Hanna Hirsch Pauli

The Art of Being Free

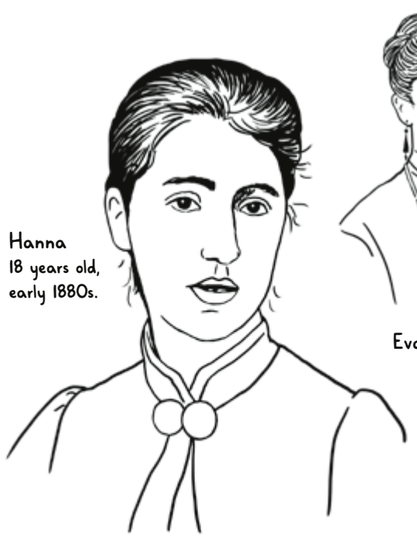
An illustrated story by

Joanna Rubin Dranger

Hanna Hirsch was born in 1864 and grew up on Gamla Stan, Stockholm, with her Jewish family. Mum Pauline and Dad Abraham, a music publisher, had six children. Hanna was the youngest and her elder sister Betty was her best friend. The family socialised with other Jewish families, spending their summers on Dalarö. At the time there were fewer than 3,000 Jews in Sweden.

At the age of twelve Hanna had already started studying under one of Sweden's most influential artists, August Malmström, who was a professor at the Royal Academy. In their teens Hanna, Betty and their friends Lisen and Anna Josephson, as well as their cousin Emma Lamm* received private tuition in history, geography and Swedish literature from Ellen Key. Ellen and Hanna remained close throughout the rest of their lives.

Hanna's upbringing was marked by emancipatory advances in the rights of both Jews and women. In 1870, Swedish Jews obtained full civil rights and in 1884 unmarried women came of age when they turned 21.



Hanna
18 years old,
early 1880s.

Eva Bonnier

The year of Hanna's birth, 1864, saw the Royal Academy opening a "ladies' department", becoming the first academy in Europe to open an art school for women. In 1878, family friend Eva Bonnier, who was seven years her senior, was accepted into the school and three years later Hanna was enrolled there.

After her years at the academy, Hanna travelled to Paris in 1885 to further her studies. Eva Bonnier had already been painting there for a couple of years.

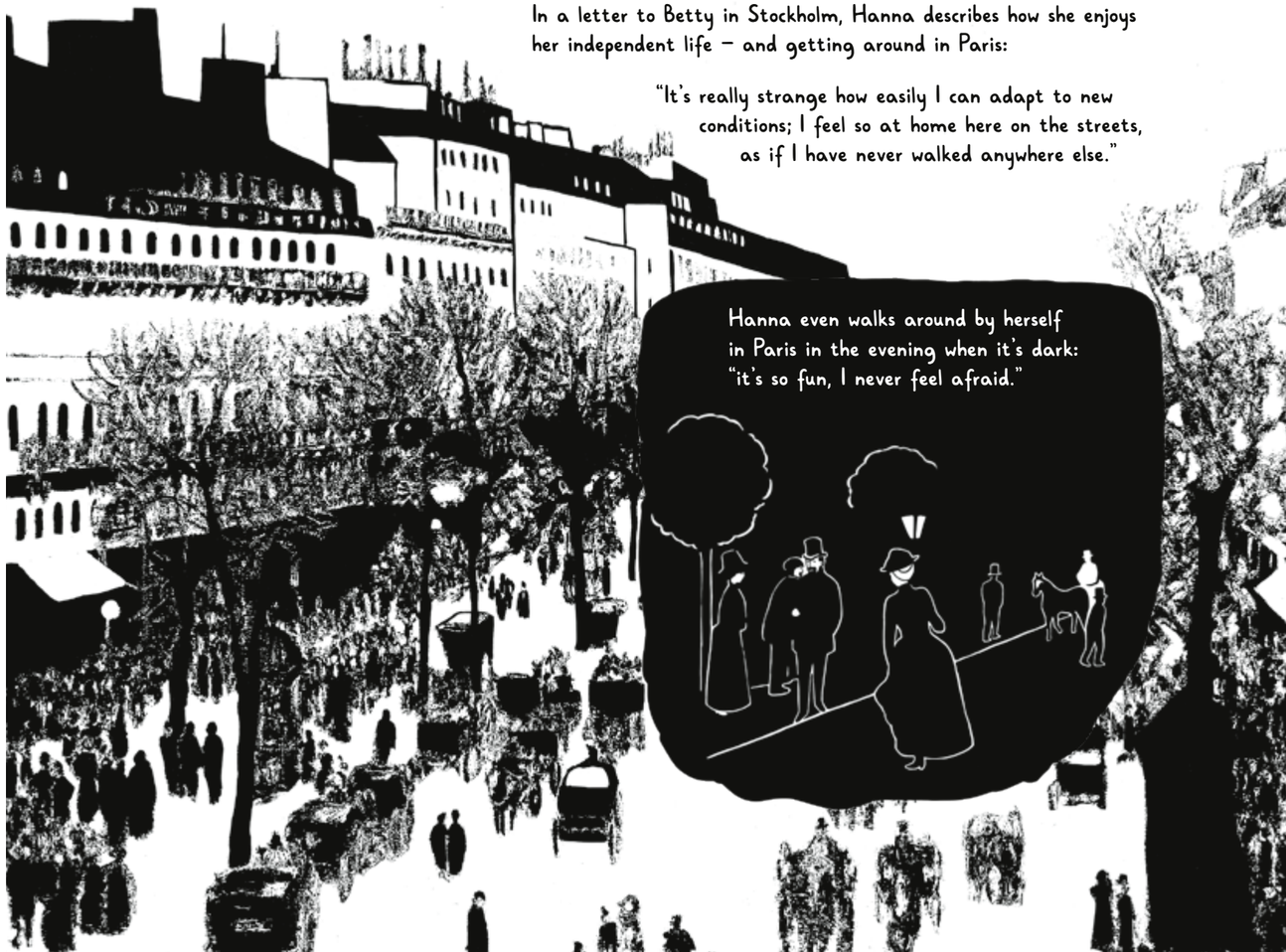
* Her cousin Emma later married the artist Anders Zorn, becoming Emma Zorn.

