

Nordic Women Sculptors at the Turn of the 20th Century

Formation, Visibility,
Self-Creation

nationalmuseum

This article is an excerpt from the book:

*Nordic Women Sculptors at the Turn of the 20th Century.
Formation, Visibility, Self-Creation.*

Editor: Linda Hinnners

Contributing writers:

Emilie Boe Bierlich

Karen Benedicte Busk-Jepsen

Laura Gutman

Linda Hinnners

Eva-Lena Karlsson

Berit Linden

Liisa Lindgren

Barbro Norbelie

Martin Olin

Susanna Pettersson

Johanna Pietikäinen

Daniel Prytz

Carina Rech

Vibeke Röstorp

Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe

Marjan Sterckx

Lucie Travaillé

Jorunn Veiteberg

Vibeke Waallann Hansen

Katarina Wadstein MacLeod

Editorial committee:

Ludvig Florén, Linda Hinnners, Martin Olin

Language editing:

Martin Naylor (Foreword), Bettina Schultz

Translation:

Stig Oppedal (Norwegian into English),

Victoria Selwyn (French into English),

Bettina Schultz (Swedish into English)

Photography:

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, and the other copyright holders for pictures.

Cover: Ida Fielitz (1847–c. 1913), Sigrid af Forselles, c. 1900, oil on canvas. Loviisa Town Museum.

© The authors/Nationalmuseum 2022

ISBN 978-91-7100-913-5

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, www.nationalmuseum.se



Fig. 1 Ida Thoresen, *Nirvana*, 1920.
Photo private collection.

Nineteenth-Century Sculpture and the Female Gaze

Katarina Wadstein MacLeod

An installation shot from the Association for Swedish Women Artists' exhibition in Copenhagen in 1920 is representative of Ida Thoresen's (1863–1937) body of work. At the back there are portraits – Thoresen was continuously commissioned to portray friends and dignitaries, politicians and intellectuals. In the foreground are her nudes, the focus of this chapter. The sculpture in the middle, entitled *Nirvana* (Fig. 1), is of a young seated female figure. Her marble body is so life-like, it feels like her toes might recoil from a tickle, or her cheek blush should we look just a moment too long at her soft, alluring body. In a way, Thoresen's art is conformist, dabbling in nudes, portraits, mythology and a realist expression. The difference is only that it was a woman who created this sensuous female figure, at a time and place when women's desire was very much repressed, yet it seems to have stayed under the radar, while being exhibited in broad daylight. This chapter deals with one of art history's best-known secrets: female longing for female figures.

THE FEMALE ARTIST'S TOUCH

Ida Thoresen trained as an artist in Gothenburg, in the studio of a sculptor named Edward Brambeck (1843–1919). From 1895 she spent the better part of five years in Paris, training at Académie Julian, exhibiting and networking. No doubt Ida Thoresen was well versed in the ideas and debates which influenced the international art scene towards the turn of the century: the fad for Egypt, mythology, symbolism, impressionism, realism. Exactly what inspired her or preoccupied her thoughts we shall never know fully. However, a drawing from the 1930s seems to contain all the things close

to Thoresen's heart: sculpture, music, dogs, and the creator of the drawing, Elisabeth. In the little drawing Thoresen exudes confidence as she leans back, playing her guitar seated next to a piano. Presumably relaxing after a day in the studio. Thoresen had allegedly trained as a singer in Italy and Germany as a young woman, before giving up music in favour of fine art.¹ Whilst music is portrayed as her pastime, her professional life frames the image. Her dirty sculptor smock hangs on the back wall and a bust of *Mamette* (1898),



Fig. 2 Ida Thoresen, *Mamette*, plaster, exhibited at the *Salon National de la Société des Beaux Arts* in 1898. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

Katarina Wadstein MacLeod is professor of History of Art, Södertörn University. She has published on the female figure and women artists in articles and books such as the monograph *Bakom Gardinerna: Hemmet i konsten under nittonhundratalet*, (2018).

