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Olof Johan Södermark
Young Woman in Italian Costume, 1930

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Olof Johan Södermark
(Landskrona 1790 – 1848 Stockholm)

Young Woman in Italian Costume

Oil on canvas, unfinished
60.5 x 48 cm. (23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 19 in.)

Provenance

Maria Louisa Södermark (1818-1888), daughter of the artist;
By descent to her daughter Carolina Örtenblad (1856-1926);
By descent to her son, Thorsten Åkerström (1879-1948)
By descent to his son Jan Olov Åkerström;
Private Collection, Sweden.

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Olof Johan Södermark (1790-1848) was born in Landskrona and showed an early aptitude for drawing, entering the fortification corps as a cadet at the age of thirteen before enrolling at the military academy in Stockholm in 1805. Trained as a military draughtsman, he developed a precise and disciplined hand through the production of maps and topographical studies, before turning fully to painting. By the 1830s he had established himself as the leading portrait painter in Sweden, executing a wide range of society portraits of the royal family, the aristocracy, and the bourgeoisie, as well as many of the most prominent writers, musicians, and scientists of his time. Many of his portraits were exhibited at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, where, between 1829 and 1848, no fewer than sixty of his works were shown.

He fought at the Battles of Leipzig and Großbeeren in 1813, and avoided death during the Swedish-Norwegian War of 1814 when his drawing materials deflected a musket shot. He received a gold medal from the King for his role in coordinating the Swedish advance across the river at Tistedalen, as well as a promotion to captain. He was later promoted to major and, by 1820, was knighted by King Charles XIV John, previously the French Marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte.

Though Södermark did not formally retire from active duty until 1833, his military career had become largely nominal by the 1820s. He subsequently turned his energies increasingly to art, approaching it with the intensity of a latecomer. Between 1824 and 1828, he travelled first to Paris, where he copied works in the museums, and then to Rome, at the invitation of the sculptor Johan Niclas Byström (1783-1848), who introduced him to the realities of artistic life and to the small colony of Swedish artists and writers living in the Eternal City. Södermark remained closely associated with Rome throughout his career, returning on several occasions between 1826 and 1847, and it was there that he produced his small but distinctive group of genre paintings.

His time in Munich (ca. 1832-1834) coincided with the accession of Prince Otto of Bavaria as King of a newly independent Greece, coinciding with a renewed academic interest in the interpretation of classical civilisation. Södermark appears to have worked intensively during this period, which aggravated his already poor health, painting out of doors during the winter months, well before the *plein-air* practices of the later nineteenth century. He approached artistic life with the intensity of a latecomer. His initial training was as a sculptor, one of the more established avenues for an artist in Rome. Printmaking briefly held his attention, but it was in portrait painting that he most effectively applied his skills as a draughtsman.

His free and confident underdrawing is generally concealed in finished compositions. These included commissioned works, such as his portraits of the King and Queen (1831), as well as depictions of figures from his immediate circle. He painted the Swedish lyric poet Karl August Nicander in 1827 and the writer and reformer Fredrika Bremer in 1843. His portrait of Stendhal (1840; Palace of Versailles) is among his most notable works. Alongside this activity as a portraitist, Södermark executed a small number of genre scenes in Rome, typically representing southern European girls and women. Although these genre works were not formally included in Ludvig Looström's early account of the artist's production (Olof Johan Södermark. Hans lif och verk,

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1879), they were nonetheless recognised and partially recorded, and a number are now preserved in museum collections, including *Greek Woman in National Costume* (1839), Gothenburg Museum of Art (fig. 1), and another unfinished portrait depicting a *Roman Girl with a Coral Necklace and Earrings* in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (fig. 2).

His Italian portraits and genre figures are characterised by a marked restraint and clarity of form. The female figures, often presented in half-length and in traditional costume, are typically idealised, with a controlled expression and a suppression of anecdotal detail. In this respect, they recall the composure and balance of Renaissance models, particularly in the treatment of drapery, where sharply defined folds and a sculptural handling of fabric suggest close study of earlier Italian painting. Södermark's engagement with such sources is documented during his first stay in Rome, when he copied works by artists such as Andrea del Sarto.

The reverse of the canvas is inscribed: '*Ovanstående, ofullbordade porträtt av en italiensk / flicka är ett arbete av Olof Södermark under / Parisvistelsen omkring 1837 intygar / Gustaf Jaensson*'. Gustaf Jaensson (1891-1981) was an artist and conservator that worked at the Swedish National Museum and various royal palaces, before becoming the conservator at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1928 and to the King in 1941. He was a talented artist in his own right and this insight, combined with a close proximity to great masterpieces, made him uniquely qualified to distinguish authentic works from the many forgeries then rife in the Old Master market of the 1940s.

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Fig. 1: Olof Johan Södermark, *Greek Woman in National Costume*, 1839, oil on canvas, 98 x 74 cm (38 5/8 x 29 1/8 in.), Gothenburg Museum of Art, Gothenburg, inv. GKM 0033

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Fig. 2: Olof Johan Södermark, *Roman Girl with a Coral Necklace and Earrings*, 1830-39, oil on canvas, 44 x 38.5 cm (17 3/8 x 15 1/8 in.), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, inv. NM 7507

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