Académie Colarossi

Between 1867 and 1889 over 120 Nordic women artists came to Paris to study art.

In a letter to Betty in Stockholm, Hanna describes how she enjoys her independent life – and getting around in Paris:

"It's really strange how easily I can adapt to new conditions; I feel so at home here on the streets, as if I have never walked anywhere else."



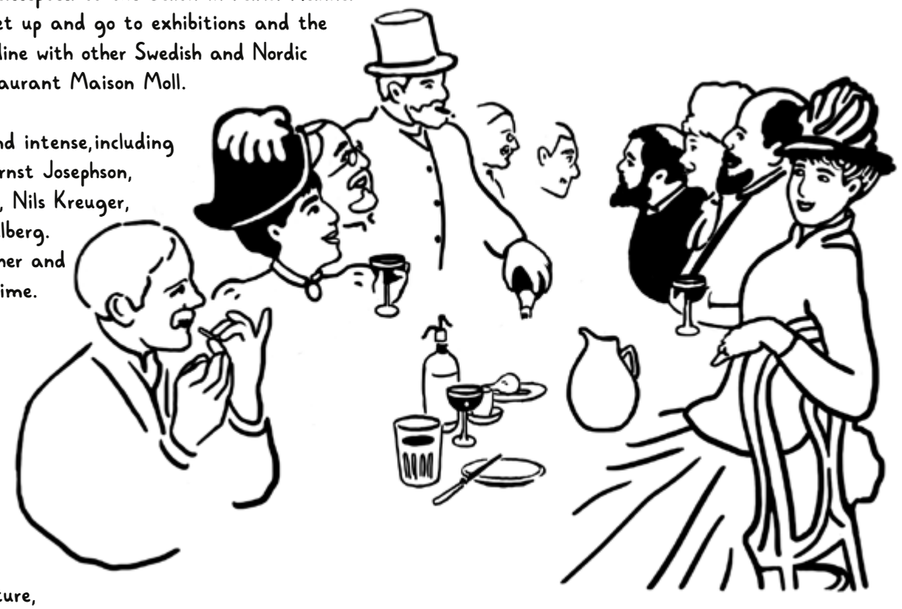
Hanna's fascination with the metropolis is tangible in her letters:

"Eva wanted to buy something today, so we went to Bon Marché. You can really get dizzy in there. Three stores on top of one another, thousands of departments, but terribly organised. // It takes up the entire block. And all the assistants running around, slim young girls in black with waists like wasps. Have you read 'The Ladies Paradise' by Zola? I thought of it in there."