a peasant woman from Bretagne, is placed high up on a pedestal to the right. (Fig. 2, Fig. 3) Next to the artist is a little black dog. Throughout her life, Thoresen is photographed with four-legged friends, mostly Jack Russells, at her home and when travelling.² Finally, there is the signature of Elisabeth Barnekow (1874–1942) her friend, life-long partner and collaborator. Beginning in the 1890s, the pair frequently travelled across Europe, worked together, networked, and shared a home until Thoresen's death in 1937.³

Thoresen was described by contemporary critics as a gifted artist.⁴ She was also financially secure, having inherited part of her industrialist father's estate. Thus, as an artist she never had to work for her income yet understood the importance of professionally striving for her legacy as an artist. She came to be a powerful player on the Swedish art scene as one of the leading figures of the Association for Swedish Women Artists (*Föreningen Svenska konstnärinnor*). Thoresen and Barnekow were involved from the very start in 1911, together with the chairperson Ida von Schultzenheim (1859–1940).⁵ In starting the organisation they built on the model of sister chapters across Europe, most notably in Paris where they had all spent formative years and were familiar with the contemporary debates and success of the French organisation for women artists.⁶ The main objective was to give equal opportunities to women artists to exhibit their art, and Thoresen and Barnekow worked as exhibition organisers securing venues, exposure and the participation of their female colleagues in Sweden and abroad.⁷ Long before she chose her path and destiny as an artist and women's rights campaigner, Thoresen seems to have had a rebellious streak. Her personality comes across as brave and single-minded. In 1890, newspapers across Sweden reported on how a young, eccentric Miss Thoresen had been fined 300 SEK (approximately €2 000 in current value),⁸ because she had recklessly obstructed the national railways by lying down on the tracks.⁹ The reason, as she declared in court, was a bet over whether it was possible to lay down between the railway tracks and survive when a train passed over her.¹⁰

It is tempting to dig into the private life of Thoresen and her relationship with Barnekow. Their private correspondence discloses their love and longing, even though wordings such as embrace, love and kiss may have had a different connotation at the turn of the century. But any real details of their relationship remains speculation. Literary scholar Sharon Marcus suggests that instead of trying to pry into the bedrooms of historical figures we should look at the context.¹¹ Although female homosexuality was less contested than male homosexuality, Sweden was one of only a few countries to introduce legislation specifically aimed at female homosexuality (in 1864).¹² It remained illegal to have same-sex intercourse in Sweden until 1944, and it was classified as a medical condition until 1979. Still, the topic of homosexuality and sexual rights was debated during Thoresen and Barnekow's lifetimes. Thoresen's contemporary and friend Frida Stéenhoff kept repeating the naturalness



Fig. 3 Drawing by Elisabeth Barnekow representing Ida Thoresen. Not located.



of same-sex love, shocking her friend and mentor Ellen Key, who propagated free love over arranged marriage, but strictly within a heterosexual framework.¹³ In a feature article for the broadsheet *Svenska Dagbladet* in 1931, they are presented as inseparable at work, in private and on their many travels across Europe. The journalist describes their forty-year companionship, how they have shared a home and how their adjoint but separate studios have been a meeting-place for artists, friends and intellectuals.¹⁴ Marcus describes the so-called female marriage in the Victorian era as two women who lived like a married couple and mimicked social norms.¹⁵ The sexuality in a female, same-sex couple did not present a social problem, due to their gender.¹⁶ Regardless of how or if Thoresen and Barnekow touched each other intimately, they presented themselves as a couple in the public eye and amongst their social network.

The public persona of Thoresen is thus aligned with her relationship with Barnekow, but the role of a sculptor carries its own context, adding a further

complexity when a sculptor is also a woman. Touch is fundamental for all sculptors. The hand of the artist has in certain periods been a testament to the authenticity and quality of the sculpted piece. There is a metaphorical touch where the artist's hands serve as substitute for the viewer's hands on the object. There is also the daily dirty work of touching and shaping clay, plaster, stone and wood. As the craft of sculpting began to balance "between gentlemen artists and working-class craftsmen"¹⁷ due to an increase in technical proficiency and collaboration with stone-carving workshops, the touch of bourgeois women was questioned due to their gender. Thus, when Thoresen started out as a sculptor, people still questioned whether women really could do this heavy and dirty work, and if so, if it was even appropriate?¹⁸ The reception of women artists, and Thoresen in particular, mirrors this gender split even decades into the new century. From the late 1910s and throughout the 1920s and 1930s her work was found to be convincing, elegant and expressive – for being made by a woman. It was therefore understood, by male critics, to be inferior to the work of male artists.

