaccessible calm sensuality. Anja Olavinen in Ateneum’s (National Gallery of Finland) publication *Helene Schjerfbeck 150 Years* identifies *Head of a Man (Christ)* as a striking illustration of Schjerfbeck’s “highly modern [...] shift towards a sparser mode of expression and the turning of the gaze inwards”.<sup>1</sup> A few years after producing the drawing and Ruotsinpyhtää altarpiece, Schjerfbeck moves with her mother to Hyvinkää and stays put for 15 years without travelling elsewhere. This period of introspection and removal from a more active lifestyle is the moment when Schjerfbeck fully develops and embraces her distinctive and celebrated modernist style. The present study carries in it the artistic conditions and biographical context that led to this decisive phase.

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<sup>1</sup> Olavinen, Anja, “*Helene Schjerfbeck’s images of men / Helene Schjerfbeck’s mansbild(er)*,” in *Helene Schjerfbeck: 150 Years*, exhibition catalogue, Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, 2012, pp. 32–43.



Fig. 1, Helene Schjerfbeck, *Resurrection of Christ*, 1898, oil on canvas, Ruotsinpyhtää Church, Pyhtää, Finland.



Fig. 2, Helene Schjerfbeck, *My Father*, c. 1880, oil on canvas, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki.



Fig. 3, *Daguerreotype of Svante Schjerfbeck, ca. 1860s*, Public domain photograph, Wikimedia Commons.