

Malmö Art Museum

Press text

Carl Fredrik Hill - *maximus pictor* 17.2 - 9.4 2012

With this large and comprehensive exhibition Malmö Art Museum wants to pay tribute to one of the geniuses in the art of painting and drawing, Carl Fredrik Hill (1849-1911). He died 101 years ago and is one of the most significant artists to have originated from Sweden.

"I would just like to mention, that in me Sweden will get a painter whose like they have never seen" Carl Fredrik Hill

Carl Fredrik Hill's personal fate was to be tragic through his progression into mental illness. His artistic development, on the other hand, was to be exciting and fascinating on its way from traditional landscape painting in the 1860s, via luminarism and impressionism in the middle of the 1870s to greater and greater expressionistic strength from 1882 until his death in 1911.

Carl Fredrik Hill was born back in 1849 and grew up in Lund, southern Sweden. He was an introvert and liked to draw and paint as a boy. He demonstrated a promise to become a landscape painter. While his father cautioned him against going into art because it was a "dangerous" career in terms of bringing financial uncertainty, he undertook studies at the Royal Academy of Arts in Stockholm. Then in 1873, against his family's wishes, he moved to Paris, the capital of art which at the time.

Both the painters of the Barbizon School and Corot had a decisive influence on him. And the Impressionists were in formation when he arrived. It's hard to imagine a better place or time to be a young painter interested in outdoor subjects. During his time in Paris Hill spent the summer months in the countryside. His first visit was to Barbizon and subsequent years he traveled to Montigny-sur-Mer and Luc-sur-Mer. On these occasions he made sketches as the basis for landscape paintings made later in his studio. Yet, Hill's endeavors were not crowned with official success; due to their radical tenor, his works were rejected when he presented them at the Paris Salons.

In 1877, he was invited to join the third Impressionist Exhibition, taking place in an apartment rented by Gustave Caillebotte. Afterward, imagining that success was at hand, Hill rushed into a frenzy of work and had a breakdown. At the age of 28, his career as a landscape painter came to an untimely end. Suffering from repeated hallucinations, he is admitted to the private clinic of Dr. Blanche. In June 1880, his sister has him transferred to the Hospital of Sct. Hans in Roskilde, Denmark. He will stay there for two years after which he returns to Sweden and enters the mental hospital of Sct. Lars in Lund. A few months later, his sister Hedda Hill decides to take care of him and he will live with her until his death. No cure occurred and he spent the rest of his life secluded at home, drawing.

"Madness – how sublime when you wholly intoxicate ... proud madness, loose your wild foals ... O madness, step down from your zenith!"

Written behind the drawn blinds in Hills room in Lund

During Hill's long isolation he produced a steady flow of drawings that has fascinated people ever since. "The prince of whispers ... where the world glows in a blood-red struggle" writes the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf in a poem to Hill. While his illness broke down Hill's possibilities to be socially accepted, it also freed him from inhibitions and allowed him to access "his inner life of sexuality, of aggression and also beauty." He worked creatively, frantically and intensively, producing five to six drawings a day. Whatever he did became art, great art. The exciting, wild world of his drawings contrasts sharply with his outwardly almost eventless life.

The many facets of Hill's creative ability during his illness are exemplified by paintings in oils, in gold and in silver, in magnificent watercolours and ink drawings, as well as in crayon images of African animals and landscapes. There are also a number of pastel still lifes and portraits of Oriental ladies with the dedication "for the love of the ladies". Hill had access to a large library in his home. He would scour all books with illustrations in search of inspiration in creating his drawings. We know that he had visual and auditory hallucinations and that he was obsessed with the written word and numerology. One can see the words and numbers on his sketches but only occasionally do we see a connection between words and pictures. It's as if the words functioned independently of pictures.

In Lund his emotional life was marked by illness and it is clear that his sexual life was associated with anxiety and suppressed concepts. This is obvious from some of his drawings from that period. Following a trip to Copenhagen Hill caught a bad cold that progressed to pneumonia that resulted in his death on February 22, 1911. Church records refer to him as a former landscape artist.

Shortly after his death the National Museum in Stockholm and the Malmö Art Museum acquired a number of Hill's paintings. During the 1920s the Malmö Museum obtained several oil paintings and drawings from Hill's sister Hedda Hill and the Friends of the Malmö Art Museum. Following Miss Hill's death, several relatives and Hill's nieces and nephews bequeathed his entire artistic estate to the Malmö Museum. Today the museum has some 30 paintings and over 2,600 drawings.

Today, Carl Fredrik Hill is deemed as one pioneer of modernism and his work has exercised a crucial impact on modern 20th-century art. Carl Fredrik Hill's drawings were discovered and admired by artists mainly. Thanks to the Swedish collector Rolf de Maré, Hill's work became known in connection with the French avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s and continues to be a rich source of inspiration for both Swedish and international artists such as Arnulf Rainer, Günter Brus, Georg Baselitz, Per Kirkeby, Torsten Andersson, Ola Billgren, or Donald Baechler.

Carl Fredrik Hill is considered one of the most significant Swedish artists of the 19th century. His paintings and drawings are now deemed of equal artistic value. No longer are some works categorized as "illness drawings." During the one hundred and one

years that have passed since his death, the exhibitions have succeeded one another, in Sweden and abroad. For example in 1949 an exhibition of his works was held in Geneva, Hamburg, London, Basel, Luzern, and in Paris in 1952. These exhibitions triggered a series of books on Hill's works. Assessments have varied, and so too the relative importance of the paintings from the so called sane period in comparison to those painted in ill-health. In 2009 an exhibition with his drawings were shown at Scandinavian House in New York.

The current exhibition *Carl Fredrik Hill - maximus pictor*, first shown at Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde in Stockholm, features both the creative periods in Hill's life and also shows how they link into one another. Curator in Malmö is Senior curator Anders Rosdahl.

A book (in Swedish) *Carl Fredrik Hill - Maximus Pictor*, authored by Sten Åke Nilsson, former Professor of Art History in Lund, published by the Atlantis to coincide with the opening of the exhibition in Stockholm.

Text Malmö Art Museum 2012