The length of Thoresen's career corresponds to the shift from mistrust in the woman artist's touch due to her femininity in the late nineteenth century, to the mockery of her loss of femininity because she aspired to the sculptor's touch in the 1920s. This shift corresponds to the increased independence of women and the legal right to vote. In a caricature from 1925, Annie Bergman (1889–1987) has captured Thoresen as a gentleman artist, an imposing figure transgressing gender roles. (Fig. 4) Her hair is tucked back and she is dressed in a footlong, polo-neck garment, more suit than dress. One hand holds a pince-nez and the other elegantly grasps a cigarette. The caricature emphasises her power, posing with a prominent belly, a common feature in portraits of male colleagues like Anders Zorn, superior and masculine, looking down her nose. In another caricature Bergman has captured the spite against women sculptors in her portrayal of Gerda Sprinchorn (1871–1951) as old, fat and humorously

masculine, again with a cigarette ungracefully falling from her lips, the cigarettes no doubt underscoring the masculinity alluded to. The little sculpture Sprinchorn is working on, formed like a devil, recoils from the uninvited touch of the artist.¹⁹

NUDES

In her survey on the Norwegian artist and sculptor Ambrosia Tønnesen, Jorunn Veiteberg describes an unconventional woman who lived her life with another woman, but followed aesthetic conventions in her professional career as an artist. Veiteberg asks if it was perhaps necessary to follow common topics in order to keep her private life private, and make it as an artist. In her art,²⁰ Thoresen follows conventional and popular topics and styles such as ancient Egypt, mythology and Vitalism.²¹ Her interest in the Vitalist movement is particularly evident in her male figures of strong, lean, young and active bodies.²² Thoresen herself was an avid follower of the Vitalist movement. With Barnekow she was a regular with Doctor Ernst Westerlund in Enköping, renowned for championing Vitalist trends and prescribing outdoor life, physical activity and cold sea bathing against mental unrest.²³ Together, Thoresen and Barnekow frequently visited spa resorts, from Lysekil on the Swedish west coast to Vevey in Switzerland.²⁴

Thoresen's female nudes seem to follow another logic altogether. In an installation photograph from Thoresen's exhibition with the Association of Swedish Women Artists, *Daggkåpan* [Lady's Mantle] is placed next to *Soldyrkaren* [Sun Worshipper]. (Fig. 5) The male figure is standing tall and active with every muscle registered in the stone surface. The tension of his athletic body is palpable as the figure holds its contrapposto. The female figure, on the other hand, sits on a rock covered with Lady's Mantle flowers, her head tilted down and body soft and still. He stretches, looking towards the sun; she is being looked at. The trope of women and nature being one, in particular at the cusp of entering

womanhood, was revitalised on the Swedish art scene by the immensely popular work of Per Hasselberg (1850–1894) depicting many female nudes in nature. Young female nudes allegorical for sexuality was a common topic as Thoresen entered her artistic training and career. In Hasselberg's *Snöklockan* [Snowflake] (1881) the Venus-like figure is decorated with a waistband made of a snowflake leaf, just about to snap open. The voyeurism is overt, so too the implication of deflowering. In *Näckrosen* [Waterlily] (1892) the reclining female figure rests on a bed of waterlilies, with arms flung across her face, facilitating an uninterrupted view. Up close one can see two male faces peeping out amongst the flowers.

