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EST. 1817

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Vilhelm Hammershøi (Copenhagen 1864–1916)

Den Hvide Dør (The White Door)

Inscribed, dated and signed (on a label on the reverse): 'Interior fra Karl Madsen's Bolig Lyngby/malt i 1888/v. Hammershøi'

Oil on unlined canvas

24 ⁵/₈ x 21 ¹/₂ in. (62 x 55 cm.)



Provenance

The artist.

Alfred Bramsen (1851-1932), Copenhagen, acquired directly from the above, 1891.

His sale; Winkel and Magnussen, Copenhagen, 1 January 1904, no. 22 as 'Interiør. Den gamle Bilæggerovn, Lyngby 1898'.

Hjalmar Hein (1871-1922), Copenhagen, acquired at the above sale.

(possibly) Christian Ludwig David (1878-1960), Copenhagen.

(possibly his sale) Kunsthallen, Copenhagen, 5-6 March 1953, lot 133a (erroneously catalogued as 'Michaëlis & Bramsen, no. 68').

Anonymous sale; Arne Bruun Rasmussen, Copenhagen, 9 February 1954, lot 97, as 'Den gamle Bilæggerovn' (erroneously catalogued as 'Michaëlis & Bramsen, no. 68').

Private collection, Sweden, until 2019.

Literature

F. Hammershøi, *Scræpbøger vedr. Vilh. Hammershøis værke*, unpublished, (The Hirschsprung Collection, Copenhagen), vol. 1, 1885 to 1891 (1892), under 1888.

K. Madsen, 'Vilhelm Hammershøi's Kunst' *Kunst*, vol. 1, no. 11 and 12, Copenhagen, 1899, p. 3, illustrated, as 'Den Hvide Dør Lyngby 1888'.

C. C. Clausen, 'Naar udstillingen nærmer sig,' *Hver 8 Dag*, Copenhagen, 1907, pp. 437-438.

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- Dr. W, 'Hos Vilhelm Hammershøi, Stuernes Maler,' *Verden og Vi*, no. 19, Copenhagen, 9 May 1913, p. 4.
S. Michaëlis and A. Bramsen, *Vilhelm Hammershøi. Kunst og hans værk*, Copenhagen, 1918, p. 86, no. 67,
as 'Den gamle Bilæggerovn, Lyngby 1888'.
P. Vad, *Vilhelm Hammershøi and Danish Art at the Turn of the Century*, New Haven, 1992, p. 62, 401
(erroneously illustrating the Statens Museum for Kunst painting).
K. von Folsach and N. Lund, eds., *Dansk kunst i Davids Samling, Fra Philipsen til Saxbo*, Copenhagen, 1995,
p. 100.
S. Meyer-Abich, *Vilhelm Hammershøi. Das Malerische Werke*, PhD diss., Bochum, 1996, no. 63.
K. Mønrad, *Vilhelm Hammershøi*, exh. cat., Gothenburg and Stockholm, p. 10, as 'Den gamla
sättugnen' (erroneously identifying the Staens Museum for Kunst painting).
K. Mønrad et al., *Hammershøi & Europe*, exh. cat., Copenhagen and Munich, 2012, pp. 96, 143 note 105.

Exhibited

- (possibly) Copenhagen, *Den Frie Udstilling*, 1896, no. 36, as 'Interiør.'
Stockholm, *Allmänna konst- och industriställningen*, 1897, no. 1227, as 'Interiør med en hvit dörr'.
St. Petersburg, *Exhibition of Scandinavian Art*, opened 23 October 1897, one of nos. 223-32.
Copenhagen, Kunstforeningen, *Vilhelm Hammershøi's Arbejder*, March 1900, no. 25, as 'Interieur. 'Den
hvide Dør.' Lyngby 1888'.
Berlin, *Große Berliner Kunstausstellung*, 5 May-16 September 1900, no. 465, as 'Interieur. Die weisse Thür'.
Copenhagen, The Townhall, *Raadhusudstillingen af Dansk Kunst til 1890*, May-July 1901, p. 35, no. 554,
as 'Interiør, (Den gamle bilæggerovn.) Lyngby 1888'.
Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle, *Vilhelm Hammershøi*, 22 March-29 June 2003, pp. 33, 134-135, 149, no.
6, illustrated, as 'Die weiße Tür'.
London, Royal Academy of Arts, *Vilhelm Hammershøi: The Poetry of Silence*, 28 June-7 September 2008, also
Tokyo, The National Museum of Western Art, 30 September-7 December 2008, pp. 34, 144, no. 9 (p. 54,
no. 11 in Tokyo), illustrated.
Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André, *Hammershøi, Le maître de la peinture Danoise*, 13 March-22 July 2019, p. 154,
158, 171, no. 42, illustrated, as 'La Porte Blanche (Intérieur avec un vieux poêle)'.

