

# ELLIOTT FINE ART

*Nineteenth Century to Early Modern*

Esther Ellqvist  
(Ausås 1880 – 1918 Vättern)

And

John Bauer  
(Jönköping 1882 – 1918 Vättern)

*Portrait of Karin Cervin-Ellqvist*

Inscribed on reverse: *Karin Cervin-Ellqvist / målat av / Esther och John Bauer / Stockholm år 1915*

Oil on canvas

91 x 66 cm. (35 ¾ x 26 in.)

Provenance:

Bukowskis, Stockholm 28 October 2018, lot 616;

Private Collection, Sweden, until August 2021;

Private Collection, London.



Esther Ellqvist's life story is one of the most fascinating yet tragic in Nordic art. Married to John Bauer, one of Sweden's most celebrated artists, Esther's own very promising career was overshadowed by her husband's. The marriage was a stormy one, with Esther coming to feel abandoned due to John's frequent and long forays into the Swedish countryside in search of inspiration. Left at home, in charge of domestic duties, Esther lacked stimulation and her career faltered, painting only very occasionally. In 1918, Esther and John, along with their young son, drowned in a shipwreck on Lake Vättern in southern Sweden, whilst journeying to their new home in Stockholm which the family hoped would reunite them and enable Esther to restart her career.

Esther's work is extremely rare. Even rarer are paintings which post-date her student days, as is the case with the portrait of Esther's sister-in-law Karin Cervin-Ellqvist. Painted in 1915, the portrait is Esther's most impactful and important painting, alongside her famous self-portrait of 1910 (fig. 1). Remarkably, the inscription on the reverse of the canvas (see Annex) tells us that the portrait was executed in collaboration with her husband John, making it an extraordinary and rare work in and of itself, as well as giving it significant narrative value within Esther's life.

All in all, the portrait gives a tragic yet tantalising idea of what might have been, had Esther been able to practice her art more freely and had her short life lasted but a few decades more.



Fig. 1, Esther Ellqvist, *Self-portrait*, 1910, oil on canvas, 35.5 x 35 cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

## The Life of Esther Ellqvist:

Esther Ellqvist was born on 4 October 1880 to Johanna Nilsdotter in Ausås, the youngest of eight children.<sup>1</sup> Her father, Carl Christenson Ellqvist, was a schoolteacher and has been described as stern and harsh. Her mother Johanna had a softer temperament. Encouraged by Johanna, life in Ausås seems to have been filled with creative activities such as singing and painting. Esther's mother came from a well-to-do farming family where artistic creativity was supported.

Esther's mother received a large inheritance in the late 1880s. She had great ambitions for her children and noticing that several of them had artistic talents, the family moved to Stockholm where the children had the opportunity to receive vocational training. Esther's father resigned from his teaching position on 1 January 1889 and they headed to the capital. Esther, alongside her brothers Oscar and Ernst and her sister Gerda, started at the Technical School in Stockholm. Gerda became a needlework teacher and Oscar and Ernst became photographers. Esther was a frequent photographic subject of Oscar (figs. 2 and 3).



Fig. 2, Oscar Ellqvist, *Esther Ellqvist at her easel*, 1897, photograph, Jönköpings Museum

Fig. 3, Oscar Ellqvist, *Esther Ellqvist*, 1905, photograph, Jönköpings Museum

Esther's time at the Technical School gave her the artistic skills she needed to gain acceptance at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts, commencing her studies there in 1900. In 1864 Sweden allowed women to enrol at Academy, one of the first European countries to enable this broader participation in the arts. That said women were not allowed to attend the same classes as the men and their artistic education was conducted differently. This was problematic for women such as Esther, who had the artistic talent and ambition to succeed but lacked the same opportunities as her fellow male students. Furthermore, to be a female artist around the turn of the century still meant encountering hostility and overcoming

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<sup>1</sup> This text relies on the biographical information given by E. Malmberg, *Esther Ellqvist. Kvinna och konstnär kring sekelskiftet 1900*, 2008.

numerous barriers. As prominent a figure as Carl Larsson demonstrated the sadly prevailing attitude of the time, writing in 1879 upon the death of the artist Anna Nordlander that ‘my heart shudders when I see this weaker vessel – woman - throwing herself into the areas man used to regard as his own. Only the male temperament can produce a Parthenon frieze or the Sistine Chapel.’<sup>2</sup>

It was at the Academy that Esther met John Bauer (fig. 4). Both were driven students, though of very different personalities. Bought up in Stockholm, Esther was sociable and vivacious, engaged in city life. John, on the other hand, was solitary and often wracked by self-doubt. He preferred wondering the forests in search of inspiration, as he had done as a child growing up in the countryside in Jönköping. Despite these differences, the couple married in 1906. In 1908, supported by John’s father, they set off on a two-year trip through Italy. Returning in 1910, they saw a house on the shore of Lake Bunn, just outside Gränna which they purchased in 1914. The following year their son Bengt was born.

