

Subtle and unruly Immanuel Ibsen

September 10, 2017 – Januar 7, 2018



Immanuel Ibsen, *Still Life with Oranges*, 1937.
National Gallery of Denmark

Out of the shadows

In September 2017 opened the largest ever exhibition of the work of the Danish painter Immanuel Ibsen (1887-1944) – and the first in 25 years. The Subtle and unruly characterised Ibsen's personality and paintings, and no less so the era in which he lived. In the 1930s he painted his immediate surroundings: still lifes on the table and views from the window. Contrasts, asymmetry and smouldering experimentation with colour characterise these works. In 1943, Ibsen fled to Sweden with his Jewish wife and died there in 1944.

The painters' painter

Ibsen had a hard life, toiling away at his paintings and struggling to sell them. In spite of his somewhat unobtrusive position in the history of Danish modernism, it is important to promote wider recognition of his work. He has, in fact, had a significant impact on many later painters. In the small text *Unknown truisms about Painting (Ukendte selvfølgeligheder om Maleri)*, which has achieved an almost iconic status within artistic circles and led to Ibsen being nicknamed "the painters' painter", Ibsen formulates his view of the nature of art and the possibilities it presents. In so doing he acquired great importance for subsequent generations of artists such as Ejler Bille, Asger Jorn, Erik Hoppe and younger artists such as Jesper Christiansen.

The latter idolised Ibsen as a hero, with Ibsen's text inspiring him to become a painter.

The yellow ticket

One day Ibsen spots a yellow tram ticket lying on the grey asphalt. This apparently insignificant event inspires him to explore the relationship between colours in his painting and his writings. Asger Jorn states that Ibsen's observations are like "an invigorating salt". This story illustrates how

little it takes to fire the passions of a sensitive and intuitive artistic mind.

A time of crisis

Ibsen spent long periods of his life working as a coach painter by day while devoting himself to painting by night by the glow of the electric lightbulb. It is out of these pragmatic circumstances that his best and most paintings came into being. This approach forced him to abandon the colours of nature and instead work with a more idea-based colour palette. Rather than painting nature – trees, bushes and sunshine – he captured the miniscule differences in shape and colour in the world around him.

Beautifully staged

Painter Jesper Christiansen has arranged Ibsen's paintings in the beautiful old halls of the gallery, which have been decorated in partnership with paint supplier Flügger, which has generously offered to sponsor the painting of the building. Lone Kisbye, PR manager at Flügger, says:

We would like to contribute to illustrating how colours can be used in the staging of visual elements and how, in this context, both bold and less bold colours each justify their presence. Ibsen's paintings and philosophy fit beautifully into such a context. If we can play a part in further sharpening the visitor's senses, we will have succeeded in demonstrating what walls painted in just the right shades can contribute to the experience of space and art.

The exhibition offered new artistic angles on Immanuel Ibsen's oeuvre, together with works by members of Ibsen's family, which the public have never before have had the chance to see. Several hundred letters, the property of Ibsen's grandchildren, shed new light on Ibsen's life and thoughts.

The time had come for a re-evaluation of this sophisticated painter.



Immanuel Ibsen, *Opstilling med appelsiner*, 1937 (udsnit) Statens Museum for Kunst



Immanuel Ibsen, *Opstilling, bord med appelsiner, 1934* (udsnit) Deponeret på Nivaagaards Malerisamling af Louisiana Museum of Modern Art



Immanuel Ibsen, *Uden titel, u.å.* (udsnit) Privateje



Immanuel Ibsen, *Det gamle bomhus i Torvegade, ca. 1924* (udsnit) Privateje