Excitedly Hanna describes the modern free life of artists in Paris where the models don't even go behind screens to change – and when they menstruate they just let it run down their legs, "it's treated so naturally".

Her goal is to get a work accepted to the Salon in Paris. Hanna and Eva Bonnier often meet up and go to exhibitions and the theatre, go for walks and dine with other Swedish and Nordic artists at "Molle", the restaurant Maison Moll.

The social group is large and intense,including Anders and Emma Zorn, Ernst Josephson, Georg Pauli, Richard Bergh, Nils Kreuger, Hugo Birger and Per Hasselberg. They work and party together and follow the currents of the time.

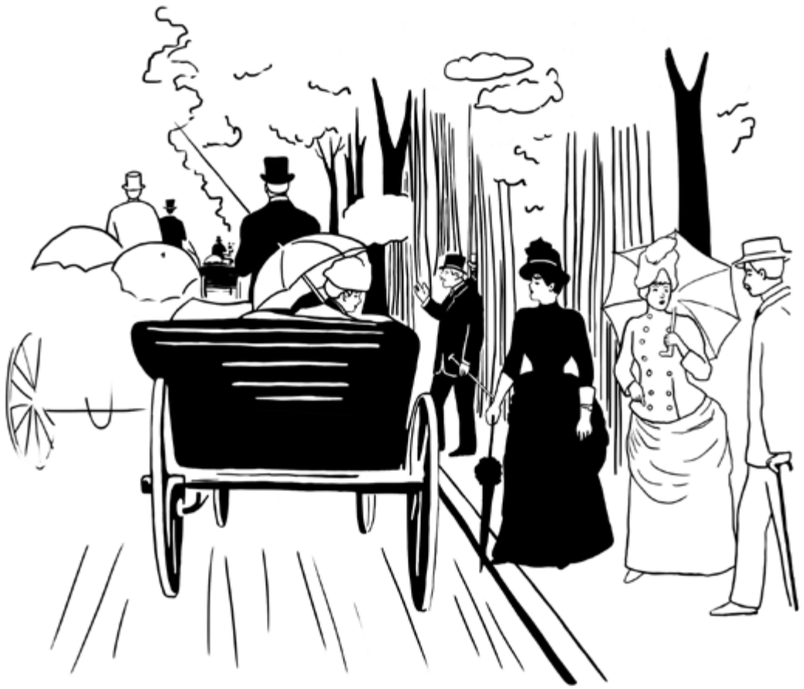


Once Hanna plans to go listen to Strindberg's lecture, but she gets the days confused and misses it, much to her annoyance.

In the many letters home to "Dearest Bettysister",
Hanna writes enthusiastically about everything she sees and experiences:

"We took a third cab and drove down, we were at Clichy, to P. de la Concorde, Champs-Élysées out to Bois de Boulogne where I hadn't been before; 'to the cascades', our coachman recommended. There was a large open-air restaurant where we stopped and ate. Real Parisian life, like in a novel that you wouldn't believe to be true: fine carriages, viscounts in cabs with their painted ladies. They sat there and watched each other!

You get a number from the coachman, because there are so many carriages that they drive up to a particular place and are called when needed by a specially designated person. Then to jardin d'acclimatation, where we gaped at all the animals, then down again through the Arc de Triomphe to Champs-Élysées where we stopped at Rue Marbeuf and I visited Gerda. The Bois de Boulogne is delightful, elegant and vast, the sun was shining and we drove between double rows of carriages. I have never seen so many people in one place. // If you had a map you could follow my descriptions ..."



Painting en plein air was something new, especially for women artists. Hanna writes:

"After breakfast today, I picked up Ingeborg W. and we went to the Tuileries Garden with our paint boxes. // Just imagine sitting in the most central part of Paris in such a popular place and still being disturbed so little, we also had a good spot in the corner of a gate. This wouldn't be possible in Stockholm, I don't think."

"Today I lost a card with permission from the state to paint anywhere here in Paris, but I can easily get another."

Hanna also befriends Finnish fellow artist Venny Soldan, and they stay close for the rest of their lives.