In her survey of Swedish women sculptors, Irja Bergström has found that many of Thoresen's peers, men and women, engaged in themes related to Hasselberg's sculptures well into the twentieth century. One example is Alice Nordin, (1871–1948), Thoresen's friend and collaborator, in her sculpture *En Vårdröm* [A Spring Dream].²⁵ The figure is Nature embodied, a dream of spring, sitting on a stone with her arms behind her head, eyes closed and body readily available to be admired and devoured. In *Nirvana* a similar economy of looking is at play. The title itself brings to mind pleasure and paradise – with the route going via the female figure. However confident, rebellious and invested in women's rights Thoresen was, she was also essentially an artist shaped by the end of the nineteenth century who took to the Salon style, with an emphasis on realism and popular themes.

Whilst the naked female body is a given feature in Western art history, a critical debate over its meaning has emerged only in the latter part of the twentieth century. In 1956, Kenneth Clark published his conservative view on the universal difference between the naked and the nude. According to Clark, the former is undressed and inappropriate and the latter aesthetic perfection, a proposition effectively challenged by Lynda Nead in the 1990s.²⁶ The balance between obscenity and aesthetic refinement, argues Nead, is defined and redefined according to time and

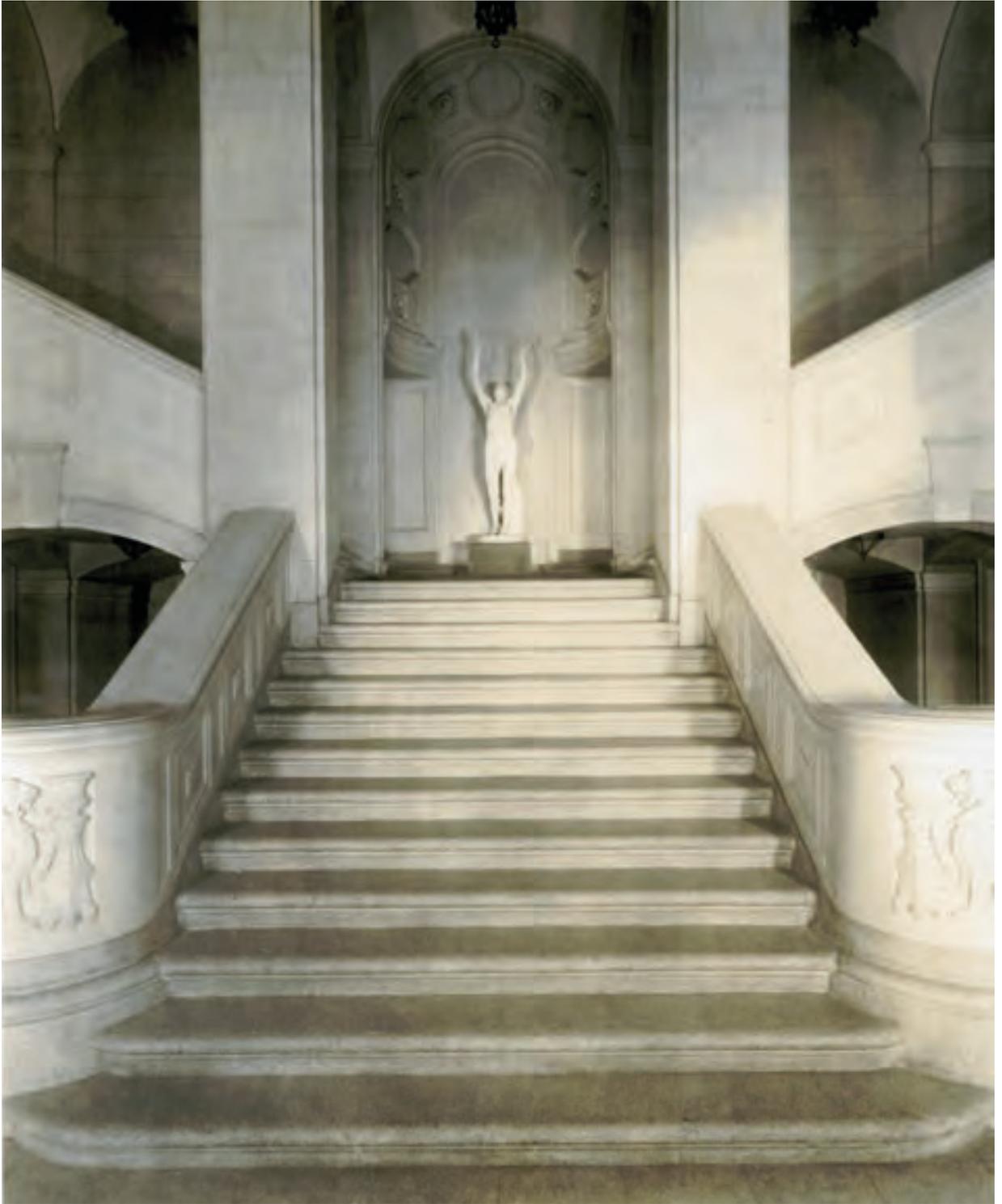


Fig. 5 Ida Thoresen, *Soldyrkaren* [Sun Worshipper] at the American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia, 1930's.



Fig. 6 Ida Thoresen's *Sphinx* 1919 from the Association for Swedish Women Artists' exhibition in Copenhagen 1920. Photo private collection.

place.²⁷ For Nead the female nude and the perceived levels of decency are dependent more on context than content. The question is which context is most telling regarding the oeuvre of Thoresen. *Nirvana*, depicting a seated female nude, is often described as one of her most successful works – the nudity on display a given, the sensualism never debated. The seated nude figure holds up a hand to conceal one of her breast. But the gesture of modesty most of all emphasises the other breast portrayed as natural, heavy and with emphasis on the erect nipple. The sculpture and its theme of a sensual young female nude was part and parcel of the visual culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Yet, when she looked at her models and formed the sculptures in clay and plaster with her fingers, the context of the desiring gaze seems of equal importance.

