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Gustaf Fjæstad  
*The Snow*, 1920-21

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GUSTAF FJÆSTAD  
(Stockholm 1868 – 1948 Arvika)

*The Snow*, 1920-21

Oil on canvas  
134 x 174 cm  
52 3/4 x 68 1/2 in.  
Signed and dated lower left: G Fjaestad / Vermland 20-21

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Provenance  
Private collection, Sweden.

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## Literature

Carl-Johan Olsson, "White Winds and White Woods," *FMR Magazine*, no. 16, p. 111  
(image p. 112-113)

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Gustaf Fjæstad, nicknamed the “Master of Snow”, dedicated his entire life to painting the snowy landscapes of his native Sweden. He trained under Bruno Liljefors, the famous and influential wildlife painter, and also studied with Carl Larsson, whom he assisted in completing the fresco murals now in the Nationalmuseum, the National Gallery of Sweden. He exhibited for the first time in 1897 and by the age of thirty was already acclaimed as one of Sweden’s leading artists, having shown numerous snowscapes at the Stockholm Artists’ Union in 1898. That same year, Fjæstad married the talented young artist Maja Hallén (1873 – 1961), with whom he founded the Rackstad Colony on Lake Racken in the heart of unspoiled nature near Arvika in the province of Värmland on the border with Norway.<sup>1</sup>

Fjæstad’s greatest success, however, came on the international stage. His delicate winter depictions were first championed by German art lovers and critics, who crowned him the “Snow-King of the North.” In Rome, his paintings were presented at the 1911 International Exhibition of Art, deeply impressing Italian collectors and King Victor Emmanuel III, who bought one of his works. “When I look at his landscapes, I feel the silence of the snow”, the king is said to have remarked. That reach only widened with time; as recently as 2025, the National Gallery of Canada acquired *Winter Brook*, the first of his works to enter a Canadian museum. The strength of these scenes lies in their capacity to find in frozen landscapes a singular metaphysical and emotional power without ever becoming repetitive, just as the Inuit are said to hold a plethora of words for the varieties of snow. Frost and winter were his original hallmark, and he painted *en plein air* in the surrounding forests in search of a particular light, exploring the serenity of untouched beauty and a deep sense of mysticism.

In the present painting, Fjæstad elevates the stillness of the winter landscape to near-mystical heights. Rather than blanket the earth, the snow here animates it, swelling over the branches in soft, sculptural masses, lending the central tree an almost creaturely appearance bowed beneath its own frozen abundance. The great tangle of ligneous limbs that stretches across the composition is at once architectural and gestural, suspended between weight and lightness, promising a vision of nature as immobilised yet never inert. The palette is also exceptionally refined. Rather than render snow as a flat white, Fjæstad instead inflects it with lilac, blue, rose, and pale gold hues so that the surface seems to shimmer from within. A low winter sun, diffused through a pearly sky, bathes the scene in a sublime radiance, while eight small golden orbs of light hang in the air like embers or celestial signs, heightening the dreamlike register of the landscape. The surface is built from countless small touches of colour that, at close range, dissolve into a mosaic of discrete marks yet, at a distance, coalesce into a single atmospheric whole.

The division of colour is redolent of Pointillism and of the strong influence of such neo-impressionist painters as Georges Seurat, though it is employed less as a scientific exercise than as a means of catching the elusive flicker of winter light. Fjæstad had arrived at this language a quarter of a century earlier, in canonical works

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<sup>1</sup> Hailey Chomos, “Gustaf Fjæstad: Snow King of the North,” *National Gallery of Canada Magazine*, December 4, 2025.

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such as *Winter Moonlight* (1895, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), where a snow-deep forest beneath a starry sky first fused his realist observation with the decorative stylisation of Art Nouveau. In *The Snow*, that synthesis finds its fullest expression.

Fjæstad's method was itself unusual given that he worked, in part, with photosensitive chemicals. He would coat the canvas with a light-sensitive preparation and project an image of the scene onto it as a preliminary map of light, which he then completed by hand. The colour was laid on in thick impasto layers, giving the artist greater control over the play of light and lending the whites their extraordinary optical brilliance. The soft, rolled, ornamental shapes of the snow bear a clear Art Nouveau imprint as positive proof that he had evolved beyond the nineteenth-century manner of depicting landscapes and was already anticipating more modern forms. What makes the work so compelling is this fusion of close natural observation with poetic imagination. At first glance, the image reads as a delicate, decorative tracery of lace-like snow and curved, graceful lines in the manner of Art Nouveau. Nevertheless, a deeper and more universal sense can be gleaned from the silence of the snowy forest, perhaps a longing to live in harmony with nature or the search for inner peace that Fjæstad seems to have found only in the purest and most unspoiled of Nordic territory. The scene thus possesses the decorative elegance of Nordic Symbolism while remaining rooted in the physical experience of nature: cold air, crystalline light, muffled sound, and the fragile splendour of a landscape held in suspension.