Hanna goes to see Sarah Bernhardt perform several times. Sarah Bernhardt grew up in a nunnery – her Jewish mother was a courtesan, her father unknown. She became world famous for her beautiful voice and her acting. In the 1880s and '90s she also produced plays, ran several theatres, painted, wrote and sculpted.

Hanna mentions a model at Académie Colarossi, "a Jew from Alger, a poor old man who only knows Spanish", "very picturesque, oriental". She continues: "He has so many gestures of secret accord with me." In the same letter she mentions that one of her fellow students, a Polish woman who didn't know that Hanna was Jewish, made derogatory comments about Jews, whereupon Hanna got both angry and sad. But the occasions in which Hanna describes experiencing antisemitism are few.

Hanna also writes to Betty and her mother Pauline about how she and her artist friends Caroline Benedicks and Venny Soldan, whom Hanna calls "my Finnish friend", go to have a look at Louis Pasteur's practice. People from all around the world flock there for the rabies vaccine.

"My Finnish friend, Caroline and I went to Pasteur to have a look. // We just went right in, he lives close to the Panthéon; on a large courtyard sits a little house, through a small door you enter into a modest cubicle, this is the waiting room and the small house is the great man's private home. // Crowded into the courtyard and the small room were all the wolf-, dog- and cat-bitten people, including a whole lot of Russian farmers, old men and women, terribly handsome to look at, Italians, Frenchmen and all nationalities. // And then Pasteur emerged in a little doorway leading to another small room where his underling was injecting the poison into the patients. It was done in an instant; he himself did nothing more than call out the names of everyone. // We were there gaping together with Zola, whom we caught sight of in a corner, absorbed in watching the Russians. Naturally he must be up-to-date with everything modern."

Hanna continues: "My Finnish friend and I wander around everywhere, once we even went to the stock exchange, where we'd been told no women were permitted, but it went well, we managed to get upstairs.

They stared at us up there, the one ran to tell the next and they all stood there gaping.

// In the end a guard asked us to be on our way.
It has to be told, for it is part of the story, right! It was fun to see in any case; it matters little if you get thrown out."

Hanna's letters are written from the perspective of a "flâneuse". Paris offers an anonymity that meant completely novel freedom for the foreign women artists. Art historian Carina Rech says the following about the portraits of friends of the time:

– In these paintings they depicted themselves as part of a profession. They wanted to express that they were not individual exceptions in the art field but a community. At the same time the studio was a place of artistic exchange and self-fulfilment. The studio became "a room of one's own", as Virginia Woolf expressed it much later.

Carina Rech continues:

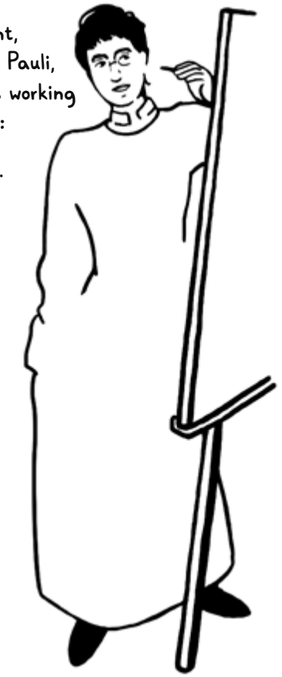
– Hanna Hirsch's portrait of Venny Soldan is an epoch-making image and in its radicality is quite unique for its time. Hanna depicts her fellow artist friend sitting on the studio floor with a lump of clay in her hands without taking prevailing feminine ideals into account. In retrospect the painting has been considered to capture late-nineteenth-century realism and women's emancipation.

In Hanna's portrait, Venny Soldan is sitting on the floor with a half-open mouth and a little lump of clay in her hand, without pretence or posing, "a subject free from staging", as the art historian Margareta Gynning put it.

– To understand just how groundbreaking Hanna's portrait of Venny Soldan is, one should compare it to other depictions of contemporary female artists, such as the portrait of Eva Gonzalès by Manet painted in 1870.

Or the painting "Young Watercolourist at the Louvre", created four years after Hanna's portrait of Venny Soldan by Dagnan-Bouveret, her teacher at Académie Colarossi.

