

Rather derogatorily, Syberg has often been called a flower painter, and like many other female artists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, she never lived to experience the success of her own work. However, her life was in some ways unconventional for a woman of her era. Growing up as the daughter of an esteemed artist, Syberg was taught painting at the Technical School where her father was a teacher, and she later married one of his apprentices, Fritz Syberg, who would go on to become the more prominent artist of their lifetime. Together, they lived on the island of Fyn along with seven children, and here they became a part of the painting collective known as *Fynbomalerne*, a provincial counterpart to Copenhagen's artistic circles, and a collective who dedicated their focus to plein-air painting and the base idea of the impressionistic movement of maintaining the immediate impression of nature with emphasis on the light, weather, and air of the moment. The Danish Nobel Prize-winning author Johannes V. Jensen was likewise a frequent visitor in the Syberg household, and he once wrote of Anna Syberg, a couple of years after her premature death, that she was 'one of the toughest and most sensitive people I have ever known, a warrior and a friend, mother, artist and wild woman.'

With an unheard-of dedication and a tremendous fascination for the distinctive characteristics of each species, Syberg did not just paint the obvious floral motifs, those familiar favourites of the Impressionism. In fact, she was often captivated by the humbler growths, and her pictures likewise reveal a unique variety of plants and fruits: thistles, roses, dahlias, campanulas, everlasting flowers, stocks, wallflowers, cacti, beetroots, lemons, wisteria, Italian fruits, onions, pomegranates, greater musk mallow, grapes, boughs of apple trees, foxgloves, chrysanthemum, crocuses, hyacinths, tulips, summer dahlias, phyllo cacti, common bugloss, calla lilies, spring flowers, cineraria,

wild roses, cyclamen, tansy. And frequently it is the thistles and the weeds that appear in the centre of the painting. Or leaves and branches that will nearly hide the three yellow lemons, which other painters would feel inclined to centralise, to emphasise. But with Syberg, you get the impression that there is no hierarchy, no ulterior motives apart from her sincere wish to eternalise a very-short lived now: a streak of light, a growth, a form of life.

Apart from a few oil paintings, the exhibition, as well as to a large extent the painter's complete oeuvre, is made up exclusively of watercolour, Syberg's favourite medium. For some paintings, Syberg worked purely with the watercolour, though more regularly she would proceed by means of a combination of drawing and watercolour. The two techniques, arguably rather contradictory, would serve to keep each other in check: the precise pencil defined the features, shaping and confining the motif; the watercolour flowed, blurred, dissolving its boundaries. In other words, the pencil is the structure; the watercolour is life, is air, is breathing; and together, Syberg utilised them to create her characteristically dynamic paintings: their sense of layering, of movement. However, the watercolour was not merely artistically useful for the painter, but from a practical standpoint, too. Syberg married in 1894 at the age of 24, and in the years that followed she would come to give birth to seven children, why she would spend the remainder of her life trying to balance her artistic pursuits with a busy role as the mother of the ever-growing family. Since the thin, translucent layers of the watercolour was quick to dry, Syberg could easily interrupt and resume her work whenever her schedule allowed it.

In general, the exhibition feels, as you move through it, watery, glistening. Not only are the paintings made up of water, but the depicted plants, trees, fruits are as well. Working with watercolours, every added layer is advancing the painting on a journey from light to darkness: the initial white paper is the lightest colour, and with every brushstroke, the painting dims. Hence, the painter is walking a tight rope from transparency to turbidity. Though, in the darkened rooms of the Hirschsprung Collection, the bright flowers of Syberg's paintings radiate. Whereas some works are green, hectic, delightfully messy, portraying complex systems of thistles and unruly weeds, others glow subtly, as if they were aquatic plants suddenly, and beautifully, lit. What is possibly most impressive about Syberg's paintings is how she manages to achieve this near perfect balance. To identify this equilibrium where the paintings, at once, feel rigorously planned, virtually scientifically considered, yet remain wild, spontaneous, mobile, brimming with life. Following on from this point, it is also the most archetypal, and maybe most evidently aesthetic, of Syberg's works that are the least stimulating components of the exhibition. Particularly, the large-scale depictions of rose bushes are neat, pleasing to the eye, yet significantly less fascinating than Syberg's more unique and vibrant botanical studies.

Despite the demands of being a mother of seven, it seems that the Syberg household was fairly modern and relatively egalitarian. Still, there are signs that Fritz' art was prioritised: he was older, more established, and his works sold for larger sums than Anna's. A circumstance also linked to the clear prioritisation of male artists at the time, which, for example, meant that *Fynbomalernes'* own museum, Faaborg Museum, opted against exhibiting women. A decision reportedly determined by the vote of Syberg's own brother, who she afterwards wrote a furious letter, stating that his decisive vote was

equal to claiming that ‘I and the other ladies were of no significance to Danish art’.

More than a century later, the works of the men of *Fynbomalerne* are still more widely recognised, underscoring the importance of this exhibition.

Towards the end of her life, the Sybergs moved their large family to Italy, to Pisa, fulfilling the couple’s lifelong dream. They ended up staying for three years from 1910 until 1913. Whereas Fritz was busy depicting the cultural heritage of their new home region, its sculptures, its monuments, Anna Syberg became especially captivated by the flowers of the Campo Santo, a historical cemetery, as is visible in the late work *Tainsy, Campo Santo* (1913). The painting is bright with Mediterranean sunlight, filled with yellow flowers atop green and whitish stems stretched across the canvas, leaning sideways into the frame; a Syberg signature. The flowers are wild, entangled, pushing themselves forward stubbornly.

In 1914, a year after returning from Pisa, Anna Syberg died of a gallstone surgery gone wrong. She was merely 44 years old. Her youngest child was less than a year old. In 1915, her first retrospective was realised to some success. This time, Faaborg Museum bought fifteen of her paintings. Studying these works now with this knowledge in mind, it is hard not to read a certain degree of commentary into them. And maybe rightly so: Fritz’ paintings – perhaps by coincidence, perhaps by design – regularly appear in Syberg’s own paintings, lingering in the background of her flowerpots and vases, painted in with superior technique. As if a discreet indication that she was capable of realising both his works and her own. Today, at least, there should be no question that her flowers clearly overshadow his.