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"Hammershøi is not one of those about whom one must speak quickly. His work is long and slow, and at whichever moment one apprehends it, it will offer plentiful reasons to speak of what is important and essential in art."

Rainer Maria Rilke, 1905



Vilhelm Hammershøi, *circa* 1912, Royal Library, Copenhagen.

Hammershøi seems to have been as quiet and reserved as his art, preferring to remain out of view: 'He spoke slowly and softly', wrote his fellow artist Emil Nolde, after visiting the artist and his wife Ida at their home on Strandgade, Copenhagen in 1900. The artist ordered all the woodwork in the flat – panelling, cornicing, door and window frames – to be painted white, the walls and ceilings dove grey, and the floorboards stained dark brown. Hammershøi loved these rooms for their stateliness, a little worn at the edges. In Hammershøi's interiors the white doorways or windowed walls are often illuminated by a

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milky light, and the spaces are at once intimate and anonymous. The artist draws our attention to the physical space – to its architectural features, its open doorways leading to other rooms, a network of bare floorboards. In the case of the present painting, a jamb stove in the corner of the room holds our attention, set against a white wall, next to an open door leading to another undefined space. It does not seem capable of performing its true function of radiating warmth, and its hulking black shape appears more akin to a sentinel whose job it is to stand and keep watch.

Painted with extreme economy, Vilhelm Hammershøi's distinctive subject matter is centred on haunting interiors. Dispensing with anecdotal detail, so central in Danish Golden Age art, he depicted his interiors as a series of disturbingly empty, silent spaces in which the passage of time appears to have been inexplicably suspended and only a sense of self-absorption remains. Hammershøi's atmospheric interiors, inconceivable without the influence of Dutch seventeenth-century painting, particularly the work of Johannes Vermeer, are also indebted to the painters of the early nineteenth century Danish Golden Age, whilst at the same time placing the artist in the context of European *fin de siècle* Symbolist art.

Whilst *The White Door* is related to studies made by Golden Age artists of empty rooms which they intended to fill with figures later in the finished works, in Hammershøi's painting the room is deliberately empty, open and closed doors suggest existential choices, and the dark, strangely impalpable floor creates a sense of distance between us and the world in the painting, which is only "populated" by light: "Hammershøi is a poet; we find ourselves wondering what vanished presence is reflected still in the empty room" (T. Martin Wood).

Indeed, this is Vilhelm Hammershøi's first known painting of an empty interior, a subject which would become a hallmark of his artistic *oeuvre*. In this early work, the artist has incorporated all the elements so representative of his unique style. A version of the present painting, also painted in 1888, is in the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen (fig. 1, see also Annette Rosenvold Hvidt & Gertrud Oelsner, *Vilhelm Hammershøi. På sporet af det åbne billed*, Copenhagen 2018, p. 424). It differs in several elements from the present picture, as it is slightly smaller and has been trimmed on the left and lower edges. These small adjustments create a radically different symmetrical balance and focus between these two paintings. The present work, considered to be the prime version of the composition, demonstrates a balance and harmony between the white door and black stove; while in the Statens Museum version the door is the

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focal point. Traces of pinholes (some of the pins even remain) are visible along all four edges of the prime version, and these pins were applied to enable the artist to create a grid for transfer in preparation of the second version. When the images are superimposed, the structure of the two works corresponds precisely (fig. 2). A similar technique was used by Hammershøi in his portrait of Ida Ilsted from 1890, in which the photograph that served as the basis for the painting was squared for transfer (P. Vad, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 50, illustrated).