Through Hanna's letters from Paris we get the impression that she is self-confident, knows her worth and rarely despairs of anything. In one letter addressed to Georg Pauli, however, Hanna writes of her doubts regarding the painting of Venny, which she is working on for the Salon, and of how she shows the work to her fellow artist Richard Bergh:



"I haven't come very far and sometimes I lose courage but now I am enlivened again. Today Dick was in; I let him see it; nobody had seen it until now. He gave me a lot of good advice and thought it could be damn good if done right, but note the 'if'. I have never made a portrait bigger and when you paint in one place it affects another and then you can't get the right tone. Well, now I will scrape off and add with care. // I think I have captured quite a lot of her character in the pose."

In January 1887 Hanna writes to Georg:
"Oh, that blessed portrait, it's progressing slowly, slowly. It's damned difficult and then I'm so distracted."

The Salon submission deadline is in mid-March and around the end of February Hanna writes to Georg:

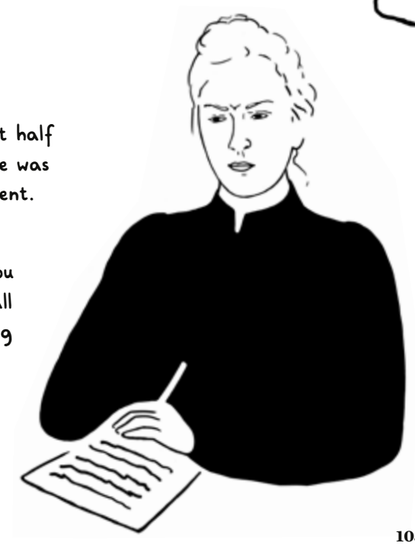
"God knows if I'll manage to finish the portrait; it's only now in the last few days that I've been overcome by the desire to paint and that I've started getting it into shape."
And she warns Georg to not expect any more letters: "Now I plan to work like a horse the last remaining days so I'll be too tired to write in the evenings."

Hanna gets the portrait ready in time and soon finds out that it's been accepted into the Salon! When the Salon opens in May, thousands of works are included, covering the walls all the way to the ceiling. Having a work hung at eye level is in itself a distinction from the jury, so when the Salon opens its doors, participants are very nervous to see where their works have been placed. Hanna's portrait of Venny Soldan is hanging right before the eyes of the visitors!

But when the painting of Venny Soldan is exhibited in Helsinki about half a year later, Venny writes to Hanna from Finland describing how she was disgraced – in Finland many people consider the portrait to be indecent.

"I've had to muster a colossal amount of self-confidence to not be entirely crushed under the weight of the accusations; the portrait, you see, the unfortunate portrait; and then it's me who has to bear it all even though it's actually you who should take responsibility for having painted such a nasty thing. The indignation is growing, you see."

Venny adds that though a number of women artists seem to like the portrait, it's different with their male colleagues.



During the spring of 1886, Hanna's relationship with the already established Swedish artist Georg Pauli, nine years her senior, deepens. Following an invitation from Georg, Hanna travels by train from Paris to Barbizon, and, among blossoming fruit trees, she paints his portrait.

In the autumn of 1886 Hanna tells her parents that she wants to marry Georg, but her father says no. "Papa believes that I don't have the required conviction for the 'sacrifice' and 'suffering' of such a step. // Papa wanted me to say that I would die if I couldn't have you – but that would be lying – die! Oh, please – you don't die of stuff like that if you're healthy and natural."

When Georg responds by assuring Hanna that if she marries him she can continue working as an artist since he desires equality in a wife, Hanna writes, noticeably irritated, that it is unnecessary to even talk about the matter because it is completely obvious to her that she will continue working as an artist.

And Hanna adds:
"If you want me to like you – let me never feel tied down – because only in freedom can I be happy with someone – be it a man or a woman."

In another letter Hanna writes to Georg: "I only mean that you should feel completely free and independent of any ties or shackles – I've said it before – the bonds lie in our feelings, if they stop existing, so do our ties – clearly!!! That's how I see it, that's also how I would like you to see it."

After six months, Hanna's father Abraham feels more certain that Georg "doesn't have anything against the Jewish tradition" and he agrees to the marriage. Hanna and Georg get married in a civil ceremony and travel to Italy to paint for half a year.

Back home in Sweden they soon welcome their first child, Torsten.

For a woman to succeed in being both a mother and an artist was very unusual at the time. Facilitating this was partly Hanna's unmarried sister Betty functioning as an extra mother, and partly the fact that Hanna and Georg could afford a housekeeper.