Such imagery grew directly from Fjæstad's experience at Rackstad. Surrounded by dense forest and some of Sweden's longest winters, he found in the snow-covered land an inexhaustible source of artistic and philosophical inquiry. His creative process, like Maja's, was strongly shaped by the Theosophical movement, a forerunner of today's New Age spirituality. Paintings that portrayed nature in its purest form became, for him, a means of expressing universal enlightenment and eternal truth. In this context of "emotional art", a phrase that captures the essence of the Symbolist project, *The Snow* is a characteristic example, evoking a meditative state of mind and a serene sensation of the sublime, and regarding nature not as a mere physical environment but an entryway to deeper spiritual truths.

Painted in 1920–21, *The Snow* belongs to the mature phase of Fjæstad's career, after the idiosyncratic manner that won him international acclaim had fully formed. Few painters are more closely identified with the winter landscape, and his snow transformed a familiar Nordic subject into one of the defining images of Nordic Symbolism. Within the broader current that Roald Nasgaard called "the mystic north", *The Snow* finds its natural companion in Harald Sohlberg's *Winter Night in the Mountains* (1914, Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo), widely regarded as the pinnacle of symbolist landscape painting in Norway.<sup>2</sup> In both, the visible world dissolves into pattern, light and atmosphere, and winter becomes less a season than a state of transcendence. In the present painting, that transcendence is held in perfect equilibrium where nature is revealed at once as material reality and as poetic vision.

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<sup>2</sup> Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America, 1890–1940* (Toronto: Published in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario by University of Toronto Press, 1984), 77.

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Fjæstad's works are held in major collections including the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio; the Musée d'Orsay, Paris; the Gothenburg Museum of Art; the Art Institute of Chicago; and, since 2025, the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The following works set *The Snow* against the two poles of Fjæstad's own career, the early breakthrough and the late international synthesis, as well as against its closest peer in the wider Nordic Symbolist movement. Fjæstad's *Winter Moonlight (Vintermånsken)* represents the most canonical early statement of his work (fig. 1). By around 1900, the winter landscape had accrued multiple layers of significance as a symbol of Nordic identity, expressed in Fjæstad's work through frost, snow, and dark water, combining a realist ambition with a high degree of stylisation. The painting demonstrates the divisionist rendering of snow and broader decorative impulse exemplified by *The Snow* already a full quarter-century earlier.



Fig. 1. Gustaf Fjæstad, *Winter Moonlight (Vintermånsken)*, 1895, oil on canvas, 100 × 134 cm (39 3/8 in x 52 3/4 in.), Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, inv. NM 1628

By 1908, Fjæstad had succeeded in uniting two of his most enduring motifs—scenes of running water and snowscapes—into a singular vision. A near contemporary of our present painting, *Winter Brook* (after 1908) documents both the late maturity of his

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manner and the international reach of his reputation (fig. 2). The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa has recently presented it in dialogue with J. E. H. MacDonald's *Snowbound* (1915), highlighting the resonance between Fjæstad and the Group of Seven.



Fig. 2. Gustaf Fjæstad, *Winter Brook*, after 1908, oil on canvas, 86 × 110 cm (33 7/8 in x 43 1/4 in.), National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

First shown at the 1914 Jubilee Exhibition, Herald Sohlberg's *Winter Night in the Mountains* (1914), represents the defining Nordic Symbolist winter image and Fjæstad's closest peer beyond Sweden (fig. 3). Donated to the National Gallery in 1918, the work retains its exceptional reception decades later, where it was voted "Norway's national painting" in 1995. Unlike Fjæstad, whose transcendence rises from a snow-laden forest at twilight, Sohlberg's rises from the moonlit peaks of Rondane. Although pursued through a different motif, both approaches reflect the same spiritual ambition animating twentieth-century Nordic artistic production.

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Fig. 3. Harald Sohlberg, *Winter Night in the Mountains (Vinternatt i Rondane)*, 1914, oil on canvas, 160 × 180.5 cm (62 in x 71 1/8 in.), Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo, inv. NG. M. 01185

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