RETURNING THE GAZE

There has been much feminist thinking on how to read images of women made by women artists. As demonstrated by Abigail Solomon-Goudeau there is a complex relationship when women artists portray their own objectified bodies.²⁸ Although these sculptures of young, female nudes are no self-portraits by the aging artist, Thoresen can still, through her own woman's body, be seen to be both the seer and the sitter, the subject and the object. In 1973, Laura Mulvey coined the term “the male gaze”, referring to how the audiences of romantic Hollywood movies automatically are positioned in the perspective of the male hero, devouring the objectified female. Regardless of gender and sexual preference, the representation itself in cinema, argued Mulvey, dictates the way in which we look at the protagonist.²⁹ In *Sitting Figure*, at Berga Castle grounds, the portrayed young woman sits on a stone, looking across a pond. Cast in bronze, the hard material is made to look soft as flesh, the waist emphasised, the buttocks folding against the rock. She is clearly there to be looked at, from across the pond. But rather than



closing her eyes or looking away, the figure is deep in her own thoughts. One interpretation of the figure is that it plays on the male viewer looking at woman in nature, as nature. But an alternative interpretation is that this sculpture accommodates the desired object and the feeling subject in the same figure.

There is a clear common theme of desire in Thoresen's female figures, from the soft sitting figures to direct gazes and erect nipples. The most striking example of Thoresen returning the gaze is *Sphinx* (1919) now in the collections of Jamtli, Östersund. (Fig. 6, Fig. 7) It's a pitch-black bust featuring a female figure with a slender, idealised face. In an interview, Thoresen commented on the choice of material, saying that she really preferred to work in Italian marble but due to material shortage after the war and increased

Fig. 7 Ida Thoresen, *Sphinx*, black granite. The sculpture's breasts were probably cut off at an unknown date. Jamtli, Östersund.