The title, *The White Door*, was the artist's choice. However, in the 1904 Bramsen sale, it was titled *Stue med en gammel Billaewggerovn* (*Interior with an Old Jamb Stove*), the title by which both versions have since become known. It could be argued that the original title more accurately connotes the painting's metaphysical qualities. *The White Door* was executed during Hammershøi's two-week stay at his friend Karl Madsen's home in Lyngby, north of Copenhagen in the autumn of 1888. Madsen, a celebrated Danish art critic and art historian, lived in a house built in 1791 known as Albertine Lyst. In an interview published in Denmark in 1907, Hammershøi recalled the present painting and his unique aesthetic awareness of empty rooms:

'The first interior I painted, if my memory doesn't fail me, was out at Karl Madsen's place. I stayed with him in the autumn of '88 in an old house called Albertine Lyst. In any case, it was the first picture of an empty room I painted. I have always thought there was such beauty about a room like that, even though there are no people in it, perhaps precisely because there are no people in it' (P. Vad, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 62, 401).

At the time, Madsen was at the beginning of a long and important career as an art critic which would lead to the directorship of the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen. Madsen was one of Hammershøi's most ardent and astute supporters and his importance in the development and success of the artist's career cannot be overestimated. Madsen considered Hammershøi to be the first neurasthenic painter in Denmark, therefore he applied a neuro-psychological approach to the analysis of his art. Neurasthenia was fashionable term invented by the American psychologist G. M. Beard, and taken up in Denmark by psychiatrist Knud Pontoppidan. It was defined as a kind of hypersensitivity of the nervous system brought on by modern life with its hectic lifestyle and perpetual state of social tension. 'True neurasthenics', Madsen wrote, 'only tolerate colours in small doses' (P. Vad, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 73). Hammershøi's work, characterized by subdued colouring, nuanced tonal harmonies, geometric rigour of

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the planar composition, tranquility and almost clinical purity devoid of any disturbing elements, can be viewed as a reaction to the alarm of urban life, a kind of refuge from the world outside the windows.

Théodore Duret, the famous art critic, most likely saw *The White Door* during a visit with Karl Madsen to Hammershøi's home. According to the artist's mother, Duret 'in very flattering terms pronounced his opinion on Vilhelm's art' (P. Vad, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 74). During his 1888 visit to Copenhagen, Duret also visited the collection of Alfred Bramsen, Hammershøi's mentor, first biographer and ardent collector. By 1905, Bramsen owned as many as fifty seven works by the artist, including the present painting. Bramsen summed up Duret's visit by stating, 'he actually went away with the impression that we only had one painter [Hammershøi] who was capable of focusing the world's attention on himself' (P. Vad, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 74-75).

Our painting was exhibited several times during the artist's lifetime, including in St. Petersburg, Russia. Sergei Diaghilev, most famous as impresario for the *Ballets Russes* in Paris, was an art critic before a change of career, and he published a journal, *The World of Art*. He also organized exhibitions in St. Petersburg of contemporary art and in the autumn of 1897 he held an exhibition of Scandinavian art. Diaghilev visited Denmark during the summer of 1897, with the express purpose of selecting works for the St. Petersburg exhibition. During this visit, he purchased one picture from Hammershøi and commissioned another, both of which are now lost. Ultimately, Hammershøi was represented in the St. Petersburg exhibition by ten pictures, five of which were lent by Bramsen, including the present painting. In conjunction with the exhibition, Diaghilev published an extensive article on Scandinavian art in the St. Petersburg journal *Severnyi vestnik* (Northern Messenger), entitled *Sovremennaja skandinavskaya zhivopis* (Modern Scandinavian Painting). This article contains a lengthy discussion of Hammershøi's work.

Hammershøi's interiors of open doors devoid of figures also inspired writers and poets of the time. In the autumn of 1904, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke visited Copenhagen several times while working on a book about Hammershøi and in 1918, Sophus Michaëlis, who co-wrote with Alfred Bramsen the first *catalogue raisonné* on the artist, penned a poem entitled *Åbne Døre* (Open Doors), which captures the essence of Hammershøi's interiors.