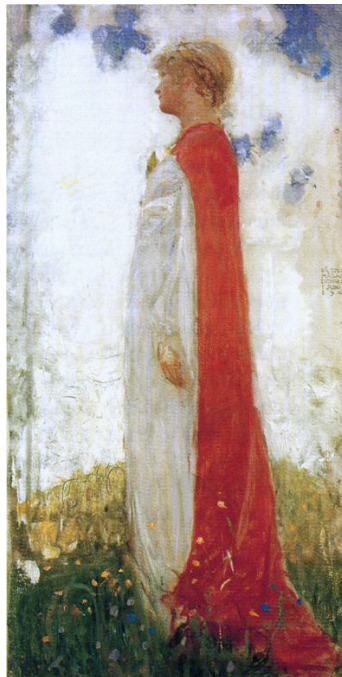


Fig. 4, Esther Ellqvist and John Bauer, c. 1904, photograph, Jönköpings Museum

Fig. 5, John Bauer, *The Fairy Princess*, 1904, oil on canvas, Private Collection

Blond-haired and classically Nordic, Ellqvist became an inspiration and muse for John, his ‘fairy princess’. He painted her frequently and incorporated her likeness into his folkloric illustrations from the outset of his career (fig. 5). John tried to mould Ellqvist into his vision of a creature of the woods and as the perfect artist’s wife; he wanted her to make a home for them in the wilds, whilst he wandered the forest seeking inspiration.

As his career took off, John was often away for long periods, leaving Ester feeling abandoned and alone, her own artistic career on hold. Instead of an independent artist, she was a lonely housewife, living far from the city where she felt most at home. Most of her known artistic production dates from before her marriage to John, painting family and friends, such as the artist Stina Tirén (fig. 6). After her marriage in 1906, Esther seems to have produced very little: the only known portraits from this time are the self-portrait of

<sup>2</sup> Cited by E. Malmberg, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

1910 and the present work. Over time, John began to use Esther as a model less frequently and by 1917 their marriage was in trouble, with John putting his thoughts about divorce in a letter to Esther.

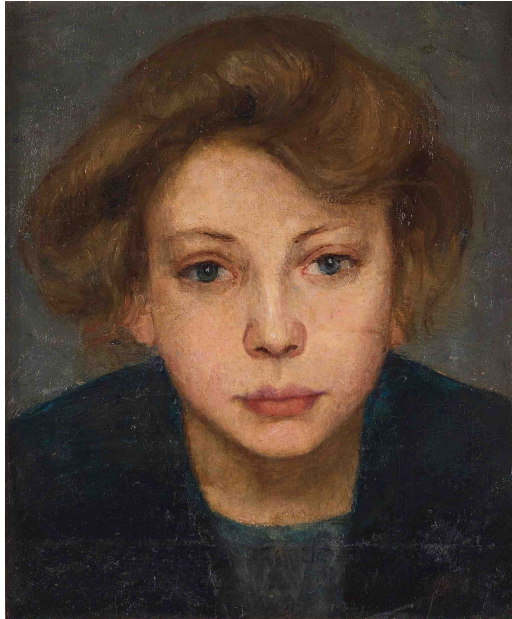


Fig. 6, Esther Ellqvist, *Portrait of the artist Stina Tirén*, oil on canvas, 32 x 35 cm, Private Collection

Perhaps to try and save the marriage, the couple purchased a new permanent house in Stockholm in 1918, where Esther would have her own studio and could focus on her painting. On 1<sup>st</sup> October 1918, in the leadup to their move, there occurred the worst train disaster in Swedish history, caused by a landslide at Getå. The well-published tragedy led to the fateful decision by John seven weeks later to take the ferry from Granna to Stockholm, instead of going by train. On 19<sup>th</sup> November a storm caused the heavily-laded boat to roll dangerously and then capsize. All twenty-four people on board, including the Bauers, drowned. John was thirty-six, Esther, thirty-eight, and their son Bengt was just three years old when they perished in Lake Vättern. Two artistic careers, one full-fledged and one full of unrealised promise, were cut short.

### The portrait of Karin Cervin-Ellqvist

The inscription on the reverse of the canvas tells us that the portrait is of Karin Cervin-Ellqvist, sister-in-law of Esther, and was painted in 1915.<sup>3</sup> Remarkably, authorship of the portrait is ascribed to both Esther and John. If so, and there is no reason to doubt it, the painting is an extraordinary testimony to spousal collaboration, a very rare phenomenon in art history though one with some precedence in Nordic art.

Even more extraordinarily, there is every reason to think that Esther was the lead artist in this collaboration. She was a portraitist proficient in oils, whereas John by this point was

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<sup>3</sup> Karin Cervin-Ellqvist was married to Esther's elder brother Carl. The sisters-in-law were close confidants and friends, frequently corresponding by post.

focussing on folkloric illustrations in watercolour. Furthermore, the chiaroscuro effect is in keeping with some of Esther's earliest known portraits (fig. 7), though here there is an expressive intensity and fluidity which far surpasses these student's attempts. Esther's technical progression over the previous decade, since her student days, is clear. There is a clear line of trajectory from the known portraits of 1904/05 to her famous self-portrait of 1910 to the depiction of Karin in 1915. This progression is made more remarkable when considering how little she practiced and makes one wonder what would have been had she been able to paint more regularly.