In a letter to Georg in late 1886, Hanna writes:

"in order to achieve something truly good you must first and foremost forget exhibitions and critics, not have a time limit – only think of what you want to portray, not your painting; but for that you need to have been quite alone with yourself in your life and be very kind."

In the summer of 1887 Hanna painted "Breakfast Time" at the family's country home in the Stockholm archipelago. "Breakfast Time" was harshly criticised at the time but today it is one of Nationalmuseum's most popular works, printed on posters, postcards, shopping bags and trays.

That same year, Hanna also painted "The Farm".

While working on this story, I stumbled upon a print of it being sold by Walmart for 124.99 dollars.

Usually a vociferous critic of women artists, Carl Larsson was an unlikely admirer of Hanna Hirsch Pauli's work. He wrote about the painting of the red barn shortly after it had been exhibited in Paris in 1889.

In the women's home magazine "IDUN", Carl Larsson writes:

"It's bizarre! I, who constantly express my scepticism of women painting, have been asked to write about Hanna Pauli, née Hirsch!"

"The thing is, when I one evening at the Publicist Club was boasting over the Artist's Association's recently opened exhibition, a member of 'Idun's' editorial team asked who I thought was the best of our female exponents. Without hesitation I answered: 'Hanna Hirsch!'

'Write about her then!' was the instant retort. But what would you, dear ladies, like to know about her? From the portrait you can tell that she is a beautiful Jewish woman. // Germanised and united through civil marriage with another capable artist, Georg Pauli.

IDUN

PRAKTISK VECKOTIDNING FÖR KVINNAN OCH HEMMET.

Nr 14 (120) Fredagen den 4 april 1890. 3:dje årg.

Hanna Hirsch,
gift Pauli.

kare inom vår konst — vi mena då Hanna Pauli, född Hirsch.

Allas vår gamle vän och bekante, Carl Larsson — ty det finnes väl nu knappast något svenskt hem, där han ej genom alstren af sin pensel eller sitt ritstift lifvit gammal vän och bekant — har visst Iduns läsarinnor den artigheten att för en stund byta paletten mot bläckhornet för att på sitt eget friska sätt berätta dem:

»Hvad jag vet om Hanna Hirsch.»

Det är för bizarrt! Att just jag, som ständigt med mycken misstro uttalat mig om kvinnomåleri, nu fått i uppdrag att skrifva om Hanna Pauli, f. Hirsch! Jag, som en gång, då jag var redaktör för akademielevtidningen »Palettskrap» (utkom-nande, när det så passar sig, och då i endast ett hundra exemplar), i en nekrolog öfver den begifvade målarinnan Nordlander bombastiskt utropade: »*Kropp sanne der lil!*; endast manna-kraft kan åstadkomma Partenonfrisen och fresk-erna i Capella di Sixtina!», sitter nu här

As I said, in the club I let slip that she is our most talented female painter, but in confidence, here 'between us girls', I can safely say that to me she is the 'most smashing' I know."

And Hanna is in an expansive phase. In 1891 she has her second child, Göran. Two years later she starts teaching at the Valand art academy in Gothenburg and her work is accepted into the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In 1896 she paints a large portrait of the prominent Swedish poet Verner von Heidenstam.

But for the women's rights movement, the 1890s entail a backlash. Traditional views of women are deeply entrenched, gender roles are seen by many to be natural and there is resistance to liberated and independent women. Men dominate and set the tone even in the Artists' Union.

The well-known painting "Friends" shows Hanna and Georg's friends gathered around Ellen Key, who is reading aloud in the couple's living room in their home on Södermalm, Stockholm. Hanna sits on the floor, attentive and listening, ready to sketch the scene with a sketchpad and pen in hand.

The friends are artists, writers and intellectuals, several of whom have known each other since childhood. They meet and discuss social development and art, women's liberation and the growing workers' movement. Hanna works on two different versions of the painting "Friends" over a span of ten years, between 1900 and 1910.

Much of value has been written about "Friends" but when I look at the painting while working on this graphic story I primarily feel an overwhelming longing for the relaxed intellectual intimacy that Hanna portrays between the friends.

Other works by Hanna, such as her painting of Betty and their father Abraham reading together, exude a strong sense of presence and intimacy.