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Art historians have focused on Hammershøi's art from a poetic perspective highlighting the importance of his choice of subject matter and the perfect balance in his art, often comparing him to Johannes Vermeer. However, although clearly influenced by 17th-century Dutch painting, Hammershøi was quietly radical, rejecting their bourgeois homes for something more austere. In his review in the English *Daily Tribune* of the Danish Exhibition at the Guildhall in London, Arthur Clutton-Brock wrote, 'Sometimes he paints interiors with figures, and sometimes without. His interiors without figures do not seem to lack human interest; and where there are figures they are neither too much like still life nor do they overpower the interest of the accessories. In fact, perfect balance is the chief excellence of his art' (P. Vad, *op. cit.*, 1988, pp. 407-408).

Despite the views of the critics and his admirers, Hammershøi himself considered the underlying structure of his paintings most important. In an interview in 1908, he stated, 'What makes me choose a subject is as much the structure of the subject, what I would call the architectural complexity of the picture. And of course, the light. It is also of importance, but it is the structure I emphasize, colours are not that relevant. I work a lot on finding a harmonious balance, but it is foremost the structure I am focusing on'. It is this search for the inherent structure of composition which presents the viewer with an almost geometrical abstract that anticipates the work of Piet Mondrian (fig. 3). With the arrangement of lines and planes, along with subtle and nuanced colour harmonies, Hammershøi discovered a model that we now call 'modernist'. Mondrian, by edging and loading his rectangular compartments with a minimal palette and an art of 'no objects', bathing it all in a light as pure as paint can deliver, demonstrated his debt to the quiet genius of Hammershøi.

While his contemporaries were experimenting with colour in Paris, Hammershøi was developing an aesthetic of restraint, what Hans Rosenhagen in 1900 described as 'A fine, spiritual art, all sensibility'. He worked on his canvases slowly, applying dryish paint in even brushstrokes, layer upon layer until he had captured all the tones of a single colour. Asked why he used a reduced palette, he replied: 'I'm utterly convinced that a painting has the best effect in terms of its colour the fewer colours there are.' Hammershøi's paintings comprise many layers of paint, and the artist generally worked on a canvas for a long time, differentiating individual nuances of colour and shade in the course of the painting process. He applied his relatively dry paint in short, even brushstrokes, their rhythm encompassing the entire picture.

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plane, often independently of the objects depicted. Pervading the entire canvas, the rhythmic brush strokes blur contours and imbue his pictures with a restless, vibrant quality. Sometimes, just before he finished a canvas, he would cover the image with a fine veil of grey, enveloping the objects and their outlines in a mysterious haze.

Remarkably, the present picture retains its original varnish. This varnish is extremely thin, deliberately uneven, and applied with a sensitivity to the integrity of the structure of the paint surface. The attention Hammershøi paid to the creation of light on the surfaces of his canvases is balanced by the equally careful construction of the composition and the careful placement of every brushstroke. The refined modulation of light and form created by his use of colour and varied brushwork create both a visual and a psychological depth. In several areas, the artist has applied brushstrokes very loosely, in some instances in the same colours. When viewed from a distance, this distinctive technique created a sophisticated depth of tonality. The artist's emphasis on the structural surface also reinforces the underlying structure of the subject. A new, thicker coat of varnish would greatly diminish these effects.

In 2008 the first ever retrospective of Vilhelm Hammershøi's work in the UK and Japan was held at the Royal Academy of Art, London and the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo; and in 2019 the Musée Jacquemart-André held the first exhibition in Paris for over twenty years devoted to the great master of Danish painting. The present painting was included in all three shows.

