Two Examples of French Naturalism – the Primary Source of Inspiration for Swedish Art of the 1880s

Carl-Johan Olsson, Curator, Paintings and Sculpture
A question that arises from time to time regarding the Swedish artists who travelled to Paris in the late 19th century is how they responded to Impressionism and what impact, if any, it had on them. It would be overly categorical to claim that Impressionism was of no significance to these artists, and yet direct evidence of its influence in their work is limited. The Swedes’ awareness of the Impressionists is well documented, however, implying that their distance from that movement in terms of artistic practice was probably the result of a more or less unconscious choice. A conceivable reason why we do not see more in the way of Impressionist techniques and ideas in the painting of Swedish artists of the period is that this would simply have been too great a step, one that they could not have taken without losing their way or feeling compelled to start again from scratch. For artists such as Hugo Salmson, Carl Larsson, Emma Lögstädt-Chadwick, Eva Bonnier and others, the most important model was instead to be naturalism. The move to naturalist painting was no doubt a more feasible one, in that, in technical terms, it was closer to the academic painting they knew from home. In terms of subject matter, though, it was radical, compared for example with the history painting that dominated the scene back in Sweden.

The Nationalmuseum has acquired two important works by French artists from the 1880s. Both are examples of the kind of art that came to be referred to as

Two Examples of French Naturalism – the Primary Source of Inspiration for Swedish Art of the 1880s

Carl-Johan Olsson
Curator, Paintings and Sculpture

Fig. 1 Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884), Portrait of Madame Waskiewicz, 1881. Oil on canvas, 31 x 33.5 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N. D. Qvist Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7349.
naturalism. Alongside Impressionism, it attracted much acclaim in the early part of the 1880s, and in practical terms it was more influential in the international art world. The foremost pioneer of naturalism is considered to be Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884). The works now added to the collection are a portrait by Bastien-Lepage, Madame Waskiewicz from 1881, and Henry Lerolle’s (1848–1929) The Organ Rehearsal (À l’Orgue), from 1885. A key characteristic of this type of painting is its everyday subject matter, represented with a light and a sharpness that were intended to be close to reality. To achieve its full potential, it required almost illusionistic abilities of its artists, and critics, too, often judged it in terms of its faithfulness to nature. The purpose of the two acquisitions is to broaden our understanding of what inspired the Swedish-born artists who were in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s, and who laid the foundations for modern Swedish art.

Of the artists of naturalism, the pioneer Jules Bastien-Lepage made a particular impression on the Swedes. His influence is often said to have lain primarily in his choice of subject matter, drawn largely from poor rural and working-class settings. But for some Swedish artists, such as Hugo Salmson and Bruno Liljefors, the technical side of his art appears to have been at least as important.

Bastien-Lepage’s painting often builds on a refined interplay of meticulous and freer, but nonetheless illusionistic, brushwork. The rendering of individual elements of the picture is balanced in such a way that meaning-bearing details are painted with a concentrated sharpness, while much of the scenery or the periphery, on closer scrutiny, seems almost to dissolve into a blur. The portrait of Madame Waskiewicz (Fig. 1) is a particularly brilliant example of this. The face is so deceptively lifelike that it is difficult...
to make out the technical dimension – the actual brushstrokes – inviting a close inspection that is sufficiently captivating to completely dominate our experience of the painting. This perhaps sounds unremarkable, but a comparison with portraits by Degas and Manet, for example, reveals less marked a difference in focus between sitter and setting there than we find here. In this connection, it makes sense of course to ask how significant photography was for Bastien-Lepage. No doubt it was not unimportant to him, but rather than trying to emulate a photographic image, he seems to have used the constitution of the human visual field as a starting point for both viewing and representing his subject. In that way, he was probably able to achieve greater variations in sharpness than were possible with a camera. The contrasts in focus seem to be designed to lock the viewer’s gaze on the most significant elements of the image without excluding the setting, which does not require the same detailed attention: it is registered, rather than reflected upon.

Madame Waskiewicz was shown at the Paris Salon of 1882, along with another painting by Bastien-Lepage, *Le Père Jacques* (*The Wood Gatherer*, now in the Milwaukee Art Center). The latter stole the show from the former, not least because of its size (199 x 181 cm) and its sentimental subject – typical of the period – of a poor, elderly man gathering wood with his grandchild. The portrait of Madame Waskiewicz was, however, noted by the author Théodore Véron, who in his observations from the Salon wrote that its naturalism was so powerful that the expression and gaze of the sitter would be etched for ever in the viewer’s memory. Véron, moreover, considered the painting so faithful a depiction of reality that he felt able to diagnose the sitter as having an eye inflammation.3

The creator of the other painting, Henry Lerolle, has been virtually ignored...
by art historians, but was all the more prominent in his lifetime. Lerolle was a central figure in a social circle that included Claude Debussy, Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas. The Nationalmuseum’s new acquisition (Fig. 2) is a smaller version of the huge canvas The Organ Rehearsal, from 1885, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. When it was presented at the Paris Salon of 1885, the work proved Lerolle’s greatest triumph.

The painting shows a company in a church in Paris (opinions differ as to which – either Saint-Gervais or Saint-François-Xavier). Several of the figures have been identified as members of the artist’s family of the artist, and the man turning to look at the viewer is Henry Lerolle himself. Further, it has been suggested that the man to the left of him is the composer Claude Debussy. The work depicts an aspect of city life, and yet is imbued with a strange atmosphere. The artist has convincingly used the unadorned, voluminous space to provide an acoustic dimension that reinforces the sense of anticipation as the woman begins to sing. It is not possible to point to any direct link between Lerolle and Swedish artists, but, just like the work of Bastien-Lepage, this image represents the realistic painting which the Swedes saw as a kind of ideal. Perhaps an even stronger reason for acquiring it is its remarkable and powerful visual idea, which makes the painting at once accessible and enigmatic.

Swedish artists were influenced both by Jules Bastien-Lepage’s brushwork and by the way he arranged his compositions. Carl Larsson, for example, successfully transferred much of his technique to the medium of watercolour. For Hugo Salmson, too, Bastien-Lepage’s painting was important, not to say completely crucial. There are countless examples of the Frenchman’s influence on him in terms of both subject matter and technique. Though uneven in quality, Salmson’s output includes works that are comparable to Bastien-Lepage’s in technical acuity and psychological density. One is his small portrait of a French girl in an 18th-century chair, in which Salmson achieves an exceptionally high technical standard and seems to capture a strong personality (Fig. 3). But the person who best of all mastered and developed the kind of skilful balancing act on which the portrait of Madame Waskiewicz builds was presumably Bruno Liljefors. In his paintings of animals in different situations, differences in focus serve as a way of locking the viewer’s gaze on central elements, while not excluding the setting. An example discussed in Art Bulletin 20 is Nestlings of Red-Backed Shrike (Fig. 4), in which Liljefors develops this method to perfection.5

Notes:
2. Sixten Strömbom, Konstnärsförbundets historia I, Stockholm 1945, p. 142. “Every year we lived at the Salon for a month at a stretch. There we learned to paint the French way” – this was something Bruno Liljefors, Nils Kreuger, Carl Larsson and many others admitted to. At the Salon, they studied the works they wanted to learn from, through intense observation or by making sketch copies. For a number of years to come, Bastien-Lepage was everyone’s idol, with the result that, refashioned to varying degrees, his manner of painting and his subjects recur in Swedish painting throughout the 1880s. The core reason young Scandinavian artists – like their Anglo-Saxon counterparts – so naturally assimilated this particular, personal form of plein-air realism was no doubt the northern temperament that permeates the art of the Lorraine-born Bastien.