prices, she had to look closer to home and found potential in Nordic, black granite.³⁰ The figure has high eyebrows over half-closed eyelids, the nose is completely straight, and the mouth is a perfect bow. The hair crafted as a wig, embossed with a geometrical pattern, is made from a yellowish stone, which a critic made fun of by describing it as an animal fur thrown across her head.³¹ Beyond the hair and title there are no other signs – no ornaments, jewellery or lion body – that bring to mind ancient Egypt. Once again, Thoresen's sculpture has more to do with the theme of the female nude. The most striking feature of this bust are, again, its breasts, pointy with large, strikingly erect nipples. During her lifetime the *Sphinx* is mentioned again and again as one of Thoresen's great achievements. However, its most striking feature, the pronounced nipples and breasts, are never mentioned. Thoresen regularly sculpted male bodies but for a woman to sculpt a male figure with similar sensual undertones would have been far more contentious. Whilst female, same-sex relationships were neither unknown nor invisible, female same-sex sexuality went under the radar in a way that male sexuality never could. Well into the twentieth century, female sexuality was still widely seen as passive and lacking drive. Yet, someone, somewhere saw it fit to alter the sculpture and in the only currently known version of the *Sphinx*, the breasts have been brutally mutilated, leaving an empty and even surface. What made Thoresen sculpt, and exhibit, such emphasised breasts? And why were they cut off? Perhaps at some point the overt sexuality was suddenly seen.

Thoresen's female figures can be situated in different historical narratives – as typical or hypersexual. Through the lens of contemporary art, the tension between conventional beauty and near aggressive sexuality come to the fore. Contemporary art makes visible how queer aesthetics can play with heteronormative ideals. In the exhibition *Futuristic Lesbians*, the Swedish artist Cajsa von Zeipel (born 1983) used exaggeration and appropriation of heteronormative femininity in what has been described as queer

aesthetics.³² The figures are like a hyperbole of aggressive femininity. Cast in silicone they portrayed and exaggerated every possible consumable in heteronormative ideals to enhance a queer and camp femininity: enlarged lips, handbag dogs, purple eyelashes and technological prosthesis.³³ The framing of the exhibition is the future, but it serves well also as a mirror to the past. We should rest assured that same-sex desire has been visible in visual culture, at different times in different ways.³⁴ Regardless of Thoresen's sexual preference, her sculptures bear witness to an artist who looked and looked again at the intimate details of the human body, in particular the female body, and who investigated different ways in which the female body can express desire.

