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Gottfrid Kallstenius
Plum twigs, 1895

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GOTTFRID KALLSTENIUS

Västervik, Sweden, 1861 – 1943

Plum twigs, 1895

Oil on canvas laid on board

56.5 x 42.5 cm

22 1/5 x 16 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Sweden

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Gottfrid Kallstenius trained initially with Edvard Perséus (1841-1890), before joining the Swedish Royal Academy in 1884. Here he would flourish, receiving medals for his early works in 1887 and 1888. Exhibiting internationally whilst still a student at the Academy, he received a gold medal at the International Exhibition in Munich in 1890. He would continue to exhibit internationally throughout his career, receiving gold medals at the World Exhibition in St. Louis in 1904, in Munich in 1905, Buenos Ares in 1910 and San Francisco in 1915. Artistically and politically aligned with the Academy, Gottfrid managed to maintain a good relationship to those artists who had instigated the formation of the Swedish Artists' Association, in opposition to the Academy. He would take on the role of the Association's secretary from 1899 to 1910, teaching there from 1898 through to 1904. He would then become a teacher at the Academy in 1910, appointed vice professor in 1912.

It was at the Academy he would meet Gerda Roosval and the two would marry in 1891, the same year he had graduated with a travel scholarship, together undertaking a study trip to France and Italy. It was in Paris that Gottfrid would absorb the new developments of the French avant-garde, studying in Raphael Collin's private studio school. Kallstenius embraced the en-plein air style of painting, particularly evident in his work during the couple's time in Grez sur loing in the summer of 1892. Just a short train from the centre of Paris, near the forest of Fontainbleu, the artist's colony at Grez was established in the 1870s, initially by Scottish, American and British artists. However, it was quickly dominated by Nordic expatriates by the 1880s, including Julia Beck, Karl Nordström, Christian Krogh, and Carl Larsson. Kallstenius' painting *Svenska målare i Grez* (Fig.1), from this summer, shows his wife and other women artists painting in a poppy field on the outskirts of the village. The work clearly shows a movement away from the academic realism he had been painting prior to his time in France, with a freedom to his brushstrokes and a clear attention to light and movement, indebted to the impressionist works he had seen in Paris.

Gottfrid travelled through Italy in 1893, including Lausanne, Verona, Padua and Pisa. He became fascinated by late medieval and early renaissance frescoes, with a prolonged stay in Siena, studying and copying works of Italian masters. Gerda would travel that October to reunite with him, their time in Siena, despite Gottfrid being gravely ill during it, always maintained an important place in their hearts, referring to it as their "dear city".¹ Whilst in Rome, Carl Bildt, the historian and Swedish envoy to Rome, asked whether Kallstenius would decorate the chapel of a monastery dedicated to the Swedish Saint Bridget, however

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Gottfrid declined, considering himself not mature enough for the task. It was during his time in Italy that Kallstenius wrote a letter home to the Academy, lamenting the lack of national art within Sweden, but praising those that painted its unique landscape, “one branch of art could perhaps be said to be national, and that is landscape painting, the lyricism of painting”.²

On his return home in 1894, Kallstenius embraced the national romantic mood that was beginning to take hold among artists within Sweden. The couple would stay on the island of Borsö in the Trosa archipelago with their young family in the summers of 1895 and 1896, where they rented a small fisherman’s cottage called “Borsö-Lina”. The painting here presented stands as a symphony in green, a painterly expression of all that he had taken in during his time in Paris, applied to his surroundings on the island of Borsö. The influence of Japanese woodcuts on the composition is clear, with the low branch breaking the immediate foreground of the viewer, a device that he would utilise in his decoration of Villa Lugnet in Saltsjöbaden. The close attention to the differing shades and intensity of light illustrates the influence of his time painting outdoors in Grez. This work stands at a pivotal point in Kallstenius’s transition from the painterly plein-airism that he had garnered in France and prior to becoming a disciple of the National Romantic movement, establishing himself as the lyrical painter of the Swedish archipelago, particularly the Småland coast, sanctifying the pine trees, rocks and sea, as well as celebrating the light of the North.

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Fig.1 Gottfrid Kallstenius, *Svenska målare i Grez*, 1892, private collection

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¹Charlotte Klingberg, *En blå hyacint i Paris (A blue hyacinth in Paris): Gerda Roosval-Kallsetnius, hennes värld och verk*, (Stockholm: Rönnells Antikvariat, 2009), p.50

²Letter to the Swedish Royal Academy, Royal Archive:

<https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/Presentation.aspx?id=12333&forceOrdinarySite=true>.

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