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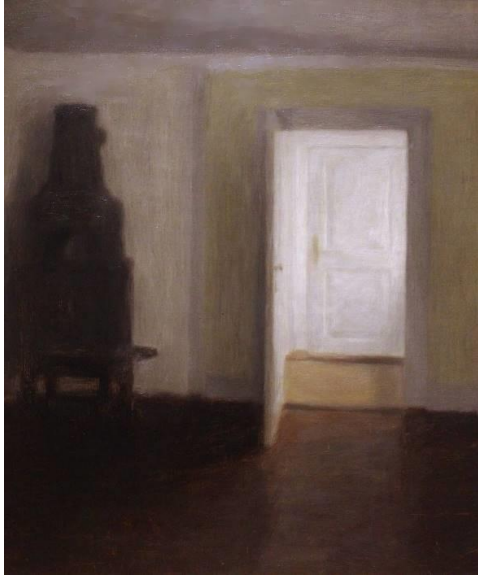


Fig. 1: Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior, the Old Stove*, Albertines Lyst, Lyngby, 1888, 60 x 52 cm., Staatens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.



The present work.



Fig. 2: Superimposed image.

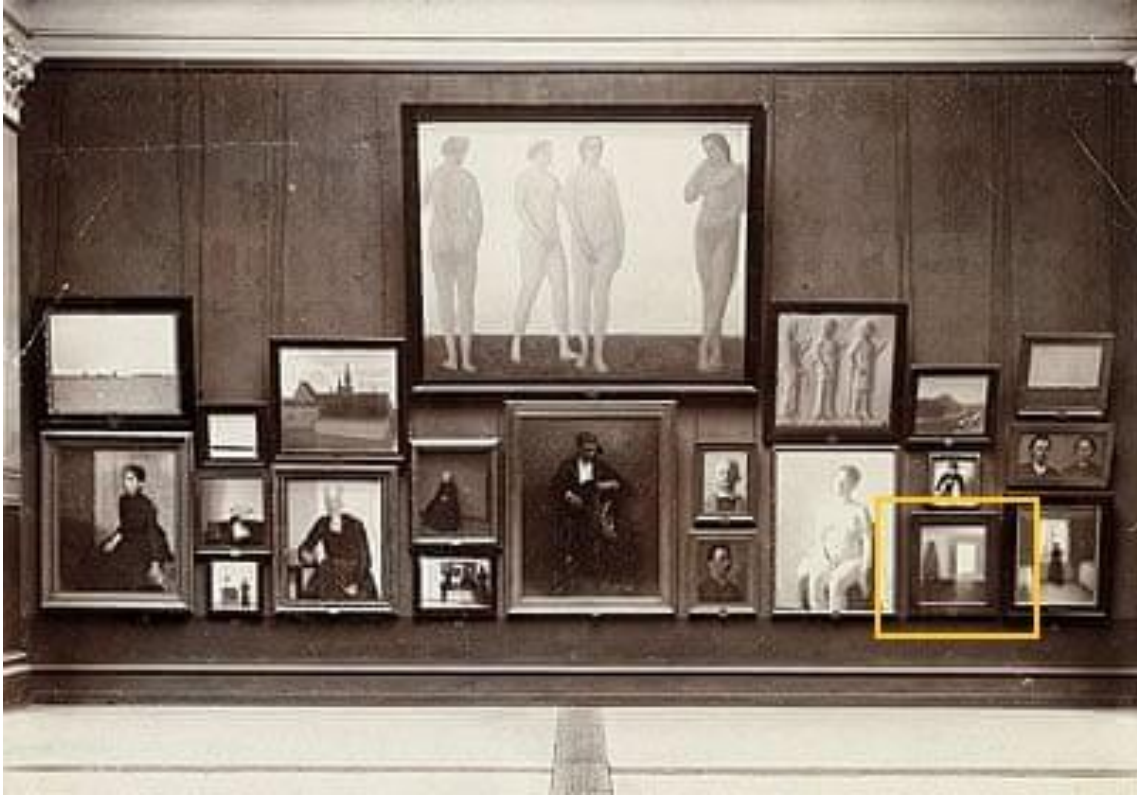


Fig. 3: Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Grid 1*, 1918, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Texas, USA.

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Photograph of works by Vilhelm Hammershøi at the Artists' Study School exhibition at Charlottenborg around New Year 1896.



Photograph of Vilhelm Hammershøi in 1891.