Endnotes

- 1 For details on her life see Irja Bergström, "Ida Caroline Thoresen", in *Svenskt kvinnobiografiskt lexikon*, www.skbl.se/sv/artikel/IdaThoresen (accessed 27-08-2020). Thoresen's singing is mentioned in connection with celebrations at the Barnekow mansion and parish: "Dumhet och hyckleri", *Arbetet* (18 October 1890).
- 2 In 1908 she won third prize in a dog breeding competition, *Svenska Dagbladet* (5 April 1908).
- 3 For their lives and collaborations as artists and networkers see Katarina Wadstein MacLeod, "Collaboration and Co-Habitation: Swedish Women Artists at the Turn of the Century", in *Modern Women Artists in the Nordic Countries*, Kerry Lynn Greaves (ed.), Abingdon and New York 2021, pp. X
- 4 See e.g. Anna Törnström, "Ida C. Thoresen", *Göteborgs Aftonblad* (13 May 1911).
- 5 Ida Thoresen was part of organising the association and its exhibitions as of 1910, between 1912–1914, and 1921; Barnekow was part as of 1913 until 1940 after which she was an honorary member of the committee. The Association of Swedish Women Artists archive, the National Library of Sweden, Stockholm. The board committed to make at least one exhibition a year, at home or abroad. Statutes 1910, the Association of Swedish Women Artists archive, National Library of Sweden.
- 6 For Scandinavian networks and friendships, see Carina Rech, "Friendship in Representation: The Collaborative Portraits by Jeanna Bauck and Bertha Wegmann", *RIHA Journal*, no. 0202 (November 2018), <https://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2018/0202-rech> (accessed 18-12-2019); see also Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late-Nineteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven 1994.
- 7 Ida von Schulzenheim is recorded to have exhibited with the *Union des femmes peintres et sculpteurs* a minimum of six times during the 1890s and nine times overall at Parisian Salons. Ida Thoresen is recorded to have exhibited at three different Parisian Salons between 1897 and 1899, while residing in Paris. Vibeke Röstorp, *Le mythe du retour: Les artistes scandinaves en France de 1889 à 1908*, Stockholm 2003, pp. 112–14, 188, 381–382, 394. See also M, R.- M., "Föreningen 'Svenska konstnärinnor,'" *Dagny*, no.5 (February 1911).
- 8 Rodney Edvinsson and Johan Söderberg, "A Consumer Price Index for Sweden 1290–2008" in *Review of Income and Wealth* 57, no. 2 (2011): pp. 270–292.
- 9 Notice in *Borlänge Tidning* (10 March 1890).
- 10 Notice in *Östgöta Posten* (29 September 1890).
- 11 Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, Princeton 2007.
- 12 Florence Tamagne, *Den homosexuella tidsåldern 1870–1940: Gay – en världshistoria*, Robert Aldrich (ed.), Stockholm 2007.
- 13 Eva Borgström, "Frida Stéenhoff, Ellen Key och den samkönade kärleken", *Tidskrift för Genusvetenskap*, no. 3 (2012): pp. 37–59.
- 14 Anonymous, "Två Konstnärinnors hem", *Svenska Dagbladet*, (22 February 1931).
- 15 Marcus 2007.
- 16 Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, London 1985.
- 17 Angela Dunstan, "Nineteenth-Century Sculpture and the Imprint of Authenticity", no. 19 (2014): p. 8, DOI 10.16995/ntn.704 (accessed 03-09-2020).
- 18 See e.g. Dunstan 2014, and Jorunn Veiteberg, *Ambrosia Tønnesen 'Stenhugger i det Fine' – En biografi*, Oslo 2009, p. 48 on the accusations against Harriet Hosmer and the originality of her sculptures.
- 19 Bergman's caricatures of women artists were reported purchased by Nationalmuseum, *Svenska Dagbladet* (28 February 1928).
- 20 Jorunn Veiteberg, *Ambrosia Tønnesen 'Stenhugger i det Fine' – En biografi*, Oslo 2009.
- 21 See e.g. Anna Törnström, "Ida C. Thoresen", *Göteborgs Aftonblad* (13 May 1911).
- 22 See e.g. Patrik Steorn, *Nakna män: maskulinitet och kreativitet i svensk bildkultur 1900–1915*, Stockholm 2006, on the turn of the century interest in Vitalism and health movements.
- 23 In the 1920s Thoresen was commissioned to create the memorial for Westerlund.
- 24 Anonymous, "Anmälda badgäster Lysekil", in *Bohuslänningen* (29 June 1899); see e.g. Anonymous, "Westerlund-statyn: upprop utfärdat: En statyskiss av Ida Thoresen godkänd", *Dagens Nyheter* (23 January 1927).
- 25 Irja Bergström, *Skulpturpriserna: Alice Nordin och hennes samtida 1890–1940*, Gothenburg 2012, p. 61.
- 26 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, Princeton 1984 (1956).
- 27 Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London 1992.
- 28 See e.g. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Francesca Woodman: Just Like a Woman", in *Photographic Work* (exh. cat.) Wellesley College Museum, 1986.
- 29 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"[1975] in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington 1989, pp. 14–26.
- 30 "Ida Thoresen ett bemärkt namn på Svenska konstnärinnors stora utställning i Köpenhamn", *Svenska Dagbladet* (23 January 1920).
- 31 "Svenska konstnärinnor i Köpenhamn", *Aftonbladet* (15 January 1920).
- 32 The exhibition was on at Andréhn-Shiptjenko gallery in Stockholm in 2019.
- 33 See e.g. Bo Madestrand, "Cajsa von Zeipel tar ett hämningslöst steg framåt", *Dagens Nyheter* (16 October 2019); Lars-Erik Hjerström Lappalainen, "Panik i samtiden", *Kunstkritikk.no* (24 October 2019).
- 34 Katherine Binhammer, "The 'Singular Propensity' of Sensibility's Extremities: Female Same-Sex Desire and the Eroticization of Pain in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Culture", *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no. 4 (2003): p. 472.