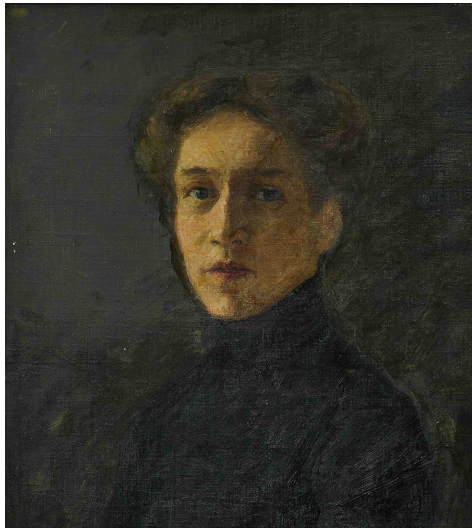


Fig. 7, Esther Ellqvist, *Portrait of Blenda, the artist's sister-in-law*, c. 1904-05, oil on canvas, 43 x 39 cm, Private Collection

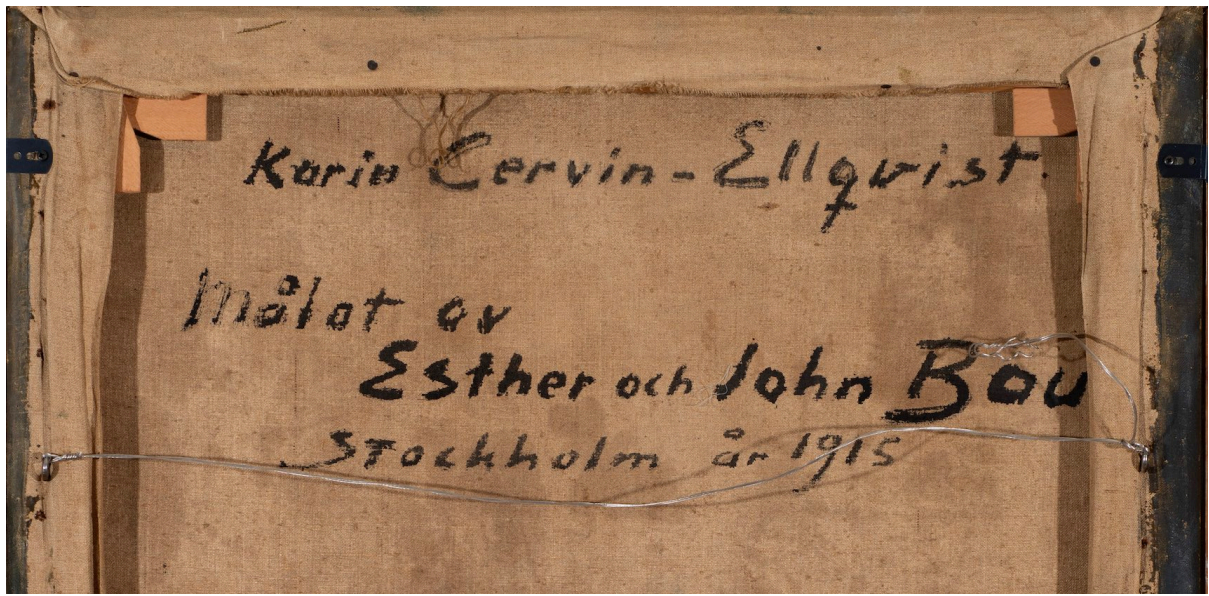


Fig. 8, Esther Ellqvist, *John Bauer and Karin Cervin Ellqvist*, 1913, photograph, Jönköpings Museum

The painting was executed in Stockholm. Although by this point the couple were spending most of their time at Granna, they did occasionally return to the capital. The painting could certainly have been done from life although there is a strong possibility that it was worked up from a photograph. A photograph of 1913 shows John, Ester and Karin sitting together in the Villa Brevik near Stockholm (fig. 8). Karin is shown seated in the same way as the painting, with her legs crossed and her arms stretched out and wrapped around her knee. Although the oversized hat is an addition, Karin wears a brooch at her naval and the same black dress, revealing her forearms. The overall atmosphere and painterly effect is reminiscent of Edgar Munch's self-portrait of 1895 in the National Gallery, Oslo.

It may be no coincidence that Esther and John's artistic collaboration dates to 1915, a year of momentary happiness for the couple following the birth of their son Bengt. Working harmoniously together, this portrait might be a manifestation of this fleeting period of happiness. Whatever the case, it is a fundamental work within Esther's oeuvre and also a painting of importance within the context of Nordic art from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Annex



Inscription on the reverse of the canvas