The same motif has also been preserved as a photograph...

... and both the painting and the photograph remind me of my grandfather and me, 100 years later.

Self-Portrait 1920

Many well-known artists painted portraits of Hanna during her lifetime, and she also painted several self-portraits.

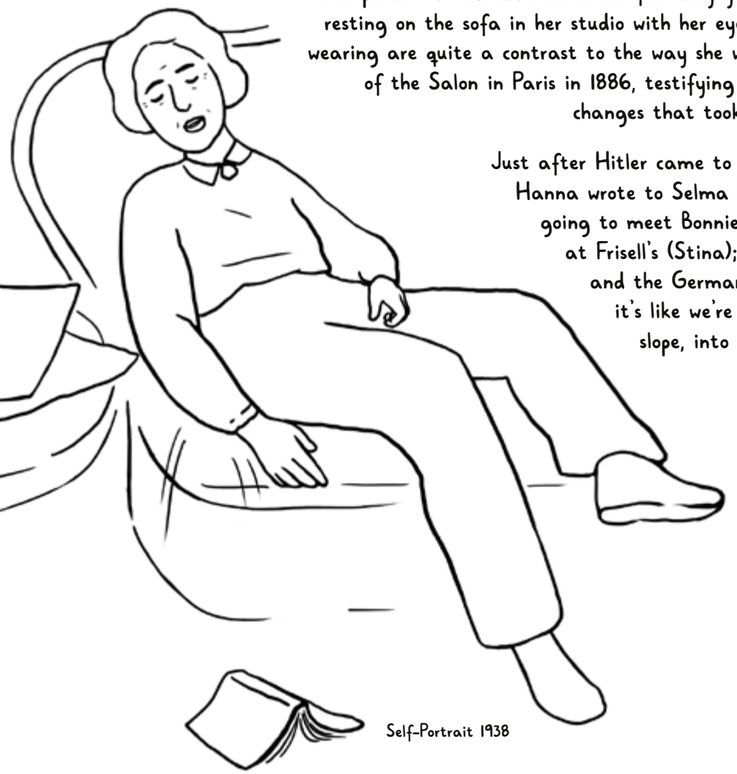
Self-Portrait 1924

Self-Portrait 1922

Self-Portrait 1922

Self-Portrait 1938

She painted her last self-portrait in 1938, two years before her death. At this point she had been an artist for sixty years. In the painting she is resting on the sofa in her studio with her eyes closed. The trousers she's wearing are quite a contrast to the way she was dressed at the opening of the Salon in Paris in 1886, testifying to the revolutionary social changes that took place during her lifetime.



Self-Portrait 1938

Just after Hitler came to power in Germany, Hanna wrote to Selma Lagerlöf: "Today I am going to meet Bonniers and our closest friends at Frisell's (Stina); there'll be talk of Hitler and the Germans and all that horror – it's like we're sliding backwards down a slope, into the darkest Middle Ages."

Antisemitism had spread across Europe and Scandinavia, and in 1939, when Hanna was 75, she mentioned in an interview that criticism of her painting "Breakfast Time" from 50 years before, was directed at her as a Jewish artist. One critic had argued that the paint-flecked tablecloth was a reflection of her Jewishness since in such families they have dirty tablecloths.

Georg passed away in 1935 and when Hanna Hirsch Pauli dies on 29 December 1940 in Solna she is buried together with him in Nacka's northern cemetery.

While looking for works ahead of the Hanna Hirsch Pauli exhibition at Nationalmuseum in 2025, Carina Rech noted that stamped on the back of many paintings was:

AUCTION PAULI 1942

When Carina met Agneta Pauli, the 91-year old grandchild of Hanna, she mentioned this:

– It's such a pity that Hanna's relatives sold so many of her works soon after her death.

– Yes. The auction in 1942. Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany at the time. I believe they thought they had to be able to leave quickly if necessary.

– Aha, yes! I remember reading a letter from 1934 where Hanna wrote: "we'll just have to make our way to Palestine when the plague gets here." Yes, the plague: Nazism is what she meant, of course.

As opposed to the masses of works by Jewish artists that were destroyed, and all those Jewish homes and collections that were plundered by the Nazis in Europe, many of Hanna Hirsch Pauli's paintings, photos and letters have been preserved and can now be exhibited at Nationalmuseum.